

DEMOS

THE DIGITAL- DEMOCRATIC DOOM LOOP

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE
BREAKING OF THE STATE-
CITIZEN RELATIONSHIP

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ABOUT THIS ESSAY

In this essay author and journalist **Phil Tinline** argues that modern democracies are caught in a “digital-democratic doom loop” in which declining trust in the state, economic stagnation, and rising inequality fuel public anger that is increasingly misdirected at democratic institutions rather than private power, especially big tech.

Phil traces how long-standing populist techniques of redirecting blame were radically intensified after the 2008 financial crash by the rise of algorithmic social media. These platforms amplify outrage, flatten distinctions between fact and falsehood, weaken journalism and democratic debate, and strengthen the power of tech companies. This, he argues, is a key contributor to the democratic doom loop. He concludes that breaking the doom loop requires rebalancing public and private power and the development of new platforms and algorithms designed to support epistemic security, deliberation and a renewed alliance between citizen and democratic state.

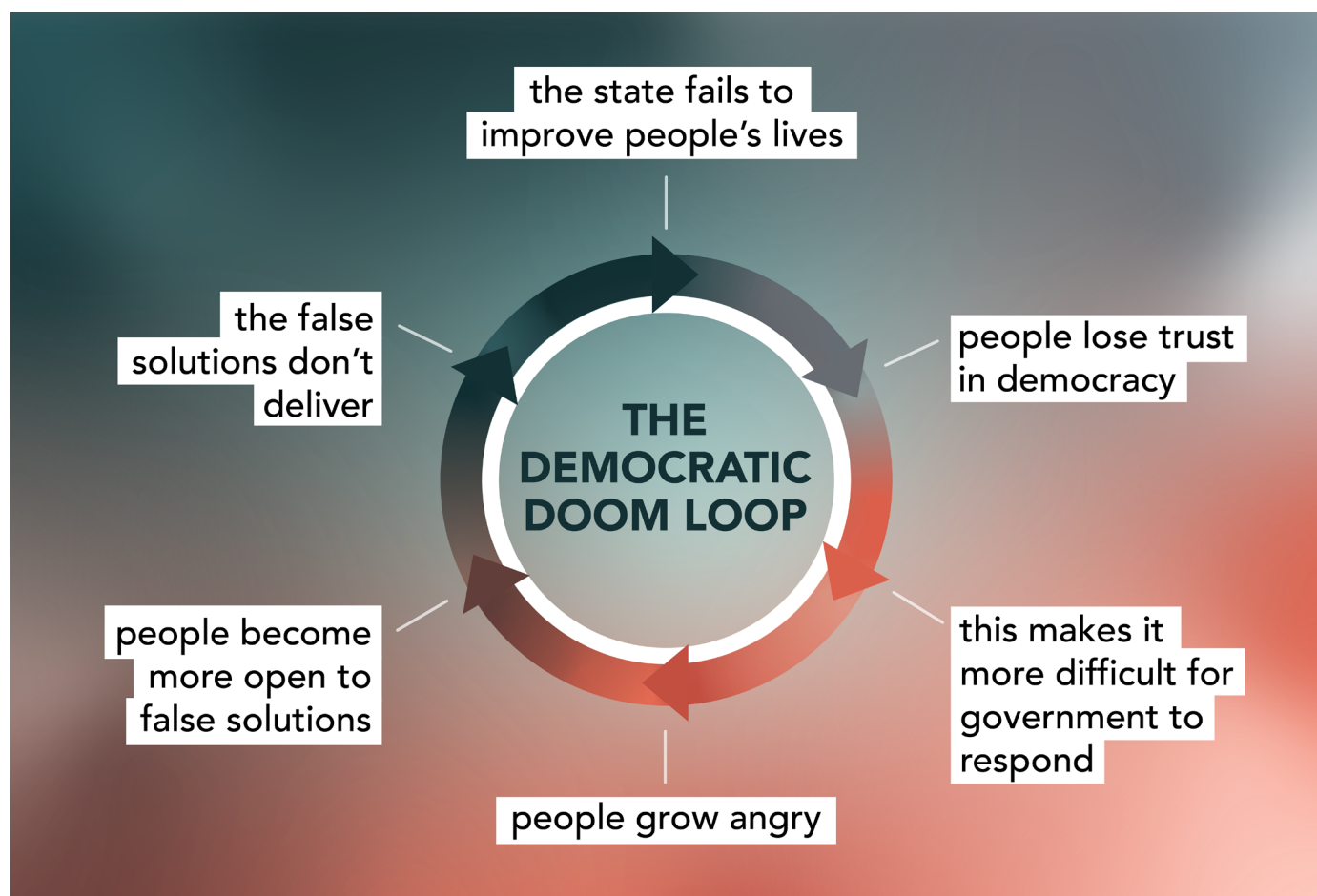
Demos’s mission is to upgrade democracy with a new deal to rebuild the relationship between state and citizen. Our work focuses on how to improve the everyday practice of democracy, public service reform, the citizen economy and to create more resilient information ecosystems. This essay deepens our understanding of how social media is contributing to the erosion of faith in democracy, and points towards practical ways to safeguard our democratic future. The work of the [Demos Digital](#) team is focused on digital policy in this space. Our mission is big and ambitious; our methods are practical, bold and hopeful.

