



BEYOND CONNECTIVITY

Democratic uses and limitations of digital technologies in contexts of democratic crisis

ALEIXANDRE BRIAN DUCHE-PÉREZ ¹

aduche@ucsm.edu.pe

MARCO TULIO FALCONÍ PICARDO ²

mfalconi@ucsm.edu.pe

EMMANUEL NEPTALI AUGUSTO CHÁVEZ URQUIZO ³

echavezu@ucsm.edu.pe

¹ Escuela Profesional de Ciencia Política y Gobierno, Universidad Católica de Santa María, Arequipa, Perú

² Facultad de Ciencias Jurídicas y Políticas, Universidad Católica de Santa María, Arequipa, Perú

³ Escuela Profesional de Derecho, Universidad Católica de Santa María, Arequipa, Perú

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines the role of digital technologies in contexts of democratic crisis. Through a multidisciplinary review and case studies in Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asia, it explores how digital platforms are reshaping citizenship, the public sphere, and political participation. While highlighting opportunities for civic agency, it also addresses risks such as polarization, digital populism, disinformation, and algorithmic capture. The article discusses state responses and media governance proposals, emphasizing the urgency of fostering a digitally literate and critically engaged citizenry. The conclusion calls for democratizing the design, regulation, and use of technology as a key axis for strengthening contemporary democracies.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, the world has undergone a profound transformation of democratic systems, marked by a growing disconnect between citizens, political institutions, and the media. What was once defined as a process of democratic expansion—particularly after the end of the Cold War—has now become paradoxical: while channels for citizen expression have multiplied, structural tensions undermining the legitimacy, representativeness, and effectiveness of democratic regimes have intensified. The digitalization of the public sphere, the fragmentation of political discourse, algorithmic manipulation of information, and the rise of populist leaderships have shaped a new informational regime that reconfigures the very foundations of the democratic contract.

In this context, various authors argue that we are not simply witnessing a temporary crisis, but rather a structural transformation in how political power is constructed, representation is exercised, and public knowledge is produced. As Callejón (2022) points out, we are experiencing an "epistemic displacement of representative democracy," where deliberative procedures and institutional mediations are replaced by digital platforms governed by private actors, operating outside democratic oversight. This phenomenon not only disrupts classical mechanisms of representation, but also inaugurates new forms of technocratic power and populist spectacle, blurring the boundaries between citizenry and audience.

The proliferation of information, combined with the increasing presence of disinformation, has deepened an epistemic crisis that directly affects citizens' deliberative capacities. According to Dahlgren (2018), media polarization, echo chambers, and the loss of common reference points for public debate pose a real threat to building democratic consensus. The erosion of trust in traditional media, together with the dominance of unregulated digital platforms, has created a new informational ecosystem where virality supplants truth, and emotionality displaces critical judgment.

From a Latin American perspective, these transformations take on specific characteristics. The region faces not only the global challenges of democratic digitalization, but also structural problems such as inequality, clientelism, data extractivism, and institutional weakness. Scholars like Villalobos-Antúnez et al. (2023) have introduced the notion of "emotional capitalism" to explain how affective flows mediated by social networks colonize politics, reducing deliberation to polarized spectacles of outrage, fear, and euphoria.

This essay aims to critically examine the democratic uses and limitations of digital technologies in contexts of democratic crisis. Drawing on both theoretical and empirical analysis, it explores how social media, algorithms, and digital platforms have reshaped the relationships between citizenship, political representation, and the public sphere. Rather than adopting a technodeterministic stance—either celebrating or condemning technology wholesale—it offers a situated perspective that acknowledges both the emancipatory possibilities and authoritarian risks emerging from the contemporary digital environment.

Methodologically, the essay employs a qualitative, multidisciplinary approach that integrates discourse analysis, case studies, and critical literature review. It draws on academic sources from political science, communication, political philosophy, and critical theory. The analysis is structured around five thematic axes: (I) contemporary challenges to representative democracy; (II) the ambivalent role of social media in accountability; (III) digital citizen agency in authoritarian or hybrid contexts; (IV) public policy and media governance in the face of disinformation; and (V) Latin America as a case study and laboratory of digital and democratic tensions.

