Open
Inclusive
Effective

Shaping the future of the modern public sphere

Governance Nexus Series 03

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United Nations Development Programme
Global Policy Centre for Governance (Oslo Governance Centre)
Kongens gate 12, 0153 Oslo, Norway

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Contact Information:
Niamh Hanafin, Senior Advisor, Information Integrity,
UNDP Global Policy Centre for Governance
niamh.hanafin@undp.org

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INTRODUCTION

This paper delves into the pressing challenges and emerging trends within contemporary information ecosystems, emphasizing their potential repercussions on the public sphere and, consequently, on development and democratic governance. By scrutinizing the characteristics and trends of digital information ecosystems, the paper sheds light on the imminent challenges they cause for open and democratic societies.

The paper argues that safeguarding open and inclusive public spheres in the online age is a critical governance challenge of the next 5-10 years. This challenge gains heightened urgency amid an overarching decline in democratic indicators and escalating concerns about the exploitation of technology by authoritarian leaders. Despite the democratising potential of digital information ecosystems, the paper underscores that the associated risks collectively pose a formidable obstacle to democratic governance and development.

The last decade has been dismal for democracy. In 2011, more countries were considered to be improving than declining in every aspect of democracy. By 2021, this trend was reversed. Democratic backsliding is the norm. Recent estimates suggest that the level of democracy enjoyed by the average citizen has declined to levels last seen in 1989 (V-Dem Institute, 2022).

Even in parts of the world where democracy has been considered highly or relatively stable there are signs of stress. The assault on the United States Capitol building, the curtailment of civil rights in parts of the European Union, continued suppression of pluralist politics in India and the closure of civic space in Hong Kong all illustrate the global nature of the problem.

In states which remain democratic, citizens are increasingly sceptical about the importance of democracy. The Pew Research Center in the United States has characterized this as “an age of democratic anxiety”, observing that over two-thirds of citizens in Japan, the United States, South Korea and France agreed that “their political system needs major change or complete reform” (2019). In the United Kingdom, more than half of people under 44 years old agreed that “having a strong leader who doesn’t have to bother with Parliament or elections is a good way to run the country” (Onward UK, 2022).

These numbers reveal the disillusionment of citizens whose ongoing consent and support for democratic rule is required if the prospects for democracy in the 21st century are not to retreat further. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres puts it in Our Common Agenda:

> ***"At the heart of this is a frayed social contract: the understanding within a society of how people solve shared problems, manage risks and pool resources to deliver public goods, as well as how their collective institutions and norms operate" (United Nations, 2021).***

In the same decade that the prospects for democracy have suffered so much harm, digital technologies have been reshaping the public sphere. The public sphere is, in many ways, the engine room of democracy[1]. It is composed of the ways citizens inform their individual opinions on public matters which, when measured periodically through electoral processes, demonstrates their collective will. Where the public sphere does not, or is not perceived to, function effectively, this creates a threat to the social contract and democratic legitimacy.

Whilst it is hard to establish causality in such complex and contextual environments, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the monopolization of the online information space by a few enormous tech companies[2] has had serious negative impacts on the public sphere. The shadow of social media platforms in particular looms over episodes of hate speech, violence and repression as well as rising levels of polarization, distrust, conspiracy and the malicious manipulation of public discourse.

Two significant trends in democratic backsliding in recent years have been the closure of civic space (Civicus Monitor, 2023) and increasing restrictions on human rights relating to freedom of association and expression (Westminster Foundation for Democracy, 2020). In many circumstances, governments have defended these restrictions as necessary to counter the negative impacts of social media platforms (Wasserman et al., 2022).

Previous research commissioned by the UNDP GPCG has demonstrated the value of democratic governance as a driver of wider development (UNDP, 2022a). If democracy is itself a driver of development, then reviving public support for democracy as a system of government is an essential task that has the potential to improve billions of lives across the planet.

[1] The public sphere is a hotly debated concept, particularly as it continues to evolve. Although the term is singular, in reality it consists of many interconnected information spaces (or spheres). However, this paper does not set out to provide a conceptual framework.