INTRODUCTION

Mainstream democratic politics is mired in a crisis of legitimacy. In one of many similar findings, the New Britain Project published polling in 2023 which found that '58 percent of people think nothing in our country works anymore', and only '21% have any faith in politicians' ability to sort things out'.¹ In September 2025 YouGov produced a survey which suggested that 67 percent of British people 'feel politicians primarily act out of self-interest'. Only 4 percent 'see them as doing what is best for their country'.²

In her June 2025 report *Upgrading Democracy: A new deal to repair the broken relationship between citizen and state*, Demos chief executive Polly Curtis traced the vicious cycle which has developed as a result of the breaking of that bond, and the consequent rise of distrust in democracy. She set out what she calls a 'democratic doom loop': a negative spiral doing ever greater damage to the legitimacy of the democratically-run state. It might be summarised like this:

FIGURE 1
THE DEMOCRATIC DOOM LOOP



1 [Broken Britain](#), New Britain Project, 2023, 4.

2 Dylan Difford, '[Do Britons think politicians are out for themselves?](#)', YouGov, 10 September 2025.

As Curtis observed, populist politicians have found ways to play on this phenomenon to build support for autocracy:

At the moment, the political debate is driven by extremes, a result of the ascendancy of populist actors, the nature of the information environment and the need to “cut through” with ideas, given the scale of dissatisfaction. The system is optimised for polarisation and division, rather than the careful bridge-building and nuanced analysis needed to navigate the policy challenges ahead.³

Demos is therefore working on practical ways to upgrade democracy and build back trust - through the everyday practice of democracy, public service reform, economic measures and through improving the health of the information environment. This last aspect is about ‘the security of the information supply chains that are essential for a healthy and well functioning democracy’, and developing ways to shape ‘technology for the public good, instead of it being an inevitable part of decline and the concentration of power.’⁴

All this points to an additional force, entwined with the relationships between the state, the citizen and the populist politician: the power of the private sector, and in particular, the giant US tech companies. These play a huge role in shaping the information environment, its systems and supply chains; they are an extreme example of new concentrations of power.

This paper explores how the private power of big tech affects the citizen’s view of the state, with reference to the doom loop Curtis outlines, and sets out some initial thoughts on what this analysis might contribute to breaking the doom loop, and renewing the citizen-state relationship.

PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE POWER

When life doesn’t seem to be getting better, it seems natural to blame politicians and the state they run, and even to lose trust in democracy. Yet state failure is not the only cause of today’s discontent. Private power has contributed significantly too. The beneficiaries of ballooning asset prices have not seen fit to share their good fortune with those who rely on a wage or salary: wages ‘have flatlined everywhere since 2008’.⁵ British business investment has been the lowest among G7 states for most of the last three decades:⁶ an important cause of the stubbornly sluggish productivity that drives much of the malaise. Concentration of wealth, ownership and power has exacerbated the cost of living. Financialisation – not least private equity firms’ tendency to saddle their acquisitions with debt – along with tax avoidance and the buying-up of UK businesses by US companies, has deprived the state of revenue, shifting more of the tax burden onto the public. And if public services such as water and rail seem to be in expensive decay, some of the responsibility for that must fall on the companies that have chosen to participate in those sectors.

3 Polly Curtis, [Upgrading Democracy: A New Deal to Repair the Broken Relationship Between Citizen and State](#), Demos, July 2025, 22.

4 Ibid., 22, 23.

5 [‘Pocketing a pay rise: What policy must do to boost wages across the country’](#), Centre for Cities, 20 January 2025.

6 [‘Business investment analysis’](#), Department of Business and Trade, 4 October 2024; see also: [‘Business investment in the UK: July to September 2025 revised results’](#), Office of National Statistics, 22 December 2025.

By what process is public anger directed so overwhelmingly onto the state? Why is private power left to pursue its interests in ways that stoke that anger without attracting it? This paper argues that social media plays a significant part in the ways this works today.

It did not start there, however. Given that social media is predominantly an American phenomenon, it makes sense to trace this history in a US context, before exploring how that applies to the UK.

THE MISDIRECTION OF BLAME

Extreme populists were riling up discontented citizens against the state long before Facebook and Twitter. In 1949, the exiled German sociologist Leo Löwenthal published *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*, synthesized from research monitoring fascist meetings, texts and broadcasts from the Depression of the 1930s onwards. Löwenthal notes how, for a genuine radical, a discontented public's unfocused suspicion of 'bankers and bureaucrats' can 'serve as starting points for analysis of the economic and political situations'. Advocates of real political change respond to their audiences' fears constructively, aiming to turn them into a 'stimulus to organized social thought and action'.

But the 'agitator proceeds in exactly the opposite way.' He cheats his audience out of the possibility of advancing from discontent to understanding to action. He makes sure to look and sound radical, while steering 'his adherents wide of any suggestion of a basic social reorganization.' He presents them with those stereotypes of bankers and bureaucrats 'only to encourage...vague resentments', fostering 'the idea of a permanent conspiracy directed against the eternal dupes'.⁷

The agitator diverts his audience's fear and anger away from any serious understanding of how power functions and how to challenge it, keeping them railing helplessly against enemies, creating what we might call a rage loop.

In the late 1940s, democratic politics enjoyed high levels of public trust, and this rage loop was too marginal to create a negative spiral which might endanger democracy. But from the conspiracist red-baiting of the 1950s and early 1960s, through the populist presidential campaigns of George Wallace in the late 1960s and early 1970s, to the culture war tirades of Rush Limbaugh and Fox News hosts and their echoes among hard-line congressional Republicans, this agitational technique became increasingly mainstream in US politics.

This was centred on the notion of the 'backlash' against anything deemed to threaten the (mis)remembered cultural norms of mid-century white America. In his influential 2004 book *What's the Matter With Kansas?*, the journalist Thomas Frank argued that agitating cultural discontent had become a means to lure people away from their own economic best interests:

⁷ Leo Löwenthal and Norbert Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*, 1949 (Verso edition 2021), 25, 35.

