

Content

<i>Identity, polarization & social conflict I</i>	5
Preferences for Speech Governance are Polarized Across 40 Countries.....	5
The Content Characteristics and Opportunity Structures of Explicit and Implicit Hate Speech in Danish Facebook Comments	7
Do citizens engage in content moderation of toxic speech against historically marginalized groups? Evidence from four western democracies	9
Media Representations of Climate Advocates: Measuring Bias in News Coverage	10
<i>Identity, polarization & social conflict II</i>	12
Weaponising “Cognitive Warfare”: Partisan Framing and Polarisation in Taiwan’s Information Environment	12
Vulnerability and Coping in Turbulent Times: How Social Media Shape Political Extremism	15
Algorithmic Amplification and Emotional Governance: AI-Generated Political Personas on TikTok	17
Is the manosphere leaking? Exploring the everyday manosphere among Danish male adolescents	18
<i>Transformations of democracy I</i>	21
DemocraTree: An Inventory and Interactive Map of Democratic Forms.....	21
Same Concerns, Different Framings: What Stakeholder Questions to a Traceable AI Chatbot Reveal About a Public Environmental Issue	22
Tracing the Semantic Underpinnings of the Kampfbegriff in Digital Information Ecosystems.....	24
The Concept of Law in the Digital Age and Its Democratic Implications	26
<i>Transformations of democracy II</i>	28
Data Visualisation as Transcription: an STS method for capturing, comparing and critiquing search results	28
Politics on Speed	30
Chat-Democracy and Info-Discursive Deliberative Auxiliaries	31
Democracy in a digitally saturated more-than-human world – an adventure to be had.....	33
<i>Digital government, welfare and public administration I</i>	34
Infrastructures of Care in the Digital Welfare State.....	34

Developing and implementing trustworthy AI and robotics solutions in City of Aarhus	36
Voicing the state: Synthetic voices in Danish public e-governance	37
Digital government, welfare and public administration II.....	39
Digital Welfare States and the Transformation of Administrative Justice – a Socio- Legal perspective	39
From discretion to dependence: the Palantirization of the Danish police	41
Digital Surveillance and the Reconfiguration of Democracy in Hybrid Regime	42
Political communication, elections and campaigning I	44
When Voting Advice Becomes Conversational: A Field Study of Human-AI Interaction During an Election	44
Facebook-based political engagement in Bangladesh	46
Political Sharenting on Instagram: Family Imagery, Platformized Visibility, and Boundary Work among Danish Politicians	47
Political communication, elections and campaigning II	49
Political issue spaces, mapping the 2026 Danish Parliamentary Election.....	49
From collective to connective action? – A study of online participation in Danish elections across 25 years	51
Venerable Representation: AI-Generated Synthetic Media in the 2024 Elections in India and Pakistan.....	53
Large Language Models (LLMs) as Agents for Augmented Democracy	55
AI governance, algorithms and democratic futures	56
The Technostructural Democratic Affordances of Decentralised Social Media: Mastodon and Bluesky in the EU push towards digital sovereignty	56
Aligning Sovereign Foundation Models through Constitutional AI	58
From Token Ownership to Participation: Rethinking DAO Governance for Public-Interest Infrastructure	60
Data for public space: How journalism can join urban issues through open municipal data.....	62
Mapping Notions of Democratic Debate Online in Denmark: Conceptualisations, Affordances, and Deficits	63
Platform governance, speech and regulation.....	65
Power over platforms: Strong and universal preference for more individual control over online choice architectures	65

Building a European Public Sphere? Stakeholder debates on a European Streaming Platform for public service media	67
Democracy or technocracy? Examining the digitalization of urban planning in Finland	69
How does digital governance of social media platforms influence the public in India and the United Kingdom?.....	71
When conflict becomes governance: Countergovernance and digital democracy in Brazil.....	73
<i>Political participation, deliberation and digital citizenship I</i>	75
Between Bans and Bildung: Figures of Youth in High School Policies Governing Students' Use of Digital Technologies	75
Democratic deliberation starts at the dinner table: Young Danes and relatable political discussions in their 'safe gardens'	76
Leave No One Behind: Using Citizen-Generated Data to Advance Democracy and Reframe Datafication	78
Sustainability and Scalability in Digital Democracy: A Comparative Study of Three E-participation Platforms	80
<i>Political participation, deliberation and digital citizenship II</i>	82
Leveraging Generative AI to Enhance Student Self-Reflection in Character and Citizenship Education	82
Imagined Citizen – Who are we Thinking About in the Digital City?	84
<i>Journalism, data and democracy</i>	86
Audience Pathways of Belonging and Critique in Non-Traditional News Use.....	86
Mainstreaming journalistic OSINT/V use as a public interest technology across layers of supply (design), experimentation (data) and popularisation (delivery)	88
<i>Humour, culture and democratic publics</i>	90
The Civic Work of Humour: Online Political Satire as a Space of Participation, Meaning-Making, and Action	90
Outwitting the adversary – Studying humorous countertactics in a not so funny context at a time of democratic erosion	92
The Democratizing Potential of Cabaret Humor on YouTube	94
<i>Misinformation, trust and information disorder I.....</i>	96
Digital News (Non-)use of Ukrainian Diaspora facing Disinformation during War	96
The Liar's Dividend and Ambient Skepticism: Deepfakes and Democratic Communication	98

Navigating Uncertainty: The Effects of Alarmist Discourse on Journalists’ Abilities to Detect AI-Generated Content	100
Truth, beliefs, and facts in the alleged post-truth era: The epistemology of politically alienated citizens in Germany.....	102
<i>Misinformation, trust and information disorder II.....</i>	104
Inside partisan environments: The influence of congruence in news environments on veracity judgments and partisan attitudes	104
Crowd-Based Advisors Against Misinformation: Accuracy, Uptake, and Citizen Choice Across Four Democracies.....	106
When Governments Use AI: Selective decline in trustworthiness and algorithmic nimbyism ...	108
Motivated Reasoning Models: How LLMs and Search Engines Differentially Enable Confirmatory Evidence Collection	110
The Dynamics of Distrust in Media and Politics: Gradual Erosion and Critical Turning Points in Germany.....	112

Identity, polarization & social conflict I

Preferences for Speech Governance are Polarized Across 40 Countries

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Balancing freedom of expression against limiting the spread of misinformation is the dilemma defining speech governance of today's information ecosystems. Yet, we lack cross-cultural, systematic evidence on citizens' preferences for solving this moral dilemma across nations that may have different ideological polarization, misinformation trends, and speech governance. Sampling preferences for solving this dilemma from participants surveyed in 40 countries ($N = 47,719$; representative for age, gender, and political ideology), we find that people are nearly evenly split between protecting free expression (51%) and preventing misinformation from spreading. We

find evidence of political polarization in the overall sample: right-leaning participants prioritize protecting free expression more than left-leaning participants (55% vs. 48%), whereas left-leaning participants prioritize limiting the spread of misinformation more than right-leaning participants (52% vs. 45%). This ideological divide is amplified by political interest, as the more interested in politics participants are, the more likely they are to prefer the ideologically congruent solution to this dilemma. These results highlight the global difficulty in trading off the value of free speech against the value of reducing misinformation, and identify what could be a new cleavage of ideological polarization that has direct implications for governing expression in information ecosystems.

The Content Characteristics and Opportunity Structures of Explicit and Implicit Hate Speech in Danish Facebook Comments

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This study examines the content characteristics and opportunity structures of sexual and gender minority hate speech in $n=176.124$ Danish user-generated Facebook comments. Online hate speech continues to be a pervasive problem on social media platforms which is harmful both to victims and to democratic participation, causing a silencing effect on targets who engage less in the online public debate to avoid hateful attacks. The study addresses two central dimensions: first, the lexical and thematic features of explicit and implicit forms of hate speech in content in Danish language; and second, the opportunity structures under which such expressions occur. Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed-methods design that combines manual content analysis, supervised machine learning, computational text analysis, and regression modeling.

First, 2,000 comments were manually coded by two human coders using a deductive coding scheme capturing features of explicit and implicit hate speech. This manually coded dataset served as training data for a Danish BERT model used to label the full dataset. Following the automated labeling procedure, computational text analysis was used to examine content characteristics of explicit and implicit hate speech. Tf-idf scores were used to identify terms particularly characteristic of explicit and implicit hate speech and topic modeling by BERTopic to uncover thematic structures. Explicit hate speech was lexically characterized by a narrow and repetitive set of derogatory slurs. Implicit hate speech was lexically characterized by terms suggesting a focus on debates around gender identity. The thematic structure of the corpus further distinguishes the specific types of hate speech where explicit comments favor direct insults and mocking, while implicit comments are characterized by broader debates around gender identity and the marginalization of sexual and gender minority individuals.

To investigate opportunity structures, the study conducted regression analyses examining whether the likelihood and type of hate speech in comments vary depending

on the type of post actor to which the comments respond. These actors - Danish news media, politicians, and political parties - are conceptualized as opportunity structures that may shape the conditions for hate speech. The analysis focuses both on the category of the actor and on whether the original post itself contains hate speech. The study provides a detailed account of explicit and implicit hate speech targeting sexual and gender minorities in Danish Facebook comments and contributes to a topic that has received limited scholarly attention in data from the Danish social media context.

Do citizens engage in content moderation of toxic speech against historically marginalized groups? Evidence from four western democracies

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Do partisans engage in crowd moderation of toxic speech targeting historically marginalized groups? We provide a comprehensive test of whether and when individuals engage in crowd moderation of toxic speech targeting gender, ethnic, and religious groups. The results show that, on average, individuals are more likely to engage in crowd moderation when toxic speech targets historically marginalized groups and minorities. These findings are robust across cross-national differences in cultural norms, free speech traditions, and political contexts in the United States, Germany, Denmark, and Italy. However, we find that this effect is conditional on partisanship and that variation in the target of speech generates greater differences on the political left than on the political right. The findings have important implications for when and whether citizens engage in crowd moderation.

Media Representations of Climate Advocates: Measuring Bias in News Coverage

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Climate change stands as one of the defining challenges of the 21st century. Top-down policy solutions have repeatedly failed to address it, highlighting the need for bottom-up civic engagement. However, public participation in climate initiatives remains constrained by social and cultural barriers. Among them, a sense of distance from climate advocates: the feeling that people campaigning for climate action belong to a different socio-demographic or cultural world than one's own. Media representation plays a critical role in maintaining such a distance: the way climate advocates are described in news coverage shapes public perceptions of who "belongs" in climate activism (broadly defined) and, by extension, who feels invited to participate. For example, a persistent stereotype portrays climate activists as predominantly female and white. However, how such portrayals emerge from, or are reinforced by, digital media remains largely underexplored.

In this work, we investigate socio-demographic biases in the online news portrayal of climate advocates and skeptics in the UK, US, and Germany. We compile a large corpus of news articles published between 2020 and 2025 by the ten most widely read outlets in each of the three countries. We then apply an annotation pipeline assisted by Large Language Models (LLMs), validated against human annotations, to identify and characterize the climate stakeholders featured in these articles. For each stakeholder, we capture how they would likely be perceived by an average reader across several dimensions: occupation, type of stakeholdership (e.g., scientific, political, civic, media), gender, age, ethnicity, and residency. Data collection and annotation are currently underway, and we expect to present our first empirical findings at the conference. By mapping how these socio-demographic profiles are distributed, including any difference across countries and years, we aim to surface systematic patterns in whose voices are present and whose are absent in climate discourse. In doing so, we connect questions of media representation to broader concerns about democratic participation: if the public face of climate advocacy is systematically narrowed by media coverage,

this may deter civic engagement among those who do not see themselves reflected in it, undermining the bottom-up mobilization that effective climate action requires.

This work contributes empirical grounding to ongoing debates at the intersection of digital media, computational text analysis, and democratic citizenship, while opening methodological pathways for studying representation bias at scale across other high-stakes public discourses.

Identity, polarization & social conflict II

Weaponising “Cognitive Warfare”: Partisan Framing and Polarisation in Taiwan’s Information Environment

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Amid escalating tensions between Taiwan and China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has expanded online information operations designed to shape political discourse in Taiwan and influence public opinion in its favour. Within this context, the concept of “cognitive warfare” has emerged as a prominent term in Taiwan’s political communication landscape.

Cognitive warfare is broadly understood as a strategy aimed at influencing public opinion and behaviour, shaping government policy, and potentially destabilising public institutions through externally supported operations (Backes & Swab, 2019; Miller, 2023; Ördén, 2024).

Existing scholarship on cognitive warfare, however, has largely focused on examining tactics attributed to the CCP, including disinformation campaigns, bot networks, and content farms used to influence Taiwanese society (Doublethink Lab, 2024; Wallis et al., 2021).

Comparatively little attention has been paid to how the concept of cognitive warfare functions within democratic contexts (Harsin, 2024), particularly in shaping political discourse and institutional dynamics.

In Taiwan, discourse surrounding cognitive warfare is strategically invoked along partisan lines to advance competing political agendas. Taiwanese politics has long been dominated by two major parties, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the Kuomintang (KMT). The DPP, generally associated with a pro-Taiwan sovereignty position, frequently uses the term “cognitive warfare” to describe CCP-led information operations targeting Taiwan. In contrast, the KMT, which advocates closer cross-strait engagement, often employs the term to criticise the DPP, accusing it of conducting its

own form of cognitive warfare to mislead voters and mobilise political support by amplifying public anxieties about information manipulation.

Guided by the central research question—how do Taiwanese political elites strategically frame the term “cognitive warfare,” and how does this framing contribute to partisan polarisation—this study examines how a seemingly neutral security concept becomes politicised through partisan contestation in Taiwan. Using parliamentary debate transcripts and legislative records from the Legislative Yuan, the study conducts a qualitative discourse analysis of how political elites frame and deploy the concept in parliamentary debates. It further considers whether structural or discursive factors shape how cognitive warfare is interpreted across political systems, and what implications this has for democratic governance and political communication. Preliminary findings indicate that the DPP is the primary actor employing the term “cognitive warfare” in parliamentary sessions, while the KMT uses the term less frequently. Although KMT legislators who reference cognitive warfare also raise concerns about foreign interference by the CCP, they have not introduced or supported related legislative amendments. Subsequent phases of the research will analyse legislative voting behaviour to assess whether the KMT’s use of the concept reflects substantive policy positions or primarily strategic political rhetoric.

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Vulnerability and Coping in Turbulent Times: How Social Media Shape Political Extremism

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This study examines the role of social media in the rise of political extremism through the lens of vulnerability—a relational condition of precarity inherent to human existence and structurally produced (Butler, 2016). As democratic societies grapple with an ongoing polycrisis—war, economic downturn, and geopolitical tensions, social media function simultaneously as vulnerability amplifiers algorithmically elevating crisis content that erodes certainty and control, as well as sites of coping (Robertson et al., 2023; Wolfers & Utz, 2022). This matters democratically: sustained vulnerability makes extremism psychologically attractive, as extreme narratives promise security, strong leadership, and restored significance (Canetti-Nisim et al., 2009; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2019). How citizens cope with this vulnerability, and with what political consequences, remains poorly understood.

Drawing on feminist vulnerability theory, stress-based models of extremism, and coping research, this study examines how coping patterns condition whether social media crisis exposure fosters radicalization or democratic resilience. It combines a two-wave panel survey (W1: $N=1,000$; W2: $N=673$) with in-depth interviews ($N=25$) in the Netherlands during and after the 2025 general election. Latent class analysis identifies three coping patterns with distinct affective and cognitive logics: Curated Engagement (14.5%), characterized by high political engagement combined with active disconnection and visibility management; Open Engagement (17.1%), characterized by high political engagement only; and Disengagement (68.4%). Only among curated engagers, crisis exposure predicts increased radical-populist support. Qualitative findings illuminate this: curated engagers heavily rely on social media as emotional buffers, yet these platforms are simultaneously their primary information source; the self-protective environment intensifies crisis salience, rendering threats inescapable and extremist certainties compelling.

