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Editorial: Democracy under siege: how actors, communication strategies, and emerging phenomena are changing the rules in the public sphere

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Editorial on the Research Topic

[Democracy under siege: how actors, communication strategies, and emerging phenomena are changing the rules in the public sphere](#)

In the contemporary digital age, democracy faces a formidable challenge: its very essence is under siege. This challenge manifests in various forms, from the rise of populism and the strategic manipulation of emotions in political discourse to the spread of disinformation across digital platforms and the tightening control of communication in non-democratic regions. The four articles featured in this Research Topic, titled “*Democracy under siege: how actors, communication strategies, and emerging phenomena are changing the rules in the public sphere*,” explore these phenomena, shedding light on the evolving dynamics in the public sphere and the implications for democratic governance.

The public sphere, as envisioned by Jürgen Habermas, was once a domain where citizens could engage in rational-critical debate, a space essential for the functioning of democracy. However, the public sphere today is increasingly fragmented, polarized, and dominated by actors who deploy sophisticated communication strategies to manipulate public opinion. These strategies, often rooted in the exploitation of emotions, the dissemination of disinformation, and the restriction of information flows, are reshaping the rules of engagement in the public sphere, with profound implications for democracy. As Barbara Pfetsch states, instead of a public sphere we have dissonant and disconnected public spheres.

The manipulation of emotions in populist discourse

The article by [Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés](#) provides a critical analysis of how populist political actors in Western Europe leverage emotions to galvanize support and undermine trust in democratic institutions. Focusing on populist movements in Spain, Italy, France, and the United Kingdom, the authors demonstrate that emotions such as fear, anger, and resentment are central to the communication strategies of these actors. These emotions are strategically employed to frame political opponents and institutions as corrupt and out of touch with the “will of the people,” thereby legitimizing the populists’ claims to represent the true voice of the populace.

The findings of [Alonso-Muñoz and Casero-Ripollés](#) highlight a crucial aspect of contemporary political communication: the shift from rational argumentation to emotional appeal. In the digital era, where social media platforms facilitate the rapid spread of messages, populists have mastered the art of using emotions to create a sense of crisis and urgency. This emotional manipulation not only mobilizes supporters but also deepens societal divisions, as it encourages an “us vs. them” mentality that pits the “virtuous” people against the “corrupt” elites.

The implications of this emotional rhetoric are far-reaching. As populist movements gain traction by exploiting public emotions, they challenge the norms of democratic discourse, which traditionally values reasoned debate and deliberation. The erosion of these norms threatens the very foundation of democratic governance, as it leads to a public sphere where emotions rather than facts drive political decision-making. This shift is particularly concerning in the context of digital media, where algorithms prioritize sensational and emotionally charged content, further exacerbating the polarization of public discourse.

The role of disinformation in eroding democratic norms

Disinformation has emerged as a potent tool in the hands of those seeking to undermine democracy. The article by [Putra](#) examines the rise of disinformation in Southeast Asia, a region where digital literacy is low, and authoritarian regimes have exploited this vulnerability to entrench their power. The study provides a comprehensive analysis of how disinformation campaigns, often orchestrated by state actors, are used to manipulate public opinion, suppress dissent, and justify repressive measures.

[Putra](#)’s analysis reveals that disinformation in Southeast Asia is not merely a byproduct of the digital age but a deliberate strategy employed by non-democratic regimes to maintain control. In countries like Myanmar, disinformation has been used to stoke ethnic tensions and justify military crackdowns, while in Singapore, it has been instrumental in curbing opposition and dissent. The spread of disinformation is facilitated by the pervasive use of social media, where false narratives can quickly gain traction and become accepted as truth.

The impact of disinformation on democracy is profound. By distorting reality and undermining trust in legitimate sources of information, disinformation erodes the foundations of informed citizenship, which is essential for democratic governance. When citizens cannot distinguish between truth and falsehood, the very premise of democratic decision-making is compromised. Furthermore, the use of disinformation to delegitimize political opponents and suppress dissent stifles the pluralism that is central to democracy.

In response to the growing threat of disinformation, [Putra](#) advocates for a regional approach within ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), emphasizing the need for collective action to counter this phenomenon. However, the challenge lies in balancing the need for effective countermeasures with respect for the principles of free speech and non-interference, particularly in a region characterized by diverse political systems and varying levels of commitment to democratic norms.