[2] For the purposes of this document, "tech company" collectively describes businesses providing online information, communication, and marketing services, including social media platforms, search engines, video sharing sites, news sites, messaging, and others. "Social media platform" is a subset of tech companies or services that allows public or semi-public content creation, hosting and sharing (e.g. Facebook, TikTok, Reddit). "Instant Messaging Apps" refer to private messaging services between individuals or groups (e.g. WhatsApp, Viber, WeChat).

An open and inclusive public sphere is essential to upholding the values of the United Nations and the human rights of every citizen in the 21st century. UNDP holds a unique position within the global governance framework. It should play a leading role in working with partners to improve modern information ecosystems and to adapt to the demands placed on 21st century democratic institutions. Doing so will help meet wider development objectives and forge a path for those institutions to navigate future challenges.

POLARIZATION, POPULISM AND DISTRUST

A recent systematic review of causal and correlational evidence on digital media and democracy looked at more than 500 studies in an attempt to distinguish which of the many democratic challenges can be fairly attributed to social media (Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022). The balanced findings acknowledge that, while social media has driven an increase in political participation and information consumption in a number of countries, it has also "driven an increase in polarization, populism and distrust" (Lewandowsky et al., 2022).

RECENT EVOLUTION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Citizens' *perception* of the effectiveness of democracy is just as important as the reality

The German intellectual Jürgen Habermas argues that in order for democratic states to retain their legitimacy, citizens must be able to recognize "the power of their own democratic opinion and will formation" (Habermas, 2022). Leaders wrestling with the decline of democracy should keep this at the forefront of their minds. The point is that citizens' perception of the effectiveness of democracy in meeting the demands of society is just as important as the reality when it comes to maintaining democratic legitimacy.

One of the most influential places where citizens form their perceptions is the public sphere. Thus, the effective functioning of an open, inclusive public sphere is integral to democracy. It enables free elections, allows the promotion of pluralistic viewpoints, provides means for citizens to raise grievances and resolve conflicts, offers a platform for independent media and encourages standards in public life.

Recently, digital technology has driven a rapid shift in the structure of the public sphere, as we move from traditional to digital information ecosystems. Online and digital technologies are revolutionizing the ways and spaces in which public opinion is formed. Traditional players in the public sphere, such as the media, civil society and public institutions, are having mixed success adapting to this new reality. The digital divide is playing an important role in the pace of transformation. As of 2022, an estimated 2.7 billion people, mainly in developing countries and rural areas, still lack access to the internet (ITU, 2022).

The trend is the same everywhere. The table below attempts to capture the essence and implications of this situation. The table is not exhaustive, and the specifics will vary according to the context, but the consequences are likely to be much the same for many societies.

Table 1: Traditional vs Digital Information Ecosystems and their implications for the public sphere

TRADITIONAL	DIGITAL	IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PUBLIC SPHERE
Citizen as consumer	Citizen as creator	• More opportunities for political participation • Exponential increase in sources and amounts of information
Mass Media	Niche Subcultures	• Fewer drivers of collective identity • Diverse narratives that are more challenging to monitor • Harder to establish consensus views
Professional standards, journalistic ethics, accountability	Few standards, anonymity, lack of traceability	• More false/misleading content • Lower levels of trust • Easier to manipulate information spaces
Analogue content produced with hardware	Multimedia content produced with software	• Different skills and strategies required to reach audiences
Low quantities of user data	Vast quantities of user data	• Potential for sophisticated understanding of individuals' patterns and behaviours • Potential to identify networks of influence • Potential to track emerging narratives

As we can see, many of the implications of digital information ecosystems pose new challenges for societies that wish to protect or build an open, inclusive public sphere.

Whilst digital information ecosystems and their underpinning technologies do offer democratizing potential, the risks are clear. A proliferation of sources that are hard to evaluate for accuracy will affect the quality of the information on which citizens form their opinions. The rise of unreliable sources, coupled with a diminishing sense of critical discernment in processing information, poses a significant threat. The fragmentation of the media environment and the reduced opportunities for cohesion around national identities will also affect citizen perspectives of the collective will. Which is to say that modern digital information ecosystems present a more challenging infrastructure for an open and inclusive public sphere.