Moreover, our findings suggest that curated engagement is a structurally conditioned coping response (rather than individual failure), disproportionately adopted by the most precarious citizens. Those with lower external political efficacy—a sense of

powerlessness—prioritize affective self-protection over epistemic openness and exhibit patterns of excessive, compulsive social media use indicative of emotional fragility. Thus, we emphasize that the problem lies in structural conditions: politically and economically produced precarity, platform architectures that incentivize dependent use, media logics that amplify crisis coverage, and social inequalities that determine who bears the greatest psychological burden in turbulent times.

Algorithmic Amplification and Emotional Governance: AI-Generated Political Personas on TikTok

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Contemporary political communication unfolds under conditions of perpetual crisis—democratic backsliding, geopolitical conflict, pandemics, climate emergencies, and rapidly advancing AI technologies (McDevitt, 2022; Vasist, Krishnan, & Agnihotri, 2025; Daume, Galaz, & Bjerser, 2023; Farooq & de Vreese, 2025). Across these disruptions, emotions have shifted from background influences to structuring forces shaping how political meaning is produced and interpreted (Richards, 2010; Döveling, Harju, & Sommer, 2018). Research on emotional publics, affective polarization, and mediated political personas shows that emotions increasingly reorganize democratic life (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019; Nordbrandt, 2021; Metz, Kruikemeier, & Lecheler, 2020), while platforms such as TikTok have become central arenas for political actors, news organizations, civic groups, and influencers (Cheng & Li, 2026). Yet generative AI introduces new modalities of emotional mediation that remain insufficiently theorized. This article conceptualizes AI-generated political videos on TikTok as a novel emotional infrastructure reshaping how political authority is felt, imagined, and contested. Often humorous, dramatic, emotionally intensified, or hyper-charismatic, synthetic videos do not merely mirror political divisions (Cervi, Tejedor, & Blesa, 2023); they actively construct affectively charged publics, amplified by TikTok’s recommendation architecture, which privileges emotional salience over authenticity or factual accuracy (Scalvini, 2023). Exaggerated facial expressions, bodily distortions, and surreal settings—frequently undisclosed as synthetic—enable political figures to operate as platform-native personas aligned with TikTok’s affect-driven attention economy.

The analysis traces how synthetic political personas are aesthetically constructed, affectively interpreted, and algorithmically amplified, revealing how emotional intensity becomes central to the platform’s reconfiguration of political authority. Empirically, we analyze around 20 thousand TikTok videos (2023–2026) featuring AI-generated depictions of political leaders, supplemented with comments from a 10% stratified subsample. Using Visual LLMs, multimodal emotion recognition, content analysis, and network diffusion modeling, we trace stylistic patterns, affective tone, framing practices, and amplification dynamics. Findings show

that synthetic political personas increasingly function as communicative actors in their own right. Through exaggerated emotional narratives grounded in satire and surrealism, they reconfigure the emotional grammars through which citizens relate to authority. These practices constitute a form of emotional governance that heightens affective polarization, blurs satire and manipulation, and challenges journalism's credibility and democratic deliberation. By theorizing AI-generated media as emotional infrastructures under chronic crisis, the article advances debates on technological disruption, emotional publics, and democratic resilience.

Is the manosphere leaking? Exploring the everyday manosphere among Danish male adolescents

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Digital platforms are central sites where democratic norms of inclusion, respect, and participation are negotiated. One arena currently moving from fringe subcultures into mainstream youth vernacular is the ‘manosphere’: influencer- and community-driven content that blends self-help and entrepreneurship advice with gendered narratives about status, dating, and resentment. As this content circulates through recommendation feeds and peer sharing, it can reshape the tone of online discussions and the conditions under which young people feel able to engage, listen, and disagree.

This paper examines how Danish male adolescents (ages 17–20, in upper-secondary education) encounter, interpret, and circulate manosphere content, and how masculinity is negotiated when manosphere-adjacent language becomes part of peer interaction. It asks: (1) through which platform pathways and social relations do participants come across manosphere material; (2) what practices of engagement (watching, liking, commenting, remixing, forwarding) characterize their interaction with it.

Empirically, the study draws on five group interviews conducted, with additional interviews planned. The group format enables analysis of meaning-making in situ: how participants establish and police the boundaries of acceptable speech, and how they connect platform content to everyday understandings of self, gender, and social status. Analysis follows a thematic strategy attentive to how themes are jointly produced and negotiated in interaction.

Preliminary findings suggest broad familiarity with manosphere related figures and vocabularies, even when participants did not recognize the label “manosphere” or identify specific influencers as such. Terms such as “grind,” “locked in,” and “looksmaxxing” are well known and used, albeit often ironically. This irony is primarily described as a way to ridicule and thereby delegitimize the manosphere worldview and signal distance from it. Irony can also serve as an opposite purpose lowering the threshold for hostile or dismissive talk. Further, participants across different groups invoked egalitarian norms commonly associated

with Denmark and high media-literacy when explaining why messages from manfluencers were unpersuasive.

The paper contributes a practice-oriented account of mediated identities and agencies by tracing how platform infrastructures and peer cultures co-produce digital masculinities. It also clarifies how hostile online ecosystems may affect participation indirectly, through everyday language and humor rather than explicit political mobilization. Methodologically, the paper demonstrates the value of group interviews for studying adolescents' everyday digital practices and meaning making.

Transformations of democracy I

DemocraTree: An Inventory and Interactive Map of Democratic Forms

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Democracy is a broad concept that encompasses various meanings, ideas and variants. While we often hear about noun phrases such as "direct democracy", "deliberative democracy", "participatory democracy" or "digital democracy", hundreds of distinct qualifications of democracy can be found in the academic and web literature. What does this plethora of variants teaches about the underlying concept of democracy? Can making sense of this diversity help us shed light on the ongoing transformations our democracies are undergoing? Based on analysis of open scholarly corpora (OpenAlex, Wikipedia) and web search data (Google Trends), we inventory several hundreds of premodified noun phrases of the form "X democracy", collecting frequency and metadata for each variant to enable temporal, clustering and network-based analyses. We then construct a visualisation of this dataset as a "tree of democracies". The result, called DemocraTree, is to be made accessible through an interactive web interface, where visitors can access sources, download raw data, and suggest additions and corrections. We also propose a sub-analysis of this dataset focusing on technology-related democratic variants and their temporal emergence. DemocraTree's purpose is dual: it serves as a research instrument to enable comparative analysis of variants' temporal trajectories and conceptual coevolution, and offers a public-facing interface to explore and inspect variants, trace their emergence and relationships over time. By making the landscape of democracy variants explicit and measurable across time, this work reveals how the conceptual space of democracy has evolved, particularly regarding the emergence and adoption of technology-oriented variants. This contributes to understanding how democratic imaginaries intersect with digital culture and technological change.

Same Concerns, Different Framings: What Stakeholder Questions to a Traceable AI Chatbot Reveal About a Public Environmental Issue

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Background: Digital technologies increasingly shape how actors access, interpret, and coordinate around complex public issues. In environmental governance, chat-based AI tools may not only distribute information but also provide new ways of studying what different stakeholders want to know. This paper examines stakeholder question-asking in relation to EcoTalkBot, a traceable retrieval-augmented chatbot (meaning its answers can be linked back to their sources) developed and piloted to provide curated information on farmland biodiversity in Denmark as a contested public and policy issue. Rather than assessing whether the chatbot changed stakeholder views, the aim of the study is to analyze what stakeholders' self-directed questions reveal about how they make sense of farmland biodiversity as a shared but differently framed public issue (Savolainen, 1995; Tang & Wang, 2024).

Methods: The study draws on 435 logged chatbot interactions from 30 purposively recruited participants across three stakeholder groups: land managers and advisers, market and finance actors, and knowledge and policy actors. User questions were analyzed using thematic analysis with inductive open coding, followed by grouping into broader themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Themes were then compared across stakeholder categories and across a cross-cutting dimension of issue framing: micro (farm and practice), meso (value chain and finance), and macro (policy and discourse).

Findings: Across stakeholder groups, participants raised similar core concerns: what counts as biodiversity, what works in practice, how biodiversity can be measured credibly, what trade-offs may arise, and who should bear the costs. However, these concerns were framed differently. Land managers and advisers focused on concrete practices and implementation; market and finance actors emphasized incentives,

metrics, and communication; knowledge and policy actors foregrounded definitions, legitimacy, and regulation. While stakeholders raised similar core concerns, the emerging analysis suggests that apparent agreement at the level of concern may mask differences in how the shared public problem is framed and approached across stakeholder groups. (Kerselaers et al., 2013; Targetti et al., 2016).

Contribution: The paper makes a cautious digital-methods argument: chatbot question logs can be used to study stakeholder engagement with less researcher steering than interview-only designs. Empirically, the study shows how self-directed question-asking can make apparently shared concerns visible as differently framed versions of the same societal challenge. Conceptually, it indicates that framing mismatch may be a useful way of understanding why shared concern does not necessarily translate into coordinated understanding or policy alignment across actors. (Lecuyer et al., 2018).

Tracing the Semantic Underpinnings of the Kampfbegriff in Digital Information Ecosystems

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Contemporary political discourse is increasingly organized around highly volatile, weaponized signifiers (e.g., “DEI,” “Woke,” “Fake News”, etc.). Traditional semiotic approaches, which might categorize these simply as agenda items, topics, frames, or just “empty/floating signifiers,” fail to capture their operational utility within an increasingly fragmented and polarized political context, embedded within a networked communication environment that relies on platform capitalism and attention economy logics.

Given the need for better analytical frameworks to study weaponized signifiers in the information ecosystem, this theory-building project proposes an updated conceptualization rooted in the German sociological concept of the Kampfbegriff, which can be translated literally into “battle term” or “combat language” (in this context, Kampf refers to conflict or struggle, and Begriff refers to a term or notion). In an antagonistic public sphere, where publics are in contestation rather than deliberation, a person or political group uses Kampfbegriffe to stigmatize or marginalize opposing viewpoints, exacerbating polarizing tensions between two or more political ideologies.

A Kampfbegriff is designed to draw absolute ideological boundaries, mobilize in-groups, and delegitimize opponents. However, the classical Kampfbegriff model assumes a relatively slow, human-driven propaganda apparatus. In a networked, digital information ecology, these terms are now integrated into three distinct but overlapping spheres of production which underpin their constitution and rapid circulation: (1) the cultural/political, (2) the communicative/algorithmic, and (3) the economic/commodified.

Today, a Kampfbegriff therefore refers not only to a weaponized signifier but one which also provides a mode of connectivity and can thereby be commodified. They function as memetic wedges used to harvest attention and build digital ties, while driving follower or subscriber conversions, soliciting political donations, and generating platform ad revenue. Algorithmic feedback loops thus accelerate the semantic dissemination (and exhaustion) of these terms: a Kampfbegriff can reach virality and obsolescence in a

dramatically short period of time, necessitating the continual development and extraction of new terms. We draw from our previous work to highlight two case types where a Kampfbegriff is circulated by political/media actors across different spheres: identity-targeted Kampfbegriffe such as “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” (DEI), “Critical Race Theory” (CRT), and “groomers,” as well as institution-targeted Kampfbegriffe such as “fake news” or “leftist media”. The goal of this preliminary work is to develop a robust framework for identifying Kampfbegriffe, understanding how they are constructed from societal resources across the three spheres, and tracing their use in public discourse.

The Concept of Law in the Digital Age and Its Democratic Implications

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Traditional conceptions of what constitutes “law,” and how to determine what is “valid law,” have been challenged by the digitalization of law and legal practice.

The traditional legal understanding of the concept of law is closely linked to the notion that law is created through a political process in Parliament and thus democratically anchored and legitimized. The formulation of legal rules has been affected by digitalization. Clear, fixed, and precise rules are more easily translated into digital systems, whereas framework legislation or discretionary rules are far more difficult, or even impossible, to digitalize. This development poses a particular challenge to elements of Scandinavian welfare-state regulation, which largely presuppose that decisions are based on the specific circumstances of the individual citizen.

Digitalization itself has a normative dimension that is relevant in this context. Coding—such as the design of algorithms—performs functions analogous to those of legal rules, in that it shapes and influences behavior. Large technology companies establish norms that, to some extent, operate in ways comparable to traditional legal regulation. These norms are typically grounded in contractual terms and conditions, which are further specified and expanded through code and algorithms. However, such norms lack democratic legitimacy. They are also often transnational in nature, which further complicates their oversight and control. This can therefore be understood as a form of “private law-making.”

Additionally, a portion of norm creation occurs through the use of machine learning. Although the algorithms themselves are initially defined, they are supplemented by the learning processes that emerge within the system, leading to the development of new ways of handling data. This results in a form of informal norm-setting, and thus a degree of norm creation.

In sum, democratically enacted and legitimized legal rules are increasingly supplemented by other norms that are not democratically grounded. These norms are

based on fundamentally different conceptions of society and reflect alternative societal ideologies.

Overall, there is a risk that digitalization will lead to changes in regulation that may result in the loss of, or fundamental alterations to, the underlying values of the regulatory framework. Consequently, core rule-of-law principles, the concept of law itself, and democracy as such are brought into question.

Transformations of democracy II

Data Visualisation as Transcription: an STS method for capturing, comparing and critiquing search results

Renée Ridgway – Aarhus University

The actors and dynamics of search are changing with the uptake of LLMs aka chatbots, which often provide one answer to all queries or an overview, instead of ten hyperlinks. To grasp the interplay between digital and data infrastructure and the politics embedded within these (search) artifacts (Winner 1980; Star 1999), new methods are needed to understand information/ knowledge infrastructures and to bring about technological literacies. Transient as well as opaque, how can search results be captured, compared and critiqued and what types of different knowledges are revealed by this method?

This presentation highlights results from recent public workshops, where participants (re)search their interests with a bespoke platform (<https://re-search.site>), co-designed with artist/programmer Anders Visti and financially supported by SHAPE. The interactive platform enables users to visualise, compare and interpret their search results based on different browser/search engine/operating system settings and a 'chatbot rodeo' that facilitates a comparative interface of responses from the same prompt. By (re)searching 'front-end interfaces' and the 'back-end databases' of search infrastructures, the method 'data visualisation as transcription' visually positions search results obtained with diverse browsers/engines side-by-side, reflecting their similarities and differences. Trained on public databases and web content and generating statistically produced textual answers, a 'chatbot rodeo,' (ChatGPT, Gemini, Le Chat, Apertus, Perplexity) brings to light what types of 'knowledges' are contained within in the different large language models (proprietary, open weight and open source).

Applying a 'feminism of the broken machine' (Sharma 2020), the data visualisations (outputs) shed light on certain power dynamics that are hidden in the backend

databases when engaging with these 'knowledge infrastructures of search' (Ridgway 2025). This tactical media platform for digital citizenship can offer other patterns of technology, with the détournement of corporate technical systems through instilling 'hacking culture norms to create these critiques,' which in turn 'offer new social meanings that can alter society' (Star Rogers 2022). A politico-aesthetic artifact, the re-search.site is a media artwork and a functional web interface, which also engenders the participants to share diverse forms of expertise through experimentation with socio-technical systems as hybrid-knowledge practices that can foster change.