The emergence of decentralized social media and its implications for democracy

In the rapidly evolving landscape of social media, decentralized platforms are emerging as significant players, challenging the dominance of centralized networks like Facebook and Twitter. Decentralized platforms like Mastodon offer an alternative that promises greater user control, privacy, and community governance. These platforms operate on the principles of decentralization, open-source technology, and the empowerment of users, which align with the broader goals of promoting democratic engagement and resisting authoritarian control.

The study by [Liao](#) on the Mastodon instance Liker.social exemplifies this shift toward decentralized alternative social media (ASM), exploring how users perceive and engage with these platforms in the context of the Web3.0 movement. [Liao](#)’s study employs the uses and gratifications (U&G) theory to understand the motivations and satisfaction of users on Liker.social, a decentralized platform within the Mastodon network. The research identifies two main categories of user beliefs: informative decentralized benefits and descriptive centralized benefits. Informative decentralized benefits include enhanced privacy, data ownership, and a unique user experience, while descriptive centralized benefits relate to more traditional social media functions, such as personal recognition and interaction. The study’s findings suggest that while users of Liker.social appreciate the new features offered by decentralized platforms, they also value the familiar benefits of centralized social media.

The implications of these findings for democracy are profound. Decentralized platforms like Liker.social could represent a shift toward a more democratic and user-centered internet. By giving users more control over their data and interactions, these platforms can foster a more participatory and transparent online environment. However, the study also highlights the challenges that decentralized platforms face in attracting and retaining users. For these platforms to become viable alternatives to mainstream social media, they must not only meet the technical and functional

needs of users but also provide a satisfying and meaningful user experience.

The impact of multimodal framing on public perception

The study by Geise and Maubach, explores the effects of episodic and thematic framing within multimodal media on public perception and policy support. By combining text and visual elements, the research demonstrates how episodic frames, which focus on specific events and individuals, are more successful in capturing viewer attention and eliciting strong emotional responses compared to thematic frames, which offer broader contextual perspectives.

Episodic frames, with their action-oriented visuals, not only heighten individual responsibility attributions but also unexpectedly increase societal responsibility attributions, challenging the traditional view that these effects are mutually exclusive. This enhanced engagement through episodic framing correlates with stronger support for policy measures, such as stricter animal welfare laws, driven by the emotional and cognitive impact these frames have on the audience.

Overall, Geise and Maubach's findings underscore the significant influence of multimodal framing on shaping public opinion and policy support. The research highlights the importance of strategic media framing in engaging audiences and guiding public discourse, particularly in ways that can strengthen or challenge democratic processes.

The future of democracy in the digital age

The articles featured in this Research Topic collectively paint a sobering picture of the challenges facing democracy in the digital age. From the rise of populism and the manipulation of emotions to the spread of disinformation and the strategic use of communication by political actors, the forces at play in the contemporary public sphere are reshaping the rules of democratic engagement.

One of the key themes that emerge from these studies is the tension between the opportunities and risks presented by digital technologies. On the one hand, digital platforms have democratized access to information and provided new avenues for citizen engagement. On the other hand, they have also created an environment where misinformation can thrive, and where powerful actors can manipulate public opinion with unprecedented ease. This tension underscores the need for a nuanced approach to the regulation of digital media, one that balances the protection

of free speech with the need to safeguard the integrity of democratic processes.

Another important theme is the need for a renewed commitment to democratic norms and values. As the studies in Research Topic demonstrate, the erosion of these norms—whether through the manipulation of emotions, the spread of disinformation, or the commodification of public discourse—poses a serious threat to the future of democracy. In response, there is a need for concerted efforts to strengthen democratic institutions, promote digital literacy, and foster a culture of critical engagement in the public sphere.

Finally, the articles in this Research Topic highlight the importance of regional and global cooperation in addressing the challenges facing democracy. Whether it is the collective action proposed by Putra to counter disinformation in Southeast Asia or the broader calls for international collaboration to address the spread of populism and the manipulation of digital platforms, it is clear that the threats to democracy are not confined by national borders. In an increasingly interconnected world, the defense of democracy requires a coordinated and collaborative response.

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