In sum, this essay seeks to contribute to the academic and political debate on the future of democracy in the digital age, emphasizing the importance of defending the public sphere as a plural, informed, and commons-oriented space. In the face of fragmentation, disinformation, and the emotional capture of political debate, the challenge is to build a critical, digitally literate citizenry committed to epistemic justice and democratic equity.

2. Democracy in Times of Crisis: New Challenges of the 21st Century

Representative democracies in the 21st century are facing a profound legitimacy crisis, stemming from the growing inability of traditional political systems to effectively respond to social demands in an environment shaped by digitalization and polarization. This crisis is reflected in the weakening of

political parties as intermediaries between citizens and the state, the rise of populist leaderships, and the increasing influence of technocratic and corporate actors in shaping public agendas.

According to Callejón (2022), representative democracy has been progressively displaced by a logic of digital democracy that, far from enhancing direct participation, is mediated by algorithms, platforms, and private actors who are not accountable to the electorate. This transformation entails the loss of the republican principle of deliberation and the fragmentation of the public sphere.

In this vein, Fabiano (2023) warns that e-participation, when not accompanied by appropriate conditions of political literacy, technological inclusion, and regulation of the digital ecosystem, can exacerbate dynamics of exclusion and the trivialization of public life. Rather than empowering citizens, the instrumental use of social networks by populist elites turns these technologies into tools of personalist propaganda, affective mobilization, and political disintermediation.

The weakening of parties as organic structures of representation also deepens the crisis. Emerging leaderships in the digital era tend to operate under personalist and short-term logics, where political capital is measured by digital metrics—such as follower counts, interactions, or virality—rather than programmatic coherence or institutional development. As a result, parties lose their articulating capacity, and representative democracy becomes an atomized, reactive, and volatile spectacle.

This crisis of representation is compounded by a parallel phenomenon: the epistemic weakening of the public sphere. One of the fundamental pillars of any functioning democracy is a well-informed citizenry. However, we are currently witnessing an unprecedented epistemic crisis, where the circulation of information, its truthfulness, and the consensus on basic facts are deeply eroded. As Dahlgren (2018) notes, this situation jeopardizes the very possibility of rational public deliberation by undermining trust in media institutions and legitimate knowledge production processes.

The rise of disinformation, fueled by algorithmic dynamics and actors who exploit sensationalism and polarization, has created echo chambers that reinforce closed political identities and promote skepticism toward science, journalism, and empirical evidence. In this context, emotions, rumors, and conspiratorial narratives replace reasoned argumentation.

Pérez-Curiel and Rivas (2022) illustrate how populism has instrumentalized this epistemic crisis, exacerbating media antagonism and weakening fact-checking systems. Traditional media, far from counteracting this trend, have lost centrality and authority in the public sphere. Moreover, they face a dual pressure: on the one hand, they must compete with digital platforms that monopolize attention and advertising revenues; on the other, they endure systematic attacks from political actors seeking to discredit them.

The contrast between traditional media and digital platforms in shaping public opinion has become more acute. While the former face economic constraints and a growing loss of credibility, the latter are presented as horizontal and participatory spaces. Yet, in practice, they operate under opaque commercial logics that hinder transparency and accountability. This asymmetrical configuration fosters the fragmentation of the public sphere and obstructs the construction of fundamental democratic consensus.

3. Social Media and Accountability: Between Democratic Potential and Manipulation

Social media has often been celebrated as a democratizing tool due to its ability to expand citizen participation, amplify social demands, and facilitate public oversight of governments. However, its functioning in times of crisis reveals a far more ambiguous reality, where democratic ideals coexist with dynamics of confrontation, polarization, and disinformation.