Politics on Speed

Peter Aagaard – Roskilde University

This paper will explore accelerated politics in digitalized political communication. Rooted in the concept of societal acceleration (Rosa 2013), accelerated politics is defined as a constantly evolving system of implicit, often unexamined relations, rituals, and beliefs of how to compete for, gain, exercise and possess power in liberal democracies, influenced by technological and social acceleration. We see accelerated politics in increased mediatization and personalization of politics, stronger competition for power, algorithmic campaigning, higher voter volatility, increased political marketing, increased information complexity, and information overload as more bits of political information call for attention, because every political issue is subjected to urgency. The RQ will be: *How do accelerated politics in different types of liberal democracies affect political communication, and with what consequences for democracy?* The paper will 1) reflect how political acceleration have influenced political communication since the break-through of social media, and 2) study how political acceleration differentiate across different types of liberal democracies. The paper will empirically show that though political acceleration takes place, there is differences in how it is being distributed in political communication in different types of liberal democracies. The aim is to analyze the development from before the break-through of social media in 2006 and until today (2000-2024), in two Anglo-Saxon democracies (US and GB) and two Scandinavian democracies (Denmark and Sweden), to illustrate differences in the impact of accelerated politics in national political communication. There are differences in these countries regarding capitalism (Hall & Soskice 2001), political systems (Fukuyama 2014), and media systems (Reuters Digital News report, 2024), which is expected to shape how accelerated politics influence political communication. These differences can be traced in the speeches of political leaders, in rhetorical degrees of authoritarianism, conformism, cynicism, urgency, as well as appeal to distrust among voters. The data material will be publicly available political speeches of political leaders from 2000-2024, from all over the political spectrum in the last twenty years.

Chat-Democracy and Info-Discursive Deliberative Auxiliaries

Jan Løhmann Stephensen – Aarhus University

Just like digital technologies have become integral to how we interact with, engage and enact many worldly matters today, so are Large Language Model-based AI-technologies increasingly becoming integral our digital ecosystems of communication, sociality and political imagining. By introducing the notion of Info-Discursive Deliberative Auxiliaries (IDEAs), this paper focusses on how so-called talk-centric practices of democracy and everyday political talk (Mansbridge 1999) in (mostly) online settings (Wright 2012) in subtle ways are being re-shaped by such natural language processing-based talk-assistants, that on the fly supply both (seemingly) context-relevant information and rhetorical, stylistic and aesthetic modes of articulating what will stand to the audience one addresses as “one’s opinions”.

The paper will present two different reading of the (not-so-future) role of IDEAs. A positive perspective, in which such functionality will represent opportunities for mediation, consensus-building, and amelioration of age-old obstacles to participation in public discussion and deliberation (e.g., fear of either lacking relevant knowledge or the ability to speak the lingo of politics, and hence public embarrassment (Mansbridge 1980; Schudson 1984; Young 2000; Hajer 2005; Agre 2004)). This perspective will be exemplified by the so-called “Habermas Machine” developed by Google DeepMind (Tessler et al. 2024, Summerfield et al. 2024; Williams 2024, 2025) and similar efforts (Landemore 2022; Argyle et al. 2023; Bai et al. 2023).

In contrast, the more critical perspective will address three interrelated perspectives and/or problems. Setting out from (1) philosophies of language and technology, and in particular the social and individual role of the use of both language (drawing on Bakhtin 1981; Gerken 2009; Foucault 1972, 1982; Butler 2021) and of technology (Simondon 1958/2017; Stiegler 2008, 2009), the paper will discuss (2) how the human/machine-“co-authored” outputs of IDEAs due to their training processes invariably, yet subtly embed ideologies and hegemonic thought (cf. Gramsci 1971; Ives 2004; Bajohr 2024; Chiang 2023; Weatherby 2023, 2025; Coeckelbergh 2022, 2024; Coeckelbergh & Gunkel 2025) that profoundly influence how we perceive and hence act upon the world, each other, and our selves. Finally (3),

in extension of Benjamin Barber's notion of *Strong Democracy* (2003), the paper will discuss whether the smooth generative ("as in GenAI") affordances of IDEAs entail too much focus on productivity and optimizing output, and too little on *taking in* — or simply: *too much talk, too little listening*. Hence the notion of *Chat-Democracy*, in which our technologies increasingly seem to nudge us all into becoming citizens that speak rather than listen.

Democracy in a digitally saturated more-than-human world – an adventure to be had...

Peter Danholt – Aarhus University

In this paper I want to discuss ideas about democracy as they are performed in the research on the consequences of digitization for democracy.

This paper is based on the work of Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour concerning the relations between science and politics. The premise of my argument, following Stengers and Latour, is that democracy, just like society is not a stable, ahistorical and universal concept and 'thing', but practiced in and through heterogenous networks of human and non-human actors. Democracy is sociomaterially configured and practiced in and through multiple assemblages; something we continuously perform and explore. In that sense, democracy, in the terms of Stengers, "is an adventure to be had". Arguably, the agora (the marketplace of Greek society) was the first democratic apparatus and architecture, and the digitally saturated society is another such configuration, albeit (perhaps) more complicated.

The relevance of such an approach is that it obligates us to understand and evaluate democracy as pragmatics and immanently, rather than from a transcendent position. This also implies that our diagnosis about the current crisis of democracy often linked to digital technologies, can be scrutinized as specific ways of practicing and performing certain idea(l)s about society and democracy.

On that basis, I will argue that the discourse on the crisis of democracy due to digitization, is based on certain idealistic assumptions about democracy (in contrast to a pragmatic approach to democracy as suggested above). Consequently, by such standards, we end up with accounts that reproduce those ideals and ironically feed into and increase our disappointment and skepticism towards democracy *as it is*.

I will exemplify and discuss this by drawing on selected research contributions and thereby try to destabilize certain taken-for-granted ness about democracy that might need revision, if we really *care* about democracy.

Digital government, welfare and public administration I

Infrastructures of Care in the Digital Welfare State

Ina Bækgaard – DTU Management and Aarhus Municipality

Despite political ambitions of efficiency, the digitalized Danish welfare state is far from self-sustaining but relies on extensive informal support work to function in practice (Aagaard & Jæger, 2025; Justesen & Plesner, 2024; Papazu et al., 2024; Schou & Hjelholt, 2019). A significant – yet often overlooked – part of this work is carried out by municipal frontline employees who assist citizens struggling to manage their digital interactions (Papazu et al., 2025; Pors, 2015; Winthereik et al., 2024).

Drawing on qualitative interviews with municipal employees in health, care, and social services, this paper develops the concept of digital care work to capture the help provided to citizens who cannot sustain an everyday life in a digitalized society on their own. The analysis shows that digital care work is ongoing, relational, and embedded in broader care practices, distinguishing it from more delimited and task-oriented forms of digital support. Moreover, this work is not confined to specialized units such as citizen service centers or libraries but is deeply embedded in core welfare practices across organizational and professional boundaries. Digital care work thus emerges as an extended care infrastructure that enables citizens' access to rights, services, and participation in a digitalized society. In this sense, it constitutes a precondition for the reproduction of the welfare state.

This points to an understanding of digital care work as a matter of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2011), drawing attention to the maintenance practices that sustain sociotechnical systems.

From this perspective, the digitalization of the public sector does not appear as the implementation of seamless, self-operating technologies, but as an ongoing and careful alignment between technologies and human needs. However, while care in Bellacasa's work is described as ontologically pervasive, the empirical analysis shows that digital

care work is distributed and individualized. Not all employees are able or willing to perform it, and the ontology of care is thus enacted differently across situated practices.

This has significant democratic implications. Digital care work is not a right; citizens cannot be formally allocated digital care in the same way as other welfare services.

Access to the digital welfare state therefore depends, in practice, on which employee a citizen encounters.

The result is a situated and uneven access to the state, where citizens' ability to participate, exercise rights, and enact digital citizenship is shaped by local and relational practices rather than guaranteed through universal entitlements.

The analysis thus challenges the dominant view of digitalization as a process of efficiency, showing instead how digital technologies produce inequality and reshape the democratic foundations of the welfare state.

Developing and implementing trustworthy AI and robotics solutions in City of Aarhus

Morten Falbe-Hansen – Aarhus City Lab

How can public organizations be at the forefront of adopting new technology while maintaining public trust? This paper examines the challenges faced by public institutions in implementing artificial intelligence (AI) and robotic solutions, with particular attention to the role of testing and experimentation in ensuring the development of trustworthy digital systems in the public sector.

In Denmark, the public sector is under increasing pressure to adopt new technologies in order to “do more with less.” This pressure stems from a combination of practical, political, and societal factors, including rising public expectations, demographic changes such as an ageing population, difficulties in recruiting service and care personnel, and the imperative of supporting a green transition. Digital solutions are widely regarded as essential to addressing these challenges, with AI in particular seen as a key driver of improved service quality and cost efficiency.

At the same time, public organizations face significant risks when investing public funds in emerging technologies, while remaining accountable to citizens and operating within politically sensitive environments. Public trust in the use of digital solutions by governmental institutions is therefore crucial for realizing the potential of AI. This importance is emphasized in policy frameworks such as the European Commission’s White Paper on Artificial Intelligence (2020) and Digital Compass for the Digital Decade (2021), as well as in the Danish Agency for Digital Government’s recommendations on AI in the public sector.

This paper provides insight into how a municipality can approach the development and implementation of new technologies, particularly AI and outdoor autonomous mobile robots. It explores the practical, legal, and ethical principles guiding these initiatives in Aarhus, as well as the challenges of introducing such technologies in public spaces in a transparent and democratically grounded manner.

Voicing the state: Synthetic voices in Danish public e-governance

Iben Have – Aarhus University

Voice as a method and medium of interacting with digital systems is no longer peripheral but is rapidly consolidating itself as a mainstream interface valued for its convenience and accessibility. A significant driver of these changes is the fast development and implementation of text-to-speech (TTS) technology, further accelerated by global web accessibility acts mandating that websites and apps implement accessibility solutions for citizens who are permanently, temporarily, or situationally unable to read on-screen text. But what kinds of voices are being included and excluded in this development, under whose control, and with what social, ethical, and democratic consequences?

While several studies show that synthetic voices influence trust, affect, and user experience, most of them rely on isolated words or short commands and pay limited attention to context specificity. Much less attention has been paid to how synthetic TTS voices are perceived when they read longer texts such as webpages or audiobooks (Cambre et al. 2020). And obviously, context matters: the voice representing public authorities should be qualitatively distinct from that of a domestic smart speaker or an online clothing store.

This paper focuses on TTS solutions in Danish public e-governance, as exemplified by the national self-service portal Borger.dk. Denmark is a high-trust and digital-by-default welfare state. Trustworthy, accommodating, and well-functioning e-governance is therefore considered a democratic necessity when Danes are to exercise their rights and fulfil their civic duties. Currently, Borger.dk directs users to the TTS functions embedded in Apple's and Microsoft's operating systems. Consequently, the voices of Danish authorities are the voices of American Big Tech. Empirically, the paper presents preliminary findings from the physical installation "Stemmeboxen" [The Voice/Ballot Box], placed in two Danish municipalities in spring and summer 2026. Stemmeboxen's interface invites citizens to listen to and evaluate a short TTS reading from Borger.dk (on how to apply for a passport), focusing especially on credibility, confidence, and intelligibility. Drawing on sound, voice, and media studies, including the concept of

listening publics (Lacey 2010) and Walter J. Ong's work on orality (1982), the paper presents a theoretical framework around the concept of synthetic orality to discuss the cognitive, cultural, and democratic implications of ubiquitous synthetic voices in digital communication.

Digital government, welfare and public administration II

Digital Welfare States and the Transformation of Administrative Justice – a Socio-Legal perspective

Bettina Lemann Kristiansen – Aarhus University

Across Europe and beyond, public administration is undergoing a profound digital transformation. In Denmark digitalization occupies a prominent position on the political agenda, and over the past 25 years Denmark has witnessed close cooperation between municipalities, regions, and the central government in advancing the digitalization of the public sector

The shift from traditional bureaucratic governance to algorithmic and data-driven governance requires a fundamental rethinking of administrative justice. The digital age demands a paradigm shift in administrative justice, moving from a focus on human bureaucrats and static rules to one that encompasses algorithmic accountability, dynamic transparency, and inclusive design.

A key question is how to ensure that digitalization is implemented in a manner that allows citizens to keep pace. It is essential to avoid situations in which citizens suffer a loss of legal rights as a consequence of digitalization, or in which new forms of inequality are created within the population.

Digitalization disrupts the core architecture of Administrative Justice, which is based in doctrines of due process. Traditional guarantees, such as individualized hearings and reason-giving, cannot simply be transposed onto algorithmic systems without adaptation. Instead, procedural values must be embedded in technological design, supported by independent oversight mechanisms capable of scrutinizing code, data, and institutional practices. If administrative justice is to retain legitimacy in a digital age, legal systems must reconceptualize procedural safeguards for system-level governance.

The fact that fundamental principles and rules of administrative law are often set aside in connection with digitalization—and that this may even occur deliberately and with explicit legal authorization (for example, through the removal of rights to be heard or to appeal)—clearly entails a deterioration in citizens' legal protection.

The digitalization of public administration entails changes in workflows and case-processing methods. However, the principles and rules of administrative law have largely been developed with traditional written case handling in mind. This necessitates the development of new ways to safeguard these principles, as well as the formulation of new rules and standards specifically tailored to digital administration.

This paper examines how digitalization transforms administrative justice in advanced welfare states – Denmark being the primary case. While Scandinavian states are often celebrated as global leaders in digital governance, their experience reveals structural tensions between efficiency-driven automation and rule-of-law guarantees.

From discretion to dependence: the Palantirization of the Danish police

Vasilis Galis, Irina Papazu – IT-University of Copenhagen

Denmark is widely recognized as an early adopter and global leader in public sector digitalization (Aagaard & Jæger, 2025; Schou & Hjelholt, 2018; Ejersbo & Greve, 2016). Digitalization has allegedly made the public sector more efficient and life in the Danish welfare state easier for citizens and businesses (Ejersbo & Greve, 2016; Fleron et al., 2022). Recently, however, the realization has dawned that Denmark, in its pursuit of digital excellence, has made itself vulnerable to outside influences. With digital sovereignty a new matter of concern, state relations to tech companies, citizens, and territory have shifted and are currently objects of intense problematization (Flyverbom et al., 2025; Tornsø Jørgensen, 2025). The hitherto unquestioned and undebated Danish practice of outsourcing its digital services and critical public digital infrastructures to foreign technology companies, including storing sensitive citizen data on US-based platforms, has suddenly made it onto public agendas, bringing the strong Danish ties to its international partners into question.

In this paper, we focus on the case of the Danish police. The Danish government purchased the digital platform Gotham for both the police (POL-INTEL) and intelligence services (PET-INTEL) from the controversial American-based company Palantir. We argue that there is a paradox and an incompatibility between the interests and values of the Danish state monopoly to violence, including its digital infrastructure, and the profit and geopolitical interests of a foreign private business like Palantir (Karlsson & Galis, 2025), not least in the current changing geopolitical climate. Building on earlier empirical work on the digitalization and platformization of the Danish police, this paper will problematize how the process of digitalization of the police and outsourcing of data collection, storage, and use impacts Danish national sovereignty both directly and indirectly. In doing so, we will tease out the different meanings and practices attached to ‘digital sovereignty’ in Denmark at the moment as well as their critical implications.

Digital Surveillance and the Reconfiguration of Democracy in Hybrid Regime

Noluthando Khumalo

This study investigates the reconfiguration of democracy and citizenship in Uganda from 1995 to 2026 through the lens of digital surveillance technologies. It examines how these technologies mediate state citizen relations within a hybrid regime, wherein formal democratic institutions coexist with entrenched authoritarian practices (Diamond, 2002; Levitsky and Way, 2010; Tripp, 2010). Particular emphasis is placed on the implications of surveillance for political participation, civil liberties, and the management of dissent.

