Democracy On, Not Just Around, the Internet

Nathan Schneider

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A curious desire began to arise among the masters of the platform universe in recent years. Mark Zuckerberg, who once secured for himself majority control of the company now known as Meta when it went public, established an independent Oversight Board to evaluate and even challenge corporate moderation decisions. Jack Dorsey, after establishing Twitter, now known as X, as the go-to mouthpiece of a U.S. president and the media elite, backed Bluesky, a project to build a social media protocol that no one company could control. Dorsey later said that Twitter never should have been a company at all. After sufficient experience at the apex of dominant social media platforms, it appears that the urge arises to relinquish power.

This urge is a symptom of our upside-down approach to the governance of online life. So much power has accumulated at the top that even the power-hungry people holding it want some relief from the burdens of responsibility. And this situation is a result of design.

The earliest online social media—such as bulletin board systems, chat rooms, and email lists—set a norm. I call it "implicit feudalism." It is a software design pattern, along with the cultures and norms that surround it, that assigns arbitrary power to users with special roles, which might go by names like "sysop," "admin," or "moderator." These users can set rules and enforce them, generally through the digital equivalents of censorship and exile. As online communities became big business, the same habits persisted. Governance at the community level continued to rely on users with special powers, which came as an in-kind reward for providing free moderation labor to the platform companies. Among those companies, venture capitalists invested in business models designed to win monopolies, and shareholders came to tolerate unusual arrangements, like Zuckerberg's majority voting power. On an industry-wide scale, with Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act, Congress granted companies sweeping legal immunity to manage their online fiefdoms as they saw fit.

In certain respects, this arrangement works. Many moderators and influencers do heroic things to keep their communities healthy for participants, lurkers, the bottom lines of companies, and the gross domestic product in general. The policy apparatus provides a considerable breadth of free speech—probably more free speech at greater scales than has ever been available in human history. Let's not lose perspective on those achievements.

Still, the internet has a democracy problem. Here, I am not going to focus on the usual problem people point to—the trouble of relying on ad-optimized algorithmic feeds to organize public discourse, particularly surrounding election events. My concern is a bit more subtle but more fundamental: the trouble of living our lives in contexts where daily democratic practices are unavailable.

Compare a Facebook Group or subreddit to an average town or neighborhood. Instead of electing council members to hold office through a set of pre-arranged rules, admins hold power at their pleasure, and the rules they set do not necessarily apply to them. Instead of resolving disputes before a judge or jury who interprets established law, users must work out differences through mob-like pile-ons—thus, cancel culture, call-out culture, and the like—or by reporting to the platforms' opaque moderation processes. The closest thing to accountability comes through user complaints or the threat of mass exodus. These are sufficient only sometimes, at best. And, like Zuckerberg and Dorsey, many volunteer moderators become exhausted with the power they hold.

Does it really matter how power flows around our online friends and affinities? Past experience says yes. Daily democracy trains people for democratic politics. The training happens not just with governments but in unions, social clubs, and student councils. Links between everyday and mass politics have been observed among political scientists, from Alexis de Tocqueville to Robert Putnam, and also among activists for social change, from C. L. R. James to adrienne maree brown. To maintain the faith that democracy requires, as well as the skills it demands, people need to experience co-governance in their daily lives. They need to see it work and feel their own power. Without that, it stands to reason that they will do the kinds of things that have become so normal lately: electing human memes rather than

effective leaders, preferring to demolish institutions rather than improve them, and regarding any compromise as a moral failure. When people act this way in the context of a pluralistic democracy, they pave the way for divisions that deepen into authoritarianism.

In my book *Governable Spaces: Democratic Design for Online Life*, I make an extended case for this diagnosis, drawing on evidence from recent online communities, social movements, and political culture. But I also argue that there is still hope for an internet that brings more democracy into people's lives rather than less.

One kind of remedy begins in the life of online communities themselves. They can resist the top-down control of platform companies through intentional choices about technologies and processes that counteract anti-democratic norms. They can find their own ways to ensure accountability among power-holders and address conflict through processes that participants will regard as fair. Recent years have seen an explosion in the growth of digital tools for democratic participation in governments, as well as tools for participatory governance in entirely online contexts. Given the chance, the internet can enable kinds of democracy that have not been available through ballot boxes and parliament buildings.

