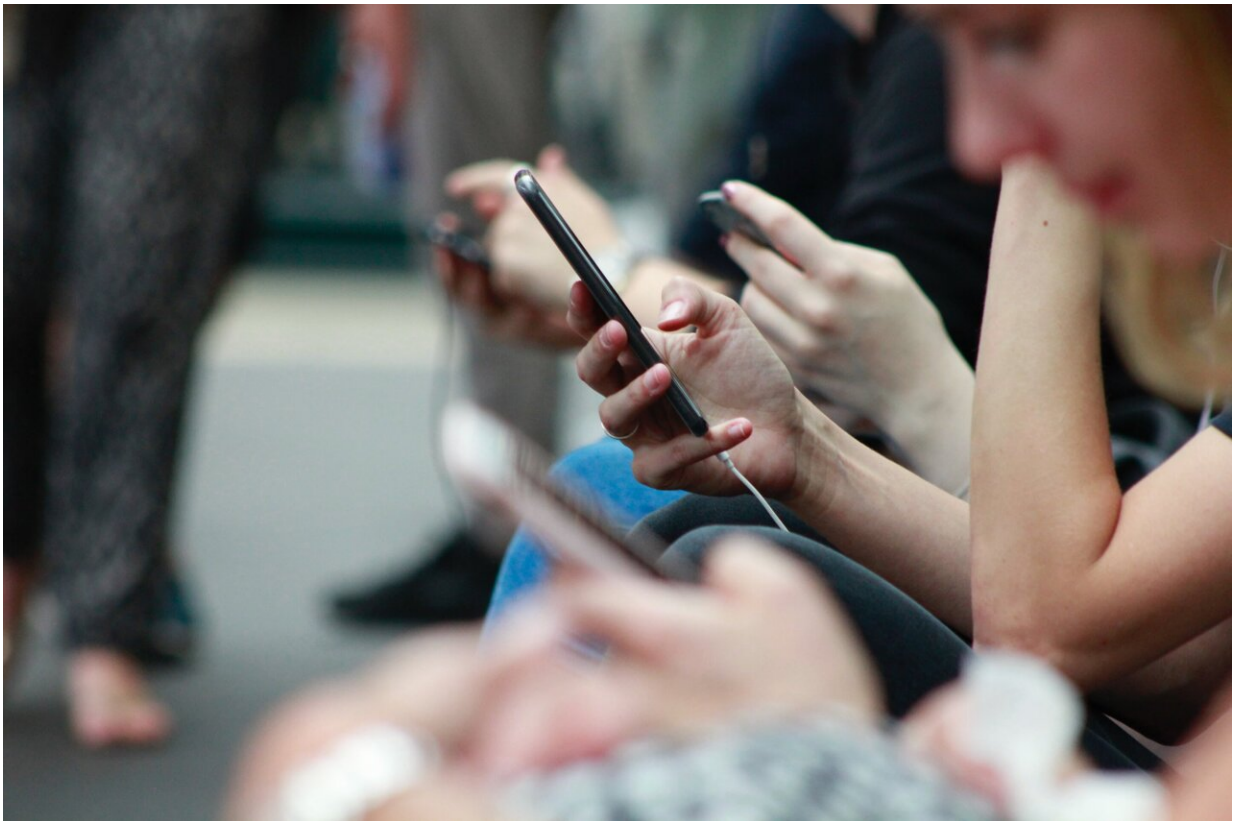


# Q&A: Professors discuss democracy in the internet age

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Democracy is a process that works best when citizens are informed and engaged. In the internet age, our relationship to information has been profoundly altered by the shifting role of legacy media, the rise of social

media and growing challenges involving misinformation, disinformation, polarization and unequal broadband access. How do these changes help or hinder our participation as democratic citizens?

Penn State News spoke with four Penn State experts to learn about some of the key issues impacting the digital information landscape during this presidential election season.

Christopher Ali is the Pioneers Chair in Telecommunications and professor of telecommunications in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications and author of "Farm Fresh Broadband: The Politics of Rural Connectivity."

Christopher Beem is a research professor of political science and managing director of the McCourtney Institute for Democracy in the College of the Liberal Arts. Beem is a co-host of the Democracy Works podcast.

Kelley Cotter is an assistant professor in the College of Information Sciences and Technology and a faculty affiliate of the Center for Socially Responsible Artificial Intelligence. Her research explores how data-centric technologies shape social, cultural and political life, and vice versa.

Matthew Jordan is a professor and head of the Department of Film Production and Media Studies in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications and director of Penn State's News Literacy Initiative.

**Why is reliable local news so important for a healthy democracy, and how can local news be strengthened in the current digital climate? Can platforms like NextDoor, a hyperlocal social networking service for**

## **neighborhoods, play a positive role?**

Jordan: Local news, when it works well, serves as a keystone to democracy, bridging partisan divides by focusing on the needs of communities. Unfortunately, local news organizations have been hollowed out over the last 20 years by market forces, and that means local news organizations have had fewer reporters covering the community and letting citizens know what issues are important and how they can solve these together. Instead, they have become vehicles for abstract national identity politics.

To remedy this situation, we need to think of local news as a public good, almost like a necessary utility, and develop ways to fund it as a non-profit venture. Solutions to the problem would include taxing social media companies that dominate the media ecosystem and using those funds to pay for local journalism. Other solutions might include creating local public news organizations dedicated to serving the needs of their communities.

Cotter: Localized platforms like NextDoor, local Facebook groups and city/state subreddits [subsidiary threads or categories within the Reddit website] can contribute to strengthening communities and enhancing civic engagement, but they are not a replacement for traditional local news sources. Their coverage is often skewed by the interests of those with the digital access and skills to participate and by a tendency to avoid topics likely to provoke conflict.