A striking example of this ambivalence is found in Brazil during the COVID-19 pandemic. Dos Santos and Lopes (2025) analyze how social media, far from serving as deliberative spaces, became platforms for ideological confrontation, the spread of health-related disinformation, and the delegitimization of the press. The Brazilian government used digital channels to promote narratives contrary to scientific consensus and to attack institutions responsible for public oversight. This strategy weakened traditional mechanisms of accountability and amplified denialist discourses that undermined the country's public health response.

A parallel case can be observed in Hong Kong, where Kwong (2023) examines political framing on social media during the health crisis. The author identifies an intense dispute between pro-democracy and pro-regime opinion leaders, whose polarized narratives fragmented the digital public sphere. While social media offered a channel for civic activism, it also reproduced dynamics of censorship, emotional manipulation, and symbolic confrontation. This duality raises a crucial question: to what extent can social media be considered genuinely democratic spaces if they do not ensure minimum conditions for plural, informed, and ethical deliberation?

Beyond their role as participatory tools, social media have profoundly transformed the forms of representation, leadership, and authority in contemporary democracies. In this landscape, digital populism has appropriated algorithmic logic and the aesthetics of the self to consolidate governance models centered on image, emotionality, and spectacle.

Rao (2018) coined the term *selfie nationalism* to describe Narendra Modi's communication strategy, based on a hyper-personalized management of his image through social media. This modality not only displaces parties and parliaments as centers of political deliberation, but redefines the relationship between the leader and the citizenry as a direct, affective, and performative visual bond.

From a more structural perspective, Morelock and Narita (2021) argue that selfie culture is not merely a discursive resource but a profound symptom of the liberal democracy crisis. The neoliberal logic of self-exposure, amplified by algorithms and digital metrics, replaces civic engagement with a politics of visibility that rewards spectacle and punishes argumentative complexity.

This culture of self-image becomes a device of power when embedded in institutional structures. Report UWP-059-final (2021) shows how digital politics is aestheticized through "visual rituals" that not only conceal democratic precariousness but reconfigure authority as a constant performance of proximity, authenticity, and emotional control. The result is a form of algorithmic governance that reinforces dynamics of social control under the guise of active and horizontal citizen participation.

4. Digital Citizenship and Political Agency in Authoritarian or Hybrid Contexts

In authoritarian or hybrid contexts, digital technologies play a strategic role in civic activism and the expression of dissent. Social media and other digital platforms not only help circumvent state censorship and repression but also function as spaces for alternative political articulation, capable of challenging the narrative monopoly of authoritarian regimes.

Navumau, Gustafsson, and Matveieva (2025) analyze the cases of Ukraine and Belarus as paradigmatic examples where digital technologies have been crucial for fostering citizen agency during moments of political crisis. In Belarus, for instance, activists managed to coordinate protests, disseminate alternative information, and maintain solidarity networks through the use of encrypted messaging apps and decentralized social networks. In Ukraine, digital technologies played a dual role: they served as tools for citizen mobilization and as mediums for reconstructing a democratic imaginary in the face of foreign occupation.

These digital platforms should not be seen merely as channels of dissemination but as counter-hegemonic devices (following Gramscian logic) through which civil actors can construct alternative narratives, challenge state discourses, and form communities of both symbolic and political resistance. However, this subversive potential faces significant structural limits, such as digital surveillance, technological blockades, and the growing sophistication of disinformation tactics and algorithmic control.

In the face of informational manipulation and algorithmic biases that shape political behavior online, digital citizenship must develop critical competencies to participate consciously and informatively in the digital public sphere. In this sense, media literacy is not limited to the responsible consumption of content; it involves epistemic and political education that enables resistance to manipulation logics.

Feldvári, Mičunović, and Badurina (2022) argue that the algorithmic design of digital platforms directly influences political perception, the formation of citizen will, and the exercise of critical thinking by prioritizing emotional, polarizing, and viral content. Confronting this threat, critical civic education emerges as an essential antidote to prevent the deliberative and epistemic collapse of democracies.