While earlier forms of conservatism emphasized fiscal sobriety, the backlash mobilizes voters with explosive social issues – summoning public outrage over everything from busing to un-Christian art – which it then marries to pro-business economic policies.

Cultural anger is marshalled to achieve economic ends. And it is these economic achievements – not the forgettable skirmishes of the never-ending culture wars – that are the movement’s greatest monuments.⁸

Twenty years later, in *White Rural Rage: The Threat to American Democracy*, political scientist Tom Schaller and journalist Paul Waldman argued that this strategy worked cyclically, repeatedly diverting discontent at real problems away from a challenge that might lead to a solution. Conservative rural Americans’ own leaders:

deploy a sophisticated propaganda system meant to ensure that every problem rural America faces will be blamed on faraway forces and people who have little if any actual influence on rural Americans’ lives. It’s the best way to stoke the voters’ seething – that and telling them the solution to their problems will always be to elect more conservative Republicans, who will continue to spend more effort in ratcheting up rural anger than in addressing the problems confronting rural communities.⁹

Schaller and Waldman’s analysis suggests that for this demographic, this process now constituted not just a self-contained rage loop but a dangerous negative spiral – a democratic doom loop – because it was ‘undermining White Americans’ democratic commitments’. They ‘feel passed over, desperate, even angry *despite winning elections*’ (my emphasis).¹⁰ The implication is that the democratically-run state can never be a force for good.

We should be wary, however, of talk of ‘sophisticated propaganda systems’, and of any representation of voters as dupes.¹¹ As we’ll see, this risks aping the agitators by misdirecting blame and perpetuating the problem we’re tracing.

The escalation in concern about citizens’ loss of trust in the democratically-run state between the 2000s and the 2020s goes well beyond the specific complaints of rural white Americans. It is often directed at one major change: the advent of social media. But just as important is the economic rupture that intersected with it.

8 Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter With Kansas?: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*, 2004, 5. ‘Busing’ refers to efforts to achieve the racial integration of schools by busing white children to majority-black schools and vice versa; ‘un-Christian art’ refers to controversies such as that concerning the artist Andres Serrano’s work *Piss Christ*, which had received funding from a federal agency, the National Endowment for the Arts.

9 Tom Schaller and Paul Waldman, *White Rural Rage: The Threat to American Democracy*, 2024, 5.

10 *Ibid.*, 13.

11 In an influential study which argues that Americans have divided themselves into two increasingly separate tribes, the journalist Bill Bishop took Frank’s analysis to task for relying on voters’ ‘gullibility’, and the ‘duplicitous’ of ‘manipulative Republicans’. See Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*, 2009, 36.

DRIVERS OF ESCALATION 1: THE CRASH

In response to the global financial crisis in 2008, President Bush spent \$700 billion to rescue Wall Street banks. The following spring, his successor President Obama signed a (rather smaller) rescue package of \$75 billion for mortgage holders at risk of defaulting on their mortgages and losing their homes to foreclosure.¹² On 19 February 2009, a CNBC reporter called Rick Santelli delivered an impromptu rant from the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, calling for a 'Chicago Tea Party' – not to protest the bailout for the bankers who had caused the crash, but rather Obama's use of tax dollars to 'subsidise the losers' mortgages'.¹³ Santelli was criticised for effectively directing blame away from those primarily responsible for the crisis, but his view was evidently widely shared. The rant became one of the triggers of the Tea Party movement.

In response to this, and to Thomas Frank's paradox, the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild set out to ask how a system can 'both create pain and deflect blame for that pain'. As she saw it, 'In 2008, reckless and woefully underregulated Wall Street investors led many to lose savings, homes, jobs, and hope. Yet, years later, under the banner of a "free market," many within the growing small-town right defend Wall Street against government "over-regulation."' ¹⁴

Rather than attribute this simply to gullibility, she travelled to Lake Charles, Louisiana, and spent years getting to know Tea Party supporters in the area. In her 2016 book *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, she sketched out how they saw their situation. In their 'deep story' of unfairness and betrayal, these Tea Party supporters were waiting in line for the American dream, doing the right thing – only to find other people unfairly cutting in ahead of them, egged on by the president.

As Russell Hochschild defines it, a 'deep story is a *feels-as-if* story – it's the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact.'¹⁵

And this helps to explain how blame is misdirected, deliberately or not: the urge to respond to threat or crisis more on the basis of feeling, an existing worldview and visible, easily-understood scapegoats, rather than nuanced analysis of worldview-disrupting facts.

More specifically, the Tea Party supporters' deep story points to how genuine disempowerment, coupled with a simple narrative, may tend to direct excessive blame towards government – whether because it is more visibly powerful than business, touches people's lives in more ways, or makes more promises and more claims to be virtuous or heroic. It's striking that the Tea Party deep story includes only public, not private, power. There is no narrative explanation of how and why the 2008 crash led to people losing 'savings, homes, jobs, and hope'. It has no place for the idea that the state might be a shared, constructive expression of public power. The state, embodied by Obama, is a readily-available villain, who appears to divisively favour some people over others.

As it turned out, the anger stirred by the financial crisis coincided with the advent of social media. This was the first time that a major disruptive new communications technology had intersected with a prolonged period of economic and political crisis since the 1930s – when the fascist agitators Löwenthal studied were learning to exploit radio.

12 ['Obama's housing plan to help 9m'](#), BBC News, 18 February 2009; the housing plan was announced the day after President Obama signed a \$787 billion stimulus package.

13 [Rick Santelli on CNBC](#), 19 February 2009.

14 Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, 2016, 10.

15 *Ibid.*, 135.