One of the most significant developments in the shift to digital information ecosystems has been the relentless rise of social media platforms. In 2010, fewer than one billion people used social media. Today that figure stands at 4.26 billion (Statista, 2023). Data from these users is being generated and collected at a scale that is hard to fathom. The amount of data generated on social media platforms is expected to grow by 463 exabytes (463 billion GB) a day by 2025. To put that in perspective, it was estimated in 2003 that all the words spoken by human beings since the dawn of time were equivalent to 5 exabytes of data (Klinkenbourg, 2003).

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These numbers partly explain the astronomical profits social media platforms are amassing. In 2021, Facebook netted US$29 billion and Twitter more than $4 billion (Statista, 2022a). Google and YouTube's parent company Alphabet earned revenue of more than $250 billion, mostly through advertising services on its various search engines and platforms. That is more than the GDP of two-thirds of the countries on the planet (World Bank, n.d.).

Habermas argues that today's social media represent a threat to the legitimacy of democracy because of the way they distort the public sphere, and therefore how citizens arrive at their opinions. This ultimately can impact the decisions they take at the ballot box. He raises the concern that, with the rise of social media, "an important subjective prerequisite for the formation of public opinion and political will in a more or less deliberative way is jeopardized among an increasing portion of the citizenry" (Habermas, 2022).

This warning should not be ignored. Whilst the public sphere consists of much more than the technologies on which it is built, the general conclusion is that social media platforms are generally having a negative impact on the public sphere across the world.

The basic business model of social media platforms is to take the data that they capture from their users and use it to sell advertising. This means that they are designed to keep users engaged for as long as possible, at the expense of everything else, including individual and societal well-being. The average current user spends 2 hours 30 minutes a day scrolling (Statista, 2022b). In order to maximize user engagement, social media engineers develop powerful algorithms that take instantaneous decisions about the type of content to offer users.

There is extremely limited transparency about how these algorithms work, but leaks and the work of whistle-blowers have revealed worrying insights (Hao, 2021). What we know is that they promote content that triggers strong engagement. This in turn incentivizes users to create content that triggers emotional reactions in order to further extend a platform's reach. This content becomes an easy and effective conduit for disinformation, hate speech, and incitement to violence, which is especially harmful to children, all of which has the potential to spill over into offline harm. Users appear to be incentivized by these algorithms to create emotive, extreme or divisive content, and there are no rewards for accuracy, civility or moderation.

THE AVERAGE CURRENT USER SPENDS 2 HOURS 30 MINUTES A DAY SCROLLING

The repercussions of this “attention economy” are being felt everywhere, sometimes to deadly effect, but especially in poorer countries where minority languages are often spoken. For this reason, the failure of social media platforms to devote sufficient, or indeed any, resources to content moderation in some contexts is the focus of growing scrutiny from civil society and the United Nations (Meedan, 2021).

That this business model, which makes a commodity of human behaviours, is being defended at all costs by social media platforms exposes their collective corporate failure to act in the interests of democracy. This manifests in a lack of transparency, accountability and effective action, as well as resistance to regulatory oversight.

Social media platforms are also susceptible to manipulation for political or monetary gain. Over the last decade, malicious actors have developed a range of tactics to manipulate these new digital spaces and, by default, the public sphere. These include but are not limited to: the coordinated use of networked automated accounts to amplify content; the creation of artificial news networks to host false or misleading information; the use of troll factories to create inauthentic discord (for a detailed description of these, see NATO, 2021), influence public opinion and harass individuals or groups; the distribution through private messaging channels of disinformation narratives; the microtargeting of specific audiences with advertising messages containing disinformation; and paying influencers to seed harmful narratives in various online communities.

Traditional news media are not immune to all this disruption. As social media secured a growing share of the advertising market, this has drawn valuable advertising revenue away from print and broadcast media. According to Zenith (2023), social media will continue to lead as the fastest growing sector, capturing 57% of the overall advertising spend in 2023. This will continue to rise, and the annual growth rate is predicted to reach 6.8% in 2025. According to UNESCO (2025), global newspaper ad revenue dropped by two-thirds in the last ten years. This matters for the public sphere, because it compounds the challenges many media organizations have historically faced in generating sufficient revenue to produce independent journalism. In places where independent media have traditionally upheld professional standards and ethics, this has meant the loss of a gatekeeping role both over the quality of information placed into the public sphere and over which sources are given credence by citizens.

