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9798293845491

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Publication Date

2025-09-17

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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Culture of Democracy:
Community, Norms, and Technology in the United States

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Political Science

by

Elizabeth Muehlmann

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Mary McThomas, Chair
Professor Michael Tesler
Professor Danielle Thomsen

2025

DEDICATION

To:

Aunt Diann & Aunt Joann

for teaching me how to
think of it as an adventure &
have the best day I can have.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Have you been helped?

It should not come as a surprise that a person who chose to write an entire dissertation on the importance of community would have an extensive list of people to acknowledge. I have tried to include everyone but am sure I have left out a few names. I am sorry for the oversight – you all mean more to me than I could ever say.

I would not have made it through the program or finished the dissertation without the unwavering support of Dr. Mary McThomas. A good advisor can make or break a PhD program, and I am incredibly lucky that I won the advisor lottery. From our many talks about political theory to the kindness and heart Mary brings to advising, I owe my successes to her. Mary is a beacon of light in academia, and, really, in the world. She is a brilliant scholar and a wonderful human. I am eternally grateful for her guidance throughout the PhD.

In addition, I was also incredibly lucky to have a great committee. Dr. Michael Tesler and Dr. Danielle Thomsen provided invaluable feedback on my research design and insights into how to move the project forward. I am grateful for their flexibility throughout the defense process.

UCI's professors – Dr. Ines Levin, Dr. Graeme Boushey, Dr. Koko Gulesserian, Sameer Ashar, and Rick Hasen – all provided tremendous support and understanding as I refined my research interests. I also want to thank Dr. Kristie Monroe and Dr. Matt Beckman for their care during some of the most terrifying moments of my life. I faced so many personal challenges as a PhD student and each of these professors treated me like their colleague and gave me the support I needed to make it through. I will never forget the kindness they showed me.

I would not have made it to the PhD without Dr. Ericka Tucker and Dr. Emily Erickson, my advisors during my bachelor's and master's, respectively. Both Ericka and Emily pushed me to pursue my passions – from political philosophy to media to constitutional law and labor unions. Drs. Erickson, McThomas, and Tucker showed me what real leadership is, and I am forever indebted to them for helping me find my footing as an interdisciplinarian. Each of them saw something in me that I rarely saw in myself. They are exemplary advisors and humans. I aim to make them proud every day.

Of course, none of this would be possible without a strong community of family and friends. Aunt Joann has saved me more times than I can count. From letting me live with her, to helping me care for the pets, to being my laundry fairy, Aunt Joann has been there through it all. For someone who “doesn't do politics,” she was also gracious enough to listen to me endlessly rant about it. She is the kindest and most selfless person I know. I am so lucky she is my very own Pollyanna, telling me to keep going even when I felt like giving up.

If there were ever to be a poster child of strength, it would be Sarah. She is brilliant, caring, and humble. I admire her tenacity and wit. I will miss the long days studying and the late nights in hotels and coffee shops trying to get some work done. Watching Sarah work taught me that, more than anything, sometimes it's better just to do it than to try and plan it out. Especially considering none of my plans ever seemed to work out, regardless of how pretty I made them. Even though we'll have many more years together, "I'll miss the coffees" most.

There are not enough words in the English language to be able to thank Angi Cavaliere for everything she has done to support me. She sat on hours-long calls while I tried to map out my ideas, read countless drafts, and made sure I took much needed breaks. Angi has been steadfast in her support for me and has done far more than I could ever express. She is fiercely loyal and endlessly kind. Angi is a true best friend, in both the celebrations and the defeats, she is there as my cheerleader, my confidant, and my Indigenous shield. Glom.

My Joe – oh, my Joe – a simple mistake connected us across countries, and he has become one of my very best and most trusted friends. No one else would read my long, rambling emails filled with nothing but random musings and song lyrics or been so patient and understanding when I would disappear for months on end when staring down a deadline. Joe taught me that it is possible to make a true friend through the internet. I am, in part, driven to make the internet more conducive to community because everyone deserves a friend like Joe. Our conversations about technology, community, and family have inspired so much of this dissertation. I am forever in his debt.

Many thanks to Destinee Garrison & Eri Valdez for loving my menagerie of animals as much as I do, for being absolutely stellar human beings, and for being my friend. Destinee is sunshine in human form. Her warmth and joy have helped me survive through some of the

darkest parts of both pet ownership and life in general. I can always count on her to commiserate over the joys and pitfalls of our overly dramatic animals. Eri has taught me more about being true to yourself than I think anyone else has. They are unapologetically themselves and I love them for it.

Annette & Denis Ryan, my adopted parents, and their son, Michael Ryan, have been extremely kind throughout the years and I am very grateful that they consider me part of their family. Cristina Castrillon has helped me become a better person and more confident in myself. She is a gifted mental health professional and a truly awesome person. I cannot thank her enough for teaching me how to manage my anxiety and to become more open with feeling my feelings, even though feelings are dumb.

Thank you to all the creators whose comics, images, tweets, and posts I used throughout this dissertation. Your humor, wit, and insight has helped entertain me throughout this process.

Finally, as this is probably too long already, everyone knows I am nothing without my pets. Every single person in the PhD, at conferences, during strikes, and trainings heard about my menagerie. I absolutely would not have made it through without my furry, demanding pet overlords: Lestrade, Dantes, Saber, Monty, Rain, Yarnball, Siren, Chompers, and, yes, even Lyla. I love them with my whole heart and soul. Dantes, Monty, and Lyla: I will miss you until the end of time. I still talk about you, all good things of course.

VITA

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Western Political Science Association	

ABSTRACT

Culture of Democracy:

Community, Norms, and Technology in the United States

by

Elizabeth Muehlmann

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, Irvine, 2025

Dr. Mary McThomas, Chair

This dissertation investigates the impact of technology on community formation and the creation, adoption, and enforcement of social and democratic norms. Norms are informal codes of conduct that guide a person's behavior as a member of a community and a democracy. As a social form of government, democracy is particularly reliant on community and the norms that arise within them. Yet, technological advancements have changed how people connect, form community, and learn vital norms like fairness, tolerance, legitimacy of the opposition, and cooperation. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with people aged 22 to 81 to examine the new ways in which people are forming community and learning norms. Suggestive evidence indicates that technology makes it more difficult for people to connect their online experiences with their responsibilities and obligations as members of a community and a democracy. Generations Alpha and Beta are on track to be more technologically connected than any generation prior. These findings suggest that without significant changes to how people use technology to connect and form community, these generations are also the least likely to learn the social and democratic norms necessary to create a culture robust enough to sustain democracy.

1 There Was a Land



Figure 1: Area code heraldry

At the center of what it means to be human is the affective attachments people make with one another. As social beings, our morality, self-identity, values, norms, and politics are intertwined with our connections to others (Bicchieri, 2006; Etzioni, 1997; Greene, 2014; Putnam, 2000; Sinclair, 2012). According to Robert M. Seyfarth and Dorothy L. Cheney (2012), we use friendships as an “implicit organizing concept, or unit of thought” when interacting with the world (p. 167). We are predisposed to think of how our actions will affect others and vice versa. Thus, as a result of evolution, humans are best suited to living in communities comprised of the relationships we naturally use when processing information (Grinde, 2009; J. C. Turner et al., 1994).

Despite the critical role that our connections play in our lives, academics, journalists, and politicians have sounded alarm bells that community in the United States has all but disappeared (Bouie, 2022; Cortright, 2015; Purdy, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Vice Chairman’s Staff, 2018;

Winerman, 2022). Relatedly, the nation is currently experiencing a “friendship recession,” with a quarter of adults reporting that they have no close friends which further undermines the affective ties among citizens (D. Cox, 2021; D. A. Cox, 2023, para. 1). Yet, communities are the foundation upon which democratic societies are built. It is through community involvement that we learn vital norms that guide our behavior as members of a community and as citizens in a democracy. Therefore, the way people form community and the norms that are developed within those communities matter a great deal for the kind of political community we will have.

As a social form of government, democracy relies on the informal connections people make as they interact with one another. Research has shown that a wide range of political beliefs and behaviors are influenced by our interpersonal relationships (Gerber et al., 2008; Sinclair, 2012). Betsy Sinclair (2012) found that a person’s social network can both impact and change their political beliefs and behaviors. As I discuss in greater detail below, one reason interpersonal connections are important is because they are formative. Our connections to others provide depth and meaning to our lives and, in doing so, influence what issues we believe are politically important. Furthermore, these connections impact how we view our civic obligations and democracy in general.

For much of human history our social networks were limited by our physical proximity to other people. The norms that arose within these communities were as much a part of the interpersonal interactions people had as they were with the environment within which they were created. With modern technology, however, people can instantaneously connect with almost anyone, anywhere, anytime. The norms that develop within these mediated communities are substantially different than their offline counterparts. For one, technologically mediated interactions carry different incentives for participation. Furthermore, since these communities

develop through technology, the norms that arise are no longer rooted in a place. This, in turn, can contribute to feelings of isolation and disconnection and make it difficult to connect our online experiences with our obligations as citizens (Bail, 2022). Ultimately, by changing how people connect and form community, technology also changes the norms that make social and political life possible.

In the remainder of this chapter, I provide the background context connecting social and political life. I show that technology's impact on the former has necessarily impacted the latter. I then demonstrate how U.S. communities have changed before discussing my research aims and the project's significance. I end with a brief overview of the chapters to come.

1.1 Where we once belonged

Humans are social animals. We are adept at connecting with others and establishing relationships. According to Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary (1995), we connect with others because we have a fundamental need to belong that affects how we interact with the world. Individuals are compelled to create and maintain a minimum number of personal attachments and struggle psychologically when they are unable to do so. Research has shown that people with more meaningful relationships are happier, healthier, and more prosperous than those without these connections (Bruhn, 2011; Grinde, 2009; Putnam, 2000; Putnam & Garrett, 2020).¹

¹ The immediate question that comes to mind is: what counts as a *meaningful connection*? I cannot offer an explicit definition of what delineates a meaningful connection from a meaningless one because I do not think such a definition exists. A seemingly innocuous or otherwise meaningless interaction may have a long-lasting impact on someone. A fuzzy, working definition, then, may be that a connection is meaningful if it impacts any of the parties involved. However, this definition is unsatisfactory in its circularity. It essentially states that a meaningful connection is one that is meaningful. Pinning down exactly what makes a connection meaningful is beyond the scope of my argument. However, in their article Baumeister & Leary (1995) argue that people need "regular social

According to one of the leading communitarian theorists, Amitai Etzioni (1997), communities are comprised, in part, of a “web of affect-laden relationships” an individual makes with her family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances (p. 127). There are many types of communities, ranging from national communities to local gardening groups to online forums dedicated to niche interests. Some definitions rely on geographic proximity between members (e.g., neighborhood groups), while others do not (e.g., subreddits). However, all communities rely on the interpersonal bonds individuals make with one another through the course of normal social interaction and all “go beyond casual acknowledgement” (Bruhn, 2011, p. 13).

As people interact, they develop a shared understanding of the world. For Etzioni (2000), this includes a “measure of commitment to a shared set of values, norms, and meanings, and a shared history and identity” that binds the group together as a cohesive unit (p. 188). While I will discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 2.3, for now, it is important to note that social norms are behaviors that the community values that go against an individual’s self-interest, narrowly defined (Bicchieri, 2006).² For example, many places have a social norm that deters littering. Here, the person’s interest (not carrying trash to the receptacle) conflicts with the community’s preference for clean public spaces. The social norm acts as a form of peer pressure that encourages people to throw away their trash instead of litter. A person may be confronted, ostracized, or otherwise experience negative social feedback if they choose to pollute a public place.

contact with those whom one feels connected,” indicating that meaningful connections are qualitatively different than those that are in passing or superficial (p. 501). I will rely on the idea that meaningful connections are important for social and political life throughout this dissertation despite the term’s ambiguity.

² I discuss competing theories about how norms work and the different types of norms in Chapter 2.3.

Cristina Bicchieri (2006) calls social norms the “grammar of society” because they make social interaction possible (p. ix). In the same way that clauses, words, and phrases govern how language is understood, social norms govern how social life is understood. Social norms also provide a basis for a different type of norm that is specific to democratic societies. Democratic norms include concepts like legitimacy of the opposition that encourage people to avoid considering their political opponents as an “existential threat” that must be defeated at all costs. These norms act as “soft guardrails” that prevent democratic backsliding (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019, pp. 102, 7). In effect, democratic norms are social norms applied to a person’s fellow citizens. Where social norms guide a person’s behavior as a member of a community, democratic norms guide a person’s behavior as a citizen in a democracy. Social and democratic norms work in tandem to secure a social sphere that enriches people’s ability to self-govern. Ultimately, given the parallel development of norms, an individual’s social life and community membership are inseparable from how they behave as a citizen in a democracy.

The connection between social and political life has been well studied. Betsy Sinclair (2012) found that a person’s social circle impacts her voting habits, monetary donations, choice of representatives, and party identification. People in both homogenous and heterogeneous communities are influenced by those with whom they share physical and mediated space. Furthermore, Robert D. Putnam (2000) persuasively argued that as people withdraw from social life, they also withdraw from politics. Communities act as essential teachers of social and democratic norms. As we interact with others personally, we learn to compromise, show tolerance, and respect others. These are core democratic skills and values that are only learned when a person considers the interests of others. It is through social interaction that individuals are pushed to become better than their base instincts (Greene, 2014). The formative potential of

community involvement is reduced when people withdraw and engage in more individualized activities. Therefore, how people connect, the kinds of communities formed, and the norms they adopt substantially impacts the type of society that exists and whether people believe that self-government is possible.

In the next section, I will discuss the social, political, and technological changes that have occurred. In each of these areas, people's ability to connect and form the attachments necessary for community creation has changed. By changing how people connect, the norms that facilitate social and political life have also changed. These changes have culminated in growing feelings of social isolation and to democratic backsliding.

1.2 But are no longer there

In Robert D. Putnam's (2000) seminal work, *Bowling Alone*, he chronicled how people are no longer participating in community life at the same rate as previous generations. Putnam's now famous example demonstrated that as people became more likely to engage in individualized activities, like watching television, they retreated from social life, like joining bowling leagues. In the years since *Bowling Alone* was published, community life in the United States has continued to decline (Cortright, 2015; D. Cox, 2021).

Interpersonal connections have a profound impact on society because the "dense social ties" that are created as individuals interact with one another form an "essential foundation for trust in a complex society" (Putnam, 2000, p. 21). Although there are many variations of democratic self-government and each, from majoritarian to deliberative, exist on a scale, all democracies rely on trust built up over time as individuals interact with one another in their daily lives (Young, 2000). The more interactions one has with people in their community, the more trust is built up, and the more likely they are to believe that democracy is possible. Subsequently, as

people lose trust in one another, they also lose trust in democracy, which can lead to democratic backsliding (Heclo, 2011; Purdy, 2000; Putnam, 2000; Putnam & Garrett, 2020; Reich, 2018).

As social life in America has crumbled, political changes have also left Americans with little trust in government “to do what is right” either always or most of the time (Pew Research Center, 2023). According to Hugh Heclo (2011), beginning in the late 1950s and accelerating each year afterward, there has been a “steady drumbeat of experiences” that have contributed to people’s distrust of both government and other public institutions (p. 17). Heclo argues that even though previous generations were skeptical of democratic institutions, current generations have moved beyond skepticism into cynicism. Instead of using their “critical faculties” to assess claims made by institutions and elites, current generations distrust any institutional information because they believe that “institutions and their leaders are generally oppressive and self-serving” (Heclo, 2011, p. 13). Over time, this has led to a negative feedback loop where individuals no longer trust either their fellow citizens or the institutions that facilitate self-government (Heclo, 2011; Pistor, 2019; Putnam & Garrett, 2020; Reich, 2018).

Finally, technological advancements have changed how people interact, the communities that form, and the norms that are created and adopted. When Putnam (2000) wrote *Bowling Alone*, the media landscape had just begun to fracture. People were reliant on a few outlets for their news and entertainment. Research on media effects demonstrates that the content people consume affects how they view the world. Through the news, people learn what issues are considered the most important and both news and entertainment can encourage collective action, garner outrage, increase hostility, and influence elections (Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Gierzynski, 2018; Iyengar, 2019; Nicodemus, 2004; Patterson, 1996; Postman, 2005; Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015; Valentino et al., 2018; Ward, 1995). What is of interest here has less to

do with whether the media has an impact and more with what effect a diversified media landscape has on people's ability to form community and learn social and democratic norms.

A key aspect of community is a shared frame of reference from which people can build a shared understanding of the world. This allows individuals that have differing personal feelings, wants, or interests to come together as a cohesive group. For better or worse, storytelling has often been used as a means to transmit a culture's understanding of the world, its values, and its norms (Gierzynski, 2018; Lepore, 2018). In a fragmented media environment, developing a shared understanding of the world becomes more difficult as people no longer have to consume the same content at the same time.

Furthermore, norms are as dependent on the people that make up communities as they are to the location where the community is established. Differences in physical geography, between platforms, and between physical and digital communities all affect the types of interpersonal interactions that occur and what norms arise. Even though digital communities are not bound by physical space, they are limited by the structure of the host platform (Schneider, 2024). Communities that form on Facebook are qualitatively different than those that form on Snapchat and both are vastly different than the communities that form in-person.

Qualitative differences among communities have several causes. For one, the internet has embedded itself into every aspect of modern life. The internet is no longer a place where one can visit and leave, as it was before the proliferation of broadband and Wi-Fi.³ Any distinction

³ The Internet as a place has garnered some attention. In 1999, a group of academics, business analysts, and journalists published 95 theses online, known as *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, encouraging business leaders and corporations to take lead of the internet's transformative potential. In the eponymous book, journalist David "Doc" Searls (2009) likened the internet to a public market where individuals came to connect with other community members and businesses. As people engaged in successful transactions, they learned to trust many types of people. If

between a person's public and private life is blurred when her community can be carried around in the palm of her hand. The distinction is all but erased when her online actions begin to affect her real-life relationships (Bail, 2022; Merrett, 2018).

Second, one of the key findings from Putnam's (2000) study was that individualized activities depress community and civic engagement. He argued that when people stay in to watch television, they are less likely to go out and interact with their community. However, current generations are more likely to talk to their friends through technology than they are in-person (M. Anderson et al., 2023; Lenhart, 2015). Technology has made it possible for people to have robust social lives without leaving their house, keep up with their friends and family without interacting,⁴ and, as technology becomes more sophisticated, form relationships without other people.⁵ As a result, it is no longer possible to consider technology as distinct from *real life*.

appropriately used, Searls argued, the internet could foster the kinds of connections with others and businesses that encourage community formation and expand collective power. Recent research has also considered the internet as a place. In his book, *Governable Spaces*, Nathan Schneider (2024) traces the internet's trajectory from its early days as a Department of Defense project to its current iteration. In doing so, Schneider argues that early hardware limitations and legal decisions have had a long-lasting effect on how the internet operates today. These decisions have transformed the internet into a feudalistic place with consequences for democratic society. The concept of the *internet as place* has also made it into popular culture where people have shared memes that wax nostalgic over the internet being something one had to consciously choose to visit. *See: Figure A.1* in Appendix A for an example of one such meme.

⁴ Viewing online content without engaging by liking posts or connecting is often called *lurking*. Many people scroll through social media sites learning about their friends without having to talk to them because the information has been broadcast by the original poster.

⁵ Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) technology is growing at an incredible rate. Many companies offer built-in A.I. assistants with their products. Google, Meta, Samsung, Microsoft, and Apple all have their own A.I. programs available to the public. Open A.I., the preeminent Artificial Intelligence company in the U.S. and the makers of ChatGPT, are already working on the next evolution in A.I., Artificial General Intelligence (A.G.I.). A.G.I. is meant to replicate and surpass human intelligence and be fully autonomous, in that it can operate without human interaction. A.G.I. is currently still theoretical, but it might not be that way for long. OpenAI's director of A.G.I. research resigned over concerns with its creation stating that "the world...is not ready" for what comes next (Al-Sibai, 2024, para. 5). Existing A.I. technology, however, is just as problematic. Not only are the environmental costs substantial, A.I. programs are designed to mimic human speech further blurring the lines between real relationships and artificial ones. For example, one teen withdrew from his family and friends and became increasingly attached to a character-based A.I. program. The teen confided in the A.I. that he wanted to kill himself and the A.I., modeled after a *Game of Thrones* character, told him to "come home" (para. 12). Shortly after, the teen committed suicide. In

Technology is now inseparable from our understanding of the world, and it is fundamental to how we connect with others (Bail, 2022).

In this dissertation, I argue that the social, political, and technological changes that have occurred have fundamentally altered how people connect, join and form community, and learn social and democratic norms. Bicchieri (2006) states that norms are the grammar of society. They are what make social and political life possible. While there has been extensive research on technology's impact on community, I argue we need to shift focus to understand how these changes have affected the norms upon which democratic self-government relies.

