

Introduction: Democracy Disorganized?

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Abstract

This article introduces three essays in the Focus section on “Problems of Democracy” adapted from the 25th Anniversary Conference of Columbia University’s Center on Organizational Innovation (COI). It argues that an ongoing shift in the organizational form of society from mass to network production and communication requires a new set of questions around the organization of democracy. Specifically, democracy’s core function of connecting power to accountability is shown through these essays to be increasingly dis-organized by this shift, necessitating new ways of addressing this old problem.

Keywords: Democracy; technology; accountability; organizational form; inequality; power.

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Three days after the US election in 2024 that returned Donald Trump to the Presidency, Columbia University's Center on Organizational Innovation (COI) organized a conference to mark its 25th anniversary. The keynote addresses were on the timely topic of "Problems of Democracy", which we share with our readers here. The phrase "problems of democracy" resonates at different levels: It refers to the erosion today of democratic institutions and norms while authoritarian-style regimes capitalize on, and foment, a climate of fear and distrust. More generally, it reflects longer-standing debates in sociology, politics, and philosophy: What kind of problems are specific to democracies? What is the problem to which democracy is the answer? Conversely, is democracy itself a problem? Specifically, it resonates with research explored at the COI over the years — how the changing relationship between technology, organization, and communication impacts democracy as both practice and concept.

László Bruszt's paper (2024) in this section exemplifies how an organizational approach to democracy provides perspective on the problems of democracy as they have shifted over time. In an organizational reading, democracy is about connecting power to accountability by organizing diversity. The dream of despots, monarchs, and tyrants is of power disconnected from accountability, such that the powerful face scant consequences for their actions, save for the risk of revolution. Democracy works to organize heterogeneous interest groups through mechanisms of competition (e.g., political parties), constraint (e.g., checks and balances and the rule of law), and contestation (e.g. civil society), creating a self-sustaining system that, on balance, acts for the common good.

As with all organizational forms, democracy has co-evolved with changes in technology and communication, but also, like all organizational forms, it is not immune from organizational failure. When successive generations of scholars of democracy, in Bruszt's reading, identify the problems of democracy, they are identifying organizational failures. The causes of feared failure change over time and vary in the eye of the beholder. In the 1970s there was anxiety about an "excess" of democracy: challenges to the hegemonic "establishment" by new actors (women, non-White populations, youth), who, conservative analysts feared, were making complex societies *too* complex to govern. A generation later the problem seemed to be the inverse — the perceived excess had become a lack: citizens seemed increasingly depoliticized and disillusioned with politics, withdrawing from the public sphere as key decisions that affected their lives were delegated to technocratic experts in regulatory agencies or supranational bodies such as the WTO.

Bruszt sees the populist politics of today as heir to the organizational pressures of especially the latter development, what Ruggie (1982), drawing on Polanyi, called "embedded liberalism". When states adapt to transnational markets, their own citizens struggle to feel represented. Bruszt suggests that the cumulative effect on democratic institutions has been twofold: a dramatic loss of agency among citizens and thus trust, and a reactionary movement of "strong leaders" appealing to the alienated while usurping democratic processes in the service of unaccountable and increasingly centralized power. If democracy is an organizational form, then Bruszt's intervention calls attention to the form and consequences of its dis-organization.

Dis-organized democracy is less a state of disorder or chaos (though it may appear so at times), than a manifestation of the co-evolution of 20th and 21st century organizational forms into something new. The current era's platform organizational form and its accompanying algorithmic management differ from the kind of bureaucratic forms that emerged in the last century around mass production and mass communication (see Stark & Broeck, 2024; Stark & Pais, 2020). Network production and network communication raise and require new sets of questions around the relationship between societal form and the organization of democracy.

In her article, Gina Neff (2024) puts pay to the widespread hasty optimism for the democratic potential of new network technologies in the early years of the study of digital society. Even empirical work that sought to eschew any ideological bent often could not quite grasp the way that market centralization and control were, already by the early 2000s, becoming the dominant story of the digital era.

