

Why the future of democracy could depend on your group chats

June 4 2024, by Nathan Schneider



Is your social media group a budding democracy or someone's fiefdom? Credit: [John Trumbull's painting, Declaration of Independence, plus emoticons](#)

I became newly worried about the state of democracy when, a few years ago, my mother was elected president of her neighborhood garden club.

Her election wasn't my worry—far from it. At the time, I was trying to resolve a conflict on a large email group I had created. Someone, inevitably, was being a jerk on the internet. I had the power to remove

them, but did I have the right? I realized that the garden club had in its bylaws something I had never seen in nearly all the [online communities](#) I had been part of: basic procedures to hold people with power accountable to everyone else.

The internet has yet to catch up to my mother's garden club.

When Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States in the early 1830s, he made an observation that [social scientists](#) have [seen over and over since](#): Democracy at the state and national levels depends on everyday organizations like that garden club. [He called them](#) "schools" for practicing the "general theory of association." As members of small democracies, people were learning to be citizens of a democratic country.

How many people experience those kinds of schools today?

People interact [online more than offline](#) nowadays. Rather than practicing [democracy](#), people most likely find themselves getting suspended from a Facebook group they rely on with no reason given or option to appeal. Or a group of friends join a chat together, but only one of them has the ability to change its settings. Or people see posts from Elon Musk inserted into their mentions on X, which he owns. All of these situations are examples of what I call "[implicit feudalism](#)."

Implicit feudalism

"Feudalism" is a term for [what the Middle Ages never really were](#): a system of rigid fiefdoms where local nobles wield absolute power. But as I describe in my book, "[Governable Spaces](#)," feudalism describes life online quite well. Admins, moderators and influencers rule their communities with powers that the software grants them. They suppress conflict through the digital equivalent of censorship and exile. Big

companies and their CEOs are like the kings and popes. But people experience feudalism most directly among fellow users who happen to hold moderation roles.

I call this feudalism "implicit" because people carry it out unconsciously. People use their online spaces to talk about democratic politics, and tech companies [often say they are "democratizing" something](#), whether it is free speech or food delivery. But in practice, democracy is usually missing in these spaces.

I believe that implicit feudalism is becoming a template for politics more broadly. Admin power is political power, and the two are blending in the public imagination. After the 2016 election, some observers [speculated that Mark Zuckerberg would run for president](#).

Donald Trump came to power not by holding office but as a viral influencer; after leaving the presidency, his consolation was to start his own social media fiefdom, Truth Social. Controlling his own server means he doesn't have to follow anyone else's rules for acceptable speech, and it lends him the status of a platform owner. The archetype of a leader is shifting from a responsible and accountable elected official to an unelected, minimally constrained tech CEO.

Various pathologies of online life also become easier to understand in light of implicit feudalism. Take the phenomenon of [so-called "cancel culture"](#). Critics often [blame the people who participate](#) in online pile-ons against public figures they disagree with. But under implicit feudalism, what better options do people have? You can't elect a new admin. If you submit a report about the harm someone caused, it goes into a black box—not a jury of peers or any other clear process of adjudication.

In her book "[We Will Not Cancel Us](#)," the writer and activist adrienne

maree brown observed that the problem with online callouts and takedowns is that many people don't have a better choice. She contrasts this to her work as a facilitator in offline groups, where she can guide people through a process to resolve their conflicts. Online platforms, however, aren't designed for problem-solving. Instead, they make problems either disappear or go viral.

Digital democracy

In the hopes that online life can catch up to my mother's garden club, I have looked for places where people are exploring the possibilities for democracy on and through the internet.

Hidden behind the scams and [meme coins](#), the advent of blockchains has enabled a new industry of online governance tools to help users co-manage systems holding billions of dollars in digital assets. There are experiments with [delegated voting](#), [continuous voting](#) and [reputation-based voting](#). There are [crypto-juries](#) and [crypto-guilds](#).

Closer to planet Earth, governments have started encouraging technology for online democracy. The city of [Barcelona, for instance, supported Decidim](#), a [governance platform](#) now used both by other cities and civic organizations. [People have built modules](#) on it to support digital versions of a wide range of democratic processes, from debates and assemblies to petitions and participatory budgeting.

The fate of democracy anywhere, I have come to believe, depends on experiments like these.

People around the world are losing faith that democracy is responsive to their needs. As the technologist Bruce Schneier has argued, "The modern representative democracy was the best form of government that mid-18th-century technology could conceive of. The 21st century is a

different place scientifically, technically and socially."

Online communities can start this work on their own. They can adopt basic charters that keep the people with admin powers in check. Founders can make plans for transitioning their power to other group members, what I call "[exit to community](#)." Different communities can [share their rules](#) and learn from each other.

Practicing democracy

Groups of users, however, cannot defeat implicit feudalism alone.

Policymakers have a role to play. They can facilitate online communities that are user-governed for the public interest. Decades ago, the U.S. Congress filled the gaps in rural electrification by creating [a framework for financing user-owned cooperatives](#). Successes like this can guide the future.

As artificial intelligence systems become more widespread, democracy can help keep them useful and safe. For example, the [Collective Intelligence Project](#), a technology incubator for guiding progress toward the common good, has shown that assemblies of ordinary people can bring [insights to AI governance](#) that even experts miss. As policymakers design rules around these new technologies, they can emphasize the voices of those whose livelihoods are at stake.

When W.E.B. Du Bois wrote his classic history of the Civil War's aftermath, "[Black Reconstruction in America](#)," he landed on a choice phrase: "[abolition democracy](#)." The idea is that abolishing slavery and racism is not a one-time event; a just society requires the vigilance of democratic participation as a way of life, wherever people find themselves.

That is why Du Bois devoted himself not just to legal advocacy through the NAACP but also to [supporting Black-led cooperatives](#), where workers could practice democratic ownership and governance every day.

Online spaces have become the new schools of association. Unless democracy reigns there, it is in peril everywhere.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Why the future of democracy could depend on your group chats (2024, June 4)
retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-06-future-democracy-group-chats.html>

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