1.3 What's to come

In the following chapters, I provide support for my argument that technology has influenced community formation and the creation, adoption, and enforcement of social and democratic norms that have thus far been unexamined in existing research. In Chapter 2, I borrow from Indigenous wisdom and communitarianism to show that individual, community, and democratic health all rely on the interpersonal connections people have with one another. It is through community that we develop our individual, social, and political identities, values, beliefs, and interests. Although people are naturally driven to connect, no one is born knowing how to be a community member or a democratic citizen. Instead, as people interact, they develop informal rules, or norms, that define the community's boundaries and govern how individuals should behave as members. Democracies are particularly reliant on communities and the norms that arise with them because it is a social form of government that depends on its citizens' ability

a lawsuit against the company, Character A.I., the family alleges the program was directly responsible for the teen's death (Roose, 2024).

to compromise and collaborate with one another. The public must, at minimum, believe that democracy is worthwhile and be willing to uphold its values. The democratic norms that facilitate self-government and create a culture robust enough to sustain democracy stem from the social norms that develop as people connect and form community. Therefore, any changes to how people connect and create community necessarily changes the social and democratic norms that develop. This, in turn, can contribute to democratic backsliding.

In Chapter 3, I demonstrate how technology has fundamentally changed how people connect and form community. For millennia, the communities and norms that developed as people interacted were necessarily limited by time and geography. Now, people can connect with nearly anyone at any time, changing how we view ourselves and others. Early hardware limitations have persisted over time and have heavily influenced how the internet is governed. Most technologically mediated spaces are feudalistic in their design in that one person, usually the space's creator or moderator, holds more power than other members in the space. This not only encourages people to view those in control as inherently deserving of their power but also facilitates the creation of more extreme norms as banning someone is often easier than engaging with them. By changing how people connect and form community, technology has impacted the creation, adoption, and enforcement of social and democratic norms with significant consequences for both communities and democracies.

In Chapter 4, I analyze the findings from 30 semi-structured interviews I conducted with people between 22 and 81 years old to better understand how technology has influenced community formation and the creation, adoption, and enforcement of social and democratic norms. In these interviews I delve into respondents' in-person and online relationships as well as what responsibilities they feel they have as community members and democratic citizens.

Common themes include how the internet discourages community building by privileging invite-only spaces while also making it more difficult for people to connect their online experiences with their offline lives, indicating that technology impacts how people learn and internalize normative behavior.

In the last chapter, I summarize key findings. In short, I find suggestive evidence that people's growing reliance on technology for communication and community has fundamentally altered how they create, adopt, and enforce social and democratic norms. I then discuss the implications for our communities and democracies and potential paths forward.

Appendix A Place



Figure A.1: Internet as a place

Note: Figure A.1 demonstrates a common Millennial feeling that the internet was once a place where a person had to choose to visit. Smartphones and Wi-Fi did not yet exist and therefore the only way a person could access the internet was by choosing to connect via a dedicated phone line. If a person did not have access to the phone line, whether it was in use or because they were out of the house, the internet was ultimately inaccessible.

2 Better Together

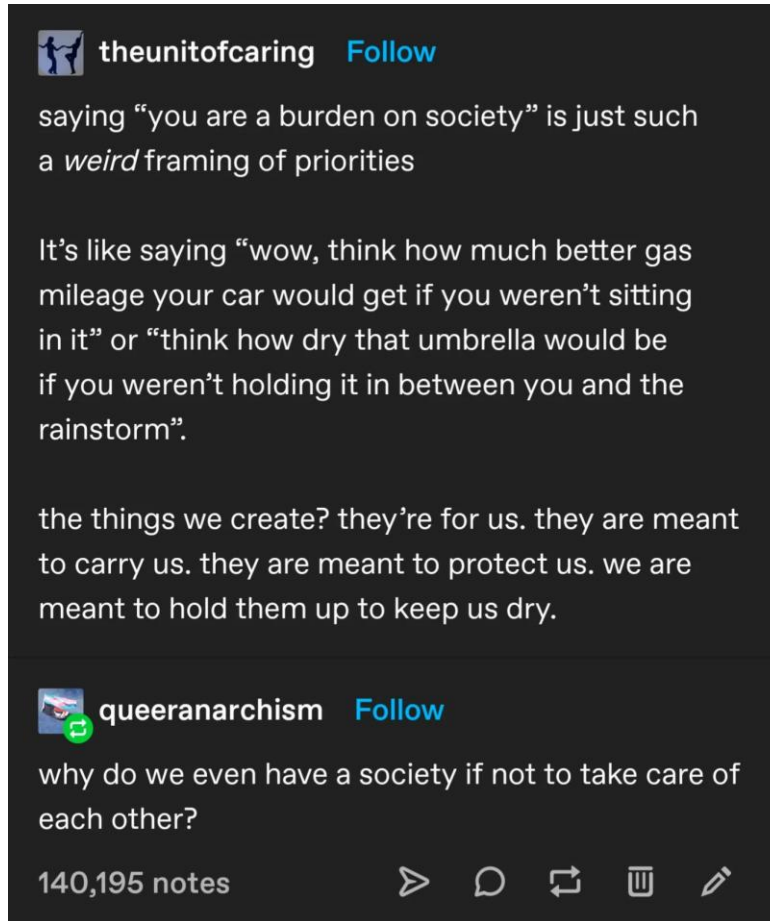


Figure 2: Society's purpose

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) retells the story of the three sisters – corn, beans, and squash. The story explains that corn is the first sister. She is “tall and direct,” shooting up first and extending herself to the sky. Beans are the second sister, “unruly” and meandering, their vines twirl around the corn for support (p. 132). Finally, squash, the third sister emerges and is busy “steadily extending herself over the ground, moving away from the corn and beans” while unfurling her leaves like large umbrellas (p. 131). A botanist by trade, Kimmerer explains that, when sown together, these three plants help each other grow and produce more food than when they are planted separately. The corn provides support for the beans, the squash

shades the roots, “keeping moisture in and other plants out,” and the beans fertilize the soil with nitrogen that “fuels the growth of the corn and the squash” as well as its own (p. 134). While important, the true wisdom of the Three Sisters comes not from the knowledge they provide about best practices when farming, but rather what the story tells us about ourselves.

Kimmerer states that, within Indigenous cultures, particularly those of North America, the Three Sisters are nature’s example of how to live in mutualistic collaboration with one another. Even though “each plant does what it does in order to increase its own growth,” it helps the collective succeed (p. 134). When the plants, or individual members of a community, “understand and share their gifts” the group is made stronger. Although each plant can grow separately and live – as is often done – it is only when planted together that the Three Sisters thrive. The Three Sisters’ story directly parallels that of humans. Although each person can live separately and pursue their own interests without regard to others, it is only when we are embedded within a community and learn to contextualize our experiences that we are able to truly flourish.

This contextualization is done through the affective attachments we form with others. Affective attachments, or the relationships between people, are what inform our identity, encourage us into action, provide us with a shared narrative that we use to make sense of the world, and are the source of the shared values and norms that guide our behavior as community members and democratic citizens. At our core, we are “cognitive misers” that rely on shortcuts to help alleviate the burden of living in a complex world (Bicchieri, 2006, p. 170). Norms are important because they act as informal codes of conduct by providing templates for our behavior. There are several theories of how norms work, which I will discuss in detail in section 2.3, but one of the most common explanations for why people abide by norms is because they want to,

either out of self-interest or to help them navigate social life. As social beings, norms help us gain admittance to different communities, distinguish us as members once admitted, and give us easy scripts to follow to maintain our membership.

There are many types of norms, also covered in section 2.3, however, the most salient for this dissertation are social and democratic norms. First, social norms help with coordination problems (Bicchieri, 2006; Chong, 2000; Greene, 2014). Humans are innately social, but our sociability must be cultivated and learned (Greene, 2014; Grinde, 2009; Tomasello et al., 2012). We are not born knowing how to be community members in the way that corn, beans, and squash are born to be exactly what they are. Instead, as we interact, we learn to consider the thoughts, feelings, wants, and interests of others and learn to become better versions of ourselves (Greene, 2014; Pariser, 2012). The way we connect and form attachments to others determines the kind of education we receive. If we prioritize our own rights and interests at the expense of others, we will learn dangerous, anti-social norms that are characteristic of bad communities, like the Ku Klux Klan, the Mafia, and the Alt-Right (Donovan et al., 2022; Marantz, 2020). Alternatively, if we follow the guidance of the Three Sisters, and learn to work together, to cooperate rather than compete, we will learn pro-social norms that help us use our individuality to not only make ourselves stronger, but also the communities of which we are a part.

Democracy is a social form of government and is particularly reliant on community and the normative education that occurs within it. In the same way that we are not born knowing how to be community members, we must also learn to become citizens (Barber, 1984; Etzioni, 1997; Sandel, 1996; Young, 2000). Some of this education occurs through the act of governance – voting, evaluating policies both before and after elections, and political involvement. However, interaction with the formalities of self-government is not enough to transform atomic, self-

interested individuals into other-regarding democratic citizens (Barber, 1984; Etzioni, 1997; Sandel, 1996, 2020). This transformation is only possible when people, through interaction with others, internalize the political community's shared values and abide by its norms (Etzioni, 1997).

Democratic norms are specific to democratic societies and guide people's behavior as citizens. Like social norms, democratic norms are other-regarding and help prevent individuals or groups from exploiting the political system for individual gain. However, democratic norms are more difficult to teach because they require us to consider people with whom we have limited contact and with whom we may disagree strongly. The challenge within democratic societies, then, is how to encourage individuals to view themselves as part of the political community, adhere to its norms, and thus create a culture capable of sustaining democracy (Almond & Verba, 1963).

The solution is community. Norms, both social and democratic, develop naturally as a by-product of interpersonal interaction. As people connect, they develop preferred behaviors by which members are expected to abide. The social norms that develop, in turn, provide the basis for the democratic norms that sustain democracy. Communities are the very essence of politics as it is the affective attachments between people that not only provide meaning and belonging, but also create both the social sphere and the political community (Etzioni, 1997; Hill Collins, 2010; Zink, 2019). As a result, it is vital to understand how technological changes have fundamentally altered how people connect, form community, and learn social and democratic norms.

Technological advancements have not only been extreme (society is on the verge of having Artificial Intelligence with the capacity for independent thought), these advancements have occurred at incredible speed (only 66 years elapsed between the Wright Brothers first flight

and man walking on the moon), and the pace is only accelerating (the first Artificial Intelligence, Deep Blue, was invented only 10 years after the internet). Technology has impacted every aspect of modern life – from education, to business, to travel, to health care – however, no area of life has been so profoundly changed as humans’ social lives.

For much of human history, the connections one could make and the communities that could form were limited by both geography and time. We were necessarily grounded in the corporeality of our existence. We met face-to-face, spoke in person, joined organizations locally, and participated in politics with those in our physical area (Oldenburg, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Tuan, 2001). It was easy to connect our social experiences with our political ones because they occurred in the same bounded area. Today, people are more likely to talk to their friends through text or social media, more likely to meet their romantic partners through dating apps, join a petition or cause online, and, in general, rely more on technology than they do their fellow humans (M. Anderson et al., 2023; Bail, 2022; Lenhart, 2015; Pariser, 2012; Turkle, 2017). Yet, due to how norms work, changing how people connect and form community necessarily changes the norms that are created and adopted. These changes have the potential to not only increase feelings of loneliness and isolation but also contribute to the growing disillusionment with democracy as it is becoming more difficult to connect our online existence with our offline realities.

However, this dissertation is not an argument that we must return to a simpler time when communities existed before technology – as this is no longer possible, nor is it advisable (as I cover in sections 2.1 and 2.2 regarding the downsides of community membership). Rather it is a proposition that democracy requires a culture robust enough to sustain it and that can only happen when we consider the role communities – and the norms that arise within them – play in

social and political life. As Patricia Hill Collins (2010) argues, “people do not aspire for a better or different world for intellectual reasons only. They act because they care” (p. 26). While individually we live, it is only together, like the Three Sisters planted in the same patch of land, can ourselves and democracy thrive.

2.1 The purpose of government

Constitutional democracies, like the United States, share similar core characteristics, including representation through free, fair, and frequent elections, a guarantee of individual liberties like free speech and association, and, with time, some guarantee of civil liberties that protect individuals from undue or arbitrary discrimination based on sex, gender identity, race, class, and creed. These rules are formalized in constitutions and enforced through laws. They also distinguish constitutional democracies from purely majoritarian democracies and other forms of governments like oligarchies and autocracies.

Liberal democracies often emphasize the importance of autonomy, privacy, and individual liberty. These values are essential for human well-being because individuals need to feel like they have control over their actions and lives away from the prying eyes of others and the state. However, Benjamin R. Barber (1984) argues that, due to liberalism’s tendency to privilege individual liberty over community, the defining feature of liberal democracies is the government’s ability to keep people “safely apart rather than” its ability to “bring them fruitfully together” (p. 4). Barber’s argument highlights how political theorists have characterized individuals prior to government creation.

In Thomas Hobbes’ view, which Barber argues is the basis for liberal democracies, the lives of individuals are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes, 1994, p. 76). In this conception, humans will always be in conflict with one another, and they create government as a

means to arbitrate between competing interests and to protect citizens from each other. Barber (1984) argues this version of democracy reduces politics to a form of “zookeeping” where individuals are kept separate to prevent them from destroying one another (p. 20). Oftentimes, this leaves people feeling disconnected from the rules that govern their lives because they do not see themselves as part of a political community. Rather, they are private citizens to whom a distant government imposes limitations. This is because citizens in liberal democracies are asked to consider themselves either as a public citizen that participates in a democracy to register their individual preferences or as a private person with obligations and attachments to others.

Others, like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, disagree strongly that humans are naturally war-like and violent. While individuals in Rousseau’s state of nature are also solitary and pursue their individual interests, they are also compassionate and moral beings. Instead of creating government to prevent perpetual fighting, it is established because people create community and become increasingly dependent on one another. As such, the Rousseauian society is one that works towards common goals, with common purpose, and for a common good.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, research has demonstrated that humans have a fundamental need to belong that drives them to seek out others with whom they can form attachment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to Joshua Greene (2014), this is because the first evolutionary challenge humans had to face was an individual’s “selfishness versus [their] concern for others” or “Me versus Us” (p. 14). Human evolution relies on cooperation as there are many tasks people are unable to do individually. Cooperative goals can be as basic as safety in numbers, where a group of humans is less likely to be attacked by a large predator than an individual would, to complex tasks like creating a democratic society or exploring space. At the

heart of these cooperative goals are individuals who give up a little of their selfish desires to secure the benefits of cooperation.

Even if we reject the Hobbesian version of individuals as perpetually in conflict, humans do need some measure of autonomy. As I will discuss in greater detail below, people feel no social pressure to conform to the community's preferred behavior when they are alone. Alone, a person can behave however they wish without regard to how others may view them and how they will make others feel. While this may be an easier way to live, as a person can do what she wants when she wants, it is also an impoverished way to live. It is a person's connections to others that provide her life with meaning. The need to belong is so fundamental to human well-being that some, like Andrew Mason (2000), argue that even liberalism "can recognize" that people need to feel as though they are part of "some larger group or enterprise." Only when citizens have a "healthy sense of civic responsibility" can democracy be "enduring, stable, and vibrant" (p. 11).

Alternatively, in communitarianism, greater consideration is given to the community's role in forming individual identity. Scholars like Amitai Etzioni (1997), go so far as to argue that the individualized, atomistic version of people emphasized in liberal democracies has never existed. Instead, people are "socially constituted and continually penetrated by culture, by social and moral influences, and by one another" (p. 21). As such, communitarian societies encourage people to consider themselves both as individuals and as members of the community. Rather than being an individual *despite* living in a community, people both form and are formed by their various attachments to others. Therefore, the moral force behind self-government is not the independence an individual has from others, but rather it is her ability to contextualize that independence in relation to her obligations to others. This allows us to consider our interests in

relation to the responsibilities we have as members of a family, social group, or political community.

People naturally engage in social comparison when developing their individual identity, values, and beliefs (Bicchieri, 2006; Greene, 2014; Sandel, 1996). According to Etzioni (1997), “people abhor an ethical vacuum” where “all choices have the same standing and are equally legitimate” because they have “no compass to guide them” (p. xv). Human brains are designed to be “cognitive misers” by finding shortcuts that make moving through the world easier (Bicchieri, 2006, p. 170). Social comparison allows us to see what has worked for others to determine whether it will work for us, too (Boyd & Richerson, 2009).

A balance between too much choice and too little choice is necessary for human well-being as true freedom requires knowing both “what’s possible to do” and “what you want” to do (Pariser, 2012, p. 112). We have to be able to consider our lives and actions in the broader context within which they occur while also having the freedom to make our own choices (Etzioni, 1997; Greene, 2014; Sandel, 1996). Only then, as Michael J. Sandel (1996) argues, are we able to conceive of ourselves as individuals and as “members of this family or city or nation or people, as bearers of that history, as citizens of this republic” (p. 13).

Unlike liberalism, which “fails to capture those loyalties and responsibilities” that are “inseparable from understanding ourselves as the particular persons we are,” communitarianism provides a way forward (Sandel, 1996, p. 14). Within communitarian societies, individuals are given the space to negotiate these boundaries as private individuals, with their own individual interests and obligations to those whom they are affectively attached, and as public citizens, with obligations to other members of the political community. What is necessary, then, for society to flourish is a balance between the individual and the community (Etzioni, 1997).

This balance becomes even more vital in large nations where there is no underlying familial, ethnic, or religious identity. Modern political communities are often, to borrow a phrase from Benedict R. Anderson (2006), “imagined” because the people within them “will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them” (p. 6). What binds citizens together as part of the same political community are the shared values that reflect the kind of political system within which they want to live. In democratic societies this manifests itself as a shared belief that self-government is possible and worthwhile (Almond & Verba, 1963). In democracies, this shared belief asserts that the ultimate goal of society is to preserve the institutions and culture that allow for self-government.

Taking this a step further, Robert B. Reich (2018) states that a shared belief in self-government is not enough. Reich argues that citizens must have “concern for the common good” without which “there is no society” (p. 18). Economists like Joseph Schumpeter (2008) have critiqued any idea of the common good as vague since there is “no such thing as a uniquely determined good.” Individuals, communities, and nations all have “ultimate values” that differ between them and trying to find a shared idea of the “common good” is impossible. Schumpeter argues that if we were to try and find a common good, it would require that “every social fact and every measure taken or to be taken [could] be unequivocally classed as ‘good’ or ‘bad.’” Without the benefit of hindsight, this “beacon” guiding public policy is unattainable (Schumpeter, 2008, p. 250).

Adherence to the common good does not necessarily mean that all members of a political community must share the same values at all times, nor does it require classifying decisions as either good or bad. Reich (2018) argues the common good can be defined as “what we owe one another as citizens who are bound together in the same society” (p. 18). In this view, the common

good is, as Sandel (1996) argues, what allows us to contextualize our individual experiences in relation to the political community of which we are a part.

Democratic norms are how the common good is sustained.⁶ Democratic norms, like forbearance, protect institutions from being used as political cudgels thus allowing democracy to continue. According to Hugh Heclo (2011), abiding by democratic norms can be seen as a form of stewardship, or “leaving your affairs in another’s hands with the belief that this person will do right by you” (p. 143). Within the political community, Heclo argues, we are entrusted with a system that was established before we arrived and to which we are obligated to preserve. Therefore, the common good, and the actions we take towards achieving it, should be “characterized by an ongoing commitment to the value and integrity” of the process of self-government rather than an amorphous “common good” (p. 147).

Yet, communitarian societies are not a panacea for the ills of liberalism. Although communitarian societies offer a more holistic understanding of people and are better suited to take into account the various attachments and obligations one has to others, they leave us vulnerable to what Joshua Greene (2014) calls the second evolutionary challenge, “Us versus Them” (p. 14). Individual communities have their own values, norms, and interests that often place them at odds with other communities. It is unclear when, how, and in what ways one community’s values should influence the values of the larger political community.

In *The New Golden Rule*, Etzioni (1997) uses abortion as an example of the problems associated with conflicting community values. Within religious communities, abortion is often characterized as violating God’s law and many find the practice objectionable. However, in

⁶ I will discuss democratic norms in greater detail in Section 2.3.

pluralistic countries like the United States where there are multiple religions with their own set of values and norms, the question of how much should religion influence an individual's political decisions remains unanswered. In liberal societies, individuals are asked to separate themselves from the formative nature of their religious beliefs to engage in the political system. One must leave their constitutive attachments in the private sphere when entering into the public sphere. Communitarian scholars, like Etzioni (1997) and Sandel (2020), argue that this is not only unfair, but also impossible. A person cannot separate herself from her attachments or beliefs because they directly inform the kind of society within which she wants to live.

In communitarian societies the government can enact laws that reflect a specific community's "underlying values" (Etzioni, 1997, p. 145). Using Etzioni's example, the government can restrict abortion access to prevent infringing on one community's religious values, but this presents its own problems. First, those who do not find abortion objectionable will have their liberty restricted as access to the procedure is limited. Second, Etzioni argues that anyone that "does not truly share" in the underlying values that support the law will find ways to engage in "various kinds of antisocial behavior" that undermine the collective political enterprise (p. 145). As a result, the problem switches from how much a person's attachments and values should influence her political decision making to whose values should be reflected in the laws that govern the broader democratic society.

Etzioni's example demonstrates that communities need an overarching set of shared values and norms. In democratic societies, it is not enough that individuals be members of their own respective communities, they must also consider themselves as part of the broader political community and be committed to upholding its values, even when it conflicts with their individual interests. For political communities, the different groups are analogous to individuals

within the interpersonal communities they make with their family and friends. Each individual (or individual community) has their own interests and values, but what binds them together is a shared set of values and norms to which they are committed.