Writing at a time when the “tech-bros” seem, like industrialists before them, to be successfully pursuing state capture of US-American politics, Neff’s analysis is trenchant. If Bruszt helped us understand historically how democracy came to be disorganized, Neff shows us the direction it is heading, and it is not a comforting one. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is proving to be the antithesis of the kind of liberatory optimism that once accompanied the Internet. Rather, it is more akin to schemes for absolute control, this time via data. Neff invokes Kate Crawford’s (2017) description of machine intelligence as a powerful tool for achieving the fascist’s old dream of power without accountability. If Bruszt’s core understanding of democracy as an organizational form is connecting power to accountability, then AI appears in Neff’s contribution as a set of technologies that disconnects this democratic cord even as it connects people in previously unimagined ways.

Neff’s aims to examine why social scientists “got [the risks of AI] so wrong.” Her analysis is reminiscent of a longer set of concerns about the evolving relationship between democracy and economy. She identifies an “ideological infrastructure” of growth and efficiency that recalls the mantras of neoliberal economic development and IMF structural adjustment. The difficulties that democratic institutions face in reigning in AI-enabled violations of privacy, civil rights, or bots’ encroachment on free speech recall the concerns about democracy voiced at the turn of the century about speed. Hartmut Rosa (2005, p. 459), for example, claimed that democracy requires a specific temporality (he calls it a “speed-frame”) to function — too slow and it lacks the critical mass for popular expression (think of how Benedict Anderson (1983) saw print capitalism as enabling what he called “imagined communities”), but too fast and it impairs democratic deliberation and decision-making: “Below a critical threshold, democracy is implausible; above it, it might well be impossible.” Or, as the US Secretary of Health and Human Services under President Biden, Xavier Becerra, put it upon leaving office, “federal agencies are outmatched in a world of ‘instantaneous information and disinformation’ ” (Diamond, 2025).

What Neff sees as ultimately corrosive of democracy in AI-driven politics is the production of new forms of inequality that become harder to address. Society, she suggests, becomes inured to suffering by a computational approach that makes listening to others increasingly difficult. A robust literature on the “digital divide” notwithstanding, scholars of digital transformation largely missed, she argues, just how deeply unequal the gains from digital transformation would be, and with what effects. When this kind of inequality is combined with “absolute control coupled with unchecked, unaccountable power”, we lose both the ability for and the confidence in democratic solutions.

Inequality is the main focus of Pablo Boczkowski’s article (2024), the third and last in our Focus section. If one of AI’s most notable qualities is its intangibility — its effects are deeply experienced yet also seemingly invisible — poverty is something that should not be invisible, and yet it stubbornly remains outside the realm of sight for many of us. This invisibility, Boczkowski argues, requires effort, even if most of us rarely acknowledge the effort it takes to not see. This becomes not just a problem of individual, societal, or moral responsibility, but a problem of and for democracy, captured in a paradox: those who most often *do* represent the poor politically do scant little to actually help them (empty populist promises aside), while those who *could* do something for the poor lack the aspiration to represent them.

Boczkowski elucidates this paradox through two deeply moving ethnographic vignettes from the 2024 Democratic convention in Chicago and the desperate hallways of psychiatric wards in Buenos Aires hospitals. In strikingly different ways, his ethnography allows us to see what is normally left unseen in both settings. He offers not a grand solution to poverty, but a starting point for peeling away the aestheticized sheen of progressive politics that, in its increasingly mediatized self-referentiality, proves as debilitating to democracy as the power plays of today's titans of technology.

These three pieces speak to a pervasive kind of democratic disillusionment at the beginning of the second quarter of the 21st century. As institutions give way to influencers, the transitions to democracy at the end of the 20th century seem to more recently resemble transitions to authoritarianism, with a boomerang effect on the older, supposedly more resilient democracies. Politicians, pundits, and scholars alike are questioning their assumptions in new ways.

The three articles assembled here are not, however, a lament. They point to a more fundamental need to find ways to organize society in such a way that power is held to account, which, as Bruszt reminds us, lies at the very center of the democratic imagination. Even as neo-authoritarianism seems ascendent, citizens over the world continue to seek accountability; in the last five years alone there have been mass civil society protests in, to name a few, Iran, Arab countries, Hong Kong, Myanmar, Thailand, the US (Black Lives Matter), Georgia, Sri Lanka, Israel, Chile, and Belarus (see Bach & Pavan, 2023). The outcomes of protests, of course, vary. They attest, nonetheless, to a persistent desire for accountability that not only can keep the door to democracy open, but can lead to new innovations in its form and function in the face of the challenges outlined in the articles to follow.

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