DRIVERS OF ESCALATION 2: SOCIAL MEDIA

Two of social media's most transformative design innovations were introduced in the year after the crash. When Rick Santelli delivered his rant in 2009, the Facebook 'like' button was ten days old. Over the next few years, a rapid series of inventions transformed early, clunky social media into a hyper-efficient machine for promoting 'feels-as-if' stories – at the very time that economic crisis was placing millions of people under new strain, leaving them searching for a story that explained their plight.

This transformation was not orchestrated. It proceeded haphazardly, as one company broke new ground and its rivals raced to ape them, in several different ways at once.

One strand of innovation focused on winning users' attention. The metrics generated by Facebook's 'like' button gave users an incentive to generate content that would win as many likes as possible, while providing the platform with data on their preferences. Twitter later converted its 'favourite' button to a heart-shaped 'like', apparently in a bid to boost 'engagement'.¹⁶

A second strand focused on making users active participants in spreading content. In November 2009, Twitter introduced the 'retweet'. This both invited users to spread content themselves, and to generate content others might want to spread, while providing another competitive metric to chase, and more data for the platform. After the retweet helped Twitter triumph during the 2012 election campaign, Facebook added a 'retweet-style "Share" button to its mobile news feed'.¹⁷ In 2015, Twitter introduced the 'quote tweet', allowing users to add a comment above the content they were retweeting. A former head of product at the company later dubbed this the 'dunk mechanism', because it made it so quick and easy to disparage other people's posts as you shared them.¹⁸

All this took shape in the context of the 'feed'. By 2009, Twitter's reverse chronological timeline and Facebook's news feed were already in place, along with another innovation: infinite scroll. Then in 2011, Facebook transformed what appeared on screen by introducing a ranking algorithm. As an engineering manager at the company put it, this made each user's feed their 'own personal newspaper'. The algorithm selected posts partly based on the user's personal preferences, partly on which posts were going 'viral'.¹⁹ In 2016, Twitter and Instagram switched to algorithmic feeds too.

Similarly, YouTube changed its algorithm from simply trying to maximise its viewers' engagement to boosting content that had won 'likes, comments and audience retention'.²⁰ All the while, posting and watching video on smartphones rapidly became ubiquitous, encouraged by the introduction in 2015 of the 'autoplay' function across much of social media.²¹ By the time Donald Trump was elected in 2016, the essential architecture of social media was in place.

16 Will Oremus, ['Twitter Is Trading the "Favorite" for the "Like". It's About Time.'](#), Slate, 3 November 2015.

17 Josh Constine, ['Facebook Finally Launches "Share" Button For The Mobile Feed, Its Version Of "Retweet"'](#), TechCrunch, 14 November 2012; Alex Kantrowitz, ['The Man Who Built the Retweet: "We Handed A Loaded Weapon to 4-Year-Olds"'](#), BuzzFeed, 23 July 2019.

18 Jason Goldman, quoted in Kantrowitz, 'The Man Who Built the Retweet'.

19 Anna Chung, ['New Feeds, Old Content: A Brief History of Algorithmically Curated Feeds on Facebook and Twitter'](#), Medium, 29 April 2019.

20 ['History of the YouTube Algorithm'](#), Content Guaranteed, 30 December 2014.

21 Tim Carmody, ['The Evolution of Autoplay'](#), NiemanLab, 2016

As the technologist Tobias Rose-Stockwell has pointed out, this array of innovations had a dual psychological effect.

On the one hand, they encouraged emotional, impulsive, ‘feels-as-if’ responses, incentivising people to generate and spread content which provoked anger, empathy, fear and hostility. (Research suggests that in news viewed online, ‘negative words in news headlines increased consumption rates’, whereas positive words had the opposite effect.)²² This process itself was informed by data gathered through likes and attention time, which was then used to help algorithms to promote material most likely to elicit a measurable reaction.²³

On the other hand, the wave of innovations discouraged thoughtful analysis, partly by downgrading the importance of accurate information. The ‘algorithmic ordering of content soon flattened the hierarchy of credibility’, putting accurate, hard-won information on a level with rumour, trolling and conspiracism.²⁴ At the same time, removing ever more obstacles to accessing and responding to material ‘drastically increase[d] the speed and spread of information’, accurate or otherwise. This pushed users to ‘the limits of our ability to carefully parse knowledge’.²⁵ It instead encouraged swift, impulsive responses to the emotive content the systems promoted. As one misinformation scholar has put it, “We have some evidence that people who are more likely to stop and think are better at telling true from false”.²⁶

Drawing on the work of the psychologist Daniel Kahneman, Rose-Stockwell argues that social media capitalises on ‘fast’ thinking (neural systems that are reactive, unconscious, emotional and automatic), rather than ‘slow’ thinking (reflective, reliable, effortful, deliberative).²⁷ As with listeners to the extremist agitator in the 1930s, or the talk radio shock jock in the 1990s, fast thinking coaxes the discontented user away from analysis of the power structures causing their discontent and how those structures might be effectively challenged. It draws them instead into a rage loop.