In democratic communities, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2019) argue this is a willingness to abide by the “rules of the game” that allow for self-governance (p. 21). While some of these rules are formalized in laws, many, as I will discuss in section 2.3, are unspoken democratic norms. The force behind these norms stems from the shared expectations between individuals. It is not simply that I expect others to behave a certain way (for example, voting or keeping public spaces clean), it is that I believe others expect me to behave in a similar manner. I believe that the expectations others’ have on my behavior are both relevant and important because we are part of the same interpersonal or political community and therefore care for one another, have similar values or, at the very least, are committed to maintaining the community.

Etzioni’s abortion example also highlights another problem that communitarian societies face, namely how much community cohesion is necessary before the society becomes too restrictive. Nearly every definition of community rests on the idea that community members must have a shared frame of reference from which to view the world and a shared set of norms and values that govern how members of the community should behave. The resulting homogeneity defines the boundaries of the community and sets the standards that its members should meet. However, even when values are widely shared, they still have the potential to restrict individual liberty because people prioritize their values over other people’s values even though they are members of the same political community.

For instance, in the United States, the LGBTQ+ community has made great strides in securing the rights, protections, and acceptance that cis-hetero people have, yet there are still

many places that adhere strongly to cis-heteronormativity. In these areas, members of the LGBTQ+ community are seen as outsiders who violate the community's norms by virtue of who they are. As such, many LGBTQ+ individuals live in situations where expressing their identity puts them at odds with other members of their community. In these instances, LGBTQ+ individuals can and do carve out areas for themselves and others like them that do not adhere to cis-hetero norms. These areas can be in LGBTQ+-friendly states, like the Castro District in Northern California, or in discriminatory states where Atlanta acts as a haven for LGBTQ+ individuals living in Georgia (and in the South more generally). In these places, LGBTQ+ individuals can live their identity and find their own communities.

However, not everyone can leave repressive communities. It takes substantial time and resources to move from restrictive communities to havens like the Castro District or Atlanta. Children and people with limited resources are often faced with the impossible choice of living freely or maintaining the relationships necessary for their survival. The decision that LGBTQ+ individuals and other minorities face regarding whether to live their identity or maintain their relationships is a classic example of *us versus them* thinking. Here, the larger group, like a person's family, the state of Georgia, or an entire nation, has different values than that of the smaller group, as is the case for LGBTQ+ individuals and many racial or religious minorities. Thus, while communities do require some homogeneity for community identity, they may also be overly restrictive for those whom the community considers to be outsiders.

Terri Mannarini and Angela Fedi (2009) argue this is a “major critique” of community. The authors state that since most conceptions of community rely on a shared set of values, community implies an “assumption of undifferentiated identity” that emphasizes “unity instead of diversity” and “cohesion instead of conflict” (p. 212). The argument posits that as people

come to view themselves as members of a community and incorporate the community's values into their own, the individual's self-identity becomes subservient to the collective.⁷ Since community values are partially enforced through social sanction, it is not unreasonable to think that the collective will have undue influence over the individual.

Yet, adherence to a common set of values or ideas does not mean that communities are monolithic. Communities can share a common set of values while still respecting individual identity. Individuals can be members of multiple, overlapping, distinct, or contradictory communities with varying levels of attachment to each. A person learns to negotiate both the conflicting interests of her various communities *and* of her own interests and values. As a result, the shared values must include tolerance and respect for other communities as these allow people to coexist with others who have different values, interests, and norms.⁸

Furthermore, tolerance is required for healthy democracies since the state wields far greater power to control and sanction those who violate the political community's norms. The

⁷ An example of this fear from U.S. history is Benjamin Franklin's Join, or Die cartoon. The cartoon was used as a warning to the eight British colonies that they had to work together (forfeiting some of their autonomy) to survive threats from French invaders and the Indigenous population defending their land. The cartoon is an example of the fear and risk associated with the tension between individualism and community. One can join a community and be rewarded, or they can remain independent and suffer the consequences. See: *Figure B.1* in Appendix B for a copy of the cartoon.

⁸ In 1945, Karl Popper (2020) argued that there are limits to tolerance. For a society to remain tolerant, it must, paradoxically, reject individuals and communities that promote intolerance. For example, a society that allows communities to be intolerant towards others (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan, Mafia, Nazis, or Alt-Right) runs the risk of these groups using their authoritarian practices to spread their intolerance to others ultimately undermining the larger, tolerant community. The paradox of tolerance is a warning that to be tolerant, there must be some intolerance towards individuals or groups that seek to undermine the larger social or political community. The boundaries between tolerance and intolerance are, in practice, blurred as it is often only through hindsight that we recognize policies as dangerous or damaging. However, the negotiation process, where different groups attempt to secure recognition, rights, or power, is where social and democratic norms arise. Social norms arise when individual and collective interest are not perfectly aligned. Similarly, democratic norms arise when an individual community's interests conflict with the political community's interests. Social and democratic norms guide behavior to ensure that while there are differences, the system by which we negotiate, develop, learn, and choose values remains intact for all.

state can enact discriminatory policies, jail, or deport people who are considered others (i.e., those whom the state believes violate the political community's norms) on a much larger scale than an individual community can. For example, in the social sphere, if a person violates the community's norms she may be ostracized or expelled from the group. However, she (usually) can remain in her town or city and find others with whom she can join or create community either where she lives, at her work, or even online. Alternatively, when the political community lacks tolerance for others, the state can make living unsafe for entire groups of people (e.g., slavery or segregation in the South, internment camps during World War II, or current mass deportations happening across the United States). Although being expelled or ostracized from one's community is often painful, when the state ostracizes people or groups, it is often dangerous due to the scale and scope of the state's power.

As a result, tolerance is a necessary social and democratic norm so that individuals within a community and individual communities within the broader political community can learn to negotiate their interests and values in relation to their responsibilities to others. Ultimately, what binds these communities together is the shared ideal of self-government and the willingness to work together to achieve a common cause. Without a shared set of values that bind individual communities together, democratic erosion is both possible and inevitable. As each community struggles to secure its own version of the common good, it risks undermining the institutions and norms that define democracy. In both cases, either the self-interested individual or the individual community tries to secure benefits and rights for themselves, often at the expense of others.

Despite the problems associated with communitarianism, it still offers a more substantial foundation for democratic societies. Humans are social animals and the connections we make are formative. A vast majority of our political beliefs and aspirations, from healthcare to education,

stem from our attachment to and care for the people in our lives. We may support Medicare because we want our grandparents to be taken care of. When we extend this care to our fellow citizens in the larger political community, we may be more likely to support higher taxes, which goes against our self-interest, in order to ensure adequate Medicare coverage for all elderly citizens.⁹ Where liberalism asks people to disassociate themselves from these formative attachments, communitarianism takes into consideration our innate need to belong and uses it to create a culture capable of acknowledging our moral obligations to fellow citizens which, in turn, encourages democratic self-government.

Even if we accept communitarianism as a more stable foundation for democracy, most communitarians were writing at a time when community was primarily physical and in-person. The communities at issue were both temporally and physically bound as the technology to communicate instantaneously across vast distances did not yet exist. However, since most interaction is now mediated through technology, the incentives for community involvement have changed. As a result, it is necessary to revisit what factors encourage affective attachment and norm adoption in light of the new ways that people connect and form community.

2.2 Caring for others

In 1972, sociologists Colin Bell and Howard Newby argued that community studies was tainted with a “pervading posture of nostalgia” because researchers frequently conflated “empirical descriptions” of “what [community] *is*” with the “normative prescription” of what the researcher feels “it *should be*” (p. 21-22).¹⁰ This has left community research stagnated with

⁹ Popular culture has started to reflect the idea that we must learn to care about the people with whom we are affectively attached as well as other members of our political community for democracy to work. *See: Figure B.2 and Figure B.3 in Appendix B for examples.*

¹⁰ Emphasis in the original.

attempts to define what constitutes a community, what the benefits (or detriments) of community membership are, and whether scholarship can reasonably distinguish so-called *good* communities from those we often instinctively know are *bad*, like the Ku Klux Klan or the Mafia.

How to define what community is poses an interesting lexical problem. Across disciplines, community is thought “to be a good thing” and its “passing [is] to be deplored, feared and regretted.” Yet, scholars in evolutionary biology, urban studies, sociology, and political science have struggled to formulate a concise definition of what distinguishes community from other types of groups (Bell & Newby, 1972, p. 21). Early research in these areas often focused on community as it related to a physical place. Community was often coterminous with administrative boundaries and these studies either downplayed or disregarded its affective components (Sampson et al., 2002).

New Urbanists, for example, argue that communities should “return to the design” of earlier neighborhoods that were “characterized by higher densities, a diversity of housing types, a concentrated core of retail and employment, a pedestrian-oriented environment, dedicated public and open spaces, and connected street networks.” These close-knit neighborhoods, New Urbanists argue, reflect a “social environment” that more closely resembles the communities of our past (Lund, 2002, p. 301). While this return may seem like it is adopting the “posture of nostalgia” described by Bell and Newby, most evolutionary biologists agree that humans are best suited to living in “tribal settings” because our brains only have the “capacity to retain relationships with 150-200” people (Grinde, 2009, p. 590).

One of the problems with modern life, according to Paolo Parigi and Warner Henson II (2014), is that technology makes it easier for us to form relationships with other people but, at

the same time, those relationships carry less meaning. The authors argue that relationships are subject to diminishing returns because each new connection we make results in a “multiplication of contexts” that increases the “cognitive costs of maintaining [those] relationships” (Parigi & Henson, 2014, p. 163). Modern life, then, results in what Bjørn Grinde (2009) calls “discords,” or “deviations from the way we were genetically designed for” (p. 598). In turn, this has contributed to growing rates of “stress, loneliness, lack of belonging [as well as] the high prevalence of diseases such as anxiety and depression, and the numerous conflicts between individuals” (p. 592). Thus, while New Urbanism comes close to being nostalgic, increased focus on a community’s built environment is not unwarranted when considering its effects on the social ties among its members.

According to Grinde (2009), humans “have an innate propensity,” or “template,” that pushes us to be social (p. 599). However, how social we can be is partly determined by our community’s geography and partly by its “institutional resources” (Sampson et al., 2002, p. 458). Areas with difficult terrain, extreme climates, or that lack the financial resources to foster “gathering places” must either find alternative means to encourage interpersonal interactions or simply do without (Oldenburg, 1999, p. ix). Research demonstrates that communities that include more public spaces where incidental interactions between members can occur consistently score higher on measures of social cohesion, sense of community, collective efficacy, place attachment, and social capital (Bell & Newby, 1972; Carbone & McMillin, 2019; Gilman & Marquis, 2022; Joint Economic Committee-Republicans, 2021; Lekwa et al., 2007;

Lund, 2002; Mannarini & Fedi, 2009; Oldenburg, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Sampson et al., 2002; Williamson, 2002).¹¹

In his book *The Great Good Place*, Ray Oldenburg (1999) argues that America has lost the public spaces necessary for social life. Oldenburg praises places like coffee shops, cafés, bars, bookstores, and other privately owned spaces that act as “third places” that are neither one’s home nor workplace (p. xi). Third places are necessary because they act as “mixer(s)” or “neutral ground” where people can meet others and congregate, which Oldenburg argues “may create other forms of association later on” (p. xviii). For example, if a person is browsing the gardening section of her local bookstore, she may encounter a seasoned gardener that is willing to share their knowledge. This connection may later develop into a gardening group, or an association dedicated to preserving the community’s ecology – something that would not happen if she had bought gardening books online.¹² These types of incidental interactions foster trust between community members and help “[mold] our social competence” (Grinde, 2009, p. 599).

¹¹ *Note:* In this context public means out of one’s private space. For example, when I leave my home and go to the grocery store, I am leaving my private space (home) to go to a public space (grocery store), even though the public location is privately owned. The distinction between public and private space and publicly or privately owned is important, but linguistically tricky. This paragraph and the next are focused on the distinction between non-private places and private places, whereas later I discuss publicly owned versus privately owned spaces. I add clarifying notes where necessary.

¹² Purchasing a book online is a solitary action. If I am interested in a gardening book, I go online, search for a gardening book (though, more likely I already know which book I want and simply go to a website and buy it), perhaps read reviews posted by others, and make my purchase without interacting with others. The incidental interaction between a seasoned gardener and a novice does not occur because purchasing something online neither requires interpersonal interaction, nor does it facilitate incidental interactions that may occur if I were in a physical bookstore that could lead to further interactions. Online gardening groups do exist, but one must already know they exist and choose to seek them out. Later in this section I discuss the difference between destination walking (which is negatively associated with feelings of community) and non-destination walking (which is positively associated with feelings of community) both of which have parallels in online spaces. In the early days of the internet personalized algorithms did not exist or were very rudimentary. Eli Pariser (2012) argues this injected “serendipity” into the web-browsing experience that allowed for more incidental interactions (p. 96). That is, if a person searched for a “gardening book” they may receive results with recommendations for books but also information about gardening co-ops, gardening groups, and other content entirely unrelated to their search – this like browsing a

In *Bowling Alone*, Robert D. Putnam (2000) argues that incidental interactions create “bridging capital” that is useful for “linkage to external assets and for information diffusion.” Informal connections, he continues, act as “WD-40” that facilitate social life (p. 22). In his landmark article, Mark S. Granovetter (1973) argues that “weak ties” (Putnam’s bridging capital) are sometimes more important than “strong ties” because the former connect disparate groups together and helps to reduce out-group hostility (p. 1373). Furthermore, Robert J. Sampson, Jeffrey D. Morenoff, and Thomas Gannon-Rowley’s (2002) review of neighborhood effects found that weak ties may be vital for collective efficacy, or the “shared willingness to intervene for the public good” because they are easier to break (p. 457). The authors focus on the effects of community on children and argue that people may be more willing to intervene on behalf of a child in a dangerous or problematic home because the would-be intervener is willing to risk whatever social tie they may have with the child’s parent. As such, incidental interactions, and the weak ties that they create, are essential because they create a dense web of connections that help foster a sense of belonging within members and an overall sense of community and cohesion while also encouraging people to uphold the community’s shared values and norms.

According to Putnam (2000), weak ties are only one part of what he calls social capital. Social capital is the “social networks and the associated norms of reciprocity” that arise from them, which includes both bridging capital (weak ties) and bonding capital (strong ties) (p. 21). Putnam defines strong ties as those between close friends and family that are useful for

bookstore shelf or the local community board. People could have similar experiences when seeking out groups to join. For example, those who remember America Online (AOL) are likely familiar with the chat rooms that allowed anyone to logon and chat with strangers. AOL chat rooms are very different than modern chat groups on platforms like Discord or Slack, which are hosted by a particular person and are invite-only, thus acting more as gated communities than public parks. Random video chat sites like Omegle are close but are limited to one-on-one video chats rather than hundreds or thousands of participants.

“undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity” (p. 22).¹³ Unlike weak ties, which are easier to break, strong ties act as “sociological superglue” holding communities together and breaking these ties often results in significant mental anguish. Strong ties are often named – mother, father, aunt, best friend, spouse – and thus carry with them normative expectations. According to Robert M. Seyfarth and Dorothy L. Cheney (2012), “recognizing and classifying” our relationships in this way is “adaptive” because it “helps us understand and predict peoples’ behavior” (p. 154). I will return to normative expectations in the following section (2.3).

Putnam (2000) was not the first to develop the idea of social capital, a fact he acknowledges himself, but he did popularize it and it has quickly become a stable concept within community studies. However, social capital has been criticized for recasting our relationships with others as a resource to be tapped, rather than seeing these relationships as inherently valuable or part of our innate sociability. According to Jedediah Purdy (2000), this encourages a form of “irony” that contributes to growing feelings of social isolation because we are “insistently doubtful of the qualities that would make us take a person seriously” (p. 6). Purdy argues we are no longer earnest with ourselves or others which causes us to retreat from social life and thus undermines our ability to create community. Purdy’s argument is arguably timelier and more poignant now, in a time of social media where people present highly curated versions of themselves, than it was in the early days of the internet when the book was published. I return to this point in Chapter 3.3.

¹³ Specific reciprocity is tied to strong ties because if there is an existing relationship between two people (e.g., spouses), they are more likely to do things for each other. Without an existing relationship, it is more difficult to act reciprocally as the payoff for doing so (the promise of future help, usually) is less likely.

A similar argument has been against the privately-owned public spaces that Oldenburg (1999) discusses. According to Hollie Russon Gilman and Bridget Marquis (2022), privately owned gathering places are insufficient for community creation because they require resources that may not be available to all. That is, for a coffee shop or a bookstore to become “homes away from home” where people can “relax and laugh in one another’s company,” people must have the money to purchase a beverage or, presumably, a book (Oldenburg, 1999, p. ix). Gilman and Marquis argue that truly public places like parks, trails, recreation centers, or libraries “are our best hope for community and democracy” because unlike privately owned places, public ones include “the potential for people to connect across divisions of race, income and beliefs” (para. 5). Public places are open to everyone without the pressure to make purchases, thus allowing for a broader cross-section of society to interact.¹⁴

However, the privately and publicly owned places discussed by Oldenburg (1999) and Gilman and Marquis (2022) are often treated as destinations. To meet and gather in these areas a person must choose to leave their home and enter a communal space. Amy Wilkerson and her co-authors (2012) argue that communities also need “soft edges,” like porches and front gardens, where one is neither fully in public, as they would be at a coffee shop or at a park, nor fully in private, as they would be in their home. These semiprivate areas are necessary because they “provide spaces for people to interact by keeping [them] out of doors for a longer duration” and foster “feelings of home, security and social support” (p. 596).

¹⁴ The idea of public libraries as the last uncommercialized place has also gained attention online, *see: Figure B.4* in Appendix B.

Furthermore, Hollie Lund's (2002) study of pedestrian environments found that the "subjective view" people had "of the walking in their neighborhood" impacted their sense of belonging and assessment of community cohesion. Lund contends that the two most common types of walking are destination-based and non-destination based, like walking to the store or walking a dog, respectively. The former is negatively associated with sense of community because it is often done "out of necessity or under time constraints" that discourage interpersonal interaction (p. 309).

Alternatively, non-destination walking, or "strolling," was positively associated with sense of community because these people choose to leave their home and "walk through their neighborhood." Even walking one's dog, while task-based, is considered non-destination walking because there is (usually) no pre-determined place where one needs to go. Instead, dog-walkers and "strollers" can "choose the safest and most pleasant route" where they "are more likely to run into a neighbor" with whom they can have a conversation, or even nod hello as they pass (p. 310). Soft edges and non-destination walking are more likely to foster a sense of belonging and community because one either passes by the same houses or sees the same people and thus develops a sense of familiarity with them, even if they do not interact with one another.¹⁵

Most community research focuses on physical locations because these communities were all that were available as the technology to efficiently travel long distances or communicate

¹⁵ For example, if I sit on my porch each evening at the same time that a neighbor regularly walks their dog I may develop a vague sense of attachment to them, even if we do not talk, and will notice if they miss a walk one evening. This familiarity provides a sense of belonging and cohesion because if someone is a regular in our neighborhood, they are part of the same community as us and, evolutionarily, we are more likely to feel affection towards them and also more likely to trust and cooperate with them (Greene, 2014; Seyfarth & Cheney, 2012; Tomasello et al., 2012)

instantaneously did not yet exist. Modern technological advancements have all but eliminated these barriers and, as a result, have impacted how people connect and form community. I save most of the discussion regarding technologically mediated communities for Chapter 3, however, it is important to highlight that existing research's focus on a community's built environment has parallels within digital spaces.

For example, Nathan Schneider (2024) traced the internet's development, from its early days as a Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) project to its current cloud-based iteration. Schneider argues that early technological limitations meant that social spaces, such as message boards, were hosted on someone's home computer, which gave them unchecked power over the community. If a community member was disliked for any reason, the forum owner could ban them or, in extreme cases, simply close the community entirely. These early design decisions have been carried forward to the present, despite them no longer being technologically necessary. Schneider argues that reliance on these old structures has made the modern internet "feudal" in its design in a way that is ultimately incompatible with democracy because one person chooses the rules by which all other participants must abide (p. 18).

Throughout his book, Schneider highlights online spaces where people have rejected the feudalistic model and opted for a more democratic one. This not only makes it easier for people to find and connect with others, but it also makes it easier to connect the affective attachment a person feels towards others online with their responsibilities as a democratic citizen. For example, Schneider champions "governable stacks," including "the interconnected infrastructures and practices that enable networked self-governance," such as allowing community members to vote on proposed rule changes or bans (p. 86). Not only does this return power to users, but it also makes it easier to connect one's online social and democratic

experiences with their offline reality, a point I will return to in Chapter 3.1. However, what matters most is not the place where one connects with others, as the built environment whether in-person or online can always be changed, but rather the meaning derived from these connections, what kinds of communities develop, and the shared values and norms that arise.

In 1919, Mary Parker Follett described communities as a “creative process” wherein the community affects and is affected by its members (p. 576). Instead of seeing community as a physical place or a static entity, Follett viewed community as a useful nomenclature to describe the affective relationships between individuals. As an early communitarian, Follett argued that the individual can never be separated from the community nor vice versa as each is constitutive of the other. Individuals are formed by communities and their attachments to others are what provide their lives with meaning and belonging (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009; Mason, 2000). Furthermore, communities are made of individuals and it is the interpersonal relationships that define the community’s boundaries and deliver its form (Bruhn, 2011; Etzioni, 2000). In this view, the most salient aspects of community are not the built environment that defines its structure, but rather that relationships of which it is composed.