Ylipulli and Luusua (2021), meanwhile, develop the concept of participatory digital citizenship, in which technologies are not only means of expression but also spaces for political co-design. In this model, communities cease to be passive users and become active agents who influence platform design, data architecture, and digital policies. Algorithmic resistance, therefore, is not limited to rejecting

surveillance but proposes creative forms of technological reappropriation aimed at social justice and inclusive participation.

Within this framework, disinformation cannot be understood merely as an error or deviation but as a field of epistemic struggle where access to truth, the legitimacy of knowledge, and the citizen's right to deliberate are at stake. Combating it requires questioning and transforming the material, symbolic, and technological conditions that enable its proliferation.

5. Media Governance and Public Policy in Democratic Contexts

One of the main challenges facing contemporary democracies is managing disinformation during times of crisis. In situations such as pandemics, armed conflicts, or political polarization, governments must address the massive circulation of fake news without infringing on fundamental freedoms. This tension between effectiveness and legitimacy presents a structural dilemma regarding the State's role as guarantor of truth in digital environments.

Sievi and Pawelec (2025) offer a profound reflection on the ethical and democratic implications of state intervention against disinformation. From a normative perspective, they warn that surveillance and content-control policies can result in authoritarian practices if not grounded in principles of transparency, proportionality, and public deliberation. In response, they propose a logic of "democratic resilience," focused more on building citizen trust and promoting media literacy than on censorship or repression.

Aligned with this approach, several democracies have implemented digital containment policies to counter information manipulation during crises. These measures range from regulations applied to tech platforms to the creation of intersectoral fact-checking bodies. However, their effectiveness remains uneven, hindered by factors such as lack of regional coordination, resistance from large tech conglomerates, and the growing erosion of public consensus.

The democratic crisis has also prompted a critical reassessment of media governance structures in consolidated democracies. Beyond being merely a problem of disinformation, the current scenario questions the capacity of media systems to equitably, pluralistically, and sustainably guarantee the right to information.

Corduwener (2024) proposes a reform agenda that combines historical and normative perspectives on the role of the state and civil society in media governance. He argues that Europe must move toward more inclusive models that recognize the public nature of digital communication and establish effective accountability mechanisms for major tech platforms. This approach seeks to build a more democratic information ecosystem, overcoming the dichotomy between state control and algorithmic *laissez-faire*.

From a more applied perspective, Usher, Darr, Napoli, and colleagues (2023) emphasize the urgency of implementing public policies centered on the right to information as a fundamental pillar of democratic citizenship. In their study, they propose a model based on the "information needs of communities," which includes funding for local media, promoting civic content, and fostering collaboration among the state, civil society, and tech platforms to ensure equitable, plural, and reliable access to information.

Taken together, these proposals point to a paradigm shift in media governance: from a merely defensive reaction to disinformation toward a proactive, structural, and participatory vision that effectively guarantees the right to an informed citizenry.

6. Latin America Facing the Informational Regime and Democratic Crisis

The expansion of digital technologies in Latin America has been marked by profound contradictions. On the one hand, it has facilitated greater access to information and opened new pathways for citizen participation; on the other, it has enabled forms of governance mediated by algorithms, polarizing emotions, and control mechanisms that intensify already existing structural inequalities.

Villalobos-Antúnez, Guerrero-Lobo, Martin-Fiorino, Astudillo-Campusano, and Caldera Ynfante (2023) explore this issue by analyzing the functioning of the informational regime in contexts of political crisis in the region. According to the authors, Latin America's digital culture is characterized by a strong emotional and affective charge that permeates political interactions and shapes citizen decision-making processes. This configuration, typical of so-called "emotional capitalism," transforms democratic

processes into spectacles of confrontation and virality, in which algorithms prioritize discourses of outrage, fear, or hatred as the main vectors of circulation.