Despite these limitations, local social media groups can still have a positive impact. They can facilitate a sense of belonging by helping residents connect with one another and see their communities from a different angle. They also help residents mobilize when community needs arise. These groups can also serve as a valuable feedback mechanism for local government officials to learn about the needs,

values and interests of their constituents.

## **What are the major social media platforms doing to combat misinformation around the upcoming election season? Are they doing enough?**

Cotter: The major platforms have policies barring misinformation and disinformation, as well as "manipulated media," such as artificial intelligence (AI)-generated or photoshopped content. They employ automated systems that rely on machine learning—increasingly, large language models like ChatGPT—to identify potentially false information. These systems use data signals like content captions, hashtags and user flags to determine if content violates platform policies. However, major platforms generally remove content only in extreme cases where there is a risk of physical harm.

Despite significant resources devoted to combating misinformation, it remains a complex and evolving problem. One key issue is the high volume of false positives produced by automated systems, especially with political content where detecting inaccuracies requires nuanced analysis. It's also true that arbitrating [false information](#) in the political realm is often unavoidably ideological. Labeling, demoting and removing false positives under a misinformation violation can all have significant impacts on people's perceptions of political events, issues and policies. Frequently, these mistakes come across as political censorship.

Another problem is the inconsistent treatment of content [originating] from different users. Platforms often show leniency towards public figures and celebrities, sometimes bending their own rules. This differential treatment undermines the effectiveness and fairness of their misinformation policies.

## **What can users do to protect themselves against online misinformation?**

Cotter: The internet has democratized information sharing and access in many ways, allowing access to diverse sources anytime, anywhere, with minimal effort. However, this also means the quality of information varies dramatically, making our choices about what to pay attention to more critical than ever.

To protect against misinformation, it's important to maintain a diverse media diet by consulting a variety of sources. Different sources often provide slightly different information and vary in framing, offering a more comprehensive understanding of complex stories and issues. Established news organizations typically have ethical standards and practices to ensure the reliability and credibility of their information, making them generally more trustworthy than random social media accounts.

People should also trust their gut. False information is often surprising or shocking, which makes sense because it presents a reality that doesn't exist. If a claim seems too crazy or too good to be true, it likely isn't entirely accurate. By staying alert to our emotional reactions to content, we can prompt ourselves to make fact-checking in the moment a habit.

Jordan: In this election cycle, we are going to be faced with many challenges as AI is used to generate and disseminate misinformation at an unparalleled scale. Much of this media content is coming from outside the U.S. from countries who benefit from the U.S. being weakened by division and polarization. Faced with this challenge, it will be important for all of us as citizens to be very wary of information and content that get shared on social media.

If you have never heard of the source of the information or if there is a news story without an author, don't trust it. If you are reading something that seems outrageous or scandalous, it's likely that it is misinformation created to get you to engage with it. Look for news stories that give context and discuss the stakes of governance; avoid political news that only talks about who is winning the polling horserace and focuses on election strategy. The horse race coverage is easy—and lazy—but, like the sports coverage it emulates, it doesn't give us the information we need to make informed decisions and often exacerbates the "us versus them" partisan dynamic.

## **How does the digital divide impact the strength of our democracy?**

Ali: The digital divide seriously impacts our democracy as it separates those who can and can't participate in every walk of life. At least 24 million Americans lack access to a broadband network. And it's not just a matter of access. There are more people in the U.S. who can't afford broadband than who can't access broadband. So, we're actually talking about digital divides, plural. And each one of these divides impacts people's ability to participate in commerce, health care, education, government, and therefore, in democracy.

## **How does access to high-speed internet impact local economies and how does that intersect with politics?**

Ali: Particularly for rural communities, adoption of broadband can lead to lower unemployment, higher gross domestic product per capita, higher housing values, improved access to health care and improved efficiency of agriculture. For these communities, broadband can be a game changer. But it's not just rural versus urban. Rural communities tend to lack infrastructure, but the affordability issue is universal.

Eighteen percent of the population of New York City does not have internet access.

Broadband is actually a bipartisan issue. Everyone wants it for their community. We are seeing some political fighting over what broadband means and who should provide it. At the end of the day, it comes down to: What is broadband? Is it a private good, or is it a utility and our window onto the world? I see it as a utility, a social good; as important as electricity, sewage or clean water.

## **How best can the media play a role in preventing a recurrence of election denial in 2024?**

Beem: Making such a claim is much easier than investigating it, let alone debunking it. But like any democracy, ours rests on the public's confidence that our elections are free and fair. Therefore, the media and courts must take these claims seriously and investigate them thoroughly. They did so in 2020. All told, those efforts took years to complete.

All of this would undoubtedly be repeated if similar claims were made in 2024. But there is really no alternative. The media should remind Americans how this process played out in 2020: claims were made, thoroughly investigated and debunked. That might blunt the power of similar claims in 2024. But given the tribalistic condition of our electorate, any such effort is likely to be minimal.

Even if they were ultimately proven to be false, claims of electoral fraud damaged our democracy in ways that are not easily undone. There is evidence that all those investigations associated with the 2020 election—and confirmation that there was no impactful fraud—have had an effect. A 2023 CNN poll showed that almost two-thirds of GOP-leaning voters continue to believe—falsely—that the election was stolen,

even though almost half admit—correctly—that there is no "solid evidence" to support that belief. It is reasonable to assume that any similar investigations associated with the 2024 election would lead to similar results. And all of this bespeaks the perilous condition of our democracy right now.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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