The study draws on scholarly literature addressing hybrid regimes, digital authoritarianism (Glasius, 2018), and datafication, and is supported by a qualitative analysis of policy documents and secondary academic sources. A case study approach is employed to examine Uganda's digital governance architecture, including biometric identification systems (Makulilo, 2016; Nalubega and Uwizeyimana, 2024), telecommunications surveillance, and the regulation of social media platforms (Mann and Iazzolino, 2024).

The scholarly debate on this subject is characterized by competing perspectives. Cyber-optimist accounts emphasize the potential of digital tools to enhance democratic governance through improved transparency, efficiency, and citizen engagement.

Conversely, critical scholarship contends that within hybrid regimes, such technologies are frequently instrumentalized to entrench authoritarian control, curtail dissent, and discipline public discourse (Basimanyane, 2025; Jjuuko and Mwesigwa, 2024).

This study argues that in Uganda, digital technologies function primarily as instruments of political control embedded within broader strategies of regime survival. While these tools have augmented state administrative capacity (Mann and Iazzolino, 2024), they have simultaneously enabled the systematic monitoring of opposition actors, the constriction of civic space, and the erosion of substantive democratic norms. Research demonstrates that the introduction of social media taxes has had significant negative impacts on internet usage and the expression of dissent (Levi, Raffler and

Bowles, 2022), while biometric identification systems have created new mechanisms for state surveillance and control (Basimanyane, 2025; Makulilo, 2016). Nonetheless, citizens are not merely passive subjects; they continually adapt to and resist these constraints through digital platforms (Jjuuko and Mwesigwa, 2024), revealing a persistent and dynamic tension between state control and citizen agency (Wakabi and Grönlund, 2020).

Political communication, elections and campaigning I

When Voting Advice Becomes Conversational: A Field Study of Human-AI Interaction During an Election

Emil Bakkensen Johansen, Josephine Lukito – University of Southern Denmark

Generative AI is rapidly entering the informational environments in which citizens interpret parties, issues, and political preferences. However, citizens typically encounter these systems as generic chatbots that are neither transparent nor purpose-built to enact crucial civic infrastructures such as voting advice. Consequently, we still know little about how citizens use chatbots politically and where democratic potentials and problems emerge. This matters because AI chatbots are already being used across European elections, including in the Netherlands, Hungary, and Denmark, which raises questions about the efficacy of human-AI interactions for civic decision-making. This paper presents AI ValgChat FV26, a one-week field deployment of an open-source Danish-language voting advice chatbot built for the 2026 Danish parliamentary election to investigate how citizens use conversational AI for political orientation. AI ValgChat was built as a controlled wrapper around a local LLM/RAG backend: prompts were routed through party/context detection, direct factual questions were answered from local canonical party data, broader advice-seeking and comparison prompts were routed to retrieval-augmented generation, and follow-up questions were attached to LLM outputs from OpenEuroLLM-Danish. All interactions ($n = 4,452$ prompts across 903 sessions) were logged anonymously on both user and system sides, allowing us to observe naturalistic use of a public-facing voting advice interface.

The analysis is twofold. First, from a human-machine interaction perspective, the paper examines users' political goals, dialogue progression, acceptance, resistance, trust, challenges to LLM outputs, and affective responses in subsequent prompts. Second, it examines how the underlying LLM shapes outputs by replaying the same prompts,

session histories, and retrieval contexts through alternative open models. This counterfactual design separates application-level design from model-specific behavior.

Preliminary results suggest that users rarely treated the chatbot as a simple vote-maximizing calculator. Many prompts involved issue prioritization, clarification, and policy information. Responses often compared, clarified, or informed rather than directly recommended, and frequently included uncertainty markers and explanations. User reactions were mixed: many accepted or trusted suggestions, but substantial shares resisted or expressed uncertainty. On the model side, we find divergences in party recommendations across open-source LLMs ($n = 9$), suggesting model-specific political bias can enter voting advice systems even when interface and retrieval context are fixed.

The paper contributes: (1) a naturalistic field study of how citizens appropriate a deployed election chatbot, (2) an interaction-level account of political goals, trust, resistance, and affect in human-AI dialogue, and (3) design and evaluation implications for transparent, purpose-built civic AI systems.

Facebook-based political engagement in Bangladesh

Zakaria Khan – Rutgers University-New Brunswick

Incivility has gained momentum due to social media's affordances for communication without gatekeeping intermediaries. Facebook-based political engagement in Bangladesh is characterized by high levels of incivility, affective polarization, and identity-based conflict. This study examines the features and patterns of political incivility within Facebook-based political discourse in Bangladesh, a context that has recently experienced significant political upheaval. Although political incivility has been widely studied in Western scholarship, little is known about how incivility manifests in Global South contexts with distinct socio-cultural, linguistic, and political histories.

Drawing on the foundational concept of incivility as communicative action that violates norms of mutual respect and disrupts deliberative exchange, this study situates Bangladeshi political discourse within the normative framework of Habermasian deliberative democracy. Using a content analysis of Facebook comment threads from major news media pages, the research aims to identify linguistic, tonal, and rhetorical markers of incivility and examine how factors such as polarization and partisan identity are being shaped in that online discourse. The study also aims to compare these patterns to Western contexts to evaluate similarities and divergences in the performance and perception of incivility. Findings from this research aim to contribute to the global literature on political incivility by providing empirical insight from an understudied context and by demonstrating how democratic norms are negotiated, challenged, or reproduced within digital spaces in Bangladesh.

Political Sharenting on Instagram: Family Imagery, Platformized Visibility, and Boundary Work among Danish Politicians

Maja Sonne Damkjær, Janne Nielsen – Aarhus University

Family imagery has become an increasingly salient element of contemporary political communication, particularly on Instagram. While research has examined personalization and authenticity as communicative strategies online (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018), the specific use of children and family life—political sharenting—remains comparatively underexplored. This gap is especially relevant in Nordic political contexts, where high trust and media literacy shape expectations of political transparency and intimacy (Kalsnes et al., 2017). On Instagram, family imagery does not simply personalize politics; it is also embedded in platformized conditions of visibility through which political selves are publicly performed (Leaver et al., 2020; Marquart, 2023).

This paper examines how Danish politicians mobilize family imagery on Instagram as part of their communicative repertoire. It explores the types of family content Danish politicians share and the communicative and strategic functions these practices serve in terms of personalization, value signalling, political positioning, and boundary work at the intersection of the private and the political. The framework combines research on digital political communication with sharenting scholarship on intimacy, care, and children's visibility online (Farkas & Bene, 2021; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Holiday et al., 2022). It also draws on work on platformised relationality to situate family imagery within broader transformations in digitally mediated intimacy, visibility, and relational display (Erstad et al., 2024). The study draws on qualitative visual analysis of more than 2,000 Instagram images posted between 2020 and 2025 by six Danish millennial MPs. It maps family content, develops close readings of selected posts, and interprets the political functions of this imagery along a continuum from self-presentation to political argumentation.

The analysis shows that political sharenting operates through three ideal-typical modes: everyday-life sharenting, in which domestic scenes construct ordinariness and relatability; strategic sharenting, in which family imagery is linked to policy issues or political values; and negotiated sharenting, in which the partial concealment of children

functions as ethical signalling and boundary work. Taken together, these modes show how everyday domesticity is intertwined with strategic political expression and how politicians' sharenting connects politics to broader cultural scripts of authenticity, parenthood, and moral leadership. In doing so, the paper contributes to research on visual political communication and digital democracy by showing how platformized forms of family visibility and boundary work become part of the communicative conditions through which political actors become publicly visible on Instagram.

Political communication, elections and campaigning II

Political issue spaces, mapping the 2026 Danish Parliamentary Election

Johan Irving Søltoft, Lasse Uhrskov Kristensen & Daniel Nordstrand Frantzen

Political candidates in Denmark have long relied on social media, to communicate their positions, but this landscape has become increasingly fragmented. Where Facebook once used to function as a sort of townhall for political discussions, these debates are now dispersed across multiple platforms, from X to Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. To provide an overview across the different platforms, we collected over 46,000 social media posts from more than 900 parliamentary candidates across these four platforms, during the 2026 Danish Parliamentary Election. To identify thematic patterns within this landscape, we measured the semantic distance between texts using language model embeddings, which represent posts as vectors in a high-dimensional space trained to capture semantic relationships.

Drawing on Rogers and Marres' conceptualization of "issue space" and "issue networks" (Marres & Rogers, 2004; Rogers, 2012), we explore how embedding maps might provide citizens with an alternative interface for accessing and understanding political positioning.

By visualizing and annotating the emergent themes, our map allowed citizens to see which issues candidates posted about and how they relate to one another. Our map reveals, for instance, how nuclear power dominated the energy policy debate (Frantzen et al., 2026a), how chemistry and energy displaced discussions of digitalization and AI (Frantzen et al., 2026b), or why pigs on social media became an unexpectedly central election issue (Frantzen et al., 2026c). However, where Marres & Rogers' hyperlink analysis captured explicit acts of positioning, direct replies, reactions, and citations that signal active engagement with content, our approach operates purely at the semantic

level. We examine semantic kinship: how candidates cluster around issues through language choice, rather than through active relational acts.

This shift raises questions: What do semantic proximities reveal about political positioning when they are decoupled from classical relational commitment? And what are the limitations and possibilities of mapping issue spaces through textual similarity alone?

From collective to connective action? – A study of online participation in Danish elections across 25 years

Jakob Linde Jensen – Aarhus University

This paper investigates the use of the Internet and social media in Danish national elections across a time span of 25 years. It relies on 1) a contextual, historical account on party and citizens' use of the Internet in Danish elections from 1998 to 2022 and 2) a study based on five consecutive surveys conducted among voters in the Danish elections of 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2022.

Similar to other Scandinavian countries, Denmark has consistently ranked among the nations with the highest Internet penetration rates globally, and its population is among the most digitally literate. Furthermore, Denmark boasts a highly digitized public sector, where citizens routinely manage personal administrative affairs through online technologies (Flensburg & Lai, 2021), thereby creating favorable conditions for political engagement both online and offline. Thus, Denmark serves as a pivotal case study for online participation.

Theoretical framework

Political participation is a key term in political science that encompasses various forms of citizen engagement in the political process. Today, political participation occurs within what Andrew Chadwick (2017) calls a hybrid media system, where news stories and political messages circulate fluidly across various media platforms. Citizens may not always be aware of the sources of their information or where they engage. For instance, Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have defined the concept of "connective action" based on studies of activism surrounding Twitter hashtags. They highlight how social media platforms enable individuals to engage in collective action through personalized networks and communication, thus mobilizing individuals for political participation.

The paper addresses the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do patterns of online participation change over time?
- RQ2: To what extent does the Internet replace traditional participation forms?
- RQ3: Can the Internet mobilize and mitigate inequalities in political participation?

Method and data

This article adopts a longitudinal perspective, investigating citizens' online and offline participation during Danish national election campaigns over a span of 15 years. It utilizes survey data from five consecutive elections, specifically in 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2022. By replicating the research design and most questions across all five surveys, the data provide a unique study covering a time span of 15 years from the early sparse use of social media to today's fully hybrid media landscape.

Participants were recruited through online panels, with stratified sampling employed to ensure sufficient representation across all demographic categories. The sample sizes were 970 in 2007, 1,973 in 2011, 3,589 in 2015, 1,903 in 2019, and 1,511 in 2022.

The survey of the five elections: summary of findings

The increasing use of the Internet by parties and candidates, along with the continuous professionalization of their campaigns - including larger budgets and sophisticated use of targeted communication based on social media metrics - has been mirrored by voters' growing adoption of online media. Social media, in particular, has gained significant popularity, with nearly half of the population using social media in recent election campaigns and about 80 percent using the Internet in general.

The study also identified some mobilization effects. Age is the strongest predictor of online participation, but the relationship is reversed compared to traditional political participation. Online, the youngest voters are the most active, while they lag behind in traditional participation. This suggests that the youngest voters may indeed be mobilized.

Conclusion

These findings should be contextualized within a broader perspective. Online participation occurs alongside traditional media and political participation within a hybrid media landscape.

Venerable Representation: AI-Generated Synthetic Media in the 2024 Elections in India and Pakistan

Umer Jan, Jamie Ranger, Estariol De La Paz – Alliance University, India; Hasso-Plattner Institute, Germany

Scholarly and public debate on the intersection of artificial intelligence and electoral politics has been, rightly, dominated by concerns over disinformation, misinformation, and the malicious deployment of deepfakes by external adversaries. This paper identifies and theorises a distinct, underexamined phenomenon operating alongside these threats, one we term venerable representation. We define venerable representation as the use of AI-generated synthetic media by politicians and their parties to construct, extend, or rehabilitate a favourable public image of themselves, rather than to discredit opponents, in order to manage their own political persona and democratic presence.

Drawing on three case studies from the 2024 election cycles in India and Pakistan, namely Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee (West Bengal, India), Arvind Kejriwal (Delhi, India), and Imran Khan (Pakistan), we demonstrate that AI-generated synthetic media was deployed by political actors across a range of distinctive functions, including resurrection (enabling an ailing, elderly politician to participate in campaigning), ventriloquism (allowing an imprisoned leader to communicate with voters beyond the reach of state censorship), and rebranding (projecting continuity and authority for a movement deprived of conventional electoral campaigning platforms). Each case illustrates how AI-generated avatars are not merely a technological novelty, but a transformed site of political communication with direct implications for democratic participation, accountability, and the mediation of political representation.

Our analysis is situated within the cosmotechnical turn in Science and Technology Studies (Hui, 2016; 2021), which cautions against universalising western technological scepticism onto diverse publics. Evidence suggests that South Asian electorates exhibit notably higher levels of trust in AI and optimism about its benefits relative to advanced economies, a disposition shaped by lived experiences of digital technology delivering tangible improvements in governance and economic life. This sociocultural context fundamentally conditions how AI-generated political content is received, interpreted, and legitimised by citizens.

We conclude that if venerable representation continues to proliferate, particularly in regulatory environments that remain unprepared or insufficiently responsive, it will pose new and specific challenges to the relationship between politicians and their publics. As AI personas increasingly mediate democratic participation, questions of transparency, consent, and the integrity of political communication will demand urgent scholarly and institutional attention across future elections worldwide.

Large Language Models (LLMs) as Agents for Augmented Democracy

Jairo Gudiño – University of Toulouse

We explore an augmented democracy system built on off-the-shelf large language models (LLMs) fine-tuned to augment data on citizens' preferences elicited over policies extracted from the government programmes of the two main candidates of Brazil's 2022 presidential election. We use a train-test cross-validation set-up to estimate the accuracy with which the LLMs predict both: a subject's individual political choices and the aggregate preferences of the full sample of participants. At the individual level, we find that LLMs predict out of sample preferences more accurately than a 'bundle rule', which would assume that citizens always vote for the proposals of the candidate aligned with their self-reported political orientation. At the population level, we show that a probabilistic sample augmented by an LLM provides a more accurate estimate of the aggregate preferences of a population than the non-augmented probabilistic sample alone. Together, these results indicate that policy preference data augmented using LLMs can capture nuances that transcend party lines and represents a promising avenue of research for data augmentation.

AI governance, algorithms and democratic futures

The Technostructural Democratic Affordances of Decentralised Social Media: Mastodon and Bluesky in the EU push towards digital sovereignty

Joan Pla Vivoles – Østfold University College

The European pursuit of digital sovereignty (Pohle & Thiel, 2020; Santaniello, 2025) has recently shifted from abstract policy debates into demands for concrete infrastructure, particularly in the realm of social media (Scharfbillig et al., 2026; Verwiebe et al., 2025). The European Commission's registration of a European Citizens' Initiative (European Commission, 2026) in March 2026 demanding the creation of a "European Public Social Network" (EPSN) serves as a critical test of public support for sovereign digital spaces.