This highly hyperconnected communication environment does not necessarily ensure a more critical or better-informed citizenry. On the contrary, it fosters affective deinstitutionalization, where political legitimacy is measured more by the symbolic and emotional impact of narratives than by the quality of deliberation or the robustness of information. In this sense, the informational regime in Latin America tends to reproduce forms of governmentality that, far from empowering citizens, construct them as subjects governed through affect.

Beyond access to connectivity, Latin America faces structural challenges that hinder the effective democratization of the digital environment. These include deep technological asymmetries, critical dependence on foreign digital infrastructures, widespread practices of data extractivism, and digital exclusion that disproportionately affects women, rural communities, and Indigenous peoples.

The massive use of technological platforms in the region has facilitated new forms of surveillance and commodification of the citizen experience, without the presence of solid regulatory frameworks to ensure the protection of digital rights. This situation highlights the urgent need to move toward Latin American technological sovereignty—understood not only as infrastructural capability but also as a critical and normative capacity to design public policies that safeguard informational autonomy, algorithmic justice, and digital inclusion.

In this context, democratizing the digital environment means much more than ensuring access: it requires transforming the material and symbolic conditions that shape the relationship between citizenship and technology. This process demands the decolonization of technological imaginaries, the strengthening of local capacities, and the reconfiguration of digital governance based on principles of social justice, epistemic equity, and substantive participation.

7. Conclusions

Digital technologies have profoundly reshaped the relationships between citizenship, political power, and the public sphere. In contexts of democratic crisis, these tools present a double face: as instruments for expanding participation, power oversight, and collective expression, but also as mechanisms for polarization, algorithmic control, and disinformation. The theoretical and empirical cases analyzed throughout this essay demonstrate that, while social media and digital technologies have opened unprecedented avenues for accountability, activism, and citizen self-organization (Dos Santos & Lopes, 2025; Navumau, Gustafsson & Matveieva, 2025), they have also been co-opted by populist logics, affective governmentalities, and technocratic structures (Callejón, 2022; Rao, 2018; Morelock & Narita, 2021). This ambivalence precludes any optimistic or deterministic reading of technology and demands a situated, critical, and multidimensional approach.

One of the key findings of this essay is the structural tension between emerging citizen agency and the mechanisms of algorithmic capture that define the contemporary informational regime. In many cases, citizens believe they are exercising political autonomy, when in fact their emotions, interactions, and decisions are mediated—and conditioned—by technological infrastructures driven by extractive and symbolic control logics (Villalobos-Antúnez et al., 2023; Feldvári, Mičunović & Badurina, 2022). This tension is exacerbated in hybrid regimes and weak democracies, where the lack of strong institutions and effective regulation amplifies the negative effects of digital technologies. In response, it becomes essential to rethink not only access to technology but also the political and ethical conditions that enable a truly active and informed citizenry.

For digital technologies to genuinely contribute to democratic strengthening, it is necessary to promote a form of citizenship that not only consumes information, but also questions, contrasts, and collectively produces it. This requires the implementation of public policies for media and digital literacy, support for independent and community media, and the promotion of regulatory reforms that curb the power of platforms without compromising freedom of expression (Sievi & Pawelec, 2025; Usher, Darr, Napoli & Miller, 2023). Likewise, we must move toward democratic data governance that ensures transparency, algorithmic justice, and informational sovereignty. Only then will it be possible to counteract the technological asymmetries that perpetuate exclusion and digital clientelism in many regions of the Global South.

This essay opens several lines of inquiry that must be urgently addressed. These include: studying the impact of artificial intelligence on public opinion and political decision-making; investigating digital

exclusion dynamics through an intersectional lens that considers gender, class, and ethnicity; exploring grassroots experiences of technological governance, such as community networks, cooperative platforms, or autonomous digital infrastructures; and critically assessing platform regulation policies from a comparative and transnational perspective. From a political action standpoint, it is imperative to build alliances among citizens, academia, and social movements to democratize not only access to technology, but also its design, governance, and use. Only then will it be possible to move beyond mere connectivity and toward a full, critical, and transformative digital citizenship.

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