Like Follett, Veronika Zink (2019) argues that communities are best conceived of not as “the product of pre-established rules, hegemonic norms, and imposed structures,” but rather “as a net of pulsating spheres of sociability” (p. 289). As people connect and form attachment to one another they develop a “shared narrative” that defines them both as members and distinguishes their community from other communities (Mannarini & Fedi, 2009, p. 213, emphasis omitted). Within this shared narrative, the group develops its own meanings and symbols, as well as shared values and norms that help guide individual action.

Norms act as informal codes of conduct that are used to both determine if one is a member as well as determine how one is to behave to retain their membership in their communities. While I will discuss the details of norms and how they work in greater detail in the following section (2.3), it is important to note that norms derive their force from the relationships people have with one another. That is, we abide by norms because we care about other people, and we want to retain our relationship with them. Thus, while humans are innately social, Grinde (2009) argues that “social life needs to be learned” (p. 599). No one is born knowing how to be a member of a community nor a citizen in a democracy. It is only through social interaction that we develop affective attachment towards others that pushes us past our own myopia and learn to consider the thoughts, feelings, interests, and desires of others. This, in turn, transforms us into community members and citizens (Bail, 2022; Barber, 1984; Bicchieri, 2006; Brent et al., 2014; Etzioni, 1997; Pariser, 2012; Turkle, 2017).

S. Alexander Haslam and his co-authors (2022) argue that “the most basic source of human strength and resilience” is our “psychological connection to social groups” because it is within these groups that our lives find meaning and we experience belonging (p. 162).¹⁶ Similarly, Grinde (2009) states that our “relations are arguably our most potent source of good feelings” (p. 588). Research has shown that people with robust social lives tend to be healthier, happier, are more successful financially, and are more compassionate and empathetic (Brent et al., 2014; Etzioni, 1997; Greene, 2014; Grinde, 2009; Lund, 2002). Similarly, studies have found that communities with high levels of cohesion improve people’s quality of life, have higher levels of social, civic, and political involvement, less crime, and lower levels of political

¹⁶ For a discussion regarding the importance of – and fundamental need for – belonging, *see*: Chapter 1.1.

polarization (Carbone & McMillin, 2019; Greene, 2014; Lee, 2022; Lekwa et al., 2007; Lund, 2002; Mannarini & Fedi, 2009; Ross et al., 2001; Sampson et al., 2002).

According to Yi-Fu Tuan (2001), the care and attachment one feels towards their community “may come simply with familiarity and ease, with the assurance of nurture and security,” but it is established through the experiences that have “accumulated over time” through “communal participation” (p. 159). Community cannot exist without participation because as people participate in social life, they learn how to become citizens which, in turn, defines how social life is structured (Barber, 1984). Furthermore, Patricia Hill Collins (2010) argues that social and political structures “do not exist independently of people” and are thus necessarily tied to our connections with others. As a result, “whether intentional or not” we use our social identities, formed within communities, to “make sense of and organize” all aspects of our social and political life (p. 12).

In the previous section (2.1), I introduced Hugh Heclo’s (2011) idea of stewardship, which involves taking responsibility for something or someone by acting as its caretaker. Within communities this is often done by upholding its shared values and norms and caring for others, even when there is no real or perceived benefit for oneself, like the Medicare example used at the end of section 2.1. For Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), stewardship is closely related to the gift economy within Indigenous cultures. The gift economy focuses on the reciprocity between people, objects, and the environment.

According to Kimmerer (2013), the “nature of an object” changes whether we consider it as a commodity or as a gift. Using wool socks as an example, Kimmerer argues that when we consider the socks we purchase at the store as a commodity, we view it as “private property” to

which we have “no *inherent* obligation.”¹⁷ We may thank the store clerk who rang the socks up and feel “grateful for the sheep that made the wool and the worker who ran the knitting machine,” but that is where our obligation to the socks ends. Alternatively, Kimmerer challenges us to consider how we would behave if the same wool socks were knitted by our grandma and given to us as a gift rather than purchased in a store. In this case, the wool socks are a gift in that they are “something for nothing,” however the socks now have “certain obligations attached” to them. We may feel more affection towards the socks, take better care of them, and wear them even if they are not our style (p. 26-27). The only difference is whether we view the socks as a commodity to own or a gift that engenders certain obligations.¹⁸

In western societies, Kimmerer argues, an emphasis on private property favors a way of living that prioritizes a “bundle of rights” that a person can invoke to make a claim of ownership. In this view, when a gift is given or a relationship created, it is “deemed to be free because we obtain it free of charge” and therefore have no obligation towards it. We can give away, break, or discard the gift or abandon relationships at will because we are only responsible for ourselves. Alternatively, in a gift economy, “gifts are not free” as both property and relationships have a “bundle of responsibilities attached” (p. 28, internal quotations omitted). This means we are responsible and have obligations towards not only our family and friends, but also our community, nation, and the environment.

¹⁷ Emphasis in the original.

¹⁸ Kimmerer (2013) cites Lewis Hyde who states, “it is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people” (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 26, internal quotations omitted). Gifts create an affective attachment between the giver and receiver which, in turn, establishes an obligation to protect and preserve – or act as steward – over an item, environment, or person. Furthermore, gift economies are not necessarily synonymous with small or interpersonal exchanges. If society (here, the makers of the socks and ourselves) view the wool taken from the sheep as a gift we may feel more obligation to care for the socks we purchase at the store and be less hasty to damage or discard them simply because we can always buy another pair.

Many of the problems associated with communities arise when we disregard the “important responsibilities” that community membership entails by focusing primarily on the “feel-good experiences” that it invokes (Hill Collins, 2010, p. 21). When individuals or groups (like the KKK, Mafia, or the Alt-Right) seek to achieve their individual interests at the expense of the larger community both social and political life suffer. Ultimately, the value of community is the joint commitment between people that is based on the idea that there are shared values and ideals which bind them together. At the heart of these ideals is the affective attachment one feels to other members because it is through these attachments that social and democratic norms arise, and it is what gives them their force.

2.3 Determining priorities

Cristina Bicchieri (2006) argues that there are three main types of social pressure. The first two, descriptive norms and conventions, are behaviors that most people follow but carry no threat of social sanction if broken. Descriptive norms include fashion trends and fads, whereas conventions are closely related to manners and include keeping one’s elbows off the table while eating and greeting people by shaking hands. In most societies, descriptive norms are a form of shorthand that indicate membership in a community. For example, if a person develops a new interest in death metal and wishes to gain access to the death metal community, she may choose to wear dark clothing, chains, and heavy makeup. By changing her dress and ornamentation, the individual is signaling that she shares the same values as and belongs to the same community as others who dress like her.

Conventions are similar to descriptive norms, but the former are less about fitting in and more about using “signals that facilitate interaction and communication.” In her book, *The Grammar of Society*, Bicchieri uses the example of traders on the floor of the New York Stock

Exchange who use their fingers to signal how many shares they wish to sell. The act of using one's fingers is a convention because there is "no intrinsic value" associated with the action (p. 34). Using one's fingers is no more effective than using signs or having traders write down the number of shares they want to sell. Thus, descriptive norms allow a person to gain access to the community and conventions are what allow them to be recognized once admitted. For both descriptive norms and conventions, a person is internally motivated to follow the socially approved of behavior. It could be because she wants to fit in (following a fashion trend) or it is polite (shaking someone's hand when meeting them).¹⁹ In these cases, a person's interest (fitting in or being polite) aligns with the community's preferred behavior.

Alternatively, social norms only exist when an individual is required to "cooperate, reciprocate, act fairly, or do anything that may involve some material cost or the foregoing of some benefit" (Bicchieri, 2006, p. 3). That is, social norms exist specifically when a person's individual interest conflicts with the community's preferences. As mentioned in Chapter 1.1, a common social norm is one that deters littering. People may want to leave their trash behind but comply with the social norm of clean public spaces to avoid social sanction. Another example of a social norm is covering one's mouth when sneezing. Shielding others from one's sneeze is good practice for preventing the transmission of respiratory illnesses, but it has developed into a social norm because failure to abide by the mouth-covering norm results in social sanction.

¹⁹ For one to be *polite* means they can effectively communicate with people whose social station is higher than their own. It is a problematic concept as it is often used to restrict group membership as behaviors common in some cultures can be deemed *impolite* by other cultures, thus denying entry for seemingly legitimate reasons. For example, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) describes how the term "Indian giver" developed due to the differences between what white settlers and Native Americans thought was polite gift behavior. For white settlers, to be given a gift implied ownership. What was given is now owned by the receiver and is no longer the concern of the giver. For Native Americans, a gift was an introduction to a relationship. Gifts were not property and, as Kimmerer states, many Native Americans "would be affronted if the gifts did not circulate back to them" (p. 28). Gifts were reciprocal in nature and not owned by anyone in particular.

Similar to the littering example, a person may have an interest in not covering their mouth while sneezing, but the community has an interest in preventing the spread of illnesses. The individual's and the community's interests are in conflict, which can result in a norm developing.²⁰

The distinction between descriptive norms, conventions, and social norms is often blurred in real life. Descriptive norms can become entrenched and develop into conventions or be considered a social norm in another community. What makes a behavior a descriptive norm, convention, or social norm is fluid and changes as the community grows and adapts to its members. According to Bicchieri (2006), the defining feature of whether behaviors are descriptive norms, conventions, or social norms “are the expectations and motives of the people involved.” This indicates that the most important aspect of normative behavior is how people perceive, understand, and internalize the various “behavioral rules” that influence their actions. Therefore, what gives these rules “their identity as habits, norms, or mere conventions” are the affective attachments individuals have to each other and to other members of their community (p. 29).

Furthermore, adherence to norms is predicated on the expectations the community places on an individual that she recognizes as reasonable. Since humans are naturally social animals,

²⁰ In 2020, governments from many nations urged citizens to wear masks and some instituted mask mandates. Most people had no problem adhering to these mandates – either because they did not want to get sick or because they wanted to protect others, but many others were outraged at what they believed was government overreach. The controversy over wearing masks amidst a global pandemic exemplifies the tension between individual and community interests. As the pandemic continued what started as a mandate later became a social norm within certain communities. For example, there is no place in the United States that currently (as of 2025) mandates individuals wear masks either indoors or outdoors. Some areas have gone so far as to ban masks entirely. Yet, within certain communities, like those with high numbers of children, the elderly, or people susceptible to infection, mask wearing is still encouraged and preferred. People within those communities risk sanction if they choose not to abide by the mask-wearing norm (Stone, 2024).

Joshua Greene (2014) argues that we are predisposed to care about how others feel, what they think of us, and how we make them feel.²¹ Caring about others was necessary to overcome the first evolutionary challenge, *me versus us*. However, “universal cooperation” is antithetical to evolution, which relies on some competition to ensure the strongest genes survive. As a result, we are wired to care more about our family and friends (the strong ties discussed in the previous section, 2.2) than we “care about acquaintances and strangers,” but we *do* care about the latter (p. 39). Our attachments to others necessarily impact how we behave in social situations because the needs of others become part of our own. It is a person’s capacity to care about others that gives social norms their force. If I care about my community, then I will view the not-littering norm as reasonable and be more inclined to abide by it.

There are two main theories regarding how norms affect people’s behavior. In the standard view, a person is motivated to follow a social norm because she is internally motivated to do so or because she wants to avoid social sanctions. When people do follow norms for either of these reasons, they are taking a “deliberational route” wherein they “assess the situation, gather information, list and evaluate the probability of each consequence occurring” and then act accordingly. People often use the deliberational route when they believe they will be held accountable for their actions or when the “consequences may be particularly important and long-lasting” (Bicchieri, 2006, p. 4).

²¹ Greene’s argument does not discount the reality of the atrocities, violence, or pain that humans can inflict on each other, animals, or the environment. Greene argues, as I do here, that humans can be incredibly cruel, but we can also be empathetic, altruistic, and benevolent. Our malevolence is tempered by our connections to others. When we care about others, be it family, friends, or strangers, we are less willing to do harm and more willing to act kindly. One of the central themes of Greene’s book is how to create systems that reflect the care we show towards members of our community on a wider scale. This idea has also been discussed in popular culture and memes, for examples *see*: *Figure B.5* and *Figure B.6* in Appendix B.

For example, if someone attends an after-work team-building event at a non-work location (e.g., a bar or sporting event), the location's norms may directly conflict with the norms usually present while at work. An informal setting suggests that normal work-related behavior may be relaxed. A person may never consider having an alcoholic beverage while at work but would indulge at a sporting event during their off-hours. After-work activities may indicate that the norm of restraint (i.e., sobriety) may be relaxed yet not entirely dispensed with because of the kind of people in attendance (i.e., colleagues). In this situation, a person may deliberate on what behavior is appropriate for the setting (not drinking may indicate she is stuck-up or stand-offish in some cultures) and for the group she is with (drinking too much would be inappropriate because these people are colleagues, not friends). As a result, drinking too much at a bar or getting too rambunctious at a sporting event may cause consequences that are important and long-lasting because her supervisors may fire her for behaving in a manner that does not reflect the company's values.²²

However, in studies of social norm behavior people often abide by norms when they neither have the internal motivation nor the threat of external sanction, thus making the deliberational route unlikely. The more common way that social norms work is via the "heuristic route." When taking the heuristic route, a person's behavior is "guided by the default rules stored in memory that are cued by contextual stimuli" (Bicchieri, 2006, p. 5). When a person enters a new situation, she will rely on context clues about how to behave and respond using stored

²² Even though some states have regulations against employers retaliating against an employee's behavior while off-duty, there are countless examples where a company's morality clause overrides any protection the employee may have. For example, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) rescinded an internship offer when the candidate used vulgar language on Twitter (now X) (Merrett, 2018). In France, an employee wanted to opt-out of the company's social events and was fired. The employee sued the company and won the right "not to be fun at work" (Pannett, 2022, internal quotation omitted).

information from previous encounters of similar types. By using heuristics, a person can alleviate the mental burden of having to deliberate between possible actions and their outcomes.

The boundary between these two theories is often blurred in real life. A person may act deliberately and heuristically simultaneously depending on the situation she is in and what norms are in effect. Furthermore, Dennis Chong (2000) argues that even though the heuristic model is compelling, it fails to completely explain why people act against their own self-interest when abiding by a norm. He suggests that while norms often “develop without respect to self-interest” and work to “motivate actions that ignore costs and benefits,” at least some of a person’s behavior can be “accounted for in rational choice terms” (p. 4).²³

In the rational choice view, the decision to act according to a given norm does not operate “in the same way that we make purchases in a store” and it is therefore disingenuous to state that a person will consider the normative behavior’s pros and cons before acting. Instead, what makes normative behavior rational, or deliberational, to use Bicchieri’s term, is that we try to “identify and follow our interests within our limitations of experience” and act accordingly (Chong, 2000, p. 4). Instead of determining whether following a norm (or violating it) will result in a reward (or punishment), people use existing information about their life, their community, and their interests and make decisions based on that information.

For Chong (2000), people often appear to go against their self-interest when abiding by a social norm because we rely on cognitive shortcuts. Human brains are designed to use shortcuts because the burden of approaching each new situation and person as brand new is substantial. We

²³ In his book, *Rational Lives*, Chong calls the deliberational route the economic model and the heuristic route the sociological model. I have opted to follow Bicchieri’s naming convention because it describes a person’s decision-making processes in clearer terms.

use our previous experiences to interpret and determine how to behave in whatever situation in which we find ourselves. For example, when entering a new restaurant, it is common to scan the environment to see whether there is a hostess, if we need to seat ourselves, or if it is cafeteria style. We then use our knowledge of these restaurant types to determine what to do in order to receive our meal.

Norms are embedded within these past experiences because a vast majority of social norms are learned through experience growing up in a community. As children become adults, they are exposed to different situations and are guided through them by parents, teachers, mentors, or friends. These norms, like the norm of fairness, are taught through everyday encounters. For example, when a person, usually a child, encounters a situation where they would rather keep something to themselves (e.g., a toy) yet are asked to share with another person, she is usually told that sharing is the “fair” thing to do. The first child had their turn with the toy, and now it is time for the other child to have their turn. The norm of fairness, and the method by which the child learns this norm, are learned through interaction with others. As a child is exposed to more situations, she is taught more social norms, which become guidelines for future behavior in situations of similar types.

All societies have their own social norms, though democracies are particularly reliant on the pro-social behavior that norms engender. Democracy is a fundamentally cooperative form of government wherein people must work together to solve collective problems. Even in its most minimal form, democracy places heavy expectations on the public by asking them to routinely register their preferences for political representatives and policies. Although research has shown that people often rely on heuristics to make political decisions (for a review, *see*: Steenbergen & Colombo, 2018), Bicchieri’s (2006) work shows that even this approach requires a certain

understanding of what is socially permitted because heuristics, whether they are social or political, are the result of “social learning” (Sunstein, 2005, p. 9).

While closely related to social norms, democratic norms offer guidelines for how a person should behave *as a member of a democracy*. Since the basis of democracy is rule by *the people* (however defined), there must be some level of acceptance of democratic principles. The people that make up a democratic form of government must, *at minimum*, accept that democracy is worthwhile and, by extension, the principles and behaviors that underlie self-rule. As a result, democratic norms bridge the gap between the constitutional and legal rules that provide the structure of democracy and social norms which provide guidelines for interpersonal behavior. This often means that democratic norms are more challenging to teach because they require individuals to consider people and institutions with whom they may have limited connection and with whom they may disagree strongly.

For example, how does one teach their child that an outgoing president should attend an incoming president’s inauguration (norm of respect) – especially if that norm has not yet been broken? This norm has little to do with a person’s daily routine. If the outgoing president skips an incoming president’s inauguration, it makes no difference to the person who is simply trying to earn enough money to feed their family. Yet, for democracy, this norm may mean a great deal because, as Bicchieri (2006) notes, people often approach situations heuristically, relying on cues about how to behave in a given situation. Thus, while the outgoing president’s behavior may not directly affect an individual’s life, it does add to a person’s heuristic database of behavior that they may refer to when approaching situations where the norm of respect would apply in their personal life.

The choice to emulate the former president need not be and will most likely not be a conscious one. Instead, as the norm of respect is broken by elites and citizens, it is transformed into a new norm of *disrespect*. Due to the inherently social nature of norms (I do not need to worry about being fair if I am the only person around), a person is likely to follow a norm because she believes that 1) most others would conform in the current situation, 2) she believes that others think she should conform in this situation, or 3) she believes that if she does not conform, others will respond with punishment (Bicchieri, 2006).²⁴ If the norm of respect is continually broken, ignored in a public way, like a former president not attending a new president's inaugural, or it is egregiously violated, an individual would have no reason to believe that any of the three conditions apply and would have a little motivation to abide by the norm. In this way, the disrespect shown by a president who chooses not to attend her successor's inauguration may be carried through into a citizen's personal life with deleterious effect. This, ultimately, can lead to democratic backsliding because norms, once broken, are difficult to reestablish (Reich, 2018).

Social and democratic norms are reliant on the connections that people make with one another and the communities that form as both types of norms depend on the three conditions listed above. Norms require that people not only know the norm exists, but are also willing to abide by it, and believe that others will abide by it as well. Furthermore, since human brains are designed to conserve energy, the experiences we have add to a heuristic database of norms that we often follow automatically.

²⁴ "Most others" is not a strict majority nor is it a true numerical guideline. Instead, the individual simply has to *believe* that "most" others know the norm exists, would follow the norm in their place, and care enough about the norm to sanction someone who does not conform to it. The critical mass of "most" is different for each person as it is based on how many people she believes value and adopt the norm.

Modern technology has the potential to connect people across social, political, and economic divides, yet frequently exacerbates these differences instead. Individual and structural decisions often insulate people from one another which increases *us versus them* thinking and undermines community formation. Existing research has argued that declining community involvement and eroding norms significantly contribute to democratic backsliding (Barber, 1984; Bicchieri, 2006; Etzioni, 1997; Greene, 2014; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2019; Mettler & Lieberman, 2020; Putnam, 2000; Sandel, 1996). However, most of this research was either written before the internet and social media or paid little attention to technology's influence on community and norm formation.

In the following chapter, I will discuss how technological advancements have impacted every aspect of community development and norm creation and adoption. This not only makes it more difficult for us to learn how to be members of a community, but also how to be citizens in a democracy.