Taking this initiative as a catalyst, this article investigates the requisite architectural and technical properties of such a network by analysing and comparing two of the leading Decentralised Social Media contenders: the ActivityPub ecosystem (primarily utilised by Mastodon) and the AT Protocol ecosystem (developed by Bluesky and adapted by the Euroskey project). Employing the technostructural heuristic framework developed by Sanders and van Dijck (2025; see also van Dijck, 2013), this study dissects both networks across their technical (protocols, servers, licensing) and organisational (moderation, ownership, business models) layers. The analysis maps the acute structural frictions within these platforms, revealing how specific architectural choices force inevitable trade-offs between competing public values, such as community sovereignty versus individual portability, and infrastructural scalability versus decentralised governance.

This article concludes that while both protocols offer compelling decentralised affordances, they are not equally suited for a proposed EPSN project. Despite Bluesky's technical innovations, its underlying architecture and organisational model remain tethered to a centralised corporate ethos and venture capital incentives (Leerssen, 2025).

In contrast, ActivityPub provides a more robust, genuinely public infrastructural foundation for a sovereign digital commons, owing to its historical and technical roots in open web standards (Berners-Lee, 2025; Gehl, 2025; Murdock, 2005; Zuckerman, 2020), despite requiring significant refinement in usability, account portability, and discoverability. While designating ActivityPub as the definitive candidate remains a matter for further research, this study serves to delineate the essential architectural parameters of a prospective public social network with built-in democratic affordances, standing in stark contrast to current social media platforms driven by the extractive logics of the attention economy (High-Level Panel on Public Interest Media, 2025; Wu, 2016; Zuboff, 2018).

Aligning Sovereign Foundation Models through Constitutional AI

Stine Lyngsø Beltoft, Jonas Vistrup, Peter Schneider-Kamp, Lukas Galke Poech – University of Southern Denmark

Constitutional AI is the state-of-the-art method for normative alignment of large language models, driving commercial systems such as Claude. The method relies on creating a plain text file “the constitution” to encode norms and values – which is then incorporated into the model through training. When building sovereign language models, we have the unique opportunity to develop a constitution that supports human rights and democratic values.

An AI constitution is a structured articulation of the principles, values, and normative boundaries, which the system is expected to follow, defining what it should prioritize, avoid, and balance when navigating complex or ambiguous situations. It functions as a bridge between societal values and machine behavior: a living expression of collective expectations translated into guidance for AI systems. It is thus a socio-political artifact, reflecting whose values are encoded, how trade-offs are resolved, and how legitimacy is established.

The goal of the strategic initiative on Danish Foundation Models, funded by the Danish Government, is to train open-source large language models that excel in Danish.

In this context, we aim to develop a constitution for Danish Foundation Models. However, the procedure for developing such a constitution is a massive challenge in itself: Who should be invited to contribute? Who decides what norms and values get in? What would an iterative procedure look like? To what extent do we need participatory design or even a democratic process?

Either way, we argue that it is beneficial to act. If we did not develop such a constitution, we are – at best – left with norms and values set by Big Tech, and at worst, the models will not be aligned to human values at all. With this talk, we plan to open the discussion on the procedure on how a constitution for advanced AI systems should be developed.

Our starting point is that the constitution should not be treated as a fixed or finalized document, but as an evolving, participatory process, akin to continuous citizen science.

The goal is to iteratively draft, test, critique, and refine a “Danish AI Constitution” that captures diverse perspectives on fairness, transparency, accountability, and democratic values.

By opening up this process for discussion at the conference, we aim to explore what a sovereign constitution should contain and how it can remain responsive, legitimate, and aligned with a changing society over time.

From Token Ownership to Participation: Rethinking DAO Governance for Public-Interest Infrastructure

Razali Samsudin – Manifest Studio Collective, Gareth Fakhry – Amnesty International Aotearoa New Zealand

Legitimacy in public-interest digital infrastructure is a structural design constraint before it is a political aspiration. In Decentralised Autonomous Organisations (DAOs), token-weighted governance permits capital to masquerade as consent, reproducing plutocratic dynamics commons governance scholars have long cautioned against (Ostrom, 1990). For civil society organisations engaging communities from the global majority — where participation is rarely reducible to financial stake — this is not a calibration issue. It is a structural failure of authority.

This paper argues that governance legitimacy in public-interest contexts must be derived from observable patterns of sustained participation — time, advocacy, campaign engagement, and civic contribution — rather than asset ownership. We present HRDAO, a contribution-based governance architecture developed within Amnesty International’s global network. The architecture separates a transferable utility layer (HRT-UTL) coordinating operational participation from a non-transferable governance capacity layer (HRT-GOV) accumulating through sustained engagement, drawing on soulbound token principles (Ohlhaber, Weyl, and Buterin, 2022), where authority derives from participation rather than market exchange. Existing civil society signals — petition signing, event attendance, campaign involvement — function as governance inputs without imposing new behavioural demands.

We evaluated the architecture through scenario-based modelling and a preliminary pilot with 40 participants. Across conditions including participation spikes, hoarding, and adversarial farming, the separation of economic activity from governance authority consistently insulated constitutional decision-making from token market volatility — the model’s key structural property. Design constraints specific to human rights contexts include non-speculative incentives, pseudonymous identity protection for at-risk defenders, anti-capture safeguards, and cross-jurisdictional legal variability; robust Sybil resistance and digital inclusion remain open challenges.

We reflect critically on the limits of this work: thin empirical grounding at scale; the risk of “participation plutocracy” where those with flexible schedules disproportionately accumulate influence; and the contested politics of weighting contributions — a hidden value judgment embedded in technical parameters. The non-transferable nature of HRT-GOV encodes a boundary condition for AI proliferation: constitutional authority requires accountability that cannot be delegated to automated systems.

We conclude that legitimacy in civic digital infrastructure rests on two structurally intertwined conditions — participatory authority over decisions, and verifiable custody over evidence. Connecting HRDAO to complementary witness and archive infrastructure, we argue that participation and memory are the twin conditions of legitimate digital civic life. This is not a rejection of DAO infrastructure, but a reorientation: legitimacy cannot be left to emerge from market dynamics. It must be encoded directly into participation, authority, and decision-making.

Data for public space: How journalism can join urban issues through open municipal data

Isabella Moura - Universidade Nova de Lisboa

Open data is an integral part of methodologies for analyzing urban issues. Internally, administrative data serves as a decision-making tool for the political elite; its openness constitutes an essential source of information for citizens, associations, and journalists.

This research identifies data journalism as a technical and public-interest mediator, translating information that, despite being “open,” remains largely inaccessible or incomprehensible to the general public.

This study aims to support the use of public data as a means of monitoring urban public policies by reinforcing citizens’ right to access and reuse information. It emphasizes the importance of an open data agenda that focuses on content curation rather than on the quantity of datasets released. Methodologically, the study analyzes 30 urban-themed projects from the SIGMA Awards, using the City of Lisbon’s Open Data Portal as a comparative reference. The study assesses the feasibility of replicating these journalistic projects in the city of Lisbon, addressing a key question: to what extent is useful open data on these topics actually available?

The results point to information gaps that limit democratic agency. Based on these findings, the paper suggests that information curation should move beyond the logic of “what the administration wants to show” toward “what users need to know.”

Ultimately, this study proposes a model of active transparency centered on demonstrated user demand, usability, and the necessity of continuous feedback between administrations and society to foster effective urban governance.

Mapping Notions of Democratic Debate Online in Denmark: Conceptualisations, Affordances, and Deficits

Ulrikke D. Sørensen – Aalborg University

Concerns about how new information and communication structures affect democracy are not new, but the unprecedented scale and speed of digitisation, platformization, and technological advancements have intensified not only discussions but also policy and digital governance on how platforms alter democratic infrastructures (Scharfbillig et al., 2026). To grasp the democratic ramifications much attention has been given to empirical investigations of social media platforms as causing democratic decline (Gulbrandsen & Just, 2025; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022). At the same time, the intersection of social media and democracy has become a focal point in policy discussions about digital governance and tech policy. In Denmark, across organisational and political arenas these discussions have led to the production of several reports, policy documents, initiatives, and briefs identifying and assessing challenges with and on digital platforms such as misinformation, hate speech, derogatory tone, incivility, opaque algorithms, retention mechanism, etc., and their implication for democracy.

Within the Danish policy discourse the democratic ramifications are often approached from the concept of democratic debate online (Erhvervsministeriet, 2023; Regeringen, 2021; Regeringens ekspertgruppe, 2024). The concept serves as a key signifier in relation to ambitions of democratic resilience, healthy information environments, and inclusive debate. Yet, despite the concept's centrality in policy discourse the digital transformation has led to a diversification of conceptualisations with closely connected concepts such as digital public debate, public conversation, online public(s), and digital public sphere(s). As attention has been given to empirical examinations there does not exist an overview of the conceptualisation(s), assigned meanings, and attributed properties of democratic debate online or adjacent notions. Without understanding the conceptual scope of democratic debate online, the assigned meanings emerge through the ways in which it is connected to specific issues, policy concerns, and/or normative attributes (Marres, 2012). Thus, to understand what the concept democratic debate online or adjacent notions do in Danish policy discourse, I investigate the conceptual components and how Danish organisations, institutions, researchers, and policy entities employ the concept in Danish publications on social media platforms and democracy.

By situating the concept democratic debate online within broader constellations of associated terms, I contribute with better understanding of conceptual scopes and foundations of contemporary democratic ramifications of social media in a Danish context. Hence, by illuminating how key concepts structures current policy debates and shape understandings of democratic challenges, this paper explore how democratic problem definitions are articulated and how conceptualisations guide digital governance.

Platform governance, speech and regulation

Power over platforms: Strong and universal preference for more individual control over online choice architectures

Friederike Stock - Max Planck Institute for Human Development

Who should control online choice architectures, that is, the online environments in which people make decisions? This question remains controversial and is undergoing dynamic change worldwide as private actors, governments, and individuals compete for control of online spaces where news is shared and opinions are formed. Online environments steer user attention, raising concerns about a loss of user agency, autonomy and even manipulation. Yet little is known about who users themselves think should control their online environments. In our preregistered conjoint study, participants decided between combinations of three possible choice architects—governments, platforms, and individuals—and three objectives—societal, commercial, and personal—in seven real-world contexts. We developed contexts that are common across a wide range of social media and commercial platforms: the organization and ranking of news feeds, default privacy settings, suggestions of accounts to follow, misinformation labeling, the regulation of dark patterns in online shops, friction induced in sharing or opening apps, and the selection of ads. Participants were largely recruited via an engagement strategy on social media, including a total of $N = 11,686$ participants from 26 countries. Three major findings emerged. First, people consistently have a strong preference for being their own choice architects. When available, this option was chosen with a probability of 64.8% (confidence interval [CI]: 64.4%–65.2%), as opposed to commercial choice architects with 42.7% (CI: 42.3%–43.1%) and governmental choice architects with 42.5% (CI: 42.1%–42.9%). Second, this preference for more agency applies across all 26 countries in our sample, and across a broad range of political systems. Third, the preferences for governmental or commercial choice architects is mediated by characteristics of the individual and their country of residence. These include an individual's political leaning and trust in the choice architect, as well as democracy indices of the country. Nevertheless, across all these factors, a clear message emerges: People prefer to be their own online choice architect rather than rely

on governments or commercial entities. It is also clear that people disapprove of online choice architectures being organized for commercial goals—and therefore disapprove of the current state of affairs in most countries and on most major platforms. Our results challenge the status quo and suggest that people want more control over their online environments than they have at the moment. This holds across various cultural backgrounds, political systems, and platforms.

Building a European Public Sphere? Stakeholder debates on a European Streaming Platform for public service media

Gentiana Ramadani – University of Vienna, Heidi Keinonen – Independent researcher and founder Medialogi Ltd.

Communication is increasingly shaped by digital platform infrastructures, which now dominate the distribution of news and information. As a result, public debate is progressively structured by algorithmic systems and global platforms. In this evolving environment, public service media (PSM), traditionally a cornerstone of democratic media systems, face growing challenges, including declining visibility, reduced relevance, and the risk of weakening connections with citizens.

In 2025, a new study initiated a debate among stakeholders around the development of a shared European news streaming platform. This initiative can be understood as both a technological and governance project, aiming to strengthen European public media, enhance cross-border access to news, and generate “European added value.” In this context, the platform emerges as a site where public value is being redefined in the digital age, shaping how European citizens access, interpret and engage with public information.

In April 2026, the European Commission launched its first call for projects, inviting Member States to contribute ideas to what is now evolving into a concrete policy initiative. Building on this case, the present paper examines and analyses stakeholder perspectives on the proposed platform, focusing on how it is debated, imagined and/if contested. It further explores key questions, including: What does “European added value” mean for different actors? What role should citizens play in this emerging infrastructure? And to what extent is the platform driven by public interest versus market-oriented logics?

The paper combines a conceptual framework with empirical insights, drawing on the perspectives of key actors such as EU policymakers, public broadcasters, media professionals, and civil society representatives. Methodologically, it relies on document analysis of EU policy materials and the platform study, complemented by expert interviews.

The article situates the initiative within ongoing transformations of European PSM, which are increasingly adopting platform-oriented strategies while attempting to uphold their public value mission. It thus contributes to understanding how PSM are repositioning themselves within a media landscape dominated by global platforms, streaming services and processes of platformisation, by examining the European news streaming platform as a focal point of contemporary public debate.

Democracy or technocracy? Examining the digitalization of urban planning in Finland

Hanna Mattila – University of Turku, Pilvi Nummi – Aalto University, Eveliina Harsia-Mikkola – Aalto University

Urban planning has been in a key role in the development of democratic qualities of public governance in the Nordic countries and beyond. Planning shapes the everyday living environments of people, and people are typically highly motivated to participate in planning. In this paper, we examine participatory democracy in the context of Finnish urban planning, where participatory democracy has been in a key role ever since the year 2000, when the Land Use and Building Act (132/1999) introduced mandatory public engagement processes in public planning.

Today, Finnish planning law is under reform, and democratic qualities of planning have hardly been on the agenda at all. A similar trend has been observed by planning scholars internationally: planning has taken a technocratic turn (Savini & Raco 2019). Expert knowledge and its role in implementing neoliberal political agendas seem to increasingly crowd out public participation. This, in turn, opens the door not only to techno-managerialism but sometimes also to authoritarianism in planning (Fearn & Davoudi 2022).

In the Finnish case, a notable exception to the prevailing trend is the introduction of digital technology, especially the information system called “Ryhti” that stores digital information on the built environment, and the Plan Information Model (PIM) that harmonizes all municipal and regional plans, forcing them into machine-readable and interoperable format. The legislature preparing the digital transformation has argued that the Ryhti and PIM contribute significantly to the democratic quality of planning as they make planning more transparent and information more accessible to the stakeholders (Government of Finland 2022).

Nonetheless, it seems obvious that digitalization can also lead to technocratic practices (Nummi, Harsia-Mikkola & Mattila 2025). We thus ask whether the trust of Finnish legislature on the positive contribution of the Ryhti system and

PIM to democracy is warranted. Our research builds on interviews conducted with professionals in charge of the development of the Ryhti and PIM and planners involved in the piloting of these systems. The themes that stood out from the interview material included the changing position of lay participants vis-à-vis experts in planning, the relative powers of planners and technological experts in shaping digitalised planning, the shift of focus from local democracy to supra-local democracy, the potential security risks that the open plan data provision includes, and the dangers related to data becoming contaminated with disinformation.

How does digital governance of social media platforms influence the public in India and the United Kingdom?