For online habits to break from implicit feudalism and become as democratic as we need them to be, new kinds of policy are necessary—including policies at the level of platforms, protocols, and the laws that surround them. Consider how we might build on the power-weary impulses of Zuckerberg and Dorsey.

A democratized Oversight Board, for instance, might include members chosen by platform users themselves; care could be taken to balance local knowledge with global values and to enable the users of Meta products to experience democratic participation, even when no such option is available in the jurisdictions where they live. As in recent experiments with citizens' assemblies among governments, users could also be chosen at random and paid to participate.

A democratized social media protocol might encourage not just wider distribution of control but support for co-governance processes. The Mastodon server Social.coop, which I co-founded in 2017, operates as a cooperative where users both pay for service and participate in joint decision-making. Software defaults and economic incentives could help make it easier for cooperatives like this to steward our online lives. In the absence of these nudges, most other Mastodon servers are run unilaterally by people who happen to have the technical skills to operate them.

Under current conditions, companies face considerable headwinds if they try to democratize, particularly under the pressures of shareholder primacy. After creating the oversight board, Meta began losing ground to TikTok and laid off large swaths of its trust-and-safety staff. After starting Bluesky, Jack Dorsey fell to Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter, which few but the shareholders really wanted. To salvage his impulse-buy and pay off his creditors, Musk scrapped Dorsey's plans to decentralize.

Democratizing platforms will not happen solely through a new piece of technology or organizational cleverness. It requires counter-power. For example, laws that support more forms of labor organizing in tech—particularly among gig workers and volunteer moderators—could open up governable spaces among people now least likely to be heard in the industry. Laws could require co-determination, just as some countries require employee participation on boards, but for platforms this could mean seats for non-employee users. Corporate law could also do much more to enable capital access for participant-governed projects, from cooperative Mastodon servers like Social.coop to community-owned broadband networks in underserved communities.

Let's be honest, however: Serious U.S. legislative action on tech has been vanishingly rare. Enabling governable spaces now will most likely require intentional commitments from communities, a new design paradigm from platform developers, and users determined to accept nothing less. All this begins with the recognition that making the internet safe for democracy requires finding spaces for democracy on the internet.

Democracy cannot come merely from well-meaning engineers trying to ward off electoral misinformation, or from the assurances of benevolent CEOs, or from more strenuous government oversight. Healthy democracy at large scales happens when people practice it in their everyday lives, at the scale of their communities. The internet could be full of that kind of practice, but the habit of implicit feudalism has kept everyday democracy out.

We can no longer afford to regard democracy as something external to online life, as something to be protected from the internet or that governs it from above. Democracy anywhere depends on the democracy we cultivate in online spaces themselves.

About the Author

Nathan Schneider (he/him) is an assistant professor of media studies at the University of Colorado Boulder, where he studies technology, democracy, and religion. His current project is an exploration of models for democratic ownership and governance for online platforms and protocols. He is founder of the Media Economies Design Lab.

Schneider is the author of four books, most recently *Governable Spaces: Democratic Design for Online Life*, published by University of California Press in 2024, and *Everything for Everyone: The Radical Tradition that Is Shaping the Next Economy*, published by Bold Type Books in 2018. He edited Vitalik Buterin's book *Proof of Stake: The Making of Ethereum and the Philosophy of Blockchains* and co-edited *Ours to Hack and to Own: The Rise of Platform Cooperativism, a New Vision for the Future of Work and a Fairer Internet*. Recent scholarship has been published in *New Media & Society*, *Feminist Media Studies*, the *Georgetown Law Technology Review*, and *Media, Culture & Society*, among other journals. He has also reported for publications including *Harper's*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and others, along with regular columns for *America*, a national Catholic magazine. He has lectured at universities including Columbia, Fordham, Harvard, MIT, NYU, the University of Bologna, and Yale. He serves on the boards of the Metagovernance Project, Start.coop, Waging Nonviolence, and Zebras Unite. Follow his work on his website, nathanschneider.info.

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About the Second Interdisciplinary Workshop on Reimagining Democracy

This essay was adopted from a presentation given at the Second Interdisciplinary Workshop on Reimagining Democracy held on the campus of Harvard Kennedy School in December 2023. Convened with support from the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation and the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, the conference was intended to bring together a diverse set of thinkers and practitioners to talk about how democracy might be reimagined for the twenty-first century.

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Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation
Harvard Kennedy School
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Cambridge, MA 02138
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