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This paper reflects my personal views.

# Can democracies win the modern battle?

Democracy is one of the oldest forms of government. Dating back to ancient times, the concept has endured several challenges over the years. However, the greatest battle may be the one democratic societies are currently finding themselves in. With the technological revolution of the last 20 years, democracy has come to find itself in the middle of the increasing polarized discussion on how technological advancements have influenced society and the democratic process. With social media and smartphones, the modern way of participating in the democratic process has changed radically.

At the core of democracy is people's possibility to elect their leaders and influence their decisions. In history, there have been gatekeepers. With 21st century technology, one minute and 280 characters can go viral all around the world in a few hours, and you can find yourself interacting with the highest level of international leaders.

But with all this access also comes the need for more transparency. Public distrust of politicians and institutions are at historic lows[1]. Combined with politicians using social media to formulate swift and short response to international developments, social media has made the democratic dialogue more hostile and polarized.

The question is, can democracy win the modern battle?

Democracy, all though not universally defined, is characterized by "the belief in freedom and equality between people, or a system of government based on this belief, in which power is either held by elected representatives or directly by the people themselves."[2] These characteristics are based on the existence of a public conversation and debate, where everyone who has an opinion may express them publically.

Freedom of speech, a core principle of democracy, has been through many challenges before, but today democracy may face its biggest battle yet. But, what separates the old battle from this new battle democracy faces today?

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[1] http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/10/16/many-unhappy-with-current-political-system/pg_2017-10-16_global-democracy_1-03/ (Retrieved August 30, 2018)
[2] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/democracy#dataset-cacd (Retrieved September 7, 2018)

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Traditional democratic dialogue and debate take place in a regulated, public forum such as newspapers, town halls, TV, and radio. Even if some conversation takes place in digital forums, traditional democratic dialogue mostly happens offline, where people jointly decide whom to listen to and whom to ignore. There are public gatekeepers (such as editors and political leaders) who boost select voices and ensure that there is a certain level of professionalism in the conversation. In the modern political dialogue and on its digital platforms, these practices are rare.

In the modern democratic dialogue and debate, many people build their perception by being active on a few social media platforms, where they can select their sources of information. Through algorithms, often based on promoting content that engages our most negative and primitive emotions[3], people see news and feelings that can seem common even if it is not reflected in real-life. By being able to choose what information you see and who you discuss it with, people's perception of reality may become distorted as they can create their own world and even facts.

In today's society, these two forms of democratic dialogue usually coexist and feed off each other. Resentment against traditional and established media networks, together with the practice of accusing something as 'fake news' as soon as something is not correlating to the worldview one has, sets the stage for a toxic discourse where democratic participation is hindered. Thus, without one another, the modern battle for democracy would not exist.

The modern battle for democracy can be divided into two main categories, even though they are interconnected.

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[3] Facebook Fueled Anti-Refugee Attacks in Germany, New Research Suggests. Amanda Taub and Max Fisher. New York Times, August 21, 2018. Online at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/world/europe/facebook-refugee-attacks-germany.html (Retrieved August 30, 2018)

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### Disinformation campaigns and election interference

Today, many people get their information and news from social media. With attempts of election interference during recent years, attention to the problem of disinformation, and thus the vulnerability of the modern democratic processes, has increased gradually.

In an article for Foreign Affairs [4], Karen Kornbluh argues that public policy has not kept up with the growing problem of disinformation. Feeding the belief that the internet was so open that it did not need regulation, Kornbluh implies in her article that the internet has been treated as a 'special case' by policymakers. Furthermore, she argues that the 'bad guys' took notice and took advantage of the situation, and that is how many democratic societies have ended up where they are today; in a world where it is hard to tell who is who online and where conducting disinformation campaigns are easily done.

Countering disinformation is a modern battle for democracy that it may be most ill-equipped to counter. Even if lawmakers can suggest regulation, fund research and give directives to authorities to counter disinformation, it might only have minimal effect since it is the private technology companies that control the digital platforms where the modern democratic dialogue takes place. Therefore, it needs to become, and it is becoming, more pressing for these companies to take action and realize the scale of the challenges today and in the future. Here, more governments can play a role in requesting more information from these companies and asking them questions, just as the US Congress has done by requesting CEO's of technology companies to testify.

A method used to spread disinformation is through 'bots.'. A bot can be defined as "computer program that performs automatic repetitive tasks"[5], hence, they can spread disinformation at a rapid rate, enabling a worldwide coverage within hours. Moreover, since a lot of people just read the headline and a few sentences of a story, they often share the information quickly without fact-checking the whole text. Therefore, a story can be viral for a few days before an established media network publishes a fact-checking article of the story.

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[4] https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2018-08-13/internets-lost-promise?cid=int-nib&pgtype=hpg&region=br2 (Retrieved August 30, 2018)
[5] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bot (Retrieved September 8, 2018)

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As Kornbluh argues in her article[6], intervention is needed to ensure the openness of the internet. Democratic communities and its lawmakers cannot stand on the sidelines and watch how the modern democratic dialogue is hijacked by, for example, machine-controlled bot accounts.