Appendix B Obligations & Responsibilities

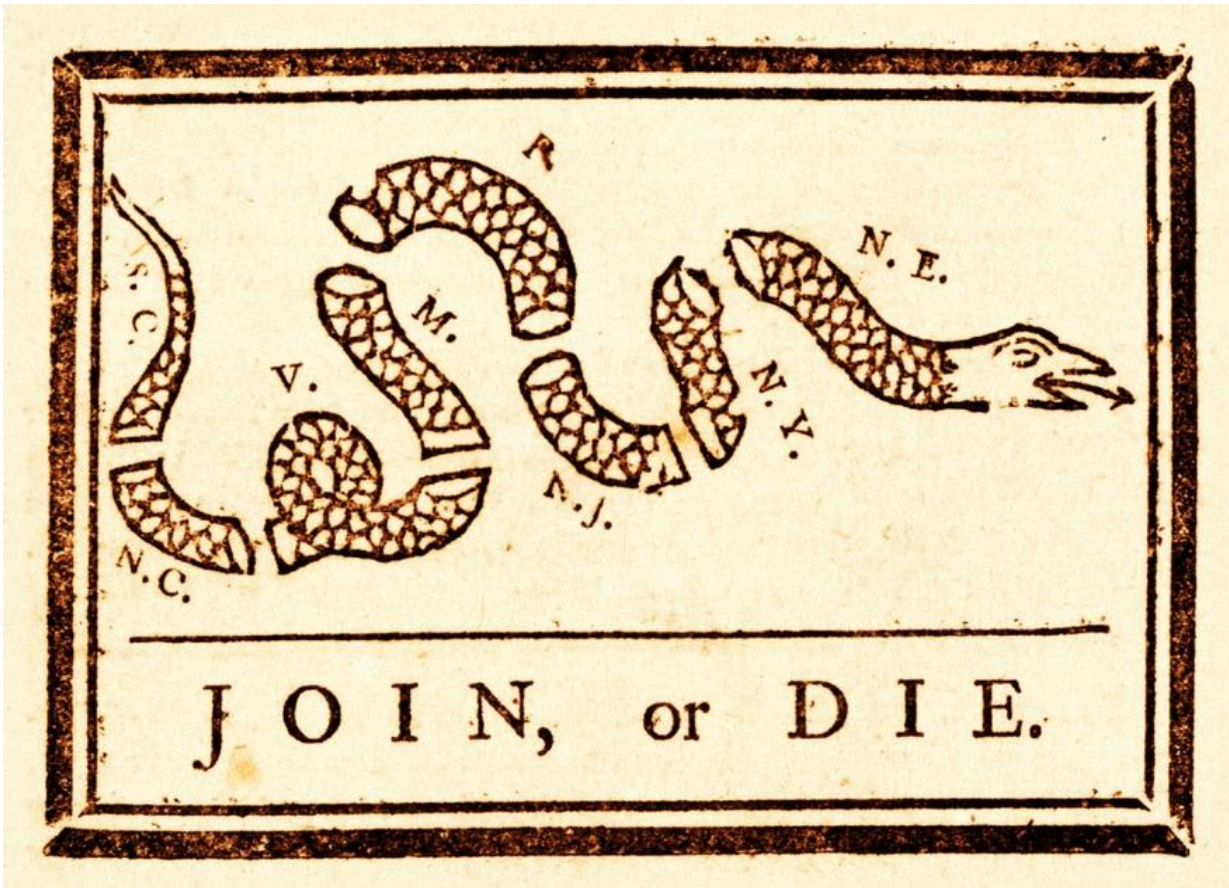


Figure B.1: Join, or die

Note: Figure B.1 shows an image of a snake broken up into eight pieces and labeled for the eight British colonies (S.C., N.C., V., M., P., N.J., N.Y., N.E.) with the caption: "Join, or die." Benjamin Franklin created the image to argue that if the colonists did not cooperate with one another, they would perish. Cooperation is the very essence of survival as there are many things that individuals cannot do alone. Hugh Heclo (2011) argues that humans are one of the few species that requires assistance to birth their young. As a result, humans only exist because they cooperate.

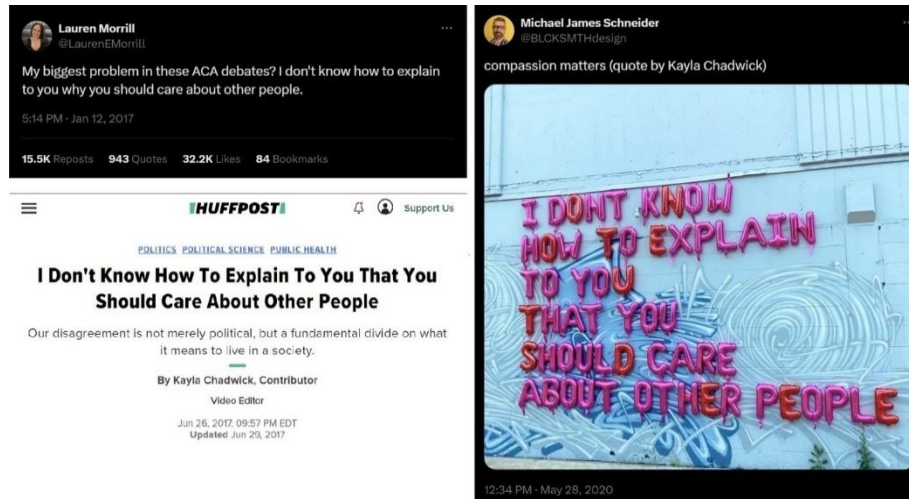


Figure B.2: I don't know how to explain to you that you should care about other people

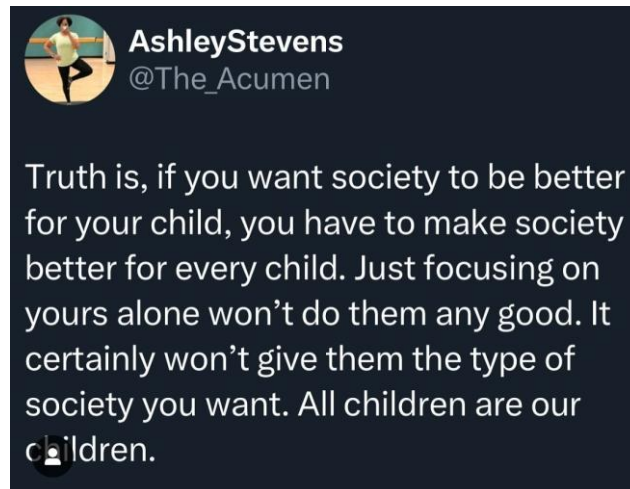


Figure B.3: All children are our children

Note: Figure B.2 includes three images that were popularized during the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and COVID-19 mask mandate debates. Lauren Morrill tweeted on January 12, 2017, that she did not know how to explain to people that they should care about others amid debates about whether the ACA should be implemented. The tweet was picked up and used by the Huffington Post as a headline during the same period. It was later tweeted by Michael James Schneider during the COVID-19 pandemic as the nation grappled with mask mandates. Democracies are particularly reliant on the affective attachment one has towards others. The problem is how we, as members of a democracy, learn to extend our circle of care beyond our immediate family, friends, and close acquaintances to include other members of our political community.

Figure B.3 reflects a similar sentiment. If we want to improve society for the people whom we care most about, we have to make it better for everyone. For example, Finland does not allow people to pay for schooling. “Everyone from six to 18, whether in a state-run or independently-run school is entitled to it free of charge” (Guyoncourt, 2023, para. 4). If people with more resources want to improve schools for their children, they must, in effect, improve schools for all children as they are prohibited from sending their children to pay-for-service schools (e.g., private schools in the U.S.).



Figure B.4: Libraries as the last uncommercialized space

Note: *Figure B.4* shows a tweet that went viral and was featured in multiple outlets including The Scottish Sun, The Poke, and Upworthy. Libraries are the only public places where an individual can relax indoors without the expectation of spending money.

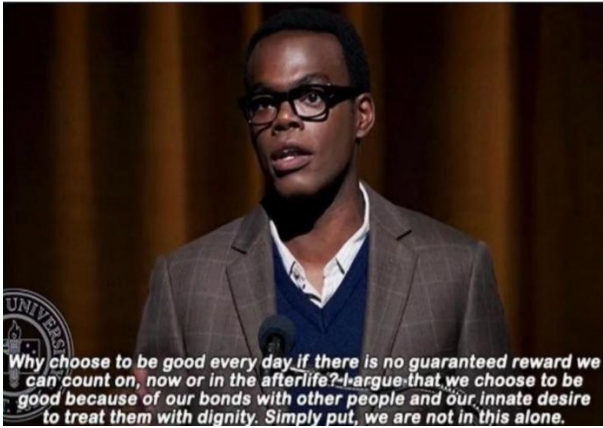


Figure B.5: We are not in this alone



Figure B.6: I owe everybody all the time

Note: Figure B.5 is a screenshot from the show *The Good Place*, written by Michael Shur. *The Good Place* was inspired by Joshua Greene’s (2014) *Moral Tribes*. The image is of actor William Jackson Harper, who plays a professor of ethics and moral philosophy named Chidi Anagonye in the show. In the scene, Harper’s character, Chidi, is giving a lecture on why people choose to be good when there is no guarantee of a reward. He argues that we choose to treat people with dignity because we are not in this alone.

Figure B.6 is a tweet that reinforces the idea that social life needs to be learned. People can be compassionate and moral when the connections between them are strengthened. Both images reflect the idea that we form and are formed by our affective attachments towards others.

3 It's Not the Size of the Screen that Matters



Figure 3: Screen sizes

Technology has advanced exponentially in the last 40 years. From on-demand television to the internet to social media and artificial intelligence, we use technology for work, to stay in touch, to find love, and to relax. Nearly every aspect of modern life has not only changed because of technology, but also, in many cases, has become entirely reliant on it.²⁵ It is both everywhere and nowhere. The communities that form via technology are not rooted in place yet are pervasive. Where people were once limited by geography and time, smart phones, tablets, and laptops allow us to connect to our social networks at anytime, anywhere we might be.²⁶

²⁵ For example, in July 2024, cyber security firm CrowdStrike updated its software and caused widespread outages for computers running the Microsoft Windows operating system. Planes were grounded, banks shut down, and emergency service lines (911) were inoperable in several states while both CrowdStrike and Microsoft tried to secure a fix. The outages were not limited to the United States as both are global companies (Ray & Brewster, 2024).

²⁶ We have grown so reliant on technology that there are now video games and applications that encourage users to stop using technology to gain rewards. For example, players in the video game *Spirit City: LoFi Sessions* have their avatars sit in various locations while doing tasks, like writing, reading, or knitting. The longer the person remains in the location and the video game is left untouched the more in-game rewards they receive (Mooncube Games, 2024).

Although technology is ubiquitous, usage patterns vary across mediums and platforms as well as within and between generations often making it difficult to establish a link between technology and its effects. People vary in how they connect – whether it is through text messages, which require an active cellular line, or chat apps, which require an active internet connection – as well as the sites they use, including social networking sites like Facebook and Snapchat to websites with social features like YouTube or Stack Overflow.²⁷ As a result, technology “provides a very incomplete record of human behavior” because there is no universal platform nor is there any content that is universally consumed (Bail, 2022, p. 7).

On YouTube, for example, videos range from fathers teaching basic household skills, to women teaching self-defense tactics, to people trying to prove the earth is flat, to obscure tournaments like the plumbing or forklift championships. While 83% of people report using YouTube, there may be little overlap in content between users (Gottfried, 2024). On other more socially oriented websites, like Facebook or Snapchat, users can choose to selectively share aspects of their lives or create entirely fictitious personas which not only limits the conclusions

The *Forest* app by Seekrtech operates on a similar premise. In *Forest*, users set a timer to grow various types of trees and earn in-game rewards. If the user navigates away from the app, the tree dies. Users can purchase new tree species using in-game coins and plant trees with other users (Seekrtech, 2024). Some apps have taken this a step further. The recently released *Touch Grass* app will lock a person’s access to their phone’s apps until they literally go outside and touch grass (Kentish, 2025). There is a certain irony in relying on technology to keep us from using our technology, but it reflects how deeply intertwined it is with our lives. See: *Figure C.1* in Appendix C is a comic capturing the dichotomy between being online and being outside.

²⁷ Technology is a catch-all term for everything ranging from mechanical clocks to artificial intelligence. Digital technologies include cell phones, laptops, tablets, video game consoles among other things. Social media is meant to connect friends or acquaintances with each other and emphasize social interactions. This includes sites like Facebook and Twitter as well as Snapchat and Instagram. There are also sites with social functions like Reddit, Stack Overflow, YouTube, and yCombinator. These sites allow users to comment and chat with one another, but the social functions are secondary. In addition, there are chat apps that help people connect with one another privately. Chat apps include Discord, Whatsapp, Facebook messenger, and text messaging.

researchers can draw when studying digital technologies but also changes how we view others and ourselves.

3.1 A matter of moderators

Nathan Schnieder (2024) cautions that individual level choices are only one part of technology's impact on social and political life. Schneider argues that early hardware limitations have persisted over time despite no longer being necessary and, as a result, the internet is more feudal than democratic in its design.²⁸ He suggests that as people become more reliant on technology, its feudal structure will likely cause democratic backsliding because it is harder to connect the arbitrary rules under which the internet is governed to the democratic systems within which a person may live.

According to Schneider, most technology is run by “benevolent dictators” who have the final say about what occurs in the space (p. 36).²⁹ Schneider uses Python, a programming language, as one example. Python is enormously popular and is used worldwide in government, academia, arts, and business, yet for nearly three decades any changes to the language were at the sole discretion of its creator, Guido van Rossum. van Rossum decided what trajectory the language would take and what fixes or improvements were made even though numerous industries relied (and still rely) on Python for their everyday operations.

Early in his reign, van Rossum created the Python Enhancement Project (PEP) that allowed users to propose, debate, and vote on what enhancements they would like to see incorporated into the next stable build, which helped him, as benevolent dictator, remain

²⁸ See Chapter 2.2 for a discussion of how hardware limitations have led to a more feudal internet.

²⁹ The feudal structure can be seen on websites, in programming languages, operating systems, social media, and chat applications. Nearly every part of technology, from design to deployment to use is feudalistic in its design.

responsive to the people his language served. When van Rossum “abruptly resigned” in 2018, the PEP “helped fill the power vacuum” left by his departure and helped the community establish a more democratic governance structure (a steering committee comprised of five elected members) that developers “perceived as both familiar and legitimate” (p. 36). The PEP helped move Python away from implicit feudalism towards an implicitly democratic governance structure that makes it easier for users to relate their online lives to their offline ones. Technology impacts our brain’s structure at a fundamental level, as I will discuss in greater detail below. However, the more we interact with feudalistic systems, the more we adopt their norms which can lead to democratic backsliding as they are often more authoritarian in nature, like accepting unilateral decisions by the president because we are used to moderators wielding unilateral power online.

Not all tech owners are as community-minded van Rossum was. In 2022, when Elon Musk purchased Twitter (X), users noticed that he would delete or ban accounts that made jokes at his expense or expressed ideas with which he disagreed, including accounts belonging to journalists and politicians (Shapero, 2022). As Twitter’s owner, Musk has the final say not only about who can use his platform, but also over much of the site’s content by adjusting the algorithms upon which it operates.³⁰ Twitter users are subject to the arbitrary rules by which the platform is governed. Users are aware that if they challenge their dictators’ rules, they risk exile from the community. As I will discuss in greater detail below, this makes it more difficult for people to recognize the power they have against tyrannical forces. As a result, Schneider argues

³⁰ For example, mis- and disinformation are common on social media platforms. Twitter instituted *community notes* where users could add clarifying context to someone’s posts. In 2025, Musk tweeted that he would change how community notes operated because, he claimed “without evidence” that the feature was being “gamed by governments & legacy media” (Quiroz-Gutierrez, 2025, paras. 1, 4). By changing how community notes operate, Musk can effectively control what information is seen as legitimate.

that websites and apps are oftentimes still feudal even if they do not have either benevolent or malevolent dictators as active in the community as either van Rossum or Musk.

Most websites give either moderators or group owners unchecked power over a space's rules, membership, and content. For example, Reddit is a popular website that hosts thousands of forums, known as subreddits, dedicated to various interests. Reddit users can join a multitude of subreddits and interact with and learn from people around the world. Reddit itself has a code of conduct that governs the website as a whole, but individual subreddits are usually run by teams of volunteer moderators that have both curatorial power over content and can suspend or ban members at will.³¹ Schneider (2024) argues the internet's feudal structure, with a tech company or mogul at the top followed by a team of moderators or administrators and a general user base, is a holdover from an earlier time in the internet's history that now poses a threat to democracy.³² The problem is that users within these spaces have no say in the community's rules nor do they have much recourse if they are suspended or banned from the community or website.

According to Schneider, users have “affective voice without effective voice” because they can oust their leaders if they make enough noise but have “none of the precision or specificity that stakeholders with actual power expect of each other” (p. 36-37). The only real power that community members retain is the power to leave the community entirely. According to Schneider, democratic backsliding is almost inevitable because online spaces have conditioned “users into a willingness to accept the exit logic...of their online fiefdoms without the effective

³¹ Non-social websites like Wikipedia also employ this method of governance. Within groups of volunteers, one or more people may be assigned an editor role which has more control over the site than regular volunteers. The site also has an Arbitration Committee (ArbCom) that mediates disputes among editors and has the final say in what is allowed on Wikipedia. ArbCom members are elected by the Wikipedia community, similar to Python's structure after van Rossum stepped down.

³² Refer to Chapter 2.2 for how the internet's early structure has been carried through to its modern iteration.

voice of democratic participation” (p. 37). That is, we are prepared to view those in control as inherently deserving of the power they wield because that is how most online spaces are designed.

For example, even when connecting through chat programs like Discord, Slack, and Microsoft Teams, or group chats using a person’s cell phone number, users are subject to technology’s implicit feudalism. One person creates the group, invites others to join, and, unless the administrator chooses to share moderating privileges, the power to decide membership, rules, and content rests with the person who created the group. Schneider (2024) argues that this changes how we think about our relationships with others and the government because it takes power from the public and vests it in a select few. Users are subject to the arbitrary rules of the space’s owner and risk ostracization or exile if they challenge the dictator’s power.

How the internet is governed also colors how we view our relationships. Using cancel culture as an example, Schneider argues that implicit feudalism has conditioned us to think that cancelling someone (as in boycotting or disassociating from them) is the only way to handle bad behavior. If someone makes offensive comments (i.e., violates the community’s norms) the solution is often to ban, block, or mute them. As I will discuss in greater detail below, these punishments are both more and less severe than if someone were to break similar norms in person. Simple infractions can cause a person to be effectively banished or exiled from the community, which is an extreme response, but since online relationships are easier to form, there is little incentive to change one’s behavior to regain admittance because they can always find another community elsewhere. As a result, more extreme punishments are used for smaller transgressions, but the moral force that has traditionally underpinned them is lacking.

In his book, *The Persuaders*, Anand Giridharadas (2023) argues that when Russian intelligence began operating bot farms to spread mis- and disinformation within the United States, it was able to exploit “the culture of the write-off” to which Americans had become accustomed (p. 4). Russian agents would spend full days managing multiple social media profiles that, while giving the appearance of being operated by real people, were designed to stoke the existing belief “that the basic activity of democratic life, the changing of minds, had become futile work” (p. 7). By exploiting the feudal nature of the internet, where cancelling someone was easier than persuading them, Russian bot farms were able to convince millions of Americans that compromise – the very heart of democracy – was not possible for people who were different than *us*.³³

Giridharadas argues that Russian “trolls covered and amplified a range of ideological topics” extending from local journalism to American race relations in their attempts to sow division among the public. Many of these accounts became top users on popular social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, with millions of Americans liking, retweeting, or commenting on their posts. Some of the posts actively spread mis- and disinformation, however, Giridharadas argues that most used rumor and innuendo to link political and non-political ideas together to encourage tribalistic thinking. For example, one bot tweeted, “What a time to be alive! Glitter armpits is a thing now. Congratulations. #FeminismIsAwful” which “didn’t rebut any feminist contention” but did foster the belief that “these people” are not like us and “are not to be trusted”

³³ Giridharadas (2023) explains that the goal of Russian bot farms had less to do with achieving specific policy or electoral goals – although they did prefer and help Trump win in 2016 – and more to do with stoking divisions among the public. The goal was to make Americans distrust one another by emphasizing existing areas of discord. Russian assets would often post content using different accounts, one for liberal talking points and one for conservative ones, that used a similar tone for different purposes. That is, to turn those with whom we disagree into a *them* as distinct from *us*.

(p. 12).³⁴ Russian bot farms also spread “hostile political rumors” on sites like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit (Petersen et al., 2018, p. 43). Millions of Americans were persuaded by the false content and often spread it within their own social networks.

Michael Bang Petersen, Mathias Osmundsen, and Kevin Arceneaux (2018) argue that, in some cases, hostile political content “operate[s] via partisan logic in which partisans seek to aid their party against mainstream opponents.” However, there is also a significant portion that “share hostile political rumors as a way to unleash chaos and mobilize individuals against the established order” as a way undermine democracy in general. These people, those who have a “need for chaos,” have no interest in persuasion or compromise and are instead motivated by a need to secure “the respect they feel they personally deserve” that is missing in their social and political lives (p. 43).

