



FUTURE DIGITAL THREATS TO DEMOCRACY

This ongoing series from Technology for Global Security and the Center for a New American Security examines the elements and potential implications of digital threats to democracy over the next ten years.

Online and Off-Kilter: Forecasting Digital Threats to Democracy

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New technologies come with unintended consequences. It is increasingly clear that the breakneck pace of technological development in the 21st century poses new digital threats to all forms of democracy, yet government, industry, and civil society remain ill-equipped to grapple with these forces in real time.

As part of the [Center for a New American Security's \(CNAS\)](#) broader [Countering High-Tech Illiberalism project](#), CNAS and [Technology for Global Security \(T4GS\)](#) have undertaken a [multi-stage project](#) to identify digital drivers and trends impacting democracies in the next ten years. Humans often struggle to envision future scenarios, but rigorous analytic futures work can help to develop practical policy and investment plans. As Brad Smith, the President of Microsoft, [warned in 2019](#):

Even the best technologies have unintended consequences, and the benefits are seldom spread uniformly. And this is before the new technology is misused for harmful ends, as it inevitably will be.

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As part of the effort to identify the trends that will shape the future, CNAS and T4GS are engaging top global experts to develop scenarios and alternative futures that highlight digital threats to democracy using futures analytics techniques. To further understanding and prepare for a series of workshops, researchers undertook a [large-scale](#) cross-disciplinary literature review; interviewed civil society, academic, policy, and technical subject matter experts; and analyzed important cross-cutting trends and underpinning drivers that may impact democracy in the next ten years.

The research thus far has identified nine cross-cutting trends, based on a broad array of driving factors, which we will discuss in greater depth through this ongoing series. These trends are:

- digitally impaired cognition
- weakened media institutions
- fragile complex infrastructure
- compromised privacy and data
- reality apathy
- weaponized information environment
- increased digital authoritarianism
- fractured ideologies and identities
- intensifying monetization of attention

Only by imagining and understanding different potential futures can civil society, government, and industry attempt to manage the risks posed by these emerging digital threats.





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THE WORLD IN 2030

This research also identified six additional social and technical challenges that contribute to the analysis of potential futures. These six environmental factors provide relevant context to an analysis of future digital threats to democracy:

1. *Cognitive biases*: Individuals are predisposed to believe new information when it confirms prior beliefs, particularly when it comes from their social circles.
2. *Computing power*: Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other advanced technologies will require increased computing power as they develop, with broad economic and environmental implications.
3. *Intelligent machines*: Autonomous systems will increasingly augment or replace humans by automating jobs, analyzing data, surveilling and policing citizens, and fighting wars.
4. *Energy*: Emerging technologies have a growing environmental cost, yet potential solutions remain years in the future.
5. *Climate crisis*: Current democratic systems are not equipped to address an incremental but catastrophic climate threat, which will exacerbate socio-economic tensions.
6. *Demographic trends*: An aging population and uneven access to higher education will worsen polarization and contribute to lack of critical thinking and civic understanding.

These elements provide valuable psychological, technical, and societal context for the nine cross-cutting trends. While these six challenges do not constitute digital threats to democracy on their own, they will each inevitably impact the information environment, distribution of resources, surveillance and privacy, and socio-economic divides.

CROSS-CUTTING TRENDS

Over the coming weeks and months, this series will discuss in depth each of these nine trends and the broad array of technical, psychological, and socio-political drivers contributing to each. T4GS analysts identified this group of nine trends based on the cross-disciplinary literature review and conversations with subject-matter experts. We prioritized understanding the emerging technologies most likely to shape democratic institutions; for example, the use of [autonomous systems for policing](#). In parallel, analysts investigated growing geopolitical and societal challenges, such as the rise in [affective polarization](#). Based on this research, a variety of drivers emerged—ranging from attention addiction and information overload at the individual level to inadequate data regulation and techno-authoritarian synergy at the systemic level.

Understanding these trends and drivers allows us to better anticipate the challenges that democratic institutions and citizens will face over the next ten years. These challenges are significant but not insurmountable. This ongoing series from T4GS and CNAS will examine these trends in detail. Stay tuned for more!

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