In summary, the speed at which technology has driven changes in how we create, exchange and debate information has been so fast that democratic institutions (and many citizens) have been unable to keep up, let alone to adapt. This has created a lag in the social norms and regulatory frameworks that support the effective functioning of the public sphere. At its most dangerous, this lag is costing lives. Over time, it risks eroding the social cohesion and perceptions of legitimacy on which democracies are built, which also undermines the prospects for development progress.

This gives rise to new governance challenges that should be considered alongside well-established ones concerning the promotion of open, inclusive public spheres as essential components of a strong democracy.

The first step is to identify and promote policy or regulatory solutions to protect the public sphere from further damage. This will have to include placing much more responsibility on social media platforms to cooperate in addressing everything from hate speech and violence to political extremism and polarization. It will also require support and incentives for the development of independent, public interest media organizations that can adapt to the challenges of the modern public sphere.

Even if all this were successful, technological change and market forces will continue to reshape the information landscape at pace, meaning regulatory solutions will inevitably come up short. Thus, this would place a premium on institutions that are able to develop alternative models for public discourse to those found on the major social media platforms of today.

Given that regulatory solutions and existing governance structures are likely to be insufficient, then the second new challenge for democratic institutions is to adapt their own approaches to engaging the public. This shift will be critical in order to address the information asymmetries, dwindling trust and poor levels of public engagement that threaten the future of an open, inclusive public sphere and democratic legitimacy.

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT

These changes in the powerful and complex forces underpinning today's public sphere have pulled into sharp focus threats to social cohesion, shrinking civic space, weakened independent media and declining public trust. When citizens struggle to identify quality information, cannot openly debate their opinions and question governments, rely on polluted or manipulated information sources and are segregated into reductive identity groups, this may contribute substantially to the current crisis of democracy.

The impacts of this status quo of the information ecosystems on the United Nations' ability to fulfil its mandate as well as on the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals more broadly cannot be underestimated.

Elections

Nowhere is this more evident than in the increasing inability of states to protect the integrity and legitimacy (perceived and real) of their electoral processes. Elections constitute the point at which discourse within the public sphere is distilled into a judgement about who should be given the democratic mandate to govern. The democratic risks inherent in electoral processes are well understood. With so much at stake, there is always potential for conflict and even violence, especially where politicians actively collude in corruption and voter intimidation or fail to uphold public faith in electoral integrity.

The degree of openness and inclusivity of a public sphere will have a direct bearing on the quality of an electoral process. It is critical to democracy that elections are free and fair, and are perceived to be so, with all citizens able to participate equally.

The changing structure of the public sphere and the rise of social media platforms have opened up a new attack surface upon elections. The efforts to influence the 2016 United States elections are the most infamous example of an increasingly sophisticated, well-organized, tech-enabled industry that brilliantly exploits digital technology and social media (US Department of Justice, 2019) to shape outcomes at the ballot box – but there are many more. In 2020, the Digital Forensic Research Lab uncovered a Tunisian public relations firm that had carried out operations aimed at influencing elections in ten countries across Africa (Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2020).

More recently, there have been multiple allegations of electoral interference in Australia (Reuters, 2022), Canada (Cooper, 2022), Taiwan (Kurlantzick, 2019) and the 2022 United States midterm elections (Nimmo & Agranovich, 2022).

Women's political participation

Women in political office and public life, particularly women of minority groups, are disproportionately targeted by online gendered disinformation, harassment and aggression [3]. This is now a problem of global dimensions, with deeply worrying implications for the political participation of women and democratic representation more broadly. It is endangering efforts to achieve gender equality for women across the world, when 44% of all female parliamentarians have received threats of death, rape, beatings or kidnappings, and one in four has experienced actual violence (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016).

Public health

In the field of public health, false and misleading information can negatively impact the delivery of major health-care efforts, such as vaccination programmes, by undermining public campaign messaging. This was most recently evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the scale of information pollution [4] was widely referred to as an "infodemic" (WHO, n.d.), but this has also been an issue during Ebola outbreaks in East and West Africa (Spinney, 2019) and Polio vaccination drives in Pakistan (Morrish, 2020), and around uptake of the Measles, Mumps and Rubella (MMR) vaccine in the United States and elsewhere (Stecula, Kuru & Jamieson, 2020).