In their study, Steve Rathje and his co-authors (2023) found that most people “lack the motivation to be accurate” when sharing information online or engaging in online discussions. It is easier, and oftentimes more rewarding, to share mis- or disinformation online, but when properly motivated through financial compensation, reputation, or social norms, users are willing to resist false information. People could be incentivized to identify mis- and disinformation if “social norms about accuracy” are present within a space. Websites that have social norms that discourage misinformation or that reward users with “reputational benefits” when they share reliable information can mitigate the spread of mis- and disinformation, even when that

³⁴ The tweet is quoted in *The Persuaders*, internal quotations omitted. A common meme format that focuses on differences between generations (e.g., “how kids dress today versus how they dressed when I was a kid”) also encourages people to view others in terms of *us versus them*. In many cases, like the previous example, it is a humorous and innocuous way to highlight how descriptive norms change. Other examples subtly imply that one generation is better than the other making cross-age relationships more difficult. See: *Figure C.2* and *Figure C.3* in Appendix C for examples of both types of meme.

information conflicts with the user's partisan identity (pp. 892, 897). For example, subreddits like r/askhistorians and r/neutralpolitics have strict guidelines about the kind of information that can be posted and moderators within these communities will delete comments that are misleading or partisan in nature.³⁵ Users gain "karma," or reputation points, and awards for providing complete and accurate information to others. The more karma they earn, the more they are respected within these communities.³⁶

3.2 Where has all the good internet gone?

Yet, the structure of the internet makes it exceedingly difficult to find accurate information because large portions of it have been deleted.³⁷ Entire websites, blog posts, news

³⁵ Wikipedia has similar rules, called the Five Pillars, which also include neutrality (Wikipedia contributors, n.d.)

³⁶ In the tech community, Stack Overflow allows users to post a question and receive answers. Community members then vote on the best answer and good answers (and their posters) earn reputation points. The higher the answer or reputation score, the better the answer and the more helpful the developer. Some hiring managers look at developer's Stack Overflow scores during the hiring process to gauge the developer's knowledge and ability to work on a team.

³⁷ History has always been written by the victors and has been subject to curation and manipulation. The danger posed by technology is that it is possible to manipulate, erase, and curate faster and with more ease than ever before. For example, when Donald Trump took office in 2025 and installed the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), entire websites were cleaned of terms which the administration deemed unacceptable, including any mention of transgenderism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), and women's health or rights. The deletion efforts not only erased the terminology from websites, but also any data associated with studying these issues (McFarling et al., 2025; Sarnoff et al., 2025). The Trump administration is not the first to limit data collection on controversial topics. For example, in 1996, the Dickey Amendment limited federal funding for studying gun related deaths as a means to discourage such research (Poitras, 2024). The danger of erasing history and data or putting knowledge behind a paywall is that it affects not only the people's collective memory but also challenges and discredits individual memory. For example, in the 19th and 20th century, both the United States and Canada forcibly removed Indigenous children from their families and communities and put them into residential boarding schools, often run by the Catholic Church, as a means to deal with the "Indian problem." Children were to be "re-educated" by forcing them to assimilate to their colonizer's culture. The school's not only irreparably damaged or destroyed entire Indigenous communities, but the children experienced tremendous abuse while at these schools and were told not to speak about the atrocities they faced – including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as a pattern of infanticide. When former students spoke out about the abuse, they were publicly denounced and accused of lying. Since the governments of both nations denied these schools existed, the former students were publicly discredited. It was only through persistent effort, community solidarity, and action that Indigenous communities received acknowledgement for the suffering they endured. For more information, Canadian filmmaker, and child of a residential school survivor, Julian Brave NoiseCat's documentary *Sugarcane*, follows the investigation into the Canadian residential school system and the long-lasting effect it has had on the Secwépemc Nation (Noisecat & Kassie, 2024). Similarly, the *Finding Cleo* podcast (audio) published by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation tracks one family's attempt to find their missing relative after child welfare workers separated her from her family

stories, and social media accounts have disappeared from the internet and are, presumably, gone forever. According to Pew Research Center (2024), “a quarter of all the webpages that existed...between 2013 and 2023 are no longer accessible” because they were either deleted or removed from “an otherwise functional website” (para. 3). This can happen if a person, company, or government entity fails to pay for domain registration, moves servers, or simply reorganizes their website and fails to update the forwarding links. If a dedicated person or groups of people do not actively try to capture the existing data it can be erased at will (Katz, 2024; Papadopoulos et al., 2020).

Furthermore, if content has not been deleted, it is increasingly being placed behind a paywall.³⁸ Paywalls are most common on news websites, but many blogs, such as those hosted on Medium and Substack, have sought to monetize content by prompting users to subscribe in exchange for access.³⁹ In their study of paywall implementation on news websites, Lesley Chiou and Catherine Tucker (2013) found that once a paywall was implemented, many sites saw a fifty-one percent decline in traffic.⁴⁰ The results indicate that over half of users seeking information

during the *sixties scoop*. The *sixties scoop* is the name given to Canada’s policy to remove Indigenous children from their families during the 1960s. Additionally, DOGE’s existence also highlights how toxic internet culture has impacted US politics. “Doge” started as an internet meme where users would put inner monologue text over an image of a Shiba Inu (the dog belonged to Atsuko Sato and was named Kabosu). The meme quickly spread and was used to mock people, events, or policies that someone thought were dumb or unnecessary. *Doge* was later used to mock Bitcoin, a cryptocurrency, when one user introduced *Dogecoin* as an alternative. In 2024, when then-candidate Trump said he would give Elon Musk an advisory role in the government, Dogecoin’s creator tweeted, “Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE).” The tweet was widely retweeted and shared by users and by Elon Musk until it became a reality after the election. See: *Figure C.4*, *Figure C.5*, and *Figure C.6* in Appendix C for examples of the Doge meme has been used in and out of politics.

³⁸ Internet users have expressed their frustration over paywalled content online. See: *Figure C.7* and *Figure C.8* in Appendix C for examples.

³⁹ Substack, Patreon, and Gumroad are all similarly pay-for-access websites and are gaining in popularity.

⁴⁰ Newspapers have long struggled with monetizing their content and have traditionally relied on an ad-supported model wherein the newspaper sold advertisement space to businesses in exchange for the *eyes* of its subscribers. The higher the newspaper’s circulation rate, the more *eyes* businesses had access to, and the more the newspaper could charge for advertisements. The money generated through advertisements was then used to pay journalists and print

from news websites would rather opt-out of viewing the information entirely rather than pay for it, making it difficult to create cross-identity coalitions as structural and systemic oppression mean that some communities lack access to paywalled information. People with access are unlikely to know the problems facing those who do not, and those without resources do not have access to the information available to those that do.⁴¹ This is a problem for democratic societies because, as Benjamin R. Barber (1984) argues, democratic communities are “inevitably obliged” to be “shaped by the past” so that they can create stable “foundation[s] for [their] futures,” which is next to impossible without accurate information (p. 195).

In the now paywalled article, *Democracy Dies Behind Paywalls*, Richard Stengel (2024) argues that “paywalls create a two-tiered system: credible, fact-based information for people who are willing to pay for it, and murkier, less-reliable information for everyone else” (para. 5). Stengel states that because most people are not willing to pay for news, they are more likely to turn to less reliable sources for their information, like unverified social media posts or questionable websites, to stay informed.⁴² Kat Williams and Scott R. Stroud (2021) suggest paywalls are especially problematic because the already disadvantaged are unlikely to have the resources available to pay for content behind a paywall. This disenfranchises the already

newspapers. However, online newspapers and businesses quickly realized that technology allowed users to block and skip ads by using third party software and the ad-supported model quickly collapsed.

⁴¹ Websites are incentivized to create content that they believe will be liked and shared (and therefore can be monetized). If a group or community do not have access to the website, they cannot engage with the content, and the website has no incentive to cover issues faced by those who lack access. I will discuss how content is incentivized in the following paragraphs.

⁴² For example, after Donald Trump announced sweeping tariffs on April 2, 2025, the United States stock market plummeted. The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell over 1,000 points and conservative estimates suggest that the announcement erased \$6.6 trillion in value. On April 7, 2025, an unverified account posted that Trump was considering a 90-day pause on the tariffs causing the market to partially rebound as the tweet gained traction (Gold & Stelter, 2025). As more people turn to unreliable news sources, like Twitter, the more mis- and disinformation can spread causing significant real-world changes.

underrepresented, leaves them “stuck with unreliable news” as their only option, and, in turn, often leads to greater polarization and extremism when coupled with personalized algorithms (para. 7).⁴³

⁴³ Tech companies, like Meta, Alphabet, and Twitter have immense curatorial power over what content an individual sees. In *The Filter Bubble*, Eli Pariser (2012) describes how social media companies use algorithms to decide what posts appear on a person’s feed. Facebook curates users feeds using three factors: affinity, importance, and time. First, users will see posts from people with whom they interact with the most, next the type of content matters for what is shown (e.g., relationships are “weighted very highly” because “everybody likes to know who’s dating whom”), and then content is sorted by time, with more recent posts being prioritized over older ones (p. 38). Pariser argues that the danger with how algorithms work is not necessarily because they filter and sort content, but rather because they operate invisibly. Most users are not aware of the way that websites and apps manipulate their feed so that some content is given preference over others. For example, during the 2010 midterm elections, Facebook conducted a political mobilization experiment by sorting users into one of two treatment groups. Sixty-one million users were “randomly assigned to a ‘social message’ group, an ‘informational message’ group or a control group” when logging into the platform. Users in the social message group saw a banner at the top of their feeds that included a link to find their polling place and a “counter showing how many other Facebook users had reported voting,” which included “six small randomly selected ‘profile pictures’ of the user’s Facebook friends who had already clicked the I voted button.” Users in the information group received the same message but it did not include the photos of the user’s friends. The control group received no message at the top of their feeds. According to the results, Facebook estimates that the “social message increased turnout directly by about 60,000 voters and indirectly through social contagion by another 280,000 voters” or, conservatively, “0.14% of the voting age population” (Bond et al., 2017, pp. 295, 297). For context, the closest race in 2010 was between Republican candidate Mark Kirk and Democratic candidate Alexi Giannoulias in Illinois. Kirk beat Giannoulias, and thus flipping the seat, by 59,220 votes. Facebook’s decision to experiment with “get out the vote (GOTV)” drives may be out of civic mindedness; however, it is the fact that the platform can manipulate users without their knowledge that is problematic for democracy. Although Facebook states that participants were randomly assigned to one of the treatment or control groups, there is no way to ensure that this is the case for future experiments Facebook decides to conduct. That is, based on a person’s post history Facebook can choose to show a GOTV message to certain users, by, for example, showing the message to only Republicans or Democrats or to only people active about certain issues, like gun ownership or LGBTQ+ rights. Since algorithms operate invisibly, both users and the public would have little way of knowing whether they were being targeted for a particular purpose or not. Facebook has already demonstrated that it has both the ability and willingness to monitor user content. In a later study on emotional transference, Facebook relied on data from approximately 155,000 users who, by agreeing to Facebook’s end user license agreement (EULA) when they signed up for the service, also agreed to participate in social experiments conducted via its website. Facebook actively monitored the users posts for certain emotionally charged words and then adjusted what content the person saw during a one-week period. By adjusting the content a person saw – whether it was positive or negative – and monitoring what they posted, Facebook determined that “when positive posts were reduced in the News Feed, the percentage of positive words in people’s status updates decreased.” Similarly, when negative content was prevalent on a person’s feed, the “percentage of words that were negative” in a person’s updates increased. This indicates that the type of content a person views online has a profound impact on their mental and emotional well-being because “the emotions expressed by friends, via online social networks, influence our own moods” (Kramer et al., 2014, p. 8789). Although these findings are compelling, the important aspect of this research has less to do with the transference of “emotional contagion” in one’s feed and more to do with the unchecked power that Facebook has to not only change what content an individual sees, but also to monitor what they post, and to do so without the user knowing about it (p. 8788). After this study was published, reporters and users were rightfully outraged that Facebook willingly manipulated them into feeling certain emotions. Editors of the Proceedings of the National

According to Eli Pariser (2012), personalized algorithms operate in the background to “create a unique universe of information for each of us,” reflecting our own views and interests back to us. He argues that these algorithms “play to the most compulsive parts of ourselves” because we often click on content that we do not think is “that important” simply out of our own morbid curiosity, boredom, or to satisfy our need for voyeurism (p. 9, 137).⁴⁴ The problem is that once we click on this kind of content, personalized algorithms are designed to show us similar content in the future.⁴⁵ Not only does this result in more homogenous communities, Pariser states that “compulsive media” – or media designed specifically to get you to click on more things⁴⁶ – also creates a vicious circle where “your identity shapes your media, and your media then shapes what you believe and what you care about” (p. 125).⁴⁷ While this is relatively harmless if the content you click on reflects who you are as a person, it can become dangerous “if your identity is misrepresented” and your online persona starts to reflect a distorted version of who you really are (p. 177).

Academy of Sciences of the United States (PNAS) issued a statement questioning the ethics of the report. The outrage over Facebook’s hidden experiments did little to prevent companies from running similar experiments on different platforms. In 2025, Reddit, a popular forum website, ran “secret experiment on Reddit users to see if they could change their mind.” Researchers used over a dozen A.I. operated bots to try and change people’s minds about contentious topics on the r/changemyview subreddit, which has approximately four million members. By using awards and comments indicating that a person changed their minds, the findings suggest “that the A.I. responses were between three and six times more persuasive than those made by humans” (B. Turner, 2025, para. 6).

⁴⁴ The traditional media corollary would be standing in the checkout line at a grocery store and thumbing through the National Enquirer to pass the time. Most people are not actually interested in the magazine’s content but will look through it out of curiosity. Reality television also plays to the compulsive parts of ourselves, often showing us the worst of humanity. Some people watch reality television for its entertainment value while others watch reality television like it is a trainwreck – both terrible and compelling (Suarez, 2022).

⁴⁵ Content is also determined by a person’s proximity to others. Most cell phones, tablets, and other digital devices default to collecting location data in the background, oftentimes without the user’s knowledge. When I hang out with my friends, our phones exchange this information – as well as our individual content preferences – so that I will also see content that my friends view. Tech worker Robert G. Reeve posted an excellent thread explaining how our devices collect a plethora of information about us and use it to modify what content we see (Santora, 2021).

⁴⁶ More clicks mean more time spent on a website and more revenue for its owners.

⁴⁷ See: Sections 2.2 and 2.3 for a detailed discussion of the dangers associated with homogenous communities. Homogeneity encourages people to view others in terms of *us versus them*, which not only depresses democratic involvement, but also discourages norms like compromise and tolerance.

For example, Andrew Marantz (2020) and Joan Donovan, Emily Dreyfuss, and Brian Friedberg (2022) found that many ordinary people were radicalized online because as people clicked on content that they found objectionable – either out of boredom or curiosity – the more the algorithm showed that kind of content. In his study of the Alt-Right, Marantz (2020) found that while some people were committed white nationalists, many were disillusioned with their personal lives and sought friendship online, and others descended into extremism due to a “gradual shift in [their] mental vocabulary” (p. 325). A person may have recoiled when first exposed to hateful content online, yet as the algorithm showed them similar content, the ideas became more acceptable overtime.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ People who study legislative politics will know this as the expansion of the Overton window. Joseph Overton argued that an idea is only politically viable if it falls within a certain range of acceptability. However, the problem is that the more content is repeated (e.g., through a meme) and the more exposure a person has to it, the more acceptable it becomes. Slowly, overtime, the Overton window expands, and once unthinkable ideas become acceptable. *See: Figure C.9* in Appendix C for a visualization of the Overton window. A good example of the expanding Overton window is Elon Musk’s use of the Nazi salute during the 2025 Presidential Inauguration. A gesture once considered unthinkable after the fall of the Third Reich has gained a type of popularity online as content creators have protested what they consider an unwarranted restriction of their free speech. For example, in 2018 Scottish resident and YouTuber Mark Meechan (who uses the pseudonym Count Dankula) taught his girlfriend’s pug, Buddha, to raise its paw to the command “Sieg Heil” and later “gas the Jews.” Meechan said he did it to annoy his girlfriend and meant no disrespect or hate. He was fined for posting a hate crime but argued that his case set a “really dangerous precedent” by restricting his free speech because the state was ignoring the larger context of the “joke.” That is, Meechan argued, the “juxtaposition of having an adorable animal reacting to something vulgar” (BBC News, 2018, para. 14). Tellingly, however, Meechan was defended in court by far-right extremist, Tommy Robinson. Meechan’s arrest did set a dangerous precedent, but not in the manner he suggests. Instead, Meechan’s use of the Nazi salute injected ambiguity around whether and when people should or should not be able to use the salute (or other hateful speech) without facing punishment. This ambiguity is evident in Musk’s use at the Inaugural where many either defended the salute outright or failed to call it by its name: A Nazi salute [e.g., The Associated Press called it a “straight-arm gesture” (Condon, 2025, para. 1), the Anti-Defamation League called it an “awkward gesture” (Walker, 2025, para. 1), Musk’s confidant, Andrea Stroppa, said the salute was the awkward result of Musk’s autism (Wright, 2025)]. The salute has since gained traction with former Presidential advisor and far-right extremist, Steve Bannon, later using the salute at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), though again, The Independent called it “a fast flash of a stiff arm” rather than a Nazi salute (Papenfuss, 2025, para. 4), and a priest, Calvin Robinson, used it at the National Pro-Life Summit. While Musk and Bannon retain their positions in society, the priest was defrocked. Robinson has since posted online that it was an attempt at “dry wit” and humor mocking “hysterical” liberals for calling Musk a Nazi after he saluted at the Inaugural (Dunbar, 2025, para. 7). Allowing for any ambiguity surrounding the Nazi salute’s use allows for more people to use it without facing social sanctions. In doing so, the Overton window expands and, eventually, the full use of the salute without ambiguity will be commonplace and unremarkable. As discussed in Chapter 2.3, norms breakdown when people do not know whether it applies and when sanctions are inconsistently applied.

Donovan et al. (2022) use Dylann Storm Roof, a 21-year old white man who murdered nine African-Americans at a church in 2015 as an example. The authors state Roof became radicalized online after Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old Black man, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman in 2012.⁴⁹ Roof explained that he went online to learn more about the incident and was unable to find information that “convincingly explain[ed] why George Zimmerman had done anything wrong” (p. 50).⁵⁰ As Roof continued to search for a reason that made sense to him, he was consistently shown websites and content that appeared reputable, yet were modern incarnations of white nationalist groups commonly found in the U.S. South during the 1950s and 1960s.⁵¹ The more Roof viewed content from these websites, the more the algorithm showed him extremist content, and the more extreme his beliefs became.⁵²

Although some people are “pushed and pulled towards increasingly radical positions” online, Chris Bail (2022) found that “most Americans are not as extreme as social media would have us believe” (p. 73). Bail argues that social media contributes to “false polarization,” or the

⁴⁹ Donovan et al. (2022) cite Roof’s online posts where explains how he wanted to become more informed about current events and ultimately became radicalized online.

⁵⁰ Roof’s inability to find information that convincingly explained why George Zimmerman’s actions were wrong can partially be explained by confirmation bias. People naturally seek out and consume information that confirms their existing beliefs. Roof most likely had either conscious or unconscious beliefs about Zimmerman’s innocence (or Martin’s guilt) and ignored any information that conflicted with that belief. Bail’s (2022) study also showed that when people are confronted with information that conflicts with their existing beliefs they rarely self-reflect on their biases. Instead, people become even more committed to their positions as they view conflicting information as an attack on their identity. However, personalized algorithms exacerbate the problem as they learn from people’s clicks and movements what information the person prefers and consistently feeds them more extreme information in return.

⁵¹ For example, the Council of Conservative Citizens, the website which led Roof down the “rabbit hole” (Donovan et al., 2022, p. 49).

⁵² In using Roof’s story, neither the authors nor I am suggesting that he was not culpable or responsible for his actions. Rather, it is to illustrate how it is easy to become radicalized online when, as Pariser (2012) argues, many people do not know that personalized algorithms exist nor how they work. Offline, traditional hate groups were limited by time and geography thus making it difficult for them to expand their ranks as the pool of individuals from which they could draw was much smaller. Online, no such limitations exist and, for better or worse, Pariser, Marantz, and Donovan et al. suggest it is up to users to be vigilant against extremism.

“tendency for people to overestimate the amount of ideological differences between themselves” and others because we often believe people are committed to their positions more than they actually are. As a result, people who rely on social media for connection and information often “perceive significantly more political disagreement in their daily lives than those who do not” (p. 75). This is partially because moderates are discouraged from sharing their views online.

According to Bail (2022), moderates often believe that “posting online about politics simply carries more risk than it’s worth” because when they do, they are often attacked by people on both sides of the aisle. People who share similar views, but are more ideologically extreme, believe that the moderate poster does not care enough about the issue, while those who disagree with the moderate attack them for holding different views than themselves. By carefully curating their feeds, moderates can avoid seeing or talking about politics entirely which, Bail argues, distorts our understanding of others and ourselves. When moderates remove themselves from the conversation, we begin to view people who disagree with us as “monolithic, unflinching, and unreasonable” because only the most extreme views are represented (p. 82).

Another problem stems from how digital content is incentivized. Andrew Marantz (2020) argues that the motivating logic behind many of the internet’s algorithms is to encourage “activating emotions,” like anger, disgust, envy, humor, or nostalgia. These emotions are ones that “lead to measurable behaviors,” such as “clicking or liking or sharing a link,” that contribute to higher economic returns for the website owner and higher emotional returns for the person who posted the content (p. 79).⁵³ That is, the more people engage with content, the more it can be

⁵³ Activating emotions are the driving force behind clickbait content on the internet. For example, headlines that start with “you won’t believe what happened...” are designed to entice people to click through to read the website’s content.

monetized, and, for the poster, the more people that interact with their content the more self-worth, belonging, and acceptance they feel.⁵⁴

According to Joshua Greene (2014), activating emotions are part of our brains' "automatic settings" that helped us overcome the first evolutionary challenge, *me versus us* (p. 15).⁵⁵ When guided by activating emotions we can make "efficient" decisions for our survival by quickly determining if someone belongs to our group and can therefore be trusted. However, the problem with these quick decisions is that they are also "inflexible" and require conscious effort to overcome (p. 15).⁵⁶ By encouraging activating emotions, the internet leads people to make quick, inflexible determinations about whether other people belong to our group (*us*) versus their group (*them*), which can increase polarization and make cooperation more difficult.