The difference is that through involving users as micro-publishers, social media creates a faster, more involving, more escalatory loop on a larger scale. Most social media content is unrelated to politics, but among the politically engaged minority, this loop has significant impact. As Eliot Higgins and Natalie Martin argue in their Demos paper *Verification, Deliberation, Accountability*, this was part of a profound shift from an information environment ‘curated by institutional gatekeepers’ who ‘imposed thresholds of verification and accountability’ to a system where ‘every individual is both recipient and distributor’. ‘Without the skills to verify content, recognise distortion, and understand how platforms shape visibility,’ Higgins and Martin warn, ‘individuals risk becoming unconscious amplifiers of disorder.’²⁸

This is exacerbated by the effect that social media and its incentives have had on our information environments: that is, on our epistemic security.²⁹ Journalists, for example, have turned too easily to viral social media posts as a source for stories, and have learned to chase virality for themselves. By 2015, one study found that ‘traffic-based rankings exerted a powerful influence over journalists’ emotions and morale, often drowning out other forms of evaluation.’³⁰ This eroded professional judgement: as one *Buzzfeed* journalist put it, ‘In the rush to get stories that would be retweeted and shared, [the press] disregarded speed bumps that might otherwise

22 Claire E. Robertson, Nicolas Pröllochs, Kaoru Schwarzenegger, Philip Pärnamets, Jay J. Van Bavel and Stefan Feuerriegel, ‘[Negativity drives online news consumption](#)’, *Nature Human Behaviour*, 7, 2023, 812

23 Tobias Rose-Stockwell, *Outrage Machine: How Tech Amplifies Discontent, Disrupts Democracy – And What We Can Do About It*, 2023, 106.

24 *Ibid.*, 2.

25 *Ibid.* 27-28

26 David Rand, an associate professor at MIT, quoted in Kantrowitz, ‘The Man Who Built the Retweet’.

27 Rose-Stockwell, *Outrage Machine*, 28-29.

28 Eliot Higgins and Natalie Martin, [Verification, Deliberation, Accountability: A New Framework for Tackling Epistemic Collapse and Renewing Democracy](#), Demos, October 2025.

29 Elizabeth Seger, Hannah Perry, Jamie Hancock, [Epistemic Security](#), Demos, 2025.

30 Adrian Hon, *You’ve Been Played: How Corporations, Governments and Schools Use Games to Control Us All*, 2023, 206.

cause them to hold on a story'.³¹ Alongside this, the impact of new media on older media outlets' profits has eaten away resources for investigative journalism.

Politicians themselves, meanwhile, have learned to treat public debate not as means for democratic interchange, but as an opportunity to create a tweetable clip.³² And in all this, extreme populists who stand in that longer agitational tradition stretching back to the 1930s spotted an opening: a way to game the outrage machine to win attention first online, and then from mainstream outlets.³³ As the MEP-turned-Stanford academic Marietje Schaake puts it, 'Trump mastered the art of amplification'.³⁴

THE POLITICAL LOGIC OF SOCIAL MEDIA DESIGN

It is clearly easier to use social media for simple emotional messaging than to make a nuanced, positive case. This makes it an ideal format for attacking the state for such things as tyranny, waste, unfairness or betrayal, and a problematic one for setting out the complicated compromises democratic governments have to make.

But beneath that, there is a more fundamental problem. Social media's design principles jar with the principles that underpin the democratically-run state and its complexities. Many of social media's key innovations – infinite scroll, one-click retweets, autoplay, alongside the internet itself – were designed to remove limits.

At first sight, this is not a political choice. It's just a function of one of the crucial design concepts in engineering and computer science: optimisation. This involves identifying a problem and removing all obstacles to solving it. As a trio of Stanford University scholars have noted of the way students are taught these disciplines, 'the idea of finding solutions as efficiently and optimally as possible is inculcated early on'.³⁵

In the appropriate context, optimisation is a powerful method, but when it is applied to the messy complexity of humans interacting on a mass scale, its dangers quickly surface. It leads to a focus on things that are easy to measure – and 'simple metrics can take us further away from the important goals we really care about'. These 'may require complicated metrics or be extremely difficult, or perhaps impossible, to reduce to any measure',³⁶ such as 'promoting an informed democracy'.³⁷

Ironically, the designers optimising social media by removing limits seem to have thought it would *improve* democratic empowerment. Chris Wetherell, who led the team that built the retweet button, felt it 'would elevate voices from underrepresented communities'.³⁸ But before the one-click retweet, the steps required to repost a stranger's tweet enforced a pause for thought. Removing this unintentionally removed the limit on the amount of mass hostility to which a single user could suddenly be exposed. And, as things turned out, it helped to erode the barrier separating fact from 'feels-as-if', without which democracy struggles to function.

31 Kantrowitz, 'The Man Who Built the Retweet'.

32 Louise Haigh MP, '[It is time to leave the cesspit formerly known as Twitter](#)', PoliticsHome, 8 January 2025.

33 Rose-Stockwell, 49.

34 Marietje Schaake, *The Tech Coup: How to Save Democracy from Silicon Valley*, 2025, viii.

35 Jeremy Weinstein, Mehran Sahami and Rob Reich, *System Error: Where Big Tech Went Wrong and How We Can Reboot*, 2021, 9.

36 *Ibid.*, 16.

37 *Ibid.*, 11.

38 Kantrowitz, 'The Man Who Built the Retweet'.

So removing limits is, in effect, a political choice. A world without limits is one person's libertarian dream, another's Hobbesian nightmare. A world with limits is one person's community of democratic give-and-take, another's suffocating tyranny. For all social media companies' uplifting rhetoric, social media is built around liberating the self-interested individual to pursue a measurable goal, posting content for which they win rewards in numerical form: likes, retweets, shares, responses, followers, subscribers. And it is optimised for the pursuit of measurable goals by the platforms themselves: gaining users, holding more of their attention, harvesting more of their monetisable data, selling more advertising, boosting the share price.