Kurt Seher

My doctoral research examined digital governance of social media platforms in India and the United Kingdom through (i) digital dual-use operations, (ii) the role of social media platforms (specifically focusing on Facebook/Meta and Twitter/X), (iii) the legal frameworks, and (iv) the observed implications these create on the public. These four analytical dimensions emerged from my data and was explored within three emergent themes: -veillance, content control, and shaped discourse. In this conference, I would share my findings on the fourth analytical dimension across three themes. Bringing together my secondary data analysis, 22 semi-structured online interviews, and data source triangulation, I identified three key findings that provide insights about how digital governance influence the public impact: public awareness, public distrust, and self-censorship.

Public awareness refers to unsatisfied knowledge people have towards the employed operations on the digital sphere and government-platform engagements. This also involves the concerns towards limited awareness due to transparency measures practiced by the countries. Some examples on this are the user data exchanges and content removal discussions between the governments and the platforms, legislation that supports public disclosure but also excepts certain RIO requests, and the uncertainty of existing stakeholders and operations they conduct on platforms.

Public distrust emerged as one of the most comprehensive findings that revealed scepticism towards technology, platforms, governments, and democracy. For instance, the amount of excessive surveillance operations illustrated distrust among a few respondents. Platforms' business centric operations were also identified as a concern, alongside perceptions that governments seek to access and profit from these platforms, further reinforcing distrust. More broadly, there was a common scepticism regarding how democracy is practiced online and a perceived decline in its transformation.

Self-censorship appears as the resulting reflexive change in the people's behaviour, where they feel in the need to tailor their online engagements. Within the digital democratic literature, this reflects a subtle form of pressure where users' free speech is suppressed from fear, particularly from their lack of control over the data and possible politicised backlash they receive from authorities.

Together, these findings will be supported with illustrative examples and quotes derived from secondary data and interviews in relation to -veillance, content control and shaped discourse.

When conflict becomes governance: Countergovernance and digital democracy in Brazil

Carine Roos – University of Sheffield

Digital technologies increasingly operate as epistemic and infrastructural systems through which democratic life is mediated and contested. Platforms shape how citizens know, engage with, and are governed by democratic institutions (Couldry, 2024, 2025; Meijas & Couldry, 2024; Woll, 2019). As AI systems become embedded within platform ecosystems, regulatory interventions targeting platforms may indirectly configure the institutional conditions under which AI operates. The weakening of content moderation and the scaling of automated systems have intensified structural harms, consolidating concentrated private authority over infrastructures central to democratic life (HIIG, 2024; Regehr et al., 2024; Santini et al., 2024).

While AI governance scholarship has emphasized regulation, ethics, and participation (Kuziemski & Misuraca, 2020; Veale et al., 2023; Dignum, 2025), less attention has been given to how organized contestation reshapes digital governance. This paper advances countergovernance as a lens to examine democratic participation through conflict within institutional settings. The paper analyzes Brazil's Digital Child Statute (Law 15.211/2025), approved after intense public mobilization and corporate lobbying. Triggered by a viral video exposing harms in platform design affecting children, the case moved rapidly from public indignation to institutional struggle. Civil society coalitions translated affective mobilization into legislative intervention through drafting, technical advocacy, and lobbying oversight under asymmetrical power conditions.

Theoretically, the paper draws on a conceptual trajectory of countergovernance. Mouffe (2000) defines conflict as constitutive of democracy, transformed from antagonism into agonism. Rosanvallon (2008) extends participation beyond elections through vigilance, denunciation, and evaluation. Dean (2018) conceptualizes countergovernance as institutionalized opposition through prevention, oversight, and judgment. Attard-Frost (2023) applies this logic to AI as organized resistance to the political-economic systems structuring technological infrastructures.

Methodologically, the study combines document analysis, process tracing, and interviews with civil society actors. Findings identify five mechanisms: anticipatory expertise, discursive reframing (from censorship to child protection), technical counter-lobbying, procedural intervention through strategic delay, and decentralized coordination. These mechanisms transformed conflict into institutional redesign, including restrictions on profiling minors and transparency obligations.

The case suggests that democratic agency in digital societies operates not only through deliberation but through interventions in the temporal, procedural, and epistemic dimensions of governance. Although the statute does not directly regulate AI, it reshapes infrastructural conditions under which AI systems operate. Implementation now reopens conflict around regulatory interpretation, privacy safeguards, auditability, and platform dependence (Görge, 2026). Countergovernance, therefore, does not end with legislative victory; it continues as sustained oversight during implementation.

Political participation, deliberation and digital citizenship I

Between Bans and Bildung: Figures of Youth in High School Policies Governing Students' Use of Digital Technologies

Ditte Andersen – VIVE

Recent global debates on digital distractions, algorithmic addiction, and the tech industry's unethical practices have spurred widespread bans on phones, social media, and AI tools in high schools. Yet, these same concerns also highlight the urgent need to cultivate students' capacities to critically engage with digital societies. This paper examines how Danish high schools navigate this tension through their digital policies. Based on a comprehensive analysis of all 160 digital policies from Danish high schools collected in 2026, we ask: How do local policies propose to govern students' use of digital technologies, and what figures of youth do they construct?

We analyze the policies using Bacchi's (2025) 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' approach and Threadgold's (2020) theoretical concept 'Figures of Youth'. We identify three prominent material-semiotic constructions: youths as potential victims, political actors, and future workers. Our analysis indicates a dynamic interplay between restrictive bans and the enduring continental tradition of Bildung; a pedagogy centered on fostering reflexive self/world involvement. In Denmark, high schools are legally required to develop students' digital competencies, but they also aspire to foster digital Bildung (digital dannelse), a concept that extends beyond digital literacy to foster autonomy, active citizenship and societal transformation.

The study further uncovers conflicting views and notable silences regarding student involvement in policy development. We situate these findings within broader discussions of moral panics, democratic education, digital citizenship, and the sociology of youth, offering critical insights into the governance of youth in an increasingly digital world.

Democratic deliberation starts at the dinner table: Young Danes and relatable political discussions in their ‘safe gardens’

Gitte Stald – IT University of Copenhagen

The term ‘safe gardens’ (Stald & Balle, 2024) indicates a private space with a homely atmosphere of safety, embracing those with a right to be present, excluding ‘threatening’ visitors. But the safe garden is not closed off – you can walk in and out, talk over the hedge, bring in information gathered elsewhere, offline or online, and you can listen, unnoticed, to what goes on outside the hedge. This paper argues that the ‘safe garden’ offers a productive metaphorical lens for understanding how many young Danes experience political awareness and participation in digital society. The analysis shows that young Danes are broadly interested in both everyday, relatable issues and larger political questions. They are well-informed across a range of topics and express relatively high trust in democratic institutions. Yet, a central tension emerges as everyday discussions in safe, informal settings are rarely recognized by the participants themselves as political engagement. Similarly, local, lived experiences are seldom framed as politically meaningful, despite their clear relevance to democratic life.

The findings show that young Danes exercise a kind of sub-activist agency (Bakardjieva, 2010) when they discuss over the dinner table or in other offline settings with family and friends or when they sign online petitions or join demonstrations (Hirzalla & Zoonen, 2011). However, when it comes to participation in public debate, the majority sign off. Key barriers include fear of insufficient knowledge, concern about social repercussions, reluctance to stand out, and limited motivation (DUF, 2024). The research question that frames the paper’s objective is: “What accounts for the discrepancy between young Danes’ self-perceived lack of political participation, and the democratic significance of their everyday deliberation within ‘safe gardens’?” Addressing this question, the paper aims to reconceptualize political participation by foregrounding informal, relational, and context-bound practices that fall outside conventional definitions of engagement (Mascheroni, 2017).

The analysis draws on a qualitative study from 2024. The study investigates young Danes’ experiences of being informed, participating, democratic citizens through interviews with twenty first-year high school students, essays from seventy-five first-

and second year high school students, and a participatory workshop with the same cohort. In the workshop, students produced podcasts or rap pieces designed to encourage younger peers to stay informed and speak up.

The paper contributes to an important understanding of young citizens' intrinsic democratic and political potentials in the light of derived democratic normativity and self-perceived lack of political insight and agency (Connolly & Miller, 2017).

Leave No One Behind: Using Citizen-Generated Data to Advance Democracy and Reframe Datafication

Jess Reia – University of Virginia

Community-based data collection is often called citizen-generated data or simply citizen data. It refers to information created and shared by individuals or communities outside traditional institutional settings, often to address public issues or advocate for change. Digital tools helped citizen data gain global recognition as a vital source of information for evidence-based policymaking, especially at the international, multistakeholder level. This data practice is generally described as a form of civic data consciously produced and publicly available, aimed at supporting democratic debate and solving public problems. The UN Statistics Division has acknowledged the importance of citizen data in monitoring Sustainable Development Goals, providing guidelines for integrating such data into national statistical systems and issuing declarations to reinforce the “leave no one behind” (LNOB) principle of equality and non-discrimination. LNOB implies that those at the social and regulatory margins of society should be seen and included in policies. However, at the national and state levels, citizen-generated data still faces many obstacles that prevent its full integration into more effective policymaking. When dealing with sensitive, digital data, special attention must be paid to avoid harming those who are already vulnerable. In a moment when countries face decreased trust in government, increased mis/disinformation, and anti-intellectual sentiments in public opinion, defining and using evidence is challenging – especially when it comes from non-official sources. The work presented here discusses the limitations and opportunities of citizen-generated data in the age of datafication to advance democracy and digital citizenship. It does so by examining one specific case study that, despite focusing on North America, aligns with growing trends in Europe and beyond: gender identity and expression. The attacks on gender-diverse communities in the US and Canada take many forms, from civil and human rights violations to the erasure of data related to trans people and gender affirming care. Historically, what we call SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression) data has rarely been officially collected by the US government, leaving the arduous task to communities, civil society organizations, individuals and research organizations. The main goals of this study are to advance theory on citizen-generated

data as a key tool for democratic processes and to build empirical roadmaps to improve its integration into more effective decision-making. The preliminary findings presented here are part of a larger project funded as an Andrew Carnegie Fellowship. Methods include primary data collections through interviews, secondary data analysis, and legal and policy analyses.

Sustainability and Scalability in Digital Democracy: A Comparative Study of Three E-participation Platforms

Anastasiia Blazhko, Summer Boucher-Robinson, Nadim Mostak Sany, Victor Werimo, Salsabil Yakoubi, Joep Crompvoets, Laurien Coenen – KU Leuven

E-participation is a form of governance, typically defined as the use of digital technologies to involve citizens in political decision-making, providing accessible channels through which citizens can contribute to political discussions, express opinions or interact with public authorities. In the last decade, the number of e-participation initiatives has rapidly grown across democratic governance systems. Despite increasing investment in digital infrastructure, many initiatives fail to reach completion and are abandoned due to misaligned goals, low user satisfaction, and sustainability issues. While current literature highlights technological design and immediate policy results, research on the long-term sustainability and scalability of e-participation platforms remains limited. This study directly addresses that gap.

This paper explores the factors that influence the sustainability and scalability of successful e-participation platforms, applying the principles of Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology 2 (UTAUT2) model. In order to better represent the public-sector context and the civic aspects of e-participation adoption, the UTAUT2 framework was expanded to include two additional constructs, perceived political empowerment and trust in government.

The research employs a comparative qualitative case study methodology across three platforms: Decide Madrid (Spain), Smart Seoul (South Korea), and the Brussels e-participation ecosystem (Belgium). These cases were selected for their geographic diversity, governance contexts, and demonstrated longevity. Data was collected through expert interviews and analysis of platform documentation, and analysed using a structured coding framework.

Findings reveal that sustainability and scalability are closely interconnected: platforms that scale successfully initially demonstrate internal sustainability through strong stakeholder ownership, adaptive leadership, and continuous institutional support. Across all three cases, perceived political empowerment and trust in government emerged as significant predictors of user adoption and ongoing engagement – factors

underrepresented in standard technology acceptance models. Facilitating conditions, including digital literacy support and infrastructure access, were particularly vital in determining whether platforms could move beyond pilot phases and achieve systemic integration.

The study also highlights ongoing cross-cutting challenges: the digital divide, lack of transparent feedback loops between citizen input and policy outcomes, and risk-averse organisational cultures that impede institutionalisation. A "one-size-fits-all" approach to e-participation design was found to be ineffective across different territorial, cognitive, and affective scales.

Rather than providing clear answers and practical steps for policymakers and platform designers, this paper highlights the main pain points and key areas that should be taken into account when building resilient, inclusive, and scalable digital democratic infrastructure.

Further research on these opportunities and challenges could serve as a valuable direction for future study.

Political participation, deliberation and digital citizenship II

Leveraging Generative AI to Enhance Student Self-Reflection in Character and Citizenship Education

Koh Tai Xiang

This study investigates the potential of Generative AI (GenAI) to enhance students' civic self-reflection in the MOE-OBS Challenge Programme, within Singapore's Character and Citizenship Education (CCE) curriculum. The programme aims to build social cohesion and concerned citizenship among youths of diverse backgrounds within Singapore's distinctive multicultural context. Reflecting on these shared experiences helps students draw insights about themselves and others, a process central to civic identity formation. Literature identifies reflection as critical to character development (Harrison et al., 2016). A CCE curriculum survey found that students' reflections often lack depth while teachers lack the bandwidth for individualised scaffolding. Existing tools show promise but were not designed for CCE's citizenship learning purposes.

The study configured Learning Assistant (LEA), a conversational AI tool within Singapore's Student Learning Space (SLS), with citizenship-focused prompts to help students uncover insights about their attitudes, skills, and mindsets. The study chose LEA its universal student access, safety guardrails, and integrated SLS ecosystem enabling student scaffolding and teacher analysis.

Employing a mixed-methods quasi-experimental design across 257 students in four schools, the study compared LEA against the Interactive Thinking Tool (ITT), a traditional scaffolded reflection approach within SLS. Quantitative measures assessed reflection depth across three phases (Think Back, Learn From It, and Do It Better) using a rubric where AI scoring was standardised against human raters before being applied to the full dataset.

From the student perspective, LEA provided a safe and non-judgmental space that was less intimidating than peer sharing. This enabled students who struggled with reflection

to articulate their thoughts more comfortably. From the teacher perspective, LEA scaffolded all students concurrently, freeing teachers to focus on those needing further assistance. The SLS Data Assistant synthesised themes across student responses, enabling teachers to facilitate richer discussions. Quantitative measures found no significant difference in reflection quality between groups, attributable to constraints only apparent through the trial: LEA's safety-focused design, including a hard limit on exchanges to prevent student overreliance, may have prevented students from reaching the deeper reflection phases.

The value of chatbots lies in scaffolding individual reflection and surfacing student voices, not in replacing the social dimensions of learning. Drawing on Lim's (2025) concept of sycophancy by design, AI's tendency to affirm rather than challenge limits its capacity for the honest civic self-examination that CCE requires. The teacher's facilitative role therefore remains essential, prompting genuine dialogue, challenging thinking and consolidating learning in ways that AI, by design, cannot.

Imagined Citizen – Who are we Thinking About in the Digital City?

Sejal Chandak – University of the West of England

Taking cities at the centre, this work attempts to question and understand the imaginaries of a citizen in our digital future. The current reimagining of our urban space as technology-backed, efficiently run, ever-growing yet sustainable, with an improved quality of life, is also reimagining the citizen residing in such a space. Who do we think about when we think about the residents of such spaces? Who is being given the right and opportunity to occupy these spaces? And what does it mean for anyone who does not fit the mould of such reimagination?