However, Greene argues that when people are given the opportunity to reflect and think about their choices, when they use their "manual mode," they are more likely to cooperate with others and less likely to view others in terms of us versus them (p. 15).⁵⁷ He suggests that our manual morality is why humans are altruistic, empathetic, and cooperative and it is what allows us to move beyond the second evolutionary challenge, *us versus them*. Without the ability to

⁵⁴ Caitlin Petre (2021) also found that metrics used in online and traditional newsrooms often "cultivate[d] in journalists a dangerous tendency to equate audience popularity with newsworthiness" (p. 26). Petre argues that the two are rarely synonymous in real life, yet the internet and our ability to gauge interest using observable phenomena, like number of clicks, has undermined journalistic standards as stories that encourage activating emotions are rewarded but the long, complex stories necessary for democracy are not.

⁵⁵ A more thorough discussion of *me versus us* can be found in Chapter 2.1.

⁵⁶ Our automatic settings often trigger our survival instincts. A related example would be seeing a snake and fleeing before determining whether it is venomous. We see something "snake shaped" and categorize it as dangerous. When we stop to think and evaluate the situation, we are better equipped to determine whether the snake poses a threat to us or not. A similar process is at work when we evaluate people using activating emotions. We are more likely to rely on stereotypes and biases to decide whether someone is part of our in-group. Greene argues that our automatic settings are "inflexible" because they allow us to act using "autopilot," without conscious thought or reasoning, but do not help us solve *new* problems, like learning how to drive or living in large multicultural nations (Greene, 2014, pp. 15, 167). In Chapter 2.2, I discuss how some argue humans are best suited to living in small communities, rather than large nations.

⁵⁷ Refer to section Chapter 2.1 for a detailed discussion of *us versus them*.

move beyond our quick, inflexible thinking, large-scale cooperative projects like democracy are impossible to achieve because we are unable to consider issues from other people's point of view and compromise when needed.

More recent research has started to investigate how the internet, and technology more broadly, affects our neuropsychology and how we think about and interact with others. In his book, *The Shallows*, Nicholas Carr (2020) argues that the human brain is “always in flux,” adapting and changing to meet new demands (p. 31). Our neuroplasticity is what allows us to “adapt to environmental pressures, physiologic changes, and experiences” and thus move beyond our rigid genetic programming (Pascual-Leone et al., 2005, p. 377). The more we adapt to situations and the more situations become familiar, the stronger our neural pathways become. According to Carr (2020), there are “paths that most of us will take most of the time,” representing our automatic and familiar reactions to various stimuli, like responding with fright when someone jumps out and scares us or choosing to sleep on a particular side of the bed. Each of these actions strengthen the corresponding neurological pathways in our brains, allowing us to turn certain behaviors into habits and use our brain's processing power for other endeavors.

Neuroplasticity allows us to achieve enormous advances, but it also includes the “possibility of intellectual decay” as we get stuck in our own patterns of thinking (p. 35). That is, “the further we proceed down” our brain's familiar paths, “the more difficult it becomes to turn back” and we may reinforce behaviors that we would rather break. Carr argues that “our neurons and synapses are entirely indifferent” to the “*quality* of our thought[s]” meaning that our brain's

“malleability” is both the cause and solution to most challenges we face (p. 35).⁵⁸ Offline, this may mean that we are uncomfortable when we have to sleep on the *wrong* side of the bed or we may have habits that we find difficult to break, like fidgeting when nervous or cursing unnecessarily.

Our neuroplasticity also poses a unique challenge when most of our connections are mediated through technology because it encourages us to make snap judgments about others to secure likes, comments, and reposts and changes what we find valuable about connecting with others.⁵⁹ As I have argued throughout the previous sections, for most of human history, we have been tied to our corporeality. Our relationships, communities, and the norms that arose within them were dependent on the “hormonal, olfactory, visual, or vocal” cues that form the “experiential proximity” of interpersonal interactions (Zink, 2019, p. 294). We learned to read a person’s facial cues, body language, and other physical stimulus to understand the meaning behind what a person is saying. For example, if a person fails to make eye contact when explaining their behavior, it may be a sign that they are lying or being less than truthful.⁶⁰

Technology cannot replace in-person interactions because it “masks the enormous amount of

⁵⁸ Emphasis in the original. Neurons do not distinguish between *good* or *bad* thoughts. Carr (2020) suggests this can be problematic for people who suffer from chronic conditions like anxiety or tinnitus. The more a person focuses on their symptoms, the more the neural pathways are reinforced. In essence, “the mind essentially trains itself to be sick” (p. 35).

⁵⁹ Social media users often engage in risky or “dumb” behavior to gain likes and comments online (Weisenstein, 2018). “Doin’ it for the gram” refers to doing something specifically designed to get digital interaction. For example, a 2025 trend has students placing metallic objects in their laptop USB ports to make them catch fire (Upton-Clark, 2025). The motivation for these actions is not to establish relationships or find meaning or belonging in a community, but rather to make *good* content for social media. The phrase “do it for the gram” has since fallen out of favor, but another “do it for the plot” has taken its place highlighting how media affects how people interact and view the world. Real-world actions are being discussed like plot points in movies, television, and fiction writing. See: *Figure C.10* and *Figure C.11* in Appendix C for examples.

⁶⁰ These cues are highly dependent on the culture within which they arise and to the people involved. People with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Anxiety, or Autism often find it difficult to make sustained eye contact even when telling the truth.

non-verbal communication that takes place” as people interact with one another (Putnam, 2020, p. 230).

Even though the observable metrics of online interactions may temporarily feed our egos, they do little to secure the substantive relationships necessary for social and political life (Bail, 2022; Pariser, 2012; Turkle, 2017). It is within our formative relationships that we are able to “express subjectively determined aspects of [our] personality, goals, and desires” (Parigi & Henson, 2014, p. 163). These relationships are based on reciprocity where we care for someone and are cared for in return. This reciprocity provides space for us to form both our identities and contextualize our experiences which not only increase our subjective feelings of well-being but also contributes to the overall sense of community discussed in Chapter 2.2. Yet, technology changes the way we interact and the more we use the internet for connection and information, the more our brains adapt to the new technology and the skills we developed over millennia to recognize, process, and understand physical stimuli begin to atrophy as we reinforce the neural pathways that govern our online lives.⁶¹

It is not surprising, then, that when Pew Research Center (2025) asked Americans to compare the relative politeness of people’s behavior before and after the COVID-19 pandemic

⁶¹ Carr (2020) builds on an argument made by Marshall McLuhan in 1964 that argued that the impact of technology is not its content, but rather the “change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 8). McLuhan argued that the technology we use becomes an extension of ourselves in the same way that glasses or shoes are an extension of our eyes and feet. Carr (2020) uses cartography as an example to argue that “even a tool as seemingly simple and benign as the map” can fundamentally change how we experience the world. He contends that our ancestors were once able to navigate long distances, cross oceans, and expand empires by reading the landscape and knowing their position relative to the sun and stars. However, as we grew more reliant on physical maps, our “ability to comprehend a landscape, to create a richly detailed mental map of [our] surroundings, weakened” (p. 211). Furthermore, reliance on technology for simple tasks like using map applications and Global Positioning Services (GPS) for navigation reduces people’s overall “sense of connection” and community that are created through “casual social interactions” like asking someone for directions (Kushlev et al., 2017, p. 73). The more we rely on technology, the less we connect with others, and the less connected we feel to other people and our environments.

they found that nearly half of U.S. adults (47%) believe that “the way people behave is rudier than before” the pandemic began (para. 2). During the pandemic, millions were quarantined to try and mitigate the spread of the disease. Every aspect of a person’s work, academic, and social life was conducted through video meeting software like Zoom and Discord as people were told to remain physically distant from one another.⁶² Although this allowed life to continue relatively normally, many commented on how technology, however sophisticated, could not replace in-person interactions and how prolonged isolation negatively affected their mental well-being.⁶³

The survey did not ask participants whether they adhered to quarantine guidelines, nor did it ask if they relied on digital technology to stay in touch if they did quarantine, so it is possible that physical distance, not technology, has led to an increase in perceived rudeness. However, it is reasonable to think that an over-reliance on technologically mediated communication reinforced the neural pathways that are characteristic of digital interactions, where the non-verbal cues that have traditionally helped people understand each other are not present, leading to an increase in perceived rudeness. That is, the social norms that once guided our in-person interactions were changed or replaced by the norms that govern our digital lives leading to the current “breakdown in civility” (Bail, 2022, p. 83).

⁶² In some instances, businesses have moved away from using popular meeting software like Zoom or Microsoft Teams and instead hold their meetings within video game worlds. For example, the video game *Red Dead Redemption 2*, a cowboy simulator, became a popular site for corporate meetings because it allowed users to sit around a fire and talk via voice connection. The game as a meeting software carried its own norms that were similar to those found on traditional meeting software. Players in the game would “wash [their] face before a Cowboy meeting” because “sometimes you can be really caked in blood and dirt, and not realize” which, like showing up to an in-person or virtual meeting dirty and disheveled, is bad “etiquette” within the norms of using a video game for business meetings (Crowley, 2020, para. 8, internal quotations omitted)

⁶³ Writing two years into the pandemic, Lea Winerman (2022) found that COVID-19 caused “an increase in loneliness” as people were forced to stay physically distant from one another. In a later study, heavily mocked by social media users, Philippa Roxby (2023) reported that the “mental health crisis from COVID-19 pandemic was minimal.” Many users reposted the article’s headlines with examples demonstrating that their mental health declined during the pandemic, *see: Figure C.12* in Appendix C.

Furthermore, structural differences between platforms affect how and why people connect. Sites like LinkedIn and Glassdoor are viewed as platforms for older people because they prioritize professional achievement and connection, and users are encouraged to share updates about their working lives. For example, on Glassdoor, users share information about working conditions and salary to help would-be employees decide if it is in their interest to pursue employment at the company. The design of these sites is vastly different than more social websites like Facebook or Snapchat. Facebook's userbase is also older, but its design prioritizes personal updates like one's relationship status or sharing vacation photos (Pew Research Center, 2021). Alternatively, Snapchat allows users to earn *streaks* for sharing images daily. Snapchat is unique in that it began as a means for users to share illicit photos that disappeared after the receiver viewed them. It has since transformed into an easy way for users to share "stupid meaningless stuff that won't matter in 5 minutes" and entertain themselves and others using filters (@Carvanha, personal communication, April 22, 2025).

These differences change who uses the platforms and what information is shared on them, making it difficult for users to establish a frame of reference from which they can build an understanding of the world. Each platform has its own norms that are partially dictated by the platform's structure and partially by the users who opt-in to using the platform. On Facebook, it may be common to see a person post about an interaction they had with someone else, but on LinkedIn the same type of post is often mocked because it does not fit within the norms of the platform.⁶⁴ Robby Nadler (2020) argues that it is no longer possible to view technology as

⁶⁴ There is an entire subreddit, r/LinkedInLunatics, devoted to making fun of people who post short stories about their day while also relating it to being a better employee or business-to-business (B2B) sales.

separate from ourselves because it is no longer a place a person visits, nor is it a neutral conveyor of interpersonal messages. Instead, “the media we use in our relationships with people influence those very relationships” by “actively mold[ing] them through the social mores embedded in those spaces” (p. 5).

3.3 Searching for connection

When we connect with people through technology it actively reshapes those connections because they are inherently different than our in-person connections. The lack of physical cues means we now rely on other tools to convey implicit meaning like emoticons and emojis or acronyms like *lol* (laughing out loud) and *qq* (which represents crying and is sometimes used to taunt other users for being weak). However, since the internet is highly fragmented, so too are the cues people rely on to make themselves understood.⁶⁵ For example, research shows there are generational differences when using common emojis like a smiley face or acronyms such as *lol*, making misunderstandings between people common and further undermines their ability to form a shared understanding of the world (Shoichet et al., 2024; Zhukova & Herring, 2024).⁶⁶ This, in turn, undermines the creation, adoption, and maintenance of social and democratic norms – a point I will return to at the end of this chapter.

Even though technology reshapes our connections with others it is still the primary way in which people connect and form community (Shklovski et al., 2006). People are more likely to text or connect via social media than they are to do so in-person (M. Anderson et al., 2023).

⁶⁵ Although physical cues vary between cultures, they are often widespread enough within groups to be nearly universal.

⁶⁶ Generation Z is more likely to use emojis ironically, whereas older generations use emojis literally. Furthermore, frequent internet users often refer to digital content that non-internet users have no knowledge of. See: *Figure C.13*, *Figure C.14*, and *Figure C.15* for examples of this affects real-world relationships.

Sherry Turkle (2017) argues that people may prefer to connect via technology because it allows us to avoid the “sometimes messy, often frustrating, and always complex world of people” (p. 7). Technology both reduces the complexity of our interactions and allows us to keep our relationships at “just the right distance” where people are “not too close” but also “not too far” (p. 15). Our relationships become ones “with limits” where our inner most thoughts and feelings are protected, but we are precluded from the formative relationships that allow us to contextualize our experiences as community members and democratic citizens (p. 11).⁶⁷

For one, technology changes how we interact by allowing us to multitask in ways that were previously unavailable, we can check our emails, pay bills, text our family, and post content from the same device and we can do so while watching movies, in class or in meetings, at the doctor’s office, or while spending time with friends. Instead of focusing on one task or trying to cultivate one relationship, Turkle (2017) argues we are in a “world of continual partial attention” that makes it difficult to know what to expect of others (is my friend not responding because they are busy, or are they mad at me?) and ourselves (should I respond to this email from work while I am at home? Is it okay to take pictures here so I can remember the moment?) (p. 161).⁶⁸

Technology also “flattens [our] interactions” and requires more cognitive effort to distinguish between what is important and what is not (Nadler, 2020, p. 14). As a person scrolls

⁶⁷ This is not to say that technology makes affective attachment or meaningful relationships impossible or to say that these types of connections cannot form via technology. Many people do find substantive relationships with other people online. In fact, that is part of the driving force behind dating apps. Dating apps allow people to form a connection with one another before meeting in person. However, technology does make it more difficult to establish these relationships and to know what norms apply in either our on- or offline lives.

⁶⁸ Read receipts on emails and text messages have only exacerbated this problem. A read receipt shows the sender that the receiver has seen the message. If the receiver chooses not to respond to the message immediately, the sender may begin to question why. Within younger generations, being *left on read* is considered rude whereas older generations are more likely to consider it normal to read and not respond to a message (Hsieh & Kibbe, 2021). For examples, see: *Figure C.16* and *Figure C.17* in Appendix C.

through her social media feed she may see a post about her college roommate’s wedding, a natural disaster in her home state, a political scandal in Washington D.C., her cousin’s graduation, and a local rescue’s fundraising call within the same few minutes. The events and information exist on the same device and are displayed in one, long uninterrupted stream of content. This both eliminates the “once helpful lines in the sand” between different facets of our lives and makes it more difficult to know what issues are the most important and whether we have any obligation or responsibility to pay attention to it or get involved (Turkle, 2017, p. 162).⁶⁹

According to Turkle (2017), our constant connectivity has the potential to dehumanize us because we communicate in ways that “ask for almost instantaneous responses,” but do not “allow sufficient space to consider complicated problems.” In doing so, we have created a “paradox” where more things demand our attention, yet we have “decreased the time available for us to think uninterrupted” so that we can thoughtfully respond (p. 166).⁷⁰ Nicholas Carr (2020) argues this is partially because the internet has become an “all-purpose medium” for most people even though it discourages thinking that is “calm, focused, and undistracted.” The “linear mind,” as he terms it, is being “pushed aside” by one that “needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed, often overlapping bursts” as our brains become accustomed to the never ending, always available, stream of content on our devices (p. 10).

⁶⁹ Social media sites often employ an “infinite scrolling” design as users are more likely to leave the website if they have to click between pages (Neusesser, 2022, para. 1). For example, internet users often joke that the best place to hide a body is page two of Google’s search results because no one clicks through to look there (*Figure C.18* in Appendix C). However, while content is often displayed using infinite scrolling, it is often interrupted by advertisements. *See: Figure C.19 and Figure C.20* in Appendix C for examples of how infinite scrolling and ads have been addressed in popular culture.

⁷⁰ People have begun to push back against the expectation of constant availability imposed by technology. *See: Figure C.21, Figure C.22, and Figure C.23* in Appendix C for examples.

The disjointed mind has two consequences. First, it poses a direct threat to democracy as citizens lose their ability to thoughtfully engage with the political system. Democratic governance involves complexity as citizens consider, debate, and decide what is best for their community. Yet, the internet encourages short-form content that simplifies issues for easy consumption. According to Andrea E. Cladis (2020), brain scans show that digital natives – those who have only known a world of hyperconnectivity – have adapted to consuming mediated, on-demand content from multiple screens simultaneously in ways that older generations have not. Even though younger generations can “process images faster and compartmentalize information more efficiently” because they have spent their lives enmeshed in digital technology, this skill may be undermining democracy (p. 344). Cladis argues that digital natives “often lack the long-term memory functionality and the cognitive functioning required for critical thinking and imagination” that also prevents them from maintaining the kind of nuanced thinking about complex issues in the way that democracy requires.

Similarly, Christopher Claassen and Pedro C. Magalhães’ (2023) study that found that younger generations are less likely to think democracy is a worthwhile form of government. The authors state that Millennials (those born between 1981 to 1996) have “particularly low levels of democratic support” because “threats to democracy” were “less plausible” in the years after the Cold War ended and because the generation has “grown into adulthood under deteriorating economic conditions” that undermine public support for democracy (p. 724). While true, the authors did not consider that Millennials are the first of the digital native generations, which now includes Generations Z, Alpha, and Beta. Even though Millennials are not the first generation to experience enormous social, political, and economic upheaval, they are the first generation to experience all three without the guidance of traditional community structures (Putnam, 2000).

Instead, Millennials have grown up alongside a feudalistic internet that discourages community and the creation, adoption, and maintenance of social and democratic norms. Without corrective measures to make digital technology more conducive to community and democracy,⁷¹ declining support for democracy among younger generations “offers a sobering prognosis” for the future as the nation “faces a continued decline in public commitment” to democracy as a form of government (Claassen & Magalhães, 2023, p. 730).⁷²

Second, the disjointed mind changes how we view ourselves and others and makes it more difficult to connect our online experiences with our responsibilities as community members and as citizens. Sherry Turkle (2017) argues that when our messages are “always there, waiting to be wanted,” whether we want them to be or not, we lose a form of agency because if we *can* respond, then we often feel like we *should* respond. This changes the “metric” of what people believe “they [can] accomplish” and makes it difficult for us to see others as individuals rather

⁷¹ Bail (2022) argues for a “new platform for political discussion” that encourages thoughtful responses like those on Stack Overflow or in the r/neutralpolitics subreddit. He also suggests that policies be put in place to limit the negative effects of existing platforms like Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram. Schneider (2024) makes a similar argument and states that the structure of the internet can be made more democratic if we actively work against implicit feudalism. Schneider suggests that governable stacks, which are “the interconnected infrastructures and practices that enable networked self-governance,” could replace the current structure of the internet. Instead of having a top-down design, often dictated by corporations, the internet can be recreated using a bottom-up approach where users have power over every aspect of their digital lives, from community-based internet services to democratically designed websites and applications. Alternatively, Pariser (2012) argues that internet algorithms need to include more randomization so that users see content that is not tailored to their interests. For example, if I search for gardening advice, the results can return information about gardening but also include information about local gardening groups, political issues surrounding the environment, or something related, but not directly linked, to my search request. For Pariser, this would be similar to searching a bookstore’s shelves for how to grow a garden and finding a book on how to grow herbs indoors. While I may have gone to the store thinking I would start an outside, in-ground garden, a book on indoor herbs would be a serendipitous result that I may not have otherwise considered.

⁷² Some, like Larry M. Bartels (2023), argue that democratic backsliding occurs because political leaders exploit vulnerabilities in existing systems rather than because the public has turned away from democracy. Bartels’ argument is persuasive, yet leaders would not be able to exploit democratic systems if the public were actively engaged with the democratic process and holding them accountable. That is, leaders can only exploit the system if the nation lacks a robust democratic culture dedicated to preserving democracy as a system of government.

than as fans, followers, or *them*. Instead, “demands become depersonalized” as we try to keep up with the seemingly endless messages we receive each day (pp. 164, 168).⁷³

Paolo Parigi and Warner Henson II (2014) argue that we have changed how we connect by moving from a world where “connections required considerable investment of time to a world where connections are widely available and inexpensive to establish” (p. 155). The authors argue that technologically mediated communications provide “greater freedom,” because people can enter and exit their relationships with greater ease than ever before, but this mode of connection also “[precludes people] from truly intimate relationships with others” (p. 158). Without emotional investment in our relationships, we risk turning them “into something close to objects” because we can pick up our devices, interact with it and our friends, then put it down, and walk away from it at will (Turkle, 2017, p. 168). As a result, technology turns us into “strangers” in our own communities because we are “embedded in a social environment” without being “completely attached to it” (Parigi & Henson, 2014, p. 158).