Climate change

Information pollution is also shaping public perceptions on climate change (Treen, Williams & O'Neill, 2020). Academics and activists have identified a range of narratives and inauthentic networks being promoted by influential accounts (Center for Countering Digital Hate, 2021) aimed at undermining the transition to sustainable green economies. Organizations working to promote racial and gender equality, are encountering online networks that spread false information and create online environments in which discrimination and the marginalization of minorities are the norm, which in turn has offline consequences (Council of Europe, 2021).

[3] For more information on how gendered disinformation is weaponized to undermine women's political participation, see research from #shepersisted: Di Meco (2023).
[4] Information Pollution is "verifiably false, misleading and manipulated content on and off-line, which is created, produced and disseminated intentionally or unintentionally, and which has the potential to cause harm – namely the presence of disinformation, misinformation [and] malinformation". UNDP, 2022b.

Disaster and crisis response

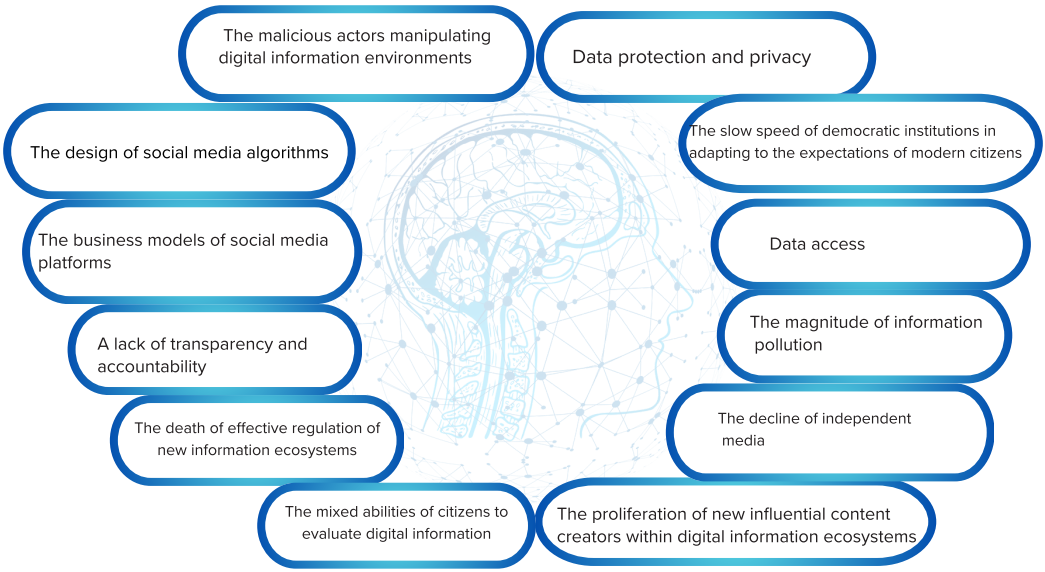
Poorly functioning public spheres can also impact the effectiveness of disaster and crisis response, and social media platforms can be used to fuel diverse narratives. The immediate aftermath of these intensely disruptive events creates an atmosphere in which rumour can feed off collective anxiety and panic, establishing the perfect conditions for information pollution to flourish (US Department of Health & CDC, 2019). States, non-state armed actors and extremist organizations are all now invested in their online capabilities, in which propaganda and online community management play an important role (although with mixed success) (Courchesne and McQuinn, 2021).

When governance systems are not operating well, all sectors of society are impacted. This in turn hinders the development community's efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and to address major developmental challenges such as climate change, inequality, and the cost of living crisis.

WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

A plethora of responses are being trialled all over the world. They include efforts to regulate social media platforms, support independent media and fact-checking, improve digital literacy, explore civic alternatives to social media, develop technology to improve online information integrity [5], and advocate for improving how social media platforms curate content. Given the relative infancy of these responses, there is inevitably a lack of evidence about what is working. The challenge of evaluating the impact of these policy responses is made even more difficult by the complex nature of the problem(s). The relationship between cause and effect and the link between online content and offline actions are examples of why it is so challenging to define the problem and to identify the desired outcomes of the initiatives intended to address it.