Building on these questions, today, a dominant narrative for urban growth has been the ability of information and communication technologies to revitalise democratic relationships through improved consultation and participation. The reimagination of urban spaces concentrates heavily on ‘citizen-centricity’ for any successful digital endeavour. However, such citizen-centric visualisation expects citizens to be digitally aware, be participative through digital mediums and be ready to contribute towards creating data in a city. On one hand, we have the increasing scope of the ‘data gaze’ and on the other hand, a shrinking space for anyone resisting this data gaze. Hence, a citizen who might not be digitally aware, might not have the technical means to participate through digital mediums, or chooses not to contribute to the data pool, might find themselves at the periphery of these smart and digitally advanced urban spaces. Do digital tools have the potential to make our cities more equitable, or are we being pushed into futures where digital tools create another level of inequality?

To explore these issues further, this work takes the theoretical framework of social imaginaries and governmentality to question the ‘imagined citizen’ of digitised urban spaces. It also utilises two citizen-centric measures adopted in Belfast (UK) and Indore (India) under their smart city projects to interrogate how policies and different actors contribute towards the creation of this imagined citizen and the role that citizens themselves play in ‘making’ their digital identities in such spaces. Through this interrogation, we seek to understand how the data gaze impacts democratic engagements in our cities and how the future of our democracies might look with the increasing scope of data gaze in our societies.

Journalism, data and democracy

Audience Pathways of Belonging and Critique in Non-Traditional News Use

Leif H. Pedersen, Eva Mayerhöffer – Roskilde University

Across contemporary digital media environments, audiences increasingly engage with news and information through practices that unfold beyond established journalistic institutions. Research on alternative news has mapped how such outlets fit into users' repertoires and relate to trust and political attitudes, yet it has largely conceptualised "alternative news" as a bounded set of outlets rather than as a wider field of practices spanning heterogeneous actors, formats and platforms. This perspective invites closer attention to how users' engagements with non-traditional information sources and arenas shape experiences of identity, community and patterns of societal critique.

This paper advances an audience-centred reorientation of research on alternative news use by examining how Danish media users who are critical of the journalistic mainstream navigate a broader informational periphery of alternative-to-mainstream sources and arenas across digital infrastructures of information and public debate.

Theoretically, the study builds on recognition theory and Douglas Giles' distinction between affirmational and transformational recognition struggles. This framework is used to examine when engagements with alternative sources function primarily as efforts to affirm personal and collective identities, and when they move toward more outward-facing struggles over visibility, voice and critique in the public sphere. In doing so, the paper refines an audience-focused model attentive to how mediated identities and social imaginaries are enacted through everyday information practices.

Empirically, the analysis draws on 32 in-depth interviews with purposively sampled Danish users from both pronounced left- and right-wing positions of the political spectrum who are critical toward the media mainstream. Each interview begins with a Q-sort-inspired card-sorting exercise designed to map informants' alternative-to-mainstream sources, followed by narrative probing of recognition-related sentiments,

experiences and evaluative judgments. The interviews conclude by exploring participants' relationships to alternative social media platforms and initiatives. In addition, participants were invited to make data donations of their media-use histories, enabling triangulation of self-reported practices with digital trace data. The paper contributes a typology of audience pathways through alternative-to-mainstream information that illuminates how users' negotiations of belonging and critique unfold across interconnected digital spaces. By situating these pathways within broader sociotechnical conditions of public communication, the study offers insights into how everyday information practices may both enable and constrain forms of critical citizenship in digitally mediated societies.

Mainstreaming journalistic OSINT/V use as a public interest technology across layers of supply (design), experimentation (data) and popularisation (delivery)

Will Fee, Christoph Raetzsch – Aarhus University

OSINT/V (open-source investigations) tools and methodologies are reshaping journalism's capacity to serve the public interest (McGuinness and Schank 2021). Practitioner communities provide a "trust-building infrastructure" (Zamith 2023) that journalists access to embed "radical transparency" into their data-based storytelling (Dodds et al. 2025). Echoing an "audience turn" in journalism (Swart et al. 2022), the incorporation of non-experts in the creation of societally relevant, data-backed knowledge as a form of "digital civics" (Le Dantec 2019, Di Salvo 2022) reduces reliance on institutions for access to impactful information (Kotířová & van der Velden 2025). OSINT/V's hybridised operational tools and methodologies including the use of geospatial data, crowd-sourcing data collection, and multi-dimensional event reconstruction enhance collaborative investigations (Reese & Chen 2022; Heft 2021) enabled by new business models and funding schemes (de-Lima-Santos 2023).

Charlton et al. (2024) have developed an initial theoretical framework that distinguishes between the input, throughput and output stages of OSINT/V in news practice. Based on that framework, this research paper analyzes how OSINT/V practices are transferred into newsroom products across networks of practitioners affiliated to three layers: 1) a supply (design) layer of activist civil society organizations raising issues or providing data; 2) an experimentation (data) layer of dedicated research teams acting as investigative specialists; and 3) a popularisation (delivery) layer of global news brands adopting and innovating OSINT/V approaches to create visibility and credibility for their practices. The research contributes to the development of a broader framework for 'mainstreaming niche innovations' in journalism studies (Raetzsch et al. 2023) to underline the networked transfer of skills, practices and tools between different actors in journalistic investigative networks.

Empirically, the study is based on mapping actor relations between participants of Europe's largest data journalism conference, Data Harvest in Mechelen, Belgium, from 2014-2025. The main method consists of a social network analysis of ties between central

actors (Nooraie et al. 2020) and how these collaborations work to mainstream OSINT/V into the newsroom. Central authorities in each layer will be interviewed during the 2026 conference to add a qualitative understanding of practice development in the field. This research examines OSINT/V as a form of Public Interest Technology (PIT), mapping its development and popularisation across distributed production layers. It analyses how this ‘mainstreaming’ process embeds OSINT/V’s trust-building infrastructure within newsroom practice, re-enforcing journalism’s capacity to serve the public interest as an “epistemic authority” in society (Carlson 2020).

Humour, culture and democratic publics

The Civic Work of Humour: Online Political Satire as a Space of Participation, Meaning-Making, and Action

Nina Cingerová, Katarína Motyková – Comenius University Bratislava

Public humorous profiles producing political satire can be understood as influential nodes of public debate that enter the discourse as active actors. In Slovakia, where the post-election (2023) political developments have raised recurring concerns about democratic backsliding and the country's pro-European orientation, highly followed satirical social media accounts function as spaces where political events are rapidly interpreted, reframed, and circulated. While existing research has examined online political satire in terms of critique, affect, or polarization, less attention has been paid to its role as a discursive space of civic participation, particularly in CEE contexts. This paper addresses this gap by proposing an analysis of how satire operates not only as commentary, but as a form of participatory practice. Focusing on the widely followed profile *Zomri* (eng. Die!), the paper outlines an ongoing study conducted within the Horizon Europe project Humour and Democratic Literacy (DELIAH). The case study analyses the discursive practices of the *Zomri* profile and its audience in relation to two politically significant events that triggered extensive discussion: the abolition of the Office of the Special Prosecutor and amendments to the Criminal Code in February 2024, and the visit of Prime Minister R. Fico to Moscow in May 2025.

Methodologically, the study combines the discourse-historical approach with multimodal discourse analysis concepts to examine both textual and visual dimensions of satirical communication, as well as audience engagement. Rather than reducing participation to quantitative engagement metrics, the paper addresses the need to approach it through a discourse-analytical framework. Specifically, we propose examining participation across three interconnected levels: (1) visibility and circulation (how events gain visibility and generate interaction); (2) meaning-making (how posts and paratexts reconstruct and frame political reality); and (3) action (how posts and user responses perform illocutionary acts). The ongoing study is

guided by the assumption that satirical profiles and their audiences co-create participatory spaces in which political events are not only interpreted but also acted upon through humorous discourse. It explores how satire may foster shared interpretative frameworks and enable users to position themselves in relation to political developments. By treating humour as a form of discursive practice, the paper contributes to a better understanding of how citizens *do things with words* in digital environments, and how democratic participation is enacted beyond formal political arenas.

Outwitting the adversary – Studying humorous countertactics in a not so funny context at a time of democratic erosion

Julia Fleischhack – Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

With the significant rise of far-right activism in the digital realm and its troubling effects on democracy within the last decade, the search for ‘effective and innovative responses’ has become a central concern among policy makers, experts and scholars alike (Ebner 2018, Fielitz/Ahmed 2021, Göpfert/N’Guessan 2025). What is particularly distinctive about these new policy discussions is how they address the role of humor as a deliberate strategy and resource for counter-tactics in recent recommendations for actions and for civic education, while at the same time acknowledging the successful strategic use of humour by far right groups, in particular the mainstreaming of ideological agendas through humour (Göpfert/N’Guessan 2025,) and memes (Aguilera-Carnerero et al. 2025). Similar to its ideological counterparts, though different in its political aim and target, the use of humour is central: the proposed responses to anti-democratic attitudes involve “bolder and funnier contents (Ebner 2018)” in counter speech or the implantation of counter-memes and satire to expose and mock the “the absurdity of extremist narratives” (Göpfert/N’Guessan 2025).

My talk tracks this recent attention to humorous counter-strategies against anti-democratic practices, by analyzing how humor is increasingly used by German civil society organization, activist groups and content creators to fight (gendered) hate, harassment, and anti-democratic attitudes through educational work and awareness campaigns. Their humorous tactics are designed less to amuse but to expose, reverse, disrupt and undermine the extremist political agendas and harmful messages behind it. Drawing on preliminary findings of a recently launched research project, my talk reflects upon the ethics and motives of using humor in civil counter action, and highlights what is harder to see: that humor is difficult and serious work in a not so funny context, involving intense knowledge of the digitally-driven ecosystems and literacy. My qualitative case studies will serve as a starting point to think more broader about the role of ‘counter-humor’ in democratic activism, civil society and media education at a time of democratic erosion. I argue that these efforts can be seen as a larger strategy not just to re-claim ‘digital civil society’ (Albrecht/Fielitz/Thurston 2018, Amadeu Antonio Foundation 2017), but also to create and explore new democratic

practices of digital citizenship that have to take the omnipresent, but ambivalent political role of 'humor' in today's digital culture and public debates seriously (Matamoros-Fernández et al. 2023; Kuipers & Zijp 2024).

The Democratizing Potential of Cabaret Humor on YouTube

Anna Sámelová – Comenius University Bratislava

The study examines the relationship between cabaret humor and its potential to influence civic participation among the passive Web 1.0 audience. Cabaret humor is one of the oldest forms of soft power for social change. This small-stage form, usually a one-person or tandem show, or any show with a small number of co-performing actors, is characterized by compressing complex political topics into jokes. Digital platforms have transformed cabaret from a one-off physical performance for a relatively small community into a viral tool, enabling cabaret artists to influence social discourse over the long term and nearly continuously. The study's qualitative narrative research, therefore, focused on creators of cabaret humor in Slovakia, specifically stand-up comedians, whose performances are available to the public both in physical form and online. However, the online research space of this study is not interactive social networks (Web 2.0) but the dominant video platform on the Internet, YouTube.

Preliminary findings on viewer communities around cabaret humor by Slovak creators on YouTube indicate that even a passive website can attract significant attention, with hundreds of thousands of views and tens of thousands of subscribers. The democratizing potential of cabaret humor distributed on YouTube is therefore relevant to accessibility and, consequently, to audience reach. In terms of content, the study focuses on how Slovak stand-up comedians design their shows in ways that can impact civic participation. The research is carried out through standardized, semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted as free narratives.

The research questions focus on (1) socially sensitive topics (e.g., religion, minorities, gender equality); (2) taboo topics that stand-up comedians consider "untouchable" or too dangerous to joke about publicly in Slovakia; (3) differences between urban and rural audiences; (4) the evolution of the audience's view of what is acceptable and unacceptable humor; (5) continuity or rupture between the political satire of cabaret humor in socialist Czechoslovakia and contemporary stand-up humor in Slovakia; (6) similarities and differences between stand-up performances in physical space and online. Interviews with stand-up comedians are ongoing, so preliminary findings are not yet available. However, the purpose of this study is to deepen understanding of

humor as a tool of soft power in democratization efforts and of the potential of online platforms to support civic participation. The research is conducted as part of the international project “Democratic Literacy and Humour (DELIAH).”

Misinformation, trust and information disorder I

Digital News (Non-)use of Ukrainian Diaspora facing Disinformation during War

Arul Chib – Erasmus University Rotterdam, Mohammad Javad Imani – Erasmus University Rotterdam, Noemi Mena Montes – Radboud University

Scholarship often bifurcates social media practices into dominant discourses of engagement and the comparatively overlooked realm of disengagement. Such binary frameworks may overlook the nuances of digital practice during periods of acute crisis. In high-stakes environments, users strategically navigate tensions between protective disconnection and the socio-political necessity of remaining informed, necessitating a sophisticated repertoire of non-use practices. This study challenges existing paradigms by synthesizing relational digital news engagement models with a contextual non-use model.

We examine how relational factors and digital news nonuse influence the Ukrainian diaspora in the Netherlands during their on-going war homeland. We note the conundrum of news engagement, risking exposure to disinformation and distressing content or disengagement, which may leave them insufficiently informed and further stressed. Based on the mobile media (non-)use framework (*author*), an iterative qualitative analysis of 22 in-depth interviews resulted in relational codes in five dimensions: user-others, user-self, user-technology, user-news source, and user-news content. Data was structured in Atlas.ti 24 and visualized via Gephi 0.10 to perform a novel co-occurrence network analysis.

We find that Ukrainian diasporic users adopted more absolute forms of disconnection such as non-adoption and platform departure due to negative news exposure motivated by self-preservation and dependency to their family based in the Netherlands. Simultaneously, widespread distrust in deceitful content, unreliable platforms, and untrustworthy sources influenced their digital news nonuse practices,

including blocking and departure. However, strong relational ties and a sense of national solidarity compelled these users to remain engaged with war-related information via doomscrolling, news sharing, and fact-checking. Less visible forms of non-use were also present. These included concealing personal opinions and deleting digital traces, particularly in response to concerns about Russian surveillance, efforts to correct mistakenly shared misinformation, and attempts to de-escalate tensions with close contacts over uncertain or contested news. We reflect upon the disconnection of dialogic engagement of diasporic communities with their homeland, and the resultant impact on democratic dialogue in the digital realm.

The Liar's Dividend and Ambient Skepticism: Deepfakes and Democratic Communication

Elizabeth Ashley Fox-Jensen, Sue-Ellen Njekwa Ryberg – Malmö University

Deepfakes cause democratic harm before deceiving anyone. When audiences know synthetic media exists, bad actors can dismiss genuine evidence as AI-fabricated. Chesney and Citron (2019) coined this the liar's dividend. This paper asks, "how do video deepfakes deployed in political communication threaten democratic resilience in European and Nordic contexts, and how can interdisciplinary interventions mitigate these harms?". Pawelec (2022) identifies deepfakes as threats to the core functions of democratic systems. We argue the liar's dividend operates through a broader structural condition we term "ambient skepticism": a diffuse, background-level doubt about the authenticity of mediated information that persists regardless of whether any specific fabrication succeeds. Vaccari and Chadwick (2020) found that deepfakes produce uncertainty more reliably than outright deception. Uncertainty is the point. The empirical anchor is Sweden. In January 2026, users of xAI's Grok tool generated non-consensual sexualized imagery of Deputy Prime Minister Ebba Busch, collapsing the boundary between gendered violence and political disinformation. Research shows that 96 to 99 percent of deepfake pornography targets women (Security Hero, 2023). The Busch case is structurally typical of how gendered harm and political disinformation converge.