THE POLITICAL CONVERGENCE OF ENGINEERING & ECONOMICS

This points to a striking similarity: the logic of engineers' optimisation thinking closely matches the basic model of neoliberal economics. Both focus on the individual pursuing self-interested, measurable goals (and both rank individuals numerically, disregarding harder-to-measure qualities). Both consequently see the benefits of removing barriers and limits. So both cast business as a force that facilitates the individual's pursuit of her goals by offering her what she wants and providing systems to obtain it, whether that is status, money or cheap consumer goods. And both cast the state and civil society as forces that get in the way of that, by imposing regulations, laws and taxes, and through the messy complexity and compromise of institutions and traditions. And finally, optimisation and neoliberalism are both willing to set aside negative impacts of their approach as a necessary cost.

The convergence of these ways of thinking eventually shaped social media, to the point where Elon Musk is cast as a heroic freedom fighter, while democratic politicians are seen as tyrants. But before that, it played a key role in the foundations of the modern internet. In mid-November 1989, just as the Berlin Wall was being torn down, the architect of the 'world wide web', Tim Berners-Lee, was inventing one of its essential elements: hypertext transfer protocol (http). The web took shape in the years that followed, driven by optimistic visions of liberation from old constraints; in a similarly hopeful spirit, free market economics spread across the globe. That economic thinking strongly influenced the Clinton administration as it established the legal precepts for the internet around a concern to protect the citizen from the constraining power of the state, and the hope that the internet would spread democracy.

Governance of the internet was therefore delegated to a series of non-governmental bodies 'rather than democratically elected ones'.³⁹ This aimed to foster the internet's international reach while thwarting the Russian-Chinese goal of transferring control over it to inter-governmental bodies they could influence. In that respect, the policy succeeded – but it missed the potential power of online corporations, which were free to set norms without serious regulatory oversight.

Clinton's time in office culminated in the removal of another barrier, which had governed American finance since the aftermath of the 1929 Wall Street crash. Until its repeal in 1999, the Glass-Steagal Act had long enforced a separation between retail and investment banking. Thus liberated, bankers and technologists helped to engineer the financial system to absorb ever greater complexity and risk in pursuit of maximum returns. Within a decade of the fall of Glass-Steagal, this culminated in the 2008 crash. However, the global financial crisis did not destroy the convergence of optimisation and neoliberal economics. Instead, these two ways of thinking came together to shape social media.

39 Schaake, *The Tech Coup*, 33.

THE DOOM LOOP

For a time, the crash appeared to have discredited neoliberal economics: those responsible benefited from bailouts and soaring asset prices, while the majority of the population, dependent on wages or salaries, found their pay flat-lining and/or their jobs more precarious. Yet the ideology that had caused the crash was entrenched in the structures and incentives of social media – which was taking on its full shape at the very time the crisis struck. In the years after 2008, ever more individual users competed for metrical status, to the benefit of a handful of owners, whose power grew more concentrated as the wave of innovations made their sites more addictive.

At the same time, the rise of the ‘gig’ economy created an opportunity to extend the design logic of social media into the world of work. More and more people have since found their jobs being run on the basis of gamification. Workers are pushed to compete for points, and so incentivised to work faster, and cut breaks short. These systems allow management to cut labour costs to a minimum as ‘any slack is perpetually being optimised out of the system’, and even to fire people without speaking to them personally. They push blame for poorly-designed or unfair systems onto workers, while treating them as pawns in the breakneck pursuit of growth.⁴⁰

For some, the solution is the dream of becoming the beneficiary of all this metric-chasing, whether as a founder, a manager, or an influencer. And where do those unseduced by that prospect turn to express their anger and frustration? Very often, to social media. But looking back, we can see how this has not solved anything. Instead, it has strengthened the doom loop.

In 2013, the political and media theorist Martin Gurri produced an influential tract which declared that we were seeing a ‘revolt of the public’, driven by the internet, as the explosion of information and connection online had shattered the authority of the ‘elites’. He expressed concern that the revolt involved no constructive programme for change. Its most organised expression was the rise of anti-establishment parties whose ‘promises were all about blame and punishment’.⁴¹

By elites, Gurri primarily meant governments. He sketched an archetypal online nihilist who ‘thinks his rulers are liars and cheats’ and ‘fills the web with angry rants on the subject’.⁴² Gurri feared the stalemate between public negation and elite stasis was endangering democracy.

But there was a crucial, powerful third force missing from this battle narrative: the companies that built and own the networks he was writing about, which were providing the means for expressing all this anger and negation and blame. If there was an existential struggle taking shape, it was not just between the public and the elite, but within the elite – between public and private power.

So every time Gurri’s raging citizen nihilist tweeted and retweeted against the state, he strengthened its private rivals. The more people expressed their anger at their disempowerment through social media, the more power the US tech companies gained. They benefited in two ways: first, in terms of the data, ad revenue and reach generated by all that tweeted and posted rage. And second, because expressing rage *through social media* served to reinforce the individualist, metrics-obsessed ideology from which social media sprang. Which was the very ideology which led to the crash and the public’s disempowerment in the first place.

40 Hon, *You’ve Been Played*, 59, 65.

41 Martin Gurri, *The Revolt of the Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium*, 2013, 251 (2018 Kindle edition).

42 *Ibid.*, 283.

This creates a dangerous negative spiral: a digital-democratic doom loop. It corrodes the bond between citizen and state by using citizens' anger to bolster the power of a worldview which rejects democratic mess and its unavoidable frustrations, in favour of the clean lines of individual freedom. When this makes the state's job harder, and citizens turn to social media to complain, they strengthen private power and make the state's job harder yet.