New digital challenges include:



[5] Information Integrity "requires citizen access to trustworthy, balanced and complete information on current affairs, government actions, political actors and other elements relevant to their political perceptions and decision-making." (UNDP, 2022b).

Balance power imbalances

Coordinated action towards big tech companies' lack of accountability to counterbalance enormous corporate power.

The success of large tech companies, especially social media platforms, over the last decade has seen them acquire incredible power. The profits of many companies that currently shape the public sphere rival the GDP of several small and medium-sized national economies. These companies are also generating a wealth of invaluable knowledge from the data of billions of users. The accessibility of these data to governments, researchers, journalists and other interested parties is highly restricted. This combination of immense financial power and proprietary global data sets of human behaviour has created a vast power imbalance between these companies and the actors trying to hold them accountable. The companies can, for instance, easily afford to fund lobbying, research and civil society programmes that serve to limit the framing of debate around the impact of their operations. With the major players now more powerful than many governments, there is an urgent need for wider cooperation between the nascent coalitions of actors committed to holding tech companies to account.

Regulate... but how?

To be effective, regulatory efforts need to recognize the limits of existing legal frameworks and focus on specific future-oriented goals.

It is generally accepted that existing regulations are not fit for purpose when it comes to the pace and scale of change occurring within the information environment. Better regulatory approaches are urgently needed, but too often conversations stop short of specifics. Should regulators enforce transparency requirements? Should they break up these companies? Should they aim to demonetize or criminalize coordinated online manipulation? How do they navigate issues of free speech and other fundamental rights? In dealing with such high stakes, we need to promote the values of openness, participation and inclusivity that are essential to a well-functioning public sphere. There is a great need for focused efforts to identify and share evidence of promising regulatory approaches and to better anticipate and mitigate problems of current and future technologies.

Cultivate alternatives

Support should be given to organizations with the expertise to explore alternative civic technology to uphold the public sphere.

We are still in the early years of the internet and digital information ecosystems. The emergence of the first generation of technology giants has dominated discourse and shaped the playing field, but the household names of today's internet are not impervious to politics and market forces. Things change fast in the online world. The online video-sharing platform TikTok went from 100 million users to one billion in five years (Silberling, 2021). The takeover of Twitter by Elon Musk (Conger and Hirsch, 2022) caused a migration of one million Twitter users to the previously niche Mastodon network.(Tangermann, 2019).

There is ample scope for civic or public actors to learn from the success of major social media platforms and other tech companies. Exploring the linkages between the design and function of the dominant social media and the values and behaviours they promote can also inspire conversations about what civic alternatives could look like. There is no guarantee that it is possible to "pick winners" when it comes to successful technology, but more can be done to foster experimentation by those with the talent and desire to scope alternative applications of technology within the modern public sphere and to help them overcome some of the extremely powerful barriers to entry.

Protect civic space

Governments can't react to the threat of emerging technologies by deliberately or inadvertently revoking human rights.

There is now an established trend, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, of governments introducing "anti-disinformation" legislation that infringes, intentionally or unintentionally, on the right to freedom of speech, expression and association, among others. There is a need for strong pushback and global policy guidance to curtail this pattern. One important element of this is support for public interest media and data-led journalism. In addition, ongoing monitoring and critical assessment of legislative efforts that go against international standards may help to prevent the further shrinkage of civic space. Where governments attempt to adopt measures that restrict the citizens' ability to cooperate and make their voices heard, there should be dedicated channels through which concerns can be raised and alternatives proposed. This is especially important for countries where technology may be used to expand citizen surveillance.

Protect and adapt independent media

New set of resources and skills is essential for news producers to manage disinformation.

Media organizations must continue to play their critical role in the public sphere. Increased investment in public interest journalism should create and sustain new ways to engage and retain audiences, particularly younger news consumers. Journalists and news content producers need a new set of resources and skills to manage disinformation, manipulation and attacks nimbly and smartly. Journalists will need to learn to tell compelling stories about the real-world impacts of digital product design and the human interest in complex data sets. Local and community media play a fundamental role in information provision to communities and yet are the most vulnerable to the economic shifts caused by the digital information ecosystem. All this requires a different type of investment, a new way of imagining media, the greater sharing of best practices and of the promotion of champions in this field.