The paper draws on the Deepfake Democracy Project¹, a Vertically Integrated Project at Malmö University. Njekwa Ryberg asks, "how are political deepfakes framed, governed, and responded to in Nordic and European contexts, and what do these responses reveal about democratic resilience?" Using semi-structured interviews with Swedish journalists and political communicators, she examines how professionals frame democratic risk and position citizens within their practice. A consistent pattern emerges: verification is reactive and individualized, while the production of doubt is structural and automated. Fox-Jensen asks, "how can deepfake detection outputs be communicated to non-expert users in ways that are trustworthy, understandable, and actionable?" Using research through design (Frayling, 1993) and co-design with Nordic participants (Sanders, 2008), she builds and iteratively tests high-fidelity prototypes.

The warning interfaces are grounded in HCAI frameworks and Epistemic Trust Theory, with findings that speak to EU AI Act provenance requirements.

The paper makes four contributions: distinguishing the liar's dividend from misinformation; situating professional communicators as structural absorbers of epistemic harm; proposing ambient skepticism as a sociological category requiring structural remedies over individual media literacy interventions (Birrer and Just, 2025; Ahmed, 2023); and arguing that co-designed warning interfaces are a concrete site for rebuilding epistemic trust at the point of encounter.

Navigating Uncertainty: The Effects of Alarmist Discourse on Journalists' Abilities to Detect AI-Generated Content

Lyngé Asbjørn Møller, Emil Bakkesen Johansen, Claes de Vreese – University of Southern Denmark

This study examines how journalists discern AI-generated content under conditions of epistemic uncertainty. While prior research shows that the general public struggles with this task (Diel et al., 2024), systematic evidence on journalists remain limited. As epistemic intermediaries, journalists play a central role in verifying information and producing socially trusted knowledge (Ekström & Westlund, 2019). This role is increasingly challenged by AI, which destabilises established cues of credibility and complicates core norms of verification (Steensen, 2019). These challenges unfold within a broader discursive environment in which AI is frequently framed as a threat to truth and knowledge itself (Habgood-Coote, 2023). Such narratives may foster a generalised suspicion that “everything could be fake”, potentially undermining both confidence in one’s own evaluative capacities and trust in information more broadly (Coeckelbergh, 2023). This raises a key question: how do journalists navigate authenticity judgments when both technological conditions and public discourse amplify uncertainty? To address this, we report a preregistered survey experiment with 400 Danish journalists. Participants evaluated social media-like items varying in authenticity (AI vs. human), modality (text vs. image), and topic (politics, crisis, culture, and sports), following exposure to either neutral or alarmist framings of AI-related risks. This design allows us to assess how both content characteristics and discursive cues shape verification practices.

Results show that journalists perform near chance level in detecting AI-generated content ($\approx 50\%$), consistent with broader deception research documenting limited detection accuracy and a persistent truth-default bias (Bond & DePaulo, 2006; Levine, 2014). However, detection varies significantly by modality. Journalists are relatively effective at identifying AI-generated images, but perform poorly on text, where judgments are strongly skewed toward classifying content as authentic. Exposure to alarmist AI narratives shifts judgments toward increased suspicion, particularly for text. This suggests that authenticity judgments depend on the availability of diagnostic cues:

when cues are present, as in images, journalists rely on more systematic evaluation, whereas in their absence, as in text, judgments become more intuitive and bias-prone.

Overall, the findings highlight how verification practices are shaped by an interaction between technological affordances and discursive environments. As generative models improve and diagnostic cues diminish, authenticity judgments may become increasingly shaped by biases, beliefs, and assumptions. This underscores the growing importance of contextual verification practices and transparent communication of uncertainty in sustaining journalism's epistemic role (Steensen et al., 2022).

Truth, beliefs, and facts in the alleged post-truth era: The epistemology of politically alienated citizens in Germany

Pietro Nickl, Max Planck Institute for Human Development

Why do people disregard mainstream authorities and vote for extremist parties? Often with a focus on the US, the present moment is described as the post-truth era: An era in which feeling and partisanship override factual evidence and expertise, undermining a sense of a shared reality. But which role do truth, expertise, and facts play in this alleged post-truth era?

And does this analysis hold for the German context? For this study, we conducted 50 in-depth interviews and two focus groups with German participants with low institutional trust (including politics and media), low satisfaction with democracy, and high political alienation to investigate how they understand truth and justify their beliefs.

Our sample was heterogeneous, and differed in their attitude towards truth: whether it exists, is accessible, and important. Positions varied from epistemic relativism and epistemic indifference to highly motivated truth-seekers and optimistic realists. While some questioned or problematised the existence of an objective truth, most interviewees presupposed that objective facts exist.

We also analysed the different epistemic justifications they employed to back their beliefs, for example about the severity of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken against it, or the current state of security in the context of immigration. While most interviewees used first-person experience as a strategy to infer truth, many also relied on epistemic authorities – although often alternative epistemic authorities outside of mainstream journalism. Facts, intuition, plausibility, testimony of others, and comparing sources were also popular verification strategies. Interestingly, explicit appeal to group identity or relativistic arguments were virtually absent, though they play an important part in the theoretical literature. At least in some cases, what we see is not so much factual disagreement as interpretative disagreement.

Our interviews reinforce many worries about a post-truth world: They are characterised by scepticism and cynicism, feelings of hopelessness regarding ever knowing the truth, by recourse to sometimes dubious facts, and conspiratorial thinking. On the positive

side, the interviews suggest that not all is lost, that most people are interested in the truth, and that objective factual evidence is still common and accepted currency. It is also apparent that the current truth crisis will not be solved by one-size-fits-all interventions against misinformation, such as lateral reading or inoculation against online manipulation.

Addressing will involve regaining trust in reliable sources and information.

Misinformation, trust and information disorder II

Inside partisan environments: The influence of congruence in news environments on veracity judgments and partisan attitudes

Ilse L. Pit, Mubashir Sultan, Lisa Oswald, Alan Tump, & Ralf Kurvers

A major finding in misinformation research is that politically congruent news headlines (i.e. aligning with one's political beliefs) are more likely to be judged as true compared to incongruent headlines. However, previous studies have used equal numbers of congruent and incongruent headlines, which does not accurately reflect news environments on social media.

This study tested the effects of the congruence of a news environment on individuals' veracity judgments of news headlines and on partisan attitudes.

Study 1 is the analysis of a dataset collated by Sultan et al. (2024) to inspect the variation of environmental congruence and its potential influence on veracity judgements in previous misinformation studies. Study 2 is an online experiment in which 911 U.S. participants each observed 48 headlines, half true and half false, in one of three randomly assigned news environments: Republican-leaning (Republican-/Democrat-leaning headline ratio: 75/25%), balanced (ratio: 50/50%), or Democrat-leaning (ratio: 25/75%). Participants indicated for each headline if they believed it to be true, and whether they were familiar with it. We additionally measured partisan attitudes before and after the headlines were rated.

Both studies replicated previous research, showing that participants were generally accurate about the veracity of the headlines, and that congruence of the headlines influenced the likelihood that participants judged them to be true. No difference on these effects was found between the different news environments, indicating stability across environments of varying congruence. We also found no difference in partisan

attitudes between environments. These findings suggest that congruence effects exist at the headline rather than the environmental level and inform the use of the experimental paradigm for studying behaviour on social media.

Crowd-Based Advisors Against Misinformation: Accuracy, Uptake, and Citizen Choice Across Four Democracies

Mubashir Sultan – Max Planck Institute for Human Development

Misinformation undermines the shared epistemic foundations on which democracy depends. Current interventions rely heavily on professional fact-checkers, an approach that is costly, difficult to scale, and increasingly contested on political grounds. Major social media platforms have recently rolled back content moderation, citing concerns about fact-checker bias. Aggregating the choices of many individuals, known as the wisdom of the crowd, has shown some promise as an alternative approach. Yet another approach is to use large language models (LLMs); while offering greater scalability, they remain prone to errors and ideological biases. Neither solution is adequate alone.

We investigate a complementary approach: hybrid human-AI crowds, formed by aggregating human and LLM judgements. The theoretical rationale is error complementarity: humans and LLMs are likely to make systematically different kinds of errors. Where one fails, the other may succeed, meaning that combining them could produce larger accuracy gains than either alone.

The study has two parts. Part 1 benchmarks the accuracy of human, LLM, and hybrid crowds across approximately 50 true and 50 false previously unseen headlines, replicated across four countries: the US, Germany, France, and Italy. Human assessments consisted of approximately 100 independent raters per headline, per country; LLM assessments consisted of six independent models (e.g., GPT, Gemini, Qwen).

Accuracy is only part of the story, however. Even if hybrid crowds perform best, it remains unclear whether people would use such advisors in practice. Part 2 examines how crowd-based advice affects individual discernment in a nationally representative survey experiment conducted via YouGov, across all four countries ($N \sim 12,500$). Participants rated news headlines under one of five conditions: no advice, fact-checker, human crowd, LLM crowd, or hybrid crowd. A sixth self-selection condition allowed participants to choose their preferred advisor or opt out entirely, operationalising citizen agency. Using signal detection theory, we distinguish two mechanisms: whether

advice improves people's ability to discriminate true from false headlines, or merely shifts their overall credulity, that is, their response bias.

At the time of writing, data collection has just been completed. I will be presenting preliminary findings on crowd accuracy across advisor types; advice uptake, discriminability, and response bias; and self-selection effects: whether having the agency to choose your advisor matters. The findings speak to a fundamental question for democratic epistemics: can hybrid human-AI systems improve citizens' relationship to truth at scale, and does citizen autonomy in choosing such systems shape their effectiveness.

When Governments Use AI: Selective decline in trustworthiness and algorithmic nimbyism

Daniel Juhász Vigild, Andreas Bjerre-Nielsen, Laust Hvas Mortensen and Vedran Sekara

Artificial intelligence (AI) has attracted considerable interest as a means of improving efficiency and productivity in the public sector (1). Yet, deploying AI in public institutions may also create unintended social costs that undermine these potential benefits. For instance, AI negatively impacting the perceived trustworthiness of public institutions could be detrimental since these institutions to a high degree rely on trustworthiness and legitimacy to function properly (2). Prior studies have documented a decline in the perceived trustworthiness of public institutions when they use AI (3), but little is known about what mechanisms drive the decline in trust. Previous work documenting algorithm aversion and appreciation suggests potential mechanisms that could explain the impact of AI on trust (4,5), but limited evidence has emerged regarding governmental AI.

Across two preregistered survey experiments (N=5056), we examine actual implementations of AI in four different public institutions in Denmark (facial recognition by police, welfare fraud detection by municipalities, jobseeking assistance by jobcenters and cancer diagnostics by hospitals) and assess how AI adoption impacts perceptions of institutional trustworthiness. In the first study, we randomly include or withhold information in the vignettes regarding AI being used in the institutional context and find that AI disclosure reduces trust in some (municipality and hospital), but not all, of the institutions in our study.

In the second study, we propose algorithmic nimbyism as a mechanism for explaining the selective effect of AI on institutional trust in the contexts of welfare fraud detection (municipalities) and cancer diagnostics (hospitals). We borrow the term from the Not In My Back Yard-phenomenon, where local groups fight against unwelcome developments, while conceding that these developments are necessary for society (6). We experimentally test this concept of algorithmic nimbyism by varying vignette descriptions in two ways: 1) showing participant's own or a random municipality and 2) randomly including either breast cancer or prostate in the vignettes. The causal results do not support algorithmic nimbyism as a mechanism that can explain the

selective decline we observe in the first study, but by exploring heterogeneous treatment effects using highly detailed public administrative records of the survey participants (such as labour participation status and medical history) we find suggestive and descriptive support for algorithmic nimbyism. In other words: people who could be personally exposed to governmental AI, seem to be more negatively impacted when AI is being used “in their backyard” than others who are less exposed.

Motivated Reasoning Models: How LLMs and Search Engines Differentially Enable Confirmatory Evidence Collection

Morgan Wack, Eva-Maria Vogel, Christian Pipal

Democratic deliberation increasingly runs through privately-operated information intermediaries. As citizens shift from search engines to large language models (LLMs) when researching contested political and policy claims, a fundamental question emerges. Do these systems expose users to countervailing evidence, or help them build confident cases for positions they already hold?

We conducted a pre-registered algorithmic audit comparing four LLMs (GPT-4o, Claude Sonnet 4, Gemini 2.5 Flash, Grok 3), two search engines (Google, Bing), and Google AI Overviews on 30 contested empirical claims drawn from cultural-cognition research, economist surveys, and mainstream polling. Each claim was queried bidirectionally with three framings (neutral, vague-confirmatory, specific-confirmatory), yielding over 4,300 system–claim–direction observations coded for supporting arguments, opposing arguments, counterevidence presence, and premise resistance.

Our results show that LLMs are substantially more one-sided than search engines ($\beta=0.138$, $p<0.001$). Importantly, we find that the mechanism is not better casebuilding, as LLMs return the same number of supporting arguments as search ($p=.275$) and roughly half as many opposing arguments ($p<0.001$). Instead, this gap is driven by counterevidence suppression. These rates also vary by LLM, with Gemini mentioning counterevidence only 17% of the time, compared with 81% for Google and 73% for Claude. A second mechanism, evidence compression, compounds this. Search engine one-sidedness tracks the underlying evidence balance ($r=0.64$), while LLMs compress this signal by near 2X ($p=.004$), producing confident cases even for weakly supported positions. A specificity crossover ($p<.001$) shows that more specific queries reduce LLM one-sidedness (premise resistance) but increase search one-sidedness (keyword filtering), so the systems converge precisely where stakes are highest. Deployment context also matters. Google's AI Overviews use LLM technology but cluster with search (0.69), not standalone LLMs (0.70–0.94), suggesting retrieval-constrained embedding disciplines one-sidedness. Our findings recast AI's democratic role. Existing auditing frameworks focused on factuality, partisan bias, or sycophancy miss a distinct

deliberative harm. LLMs suppress two signals that search engines preserve, namely the presence of counterevidence and the relationship between case strength and evidentiary strength. For citizens engaging contested questions, the shift from search to LLMs decouples the confirmation they receive from the evidence behind it, with implications for opinion formation, polarization, and the evidentiary commons of democratic debate.

The Dynamics of Distrust in Media and Politics: Gradual Erosion and Critical Turning Points in Germany

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Why do citizens display a growing distrust in legacy media and democratic institutions? While the existence of the so-called crisis of trust has been widely documented in many Western democracies, less is known about its origins and temporal dynamics. This qualitative study explores how and why German citizens come to distrust legacy media and democratic institutions, whether this shift happens gradually or at key turning points, and how it relates to media habits, political attitudes, and the acceptance of misinformation.

Drawing on 50 in-depth interviews and two focus groups with Germans exhibiting low levels of trust, we analyze how politically alienated citizens describe the development of distrust in legacy media and political institutions.

Results reveal two dominant trajectories: gradual alienation processes and abrupt shifts tied to perceived trigger events. While some participants describe a slow erosion of trust over decades, most identify specific crises—particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2015 refugee crisis—as trigger points. The COVID-19 pandemic is most frequently described as a decisive rupture, especially in relation to perceived government overreach, restrictions on personal freedoms, and doubts about the necessity and legitimacy of public health measures.

The refugee crisis is associated with narratives of crime, structural unfairness, lack of governmental control, and cultural threat.

Across these trigger points, the resulting distrust is not limited to a single authority but reflects a broader crisis of trust, in which legacy media and democratic institutions are perceived as interdependent and collectively untrustworthy. The qualitative analysis further explores whether trust can be regained and, if so, under what conditions. Our findings also suggest that existing media literacy approaches aimed at improving misinformation detection skills may inadvertently exacerbate the crisis of trust among those already most vulnerable to misinformation. Instead, interventions could place greater emphasis on rebuilding trust in high-quality journalism by improving the

understanding of how information is produced, verified, and disseminated in legacy media.