DEMOCRACY VS. FREEDOM

Perhaps the damage social media would do to the workings of democracy was not immediately obvious because it grew out of the optimistic culture of the 1990s, when individual freedom and liberal democracy seemed synonymous. This feeling was revived when the 2008 Obama campaign made innovative use of social media. When the like button was introduced in early 2009, it was reportedly thought of as 'radically democratic'.⁴³

But this misses the crucial quality which is hardest to preserve about democracy. It's not just the instant expression of an individual's personal preference. When we vote, we're not consumers, but citizens.⁴⁴ Unlike hitting 'like', voting implies a relationship with the nation, and the state: an agreement to be part of an ongoing process in which we all participate together. It implies the acceptance of the result, and of the necessity of compromise. It is a collective assertion of power. Social media ignores all that, modelling itself around self-interested individuals, each with their own personal news feed, choosing at most to form loose, temporary 'communities' of like mind.

By 2009, it already appeared that for some of its pioneers, this was part of the attraction. Peter Thiel made his first fortune with PayPal, which was designed to circumvent the need for national sovereign currencies, and went on to be the first outside investor in Facebook. In April 2009, he published an essay called 'The Education of a Libertarian'. In it, he wrote that 'companies like Facebook create the space for new modes of dissent and new ways to form communities not bounded by historical nation-states'.⁴⁵

Here was another limit social media was optimised to overcome. It pulls us towards the excitement, self-expression and global reach of individual freedom. But it pulls us away from the mutual trust, collective participation, and national belonging on which the legitimacy of representative democracy depends. This divergence had been there from the start. As one journalist had spotted in 1997, cyberspace's 'default ideology' was libertarianism, which harboured an 'almost unconscious aversion to the notion that in a representative democracy, we are the government'.⁴⁶ In his 2009 essay, Thiel duly wrote that he no longer saw democracy as compatible with individual freedom.

43 Robert W. Gehl, '[A History of Like](#)', *The New Inquiry*, 27 March 2013.

44 This distinction is developed in Jon Alexander with Ariane Conrad, *Citizens: Why the Key to Fixing Everything Is All of Us*, 2022.

45 Peter Thiel, '[The Education of a Libertarian](#)', *Cato Unbound*, 13 April 2009.

46 Gary Kamiya, '[Smashing the state](#)', *Salon*, 20 January 1997.

THE TECH LEADER AS POPULIST REBEL

Over the last few years, some tech leaders have taken their preference for individual freedom a big step further. They have begun to express populist-style rage against the state on social media themselves, while amplifying other users who do the same. This is the most pro-active iteration yet of big tech's aggressive opposition to state power.

In his book *Gilded Rage: Elon Musk and the Radicalization of Silicon Valley* (2025), the journalist Jacob Silverman traces how immensely wealthy, powerful tech figures are cast as plucky rebels, fearlessly exposing 'the deep state and power elite via Fox News and X to the MAGA masses'.⁴⁷ This helps them to cast resistance to regulation as a cry for freedom against the oppressive state.

Similarly, tech leaders' use of the word 'elites' obscures their own increasingly concentrated power, directing anger at disempowerment against the state alone. Marc Andreessen praises Gurri's *The Revolt of the Public*, averring that 'elite institutions, from government to media to academia, are losing their authority and monopoly control of information to the broader public'.⁴⁸ This omits the increasing authority and control of information by another kind of 'elite institution': tech companies like Facebook and Twitter (in both of which Andreessen, as it happens, has had investments).

The most direct intervention of this kind was Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter in 2022, combined with his own highly frequent and populist-style tweeting, the reach of which has reportedly been boosted hugely by changes he ordered to the site's algorithm,⁴⁹ which now promotes extreme right-wing messaging.⁵⁰ Some consider him to have been radicalised by his own algorithm.⁵¹ Whatever the cause, Musk's radicalisation has had a particularly direct impact in Britain through his attacks on the prime minister and other politicians and apparent calls for political violence.⁵² This brings social media's latent, inherent hostility to democratic government, at both structural and ideological levels, to an apotheosis.

The algorithm changes on Twitter, now 'X', exacerbated by the effective departure of many liberal and left-wing users, have also had a broader radicalising effect in Britain. This has had the effect of normalising extreme right rhetoric, portrayed the elected government as an illegitimate regime, misrepresented crime levels and given users – including many British politicians and journalists – a wildly skewed impression of British public opinion, thus further normalising extreme hostility to the democratically-run state. X is the digital-democratic doom loop in its fastest, most aggressive, most visible form.

47 Jacob Silverman, *Gilded Rage: Elon Musk and the Radicalization of Silicon Valley*, 2025, 24.

48 Marc Andreessen, quoted (undated) on [The Revolt of the Public promotional page](#), Stripe Press, 2026.

49 Zoë Schiffer and Casey Newton, 'Yes, Elon Musk created a special system for showing you all his tweets first', The Verge, 15 February 2023.

50 Kaitlin Tosh, Michelle Inez Simon, Joely Santa Cruz, and Sophia Massam, Data and Forensics Unit, 'The X Effect: How Elon Musk is boosting the British right', Sky News, 6 November 2025.

51 Oliver Darcy, 'Radicalized by the right: Elon Musk puts his conspiratorial thinking on display for the world to see', CNN, 19 March 2024.

52 Haroon Siddique, 'What did Elon Musk say at far-right UK rally and did his remarks break the law?', Guardian, 15 September 2025.

THE CONSPIRACY THEORY TRAP

The danger of pursuing this analysis is that it can become a conspiracy theory: that social media companies are deliberately luring us away from our best interests, whether by taking our data or trashing our democracy. As Leo Löwenthal showed in 1949, the idea that we're being duped by the powerful is a staple of extremist agitation. It risks perpetuating the doom loop by presenting what's happening in simplistic, emotional, 'elites v. the people' terms. Tech leaders' own populist turn underlines the fact that these men are not an omnipotent conspiratorial cabal: some appear to be caught up in the doom loop themselves. Social media is not a machine deliberately designed by private power to distract us from its bad behaviour, by focusing our anger at our disempowerment overwhelmingly on democratic politicians and the states they run.

