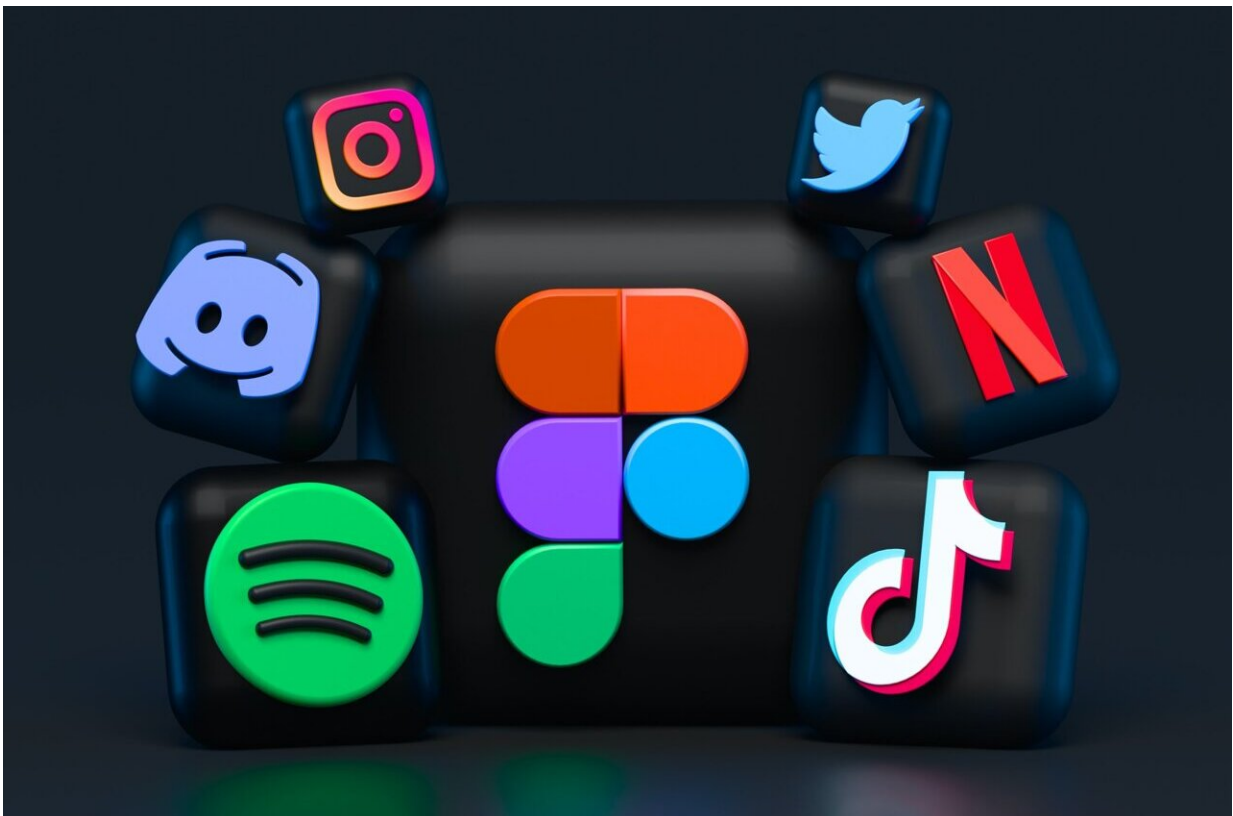


# Is the global decline in democracy linked to social media? We combed through the evidence to find out

November 8 2022, by Stephan Lewandowsky, Lisa Oswald, Philipp Lorenz-Spreen and Ralph Hertwig

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Here are two common ways of thinking about democracy in the online

era. First, the internet is a [liberation technology](#) and will usher in an era of global democracy. Second, you can have social media or democracy, [but not both](#).

Which is more correct? There is no doubt [democracy is in retreat](#) around the globe. Even supposedly stable democracies have recently seen events incompatible with democracy and the rule of law, such as the violent assault on the US Capitol in 2021.

To understand the role of [social media](#) in this process, we carried out a systematic review of the evidence linking social media to ten indicators of democratic well-being: political participation, knowledge, trust, news exposure, political expression, hate, polarization, populism, network structure, and misinformation. Our findings are published in *Nature Human Behaviour*.

We reviewed almost 500 studies across different platforms in countries around the globe, and saw some broad patterns emerge. Social media use is linked to an increase in political engagement, but also increases in polarization, populism, and distrust in institutions.

## **Different kinds of evidence**

In our review, we put greater weight on research establishing causal links between social media and indicators of democratic well-being, rather than just correlations.

Correlations can be interesting, but they cannot prove any outcome is caused by social media use. For example, suppose we find a link between social media use and hate speech. It might arise because people who produce hate speech use social media more, rather than because using social media triggers hate speech.

Causal links can be established in a number of ways, for example through large-scale field experiments. Participants may be asked to [reduce Facebook usage to 20 minutes per day](#) or [turn off Facebook altogether](#) for a month. (Both interventions led to an increase in well-being, and abstaining from Facebook altogether also significantly reduced political polarization.)

## **More engagement, more polarization**

Across the 496 articles we considered, most correlational rather than causal, we found a mix of positive and negative effects. As often happens in science, the pattern is complicated but can still be interpreted.

On the positive side, we found digital media use relates to higher [political engagement](#) and greater diversity of news exposure. For example, a [study in Taiwan found](#) information-oriented social media use increased political participation. However, this was only true if the user believed an individual can influence politics through online actions.

On the negative side, we found considerable evidence for effects such as fostering polarization and populism, and reducing trust in institutions. The effects on trust in institutions and media were particularly pronounced. During the pandemic, digital media use [has been shown](#) to be associated with COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy.

Another negative outcome of social media use, in a range of political contexts and on various platforms, appears to be increased political polarization.

We found increased polarization was also linked to exposure to opposing viewpoints in one's social media feeds. In other words, being exposed to the words of political opponents did not bridge the political divide.

Rather it seemed to amplify it.

## Links to violence

We also found a strong and pervasive association between social media use and populism. More social media use translates into a greater vote share for populist parties.

Studies in Austria, Sweden and Australia have found evidence for an association between increased [social media use](#) and online right-wing radicalization. Studies in Germany and Russia have provided causal evidence that digital media can increase the incidence of ethnic hate crimes.

For example, the German study found local outages of Facebook (due to technical faults or internet interruptions, for example) decreased violence in those locations. The authors of the study [estimated](#) that 50% less anti-refugee sentiment on social media would reduce violent incidents by 12.6%.

The distribution of effects around the world was also striking. Positive effects on [political participation](#) and information consumption were most pronounced in emerging democracies in South America, Africa and Asia. Negative effects were more evident in established democracies in Europe and the United States.

## No simple answers

So, to return to where we began: is the internet a liberation technology? Or are social media incompatible with democracy?

There are no simple yes or no answers. There is, however, evidence that

digital media impact political behavior globally. This evidence warrants concern about the adverse impacts of social media on democracy.

Facebook, Twitter and other social media are not per se incompatible with [democracy](#). Democratic welfare, however, requires that scientists carefully study the social effects of social media. Those effects must be evaluated and regulated by voters and elected policymakers, not a small clique of [super-rich individuals](#).

We have seen small but important steps in this direction. The [Digital Services Act of the European Union](#) is one. Another is the proposed [Platform Accountability and Transparency Act \(PATA\)](#) in the US, though its fate is uncertain.

**More information:** Philipp Lorenz-Spreen et al, A systematic review of worldwide causal and correlational evidence on digital media and democracy, *Nature Human Behaviour* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s41562-022-01460-1](#)

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