One way to make the dialogue more civil and genuine is to suggest a verification requirement on various social media platforms. By requiring personal verification, there will be an increasing degree of transparency about who owns a profile, page or account. Verification will not take all of the problems away, but it is a step forward that will, hopefully, decrease the number of bot accounts as well as require people to think more profoundly about what they post online.

However, the ability to speak truth to power must be safeguarded, and a verification requirement should be designed in a way where there is a tool for such action when needed.

Together with bots, anonymity is one of the biggest challenges modern democratic dialogue faces. On social media platforms, people, organizations, and governments can hide behind an account name where they, for example, can spread disinformation to achieve political ends. There needs to be a system where verification is the norm, but where anonymity can be an alternative in some cases. The dialogue once imagined that benefited democracy and ordinary citizens must be restored.

Another critical question is how democratic societies should counter disinformation. In determining a strategy, it is essential to discuss aspects such as offensive vs. defensive action, and short-term vs. long-term responses. One way to counter disinformation is to provide more information and education on what disinformation is and how it can be detected. By initiating dialogue about disinformation, both through traditional and modern means, the issue will gain more exposure, and people's awareness will increase.

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[6] Ibid.

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**Debate climate, political participation and polarization**

A recent article from researchers at Lund University shows that more and more young people are hesitant to participate in the public conversation online. Many in the study describe the same feeling; political dialogue on social media is characterized by a rough tone and polarization[7], and because of a lot of 'trolling' it appears pointless[8] to have any form of serious dialogue is unlikely to take place. The researchers conclude that:

> *"If we, on the one hand, expect social media to become an even more important source of political information for citizens and an arena for political participation, and on the other hand, that this arena becomes more polarized and extreme, this should reasonably be a problem for the political discussion and the representativeness and versatility of political participation."[9]*

Hence, the battle democracy is facing is about making sure that there is equal opportunity for people to voice their opinions without having to face the hassle with, for example, bots and other suspicious accounts. Democracy is about participation, both online and offline. But when people become more reluctant to speak out due to the whirl that comes along with it, it becomes harder for democracy to prevail and win the modern battle.

A recent study about Facebook usage in Germany and attacks on refugees, featured in the New York Times, makes the case that the platform makes communities more prone to violence. Showing that towns that have higher than average Facebook usage are more likely to have attacks on refugees, the study also highlights the algorithm the platform uses:

> *"That algorithm is built around a core mission: promote content that will maximize user engagement. Posts that tap into negative, primal emotions liker anger or fear, studies have found preform best and so proliferate."[10]*

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[7] *Ungas politiska (icke-)deltagande på sociala medier – hellre offline?* Elin Fjellman, Nils Gustafsson, and Malena Rosén Sundström, *Sociologisk Forskning, colume 55, no 2–3, p. 293–316;* p. 311
[8] Ibid, p.306.
[9] Ibid, p.311.
[10] Facebook Fueled Anti-Refugee Attacks in Germany, New Research Suggests. Amanda Taub and Max Fisher. New York Times, August 21, 2018. Online at https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/world/europe/facebook-refugee-attacks-germany.html (Retrieved August 30, 2018)

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It is important not to forget about the importance algorithms play in the modern political dialogue. As more and more people get their news from social media platforms, thus basing their worldview on what they see there, algorithms have become an integral part of people's lives. The algorithm that controls what people see in their feeds are something few social media users rarely reflect about. Articles, like the one featured in the New York Times, is an important step towards informing people about how algorithms work. However, there needs to be more information available for all age groups, from school children to senior citizens, about what to keep in mind when they consume news on social media.

Studies like the one highlighted in the New York Times are essential to understanding the real-life effects our daily social media habits have in democratic communities. The majority of people will not resort to violence due to posts and discussion they have seen online, but it is essential to understand how platforms like Facebook can contribute to forming people's actions offline. Offline action can manifest itself in everything from violent to peaceful demonstrations, to the way humankind interact with each other in traditional democratic dialogue. Nonetheless, this paper notes that online behavior is not always reflected in the offline environment. However, those times the uncivil tone often used on social media platforms is demonstrated in real life, the democratic societies and its institutions and leaders must act as role models for the modern democratic dialogue we want to have - both offline and online.

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**Conclusions**

Democracy was, and is, designed to include people in important decisions by making sure they can participate in the democratic process and dialogue. Traditionally, this happened offline where people could more easily interpret one another when they talked in person, and where it, for example, took a longer time to get your reply published in response to an article printed in the paper. Now, the modern democratic dialogue happens continuously, mostly online, in the matter of nanoseconds. The endless opportunities presented by the internet and social media platforms have led to challenges that many democratic countries were unprepared for.

Democracy has never been under as much pressure as it is today. Battling challenges spanning across the spectrum all around the world, democratic societies are facing battles that no single group of people can fight alone; not lawmakers, not policymakers and not ordinary citizens. To win this modern battle, democracy needs to adapt to the contemporary way in which people take part in the democratic process.

It is only through both regulations, education, and intense debate that democracy overcomes the challenges it is facing. It is through a joint effort by both the public and private sector, the individual, and the collective, that we can make sure that democracy survives and that the social media platforms live up to its envisioned, great potential. That would benefit everyone, and indeed democracy itself.