It has ended up doing something like that, but not as the result of a nefarious plot. Messaging on Facebook played a role in the outcome of the Brexit referendum, for example, but casting the result as having simply been engineered by Moscow or Cambridge Analytica does not help. The idea that people are simply endlessly manipulable puppets is anti-democratic. Responding to the emotional manipulateness of social media with an emotive narrative, which holds out simplistic false solutions, falls into a similar trap to the one the 1940s agitators used. Promoting conspiracist narratives in a bid to defend democracy helps to normalise the whole notion of conspiracist narratives, many of which strive to undermine democracy. More constructive responses need to start from a more nuanced analysis.

WAYS TO RESPOND & REBUILD

Tech leaders' ever-growing power, not least as allies and members of the Trump administration, has brought them to greater public prominence. Witness the photo of four tech CEOs standing together at the president's second inauguration, for example, or the image of Musk wielding a chainsaw. If one of the reasons elected politicians have received an unfair proportion of blame is their public prominence, the increased visibility of tech leaders, in ways that pointedly symbolise their power, helps to make the case for regulation. Imposing constraints is not tyranny: it is the state acting as the citizens' representative against aggressive private power.

After the financial crisis in 2008, the idea that bankers had too much power and had exercised insufficient care flourished briefly, to the point where some believed it might force systemic change. But no one in government seized the opportunity. After Brexit and Trump's victory in 2016, the idea that big tech had too much power and had exercised insufficient care flourished too. Though this was hardly the sole explanation for either result, it presented another opportunity to force systemic change. Other flash points have come and gone: the spread of misinformation during the pandemic; the role of social media in riots.⁵³ But at each point, no one in government seized the opportunity. It would therefore be worth beginning strategic preparations to respond to the next crisis, and the demand for stronger tech regulation that will follow. The scope to do this will be radically advanced if the AI bubble bursts, for example. This time, responsibility for any ensuing harms must be accurately apportioned, and public power must force systemic change.

53 Hannah Perry, [Researching the Riots](#), Demos, 2025

NEW COMPANIES, NEW PRINCIPLES, A NEW CITIZEN-STATE ALLIANCE

Those preparations should include developing technological expertise services for lawmakers, and plans for middle powers to co-ordinate.⁵⁴ Demos is developing a slate of policy interventions to improve epistemic security and strengthen democratic resilience.⁵⁵ Here I build on the specific areas for attention, the challenges and potential paths through.

Regulating the dominant companies will always be an uphill struggle, and cannot solve the problem entirely. But at a geopolitical level, there is now increasing acceptance that rising American hostility necessitates reducing reliance on US tech. The European Parliament has recently 'passed a "technological sovereignty" resolution that supports using public procurement criteria to favour European products where possible'; it also 'proposes new legislation to promote European cloud providers'. The EU is reportedly developing 'legislation aimed at promoting tech sovereignty', aimed at 'curbing dependencies and boosting European companies'.⁵⁶

Alongside the prospect of an AI crash, this creates impetus and opportunity to foster entirely new companies, on the basis of new rules, which aim to foster stronger information supply chains and better epistemic security.

Doing this effectively requires jettisoning the approach to optimisation that shapes currently dominant social media. Instead we need to develop pluralistic algorithms that optimise for multiple variables, and can therefore encourage more thoughtful responses - what Curtis calls 'optimising to depolarise'.⁵⁷ In the years since Twitter and Facebook were built, advances in computational hardware have made it more possible to design and build such systems, based on more than simple numbers and ranking. This is facilitated by the 2018 discovery by an American student of an algorithm which can 'tackle predictive recommendations at a speed previously thought possible only with quantum computers'.⁵⁸ It provides the technical basis for a 'broadsheet social media' project called Kronkite, for example, led by the political strategist and entrepreneur Garvan Walshe. This is 'crafting algorithms that promote reflection, longer-form content and intelligent debate', designed to work more co-operatively with news publishers than old-style social media has shown itself able to, in line with the business world's broader move away from narrow focus on maximising share price,⁵⁹ as Demos has previously charted.⁶⁰

To use these technological advances to create viable, profitable alternatives to the US tech companies at scale, governments will need to act with the co-ordinated urgency that is beginning to take shape in the field of rearmament. Europe should seek to emulate the Chinese

54 Schaake, *The Tech Coup*, 233, 236, 240

55 Seger, *Epistemic Security for Crisis Resilience*, 2026

56 Sam Schechner, Berber Jin, Kim Mackrael, '[Europe Prepares for a Nightmare Scenario: The US Blocking Access to Tech](#)', *Wall Street Journal*, 23 January 2026.

57 Curtis, *Upgrading Democracy*, Demos 2025

58 Samuel Greengard, '[The Algorithm That Changed Machine Learning](#)', *Communications of the ACM* [Association for Computing Machinery], 1 August 2019.

59 [Kronkite](#) webpage, accessed 23 January 2026; interview with Garvan Walshe, 24 January 2026.

60 Andrew O'Brien, [The Purpose Dividend](#), November 2023.

state's success in building private tech companies, with tax breaks, incentives and strategic investment – without emulating Beijing's autocratic approach to regulating them. This would fit with the recognition that we no longer live in the sunny world of the 1990s when the internet's existing rules were set. Today, the state must be the citizens' active ally.

Extreme populists have shown themselves capable of reimagining how the world works, and promoting technological systems and arguments that turn the state and the citizen against each other. Those who care about the future health of our democracies urgently need to exercise similar effort and imagination to show that the state and the citizen are allies.

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