Reality is up for grabs

We cannot ignore the extent to which the world is about to change. Artificial intelligence tools such as Dalle and ChatGPT have demonstrated how synthetically produced digital content will be ubiquitous on the internet by 2025. The creation of synthetic video and audio is not far behind. Soon it will be virtually impossible for online users to distinguish between what is authentic and what is “fake”. This will heighten the risks already faced by contested realities and the rejection of established fact. There are even a growing number of synthetic influencers – social media personalities created with artificial intelligence who are building millions of followers (cf. the artificial Instagram avatar “Lil Miquela” – Klein, 2020). The rise of synthetic content will pose a huge challenge to the information ecosystem. Malicious actors who are already working to manipulate information environments through inauthentic behaviour will soon have a wide range of new tools at their disposal that most institutions and citizens are poorly equipped to tackle.

All of this has dramatic implications for the public sphere, creating much greater competition over what constitutes the truth. This will place a premium on knowledge and expertise, which can help institutions to earn trust and to understand the psychological and behavioral implications of contested realities. Citizens, lawmakers, media professionals and others will need to develop an entirely new set of skills and knowledge to make informed judgements about who and what they engage with online.

Institutional imperatives

20th century institutions cannot solve 21st century problems without radical change.

There is a paradigm shift underway towards predominantly digital information ecosystems. The speed at which this is happening varies across regions, but the long-term implications for government institutions are similar. Particularly in more complex, more fragmented and less regulated digital environments, there is a need for institutions to adapt their approaches in order to achieve their goals. Falling levels of public trust in institutions are widely documented, but there is little recognition that citizens expect to be engaged and informed in ways that do not align well to traditional institutional communication strategies. As the norms of digital information ecosystems become more established, institutions will need to rethink how they approach their role within the public sphere.

This will include giving consideration to the potential of digital technology to modernize the ways in which citizens engage in democratic processes, to how to meet citizens in the digital spaces that they choose to frequent, and to the sort of characteristics they want their institutions to display. In order to rebuild or generate trust within digital information environments, it will be important to adapt to those expectations whilst ensuring that the fundamental principles of inclusivity, accessibility and legitimacy are all retained. This may require institutions to consider what internal changes in organizational culture and in approaches to public engagement are needed.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the challenges and trends which is currently shaping the future of the modern public sphere, and provided guidelines on how we can steer the direction towards ensuring a public sphere which emphasize openness, inclusivity, and effectiveness. It aims at providing development practitioners with an overview of certain key concepts, trends, and dilemmas. It is unlikely that a perfectly functioning public sphere will ever exist. Whatever form public discourse takes, it is almost certain that power dynamics will ensure some voices and perspectives are privileged over others. Perceived illlegitimacy is not the only factor driving public mistrust in governments. Cost of living crises, economic inequalities, insecurity, corruption and a myriad of other real grievances are fuelling public frustration and enabling democratic backsliding.

There are incentives for technology companies to maintain the current online business model that sustains them. There are also incentives for leaders to regulate technology in a way that benefits their political agenda at the expense of citizens' rights and a functional public sphere (Freedom House, 2021). This does not make the pursuit of an open, inclusive and effective public sphere any less urgent, but it does complicate and potentially limit what can be achieved by national policymakers or global technology companies.

Therefore, while any recommended direction of travel should recognise these important avenues, it should also promote and seek synergies between other initiatives and approaches seeing to protect our information ecosystems. There is a role for global, regional, national, and sub-national efforts as well as for diverse stakeholders from media, technology sector, civil society, intergovernmental and regional entities, Member States and others.

UNDP is uniquely positioned to forge linkages between the many stakeholders promoting and fighting for information integrity across diverse development and governance issues. Supporting effective governance and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals remain strategic priorities for UNDP. Doing so demands tackling at least some of the challenges set out in this note and beginning to forge an answer as to what an open and inclusive public sphere should look like in the 21st century.

ANNEX 1

DIRECTIONS OF TRAVEL

Consensus that the United Nations must play a role in fostering, supporting and protecting open, inclusive public spheres cascades from the UN Secretary-General's *Our Common Agenda* (2021) to UNDP's governance signature solution for 2022-2025 (UNDP, 2021, p. 9) and the priorities set out in the UNDP Governance for People and Planet (G4PP) programme (2023).

Reflecting on the strategic ambitions of UNDP to both improve programmatic impact and create thought-leadership and policy engagement at the global level, the proposed directions of travel are set out below.

UNDP should:

1. Play a contributing role in conversations about social media platform regulation

The current reluctance of most major social media platforms to offer meaningful transparency and demonstrate corporate responsibility means that more effective regulation is essential. One of the single biggest opportunities to improve the openness and inclusiveness of the public sphere would be if social media platforms agreed to share more information about how their products work and to invest in proper safeguarding of users around the world from harmful content.

With offices all around the world, UNDP teams are witnessing the end of a chain of failure when it comes to social media governance. They are in a powerful position to document the impact of the negligence of social media platforms, while UNDP leadership can use such observations to help shape productive and meaningful conversations about legislation and platform reform.

There is already momentum within the United Nations system for driving up the accountability of social media platforms. Whilst there will be no silver bullets, there is scope for UNDP to make a meaningful difference by working with partners to explore and identify areas of consensus and opportunity.

2. Inspire efforts to use open-source data to derive insights into the public sphere

Social media platforms (and other digital technologies) generate enormous amounts of data. Whilst this underpins their business models, it also means that large amounts of public discourse exist as data sets. This offers researchers and practitioners the opportunity to examine the content and structure of the public sphere at scale in ways that have not previously been possible.

The ability to capture and analyse this data will be useful to UNDP teams working at country, regional and global levels. For country teams, the ability to spot information pollution, to identify different online communities built around niche topics, and to observe discussions around political events such as elections will be an invaluable tool for sustaining their understanding of their operating context. Guides to monitoring approaches are available (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2020), and there are many new firms with increasingly sophisticated monitoring tools and techniques to support UNDP teams in these endeavours.

At a regional and global level, the insight this kind of data monitoring brings will help to inform leaders about the bigger geopolitical picture that is playing out within modern digital information ecosystems.

3. Explore the role of alternative civic technology in building open, inclusive public spheres

A number of academics and activists have been exploring how alternative technologies could be used to help create a more open and inclusive public sphere. This includes looking at what constitutes social media and considering how new civic platforms could better engage citizens in democratic decision-making. A report from researchers at the University of Stirling (Norms for the New Public Sphere, 2021) provides a starting point for thinking about the philosophical norms which need to underpin the new public sphere, and which could inform the design of new alternative civic technologies.

By exploring this further, UNDP could potentially broker partnerships that offer participants the chance to design services that are applicable to their local political context while offering the opportunity for others to learn and build on.

4. Show how modern democratic institutions can build trust through the way they engage

UNDP should examine how modern democratic institutions can communicate and engage in ways that build trust amongst citizens. This would involve a focus on organizational culture and strategic communications within democratic institutions. It would also include documenting best practices from institutions around the world. These are likely to include things like data-driven social media engagement, how to build and sustain online communities, creating new types of digital content, and facilitating different modes of engagement with citizens.

Whilst there is always a case for developing strategic communications skills, the unique value of more effective communication at a time when the public sphere is being reshaped makes this a compelling focus for the immediate future.

5. Develop an understanding of the psychology of democracy

If addressing the culture and capacity of institutions is the supply-side intervention, then this is the demand-side intervention.

A programme of work that asks behavioural questions such as how citizens evaluate the information they receive, what impact the delivery mechanism has on this evaluation, what causes citizens to share information, and the factors that influence citizen perceptions of democratic effectiveness would be instructive for wider governance reforms.

This kind of behavioural science can also uncover insights with value for wider development programmes.

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CONTACT

United Nations Development Programme
UNDP Global Policy Centre for Governance

Kongens gate 12
0153 Oslo, Norway
+47 22 12 16 00

www.undp.org/policy-centre/oslo
oslo.governance.centre@undp.org
@undpogc

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