One reason is because we can connect with others without having to engage with them. Social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter allow users to see and read content without interacting with it. That is, I can see what my friends are doing, what they eat, or read what they think about various topics without having to speak with them at all. Relationships are

⁷³ One approach, often touted within productivity circles, is to maintain *Inbox Zero*. Inbox Zero is a “rigorous approach to email management” where, before the end of the workday, a person has no emails in their inbox that need their attention (Sheldon, 2022, para. 1). Oftentimes, this means deleting or delegating emails and prioritizing short responses. The creator of Inbox Zero (Merlin Mann) suggests that because time is finite, the goal is not necessarily to reach zero new emails, but rather to reduce the time a person spends on answering emails. However, this approach highlights Turkle’s (2017) argument that “demands become depersonalized” when we rely on technology to connect (p. 168). Inbox Zero focuses on the receiver and encourages viewing emails as task rather than opportunity to connect. Turkle also argues that by viewing our connections in terms of technology, we become something less than human and become more robotic. Online, people have resisted the *optimization trap*, where a person adjusts different parts of their lives to be more productive. Users argue this is inherently capitalistic and devalues us as humans, see: *Figure C.24* in Appendix C for an example.

divorced from their formative potential because we do not need to express emotion, show compassion, empathy, or care when we scroll through the myriad of posts we see each day. Instead, we can view the content and continue scrolling without any indication that we saw it in the first place. The authors state this limits the kinds of relationships that form because we can maintain the illusion of having a relationship without expending any of the effort that relationships have traditionally required.⁷⁴ Ultimately, we begin to see connecting with others as another task to accomplish instead of as meaningful or necessary for our well-being.

Additionally, Chris Bail (2022) suggests that technology presents a danger not because it “provides us with flashy eye candy or endless distractions,” but rather because provides endless opportunities for us to develop our individual, social, and political identities (p. 10). Our identities are partially determined through social comparison – we see what others do and determine if it will work for us too – and partially through trying out different parts of our personalities and “watching how other people react to different versions of ourselves that we present in social settings” (p. 48). Bail argues that “humans are unusual creatures because we care so deeply about what other people think of us” because it “give[s] us something that we all strive for: a sense of self-worth” that is necessarily tied to our attachments to others (p. 48-49). It is through our attachments that we develop our sense of self that we later carry through when interacting with others. However, the structure of the internet changes how people interact with

⁷⁴ Additionally, people are likely to be more reticent when sharing intimate details of their lives when the probability of being ignored is high. People often use the term ghosting to refer to instances when someone cuts off a relationship without any explanation. It is common among dating app users but is also done if someone shares intimate details of their life for the first time. See: *Figure C.25*, *Figure C.26*, and *Figure C.27* in Appendix C for examples of ghosting in popular culture.

one another and allows people to share everything or nothing or create entirely fictitious personas that distort how we see ourselves and others.

For one, technology gives us unprecedented access to the private lives of others, but these glimpses are often highly edited and curated. Most social media platforms allow users to apply filters to make themselves look younger and thinner in both photos and videos.⁷⁵ Long before social networks, traditional media (e.g., magazines, television, and movies) were criticized for presenting unrealistic images of women and men by privileging white, thin, muscular bodies with impossibly smooth skin (for a review, *see*: Harrison & Hefner, 2006). While these expectations had an adverse effect on children and adults, who often developed body dysmorphia and depression while trying to achieve a body type that is different from their own, social media filters are more insidious. The affective attachment one feels towards her friends on social media coupled with social comparison erases the “line between real and make-believe” and makes it more difficult for people to realize that the standards seen on social media are as unrealistic as those found within traditional media (London, 2020).⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Snapchat, a popular social media app, was accused of using filters to adjust all users’ photos, regardless of whether the user opted to use one or not. The default filter faced public pushback when users noticed that it whitewashed darker complexions (The Independent, 2016). It was also accused of perpetuating harmful practices like blackface (J. Graham, 2016) and yellowface (Griffin, 2017). The controversy over Snapchat filters highlights another problem within software engineering. Studies show that most software engineers are white men who often (either intentionally or unintentionally) code their biases into the programs they work on (Picchi, 2019). For example, GitHub is a version control website widely used by software engineers to share and make changes to code. Users can branch or fork source code to make substantive changes or test out new features. If the changes are accepted, they can be pushed to the primary branch and become part of the code’s stable release. In 2020, after the Black Lives Matter protests in response to George Floyd’s murder, GitHub announced it would no longer use *master* for the primary branch and *slave* for subsidiary branches. The company stated that, despite the *master/slave* nomenclature being common within software engineering, it would move away from it to prevent unnecessarily harming minority communities. Many within the software engineering field argued that “it’s a stretch to connect the word Master with the whole Master/Slave concept in tech” (Kev, 2020, para. 8) even though those harmed by the terminology stated that the change was a step in the right direction (Heinze, 2020).

⁷⁶ Additionally, some filters are obvious, but as technology advances it is becoming more difficult to tell the difference between edited and unedited content. *See: Figure C.28* in Appendix C for an example of how subtle or obvious filters can be.

Furthermore, Jedediah Purdy (2000) wrote that traditional media undermined community formation because there was “no intimate moment, no private words of affection, empathy, or rebuke” that had not been repackaged and sold to us through television, movies, advertisements, or political slogans (p. xii). He argued this made us “wary and abashed in our belief” because all of our interactions were infused with a sense of unreality. When our inner most thoughts and intimate moments are “pronounced on a thirty-foot screen before an audience of hundreds” we begin to think that anything we may feel, think, or experience is “superficial” and “belonging to other people and purposes” (p. xii). In essence, our evolutionary drive to love, hate, show empathy, compassion, or humor and engage in activities like singing, dancing, or creating art were not naturally ours. Rather, these expressions of our humanity were there to entertain, sell, or persuade us and were therefore stripped of their inherent value.⁷⁷

For Purdy, this causes a form of ironic detachment that prevents people from realizing that “what we value most...is necessarily common” and that “we can only preserve or neglect them together” (p. xxi). Even though we may value similar things, like happiness or belonging, when it is presented to us through the media it is stripped of its meaning and loses its ability to bring people together.⁷⁸ Technology exacerbates the problem because it is difficult to know

⁷⁷ Purdy argued that “we cannot speak of atonement or apology without knowing how those words have been put to cynical, almost morally pornographic use by politicians. Even solitary encounters with nature, bicycling on a country road or hiking on a mount path, we reluctant ironists realize that our pleasure in these places has been anticipated by a thousand L. L. Bean catalogues, Ansel Adams calendars, and advertisements promising a portion of the rugged or bucolic life” (p. xii). A sentiment growing in popularity online is the idea that humans create and sing because it is inherent within us, in the same way that birds sing and bees make hives. However, these activities have been stripped of their formative potential because now the expectation is that to create or sing one must be good at it. See: *Figure C.29*, *Figure C.30*, *Figure C.31*, and *Figure C.32* in Appendix C for examples of how this sentiment is changing.

⁷⁸ Purdy argued his book was a “love letter” to the world because love letters “require the courage to stake oneself on an expression of hope that may very well come to nothing” (p. xxii). The idea that we have similar values and beliefs that are worth fighting for is what Purdy argues we have become numb to, but which we can no longer ignore.

whether the content is human-made or whether it has been chosen specifically to illicit a specific response from us as viewers.⁷⁹

Technology also erects a barrier between people that means we may be sharing our most intimate thoughts and experiences with a fictitious persona or a bot account run by a foreign asset or artificial intelligence.⁸⁰ People who use online dating platforms understand the struggle associated with connecting with someone who may not be truthful about their identity or who may not exist at all. Catfishing is a catch all term that refers to someone who adopts a fictitious persona to connect with others online and is often done to extort information or money from

⁷⁹ Social media especially infuses interactions with a sense of falsity. People can watch others live a life that is unlike theirs without recognizing that the poster faces many of the same challenges that other people do. Family vloggers have started receiving greater scrutiny because not only are children expected to film content for long periods of time without compensation, but also because the videos portray an idealized version of family life. Television shows like *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Brady Bunch*, *Family Matters*, and *Step by Step* were also idealized expressions of family life where every episode introduced a problem with a satisfying resolution at the end. The difference with social media is that family vloggers foster the belief that the idealized content they post is reality, rather than staged content like in it is on television or in movies. For example, Will Smith and Tatyana Ali recreated a famous dance from the show *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, a popular television show from the 1990s, using Doechii's song *Anxiety* (currently popular on social media and used in thousands of videos). Fans were initially excited because they waited 35 years for the reunion, but some argued that the trio's use of a production team made the moment less authentic. Currently, several states have either passed or are in the process of passing laws protecting child influencers, including placing earnings in trusts until they reach maturity and stricter guidelines on filming schedules (Rosenblatt, 2023).

⁸⁰ Over 20 years ago Peter Steiner created the comic *Nobody Knows You're a Dog* highlighting people's ability to effectively hide behind a screen (Cavna, 2013). See: *Figure C.33* in Appendix C for a copy of the comic. Many internet users believe in the Dead Internet Theory which states that "most activity online is generated by algorithms and bots, not by humans" (MacRae, 2025, para. 1). Dead Internet Theory started as half conspiracy theory and half satire, but has quickly gained traction as Meta, Facebook's parent company, announced that it would create social media profiles run entirely by artificial intelligence. The profiles would have their own *identities*, including their own personal, professional, and political beliefs that they would share via posts like any other user on Facebook and Instagram. Companies have also started using artificial intelligence to "resurrect deceased loved ones" by ingesting photos, videos, letters, and social media profiles of people who have died. The living can "talk" with their deceased relative or friends and the A.I. will use the collected data to respond as the deceased person (Feng, 2024). Mark Zuckerberg, owner and founder of Meta (Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp's parent company), stated in an interview that solving the loneliness epidemic in the United States (as discussed in Chapter 1.1) can be solved by having people connect with A.I. bots on his platforms. Facebook faced pushback for using A.I. to create bot-run accounts that would post and act like human users. Zuckerberg stated that "the average person has demand for meaningfully more" friendships and A.I. can help fill in the gap, "especially when the personalization loop starts to kick in and the A.I. starts to get to know you better and better" (Wong, 2025, para. 4, internal quotations omitted). People may no longer need to connect with others to have meaningful relationships if, as Zuckerberg believes, people turn to A.I. instead of humans.

others. However, the reasons that a person catfishes others has more to do with their desire to belong than it does with their desire for personal gain. When asked why they adopt fake identities online, catfishers frequently state that they catfish others because they are lonely and lack meaningful relationships in their lives (Vanman, 2018).

People often adopt false personas online because it allows them to explore aspects of their personality that they cannot share offline. In person, “our ability to hide certain aspects of our identity and highlight others is highly constrained,” meaning it is difficult to try on personas and hide those personas from the people in our lives (Bail, 2022, p. 50). At home we may be a loving parent, at work a no-nonsense boss, and with our friends a reckless daredevil, in each of these situations we have a different persona that allows us to try out and explore various aspects of our personalities. The identities we develop, try, and adopt within different settings often bleed into other areas of our lives whether we choose to show them or not. I may be a reckless daredevil in my personal life, but that behavior – confidence, hubris, or risk-taking – will likely result in me taking more chances at work and with my relationships. I cannot hide my daredevil identity completely; I can only change how much of it I show in different situations.

Alternatively, a person’s online persona can be exploratory and wishful, as in making their video game character a different gender or body type than they are in person, rich, successful, or magical, but they can also reflect parts of a person’s identity that they wish to hide to avoid being sanctioned by the people they care about in their offline lives.⁸¹ For example, after

⁸¹ Independent journalist Vera Papisova spent one year dating far-right males and found that in the real world they “spoke liberal” and had liberal friends but would go online and consume and spread extreme ideology. According to Papisova, these men are “insecure” and do not know who they are so they seek validation and understanding from other men which, she argues, can be very isolating when these men turn to people like Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson for their news and information (O’Sullivan, 2025). Will Carless (2021) similarly found that men joined the

Donald Trump was elected in 2024, many young men commented on women's posts, "your body, my choice" reflecting ownership over the woman's body and distorting a common pro-choice slogan: my body, my choice (Duffy, 2024, para. 1). Many commenters used pseudonyms or usernames to hide behind anonymity to avoid being sanctioned for their views.⁸² Although this happens offline as well, as is the case with catcalling, unsolicited whistling, or sexual comments towards strangers (mostly women), online sanctions are less likely to have the moral underpinning necessary to encourage a change in the poster's behavior.

As I have argued throughout the previous sections, we are social beings; our identity, values, interests, and beliefs come from the relationships we have with other people. Norms

alt-right group, Proud Boys, looking for community and brotherhood. Once the men joined, the group used common indoctrination tactics to encourage users to adopt more extreme ideologies. First, recruits are vetted by having to share photos of their state-issued identification cards. They then spend time in a chatroom that is mild before the recruits are "tested" by admitting them to a second chatroom with "every type of shocking content imaginable" (para. 29). If the second chatroom's content does not drive them away, they are considered part of the *real group* whose core was antisemitic, misogynistic, and racist.

⁸² Some posters used their real names and photos. However, the likelihood that someone in their offline life would see the content is minimal and thus the threat of sanction is reduced, which I will discuss in greater detail shortly. In extreme cases, commenters have faced in-person sanctions for the content they posted online. For example, users have been fired from their place of employment (e.g., Vargas, 2020). Revealing someone's identity online without their consent, or *doxxing*, is becoming more common and, at times, accepted. People have doxxed others online who say racist or misogynistic things both in-person and online. In this case, doxxing is seen as acceptable because the bigoted person is sanctioned. However, this type of doxxing requires the target of the hate speech to go out of their way to report the person making the comment. This increases the burden on the targeted person and reduces the likelihood the person will face sanctions. Research shows that young men are becoming more ideologically extreme than women in the same age cohort. Young men are more likely to turn to male-friendly podcasts and people, like *The Joe Rogan Experience* and Andrew Tate. Men will frequently post misogynistic speech online while abiding by equality norms offline. Popular media has begun to overtly and subtly address how media is radicalizing men online. For example, Netflix released the limited series *Adolescence* (Barantini, 2025) that directly investigated how the *manosphere* (media that promotes male supremacy and domination over women) has gained popularity online and has attracted young men. In the show, a young boy becomes radicalized online and, despite not being part of a traditional in-person hate group like the KKK or neo-Nazis, was influenced enough to murder one of his classmates. The show presents a nuanced picture of how unrestricted access to the internet can radicalize someone without the people in their offline lives knowing. In addition, the drama series *The Pitt* (Wells et al., 2025), follows medical professionals in a Pittsburgh area Emergency Room and includes a subplot where a young man's mother makes herself ill to get him to take her to the ER. Once there, she begs Noah Wyle's character (Dr. Michael Robinavitch, the ER's attending physician) to help her son because she found a hit list in his bedroom of teen girls at his school that he would like to harm. The subplot develops in the background of the episodes and shows how young men are dealing with loneliness as well as the impact this has on their family and community.

develop naturally as people become affectively attached to one another and it is our need to belong that drives us to learn and internalize the kinds of behaviors that will allow us to develop our identities and become members of a community. Affective attachment is also what gives norms their moral force. A person is likely to follow a norm if she knows the norm exists, believes she is expected to follow the norm, believes that others would follow the norm in her place, or believes that others will sanction her if she does not. Each of these normative expectations presupposes a relationship between community members that makes them receptive to another person's expectations about how they should behave.

Yet, technology disrupts how we connect and form community and therefore changes how norms are created, adopted, and enforced. First, technology's structure fosters norms that are both feudalistic and extreme. The norms that arise within most digital spaces encourage people to view others as *them* instead of *us* and undermine their ability to collaborate, cooperate, and act compassionately. The more people use technology for community and information, the more prevalent these anti-social and anti-democratic norms become making it more difficult for people to create healthy communities and connect their online experiences with their obligations as community members and citizens. Since most of our existence is tied to our relationships with others, Carr (2020) argues that the more we rely on technology, the more we risk "numb[ing] the most intimate, the most human of our natural capacities – those for reason, perception, memory, and emotion" that allow us to create and maintain the formative relationships necessary for social and political life (p. 211).

Technology's structure also undermines the creation and adoption of existing norms because there is no universal platform or content. It is difficult to establish norms and know which norms apply in different online situations when there is no shared frame of reference

either on or across platforms. While individual platforms have their own normative guidelines, like truthfulness and accuracy on r/neutralpolitics or Wikipedia or how people are expected to be more positive on WhatsApp or Instagram than they are on Facebook or Twitter, the number of users on each platform means that there are numerous sub-communities that may share no overlap between users (Waterloo et al., 2018). A person who frequently visits Reddit, Wikipedia, Instagram, or Facebook may not see the same content as another frequent user. The highly fragmented nature of digital technology means that users on the same app or website can create, adopt, and enforce norms that are vastly different than other users on the same platform as well as being different than the norms that exist offline. Since norms act as the “grammar of society” that make interpersonal interaction intelligible, technology makes it more difficult for people to trust others, compromise, and engage in meaningful dialogue because these communities lack a shared language that allows them to effectively communicate (Bicchieri, 2006, p. ix).

By changing how people connect and form community, technology also changes how norms are created. Norms are inherently social, yet technology erects a barrier between communicating parties that changes how people interact. Traditional methods of connection and norm enforcement that rely on non-verbal cues, like knowing glances, physical contact, or reading subtle changes in a person’s body language do not translate to digital spaces. Instead, new digital norms are created, like ghosting or using acronyms, to help people communicate in the absence of physical cues. While these new norms are social, they are defined and limited by the platforms within which they arise and may not be sufficient to support democracy.

For example, the COVID-19 pandemic forced many jobs to become fully remote so employees could remain physically distant while still fulfilling their job duties. For employers, remote work introduced new challenges because it was more difficult to tell when an employee

was not working. In traditional office settings, if workers leave their desk too often or for too long employers could easily surmise that the employee was off-task and could therefore be reprimanded. Alternatively, as long as remote workers remained off-camera, they could run errands, clean their house, or engage in self-care without their employer knowing. To combat this problem, employers began tracking their employees' statuses on popular business chat apps like Slack and Microsoft Teams. The programs would automatically change an employee's status to idle or away if the person's mouse had not moved in a certain amount of time. By tracking when an employee was active, idle, busy, or away, employers could reasonably determine if their employees were actively working. In response, many employees began using creative methods to ensure their status remained available or active by connecting their mouse to an oscillating fan or using mouse-jiggling programs that would simulate mouse activity (Smith, 2025).

The issue with these solutions is not that people found creative ways to avoid work – as this often occurs in-person, too – but rather that the solutions are individualized.⁸³ Employees at the same company may be facing the same working conditions that traditionally would have fostered a sense of community that could lead to collective solutions, like unionizing or sending a letter to human resources. Since remote workers are usually alone, in their home, with little to no non-work contact with their fellow employees, the more they rely on individualized solutions

⁸³ For example, several tools exist that make Reddit look like Microsoft Outlook (<https://pcottle.github.io/MSOutlookit/>), Microsoft Office (<https://pcottle.github.io/MSWorddit/>), and, for programmers, shell (<https://redditshell.com/>). Each of these modifications allow users to browse Reddit while appearing to do legitimate work.

to collective problems and the less likely it is that they will learn how to advocate for themselves at work and as citizens in a democracy.⁸⁴

Second, technology changes how norms are internalized. Part of the issue stems from how norms are sanctioned in-person versus online, which I will return to shortly, and part of it is the lack of shared grammar between communities. With little overlap between users on various platforms and a disconnect between a person's on- and offline experiences, it is difficult for people to know what norms exist in what spaces and whether they have any obligation to abide by them, as discussed above. Furthermore, norm internalization is more difficult in digital spaces because of a common psychological phenomenon: the doorway effect. Gabriel A. Radvansky, Sabine A. Krawietz, and Andrea K. Tamplin (2011) state that as a person moves through a doorway or threshold there is a "location-updating effect" that "reduce[s] the availability of information in memory for objects associated with the prior" location (p. 1632). Offline, this effect has been well-documented and often refers to instances where a person goes to another room to retrieve an item but forgets what item they wanted to retrieve upon entering the new room. The authors argue that digital doorways, like switching between windows on a computer or smartphone, between websites, or through posts on social media also result in a similar reduction in memory.

According to Colin Gilboy (2021), the doorway effect also explains why people often turn to their devices to achieve a specific task, like "buy[ing] your best friend a birthday gift," and unwittingly spend the next several hours using social media, answering emails, or playing

⁸⁴ The solution is not to force workers back into in-person environments, as this is bad for both productivity and is unlikely to make workers stay on task. The solution is to create more opportunities for employees to interact in non-work settings to foster a sense of community.

mobile games. Once our brains “adjust to the palette of shiny app icons,” we forget the reason we started looking at our device, or why we reopened the same app we recently closed, in the same way that we often forget why we entered a new room. As such, the doorway effect makes norm internalization more difficult within digital spaces because we are constantly discarding information as we switch between screens and tasks (Gilboy, 2021 para. 1).

Finally, technology changes how norms are enforced by paradoxically making social sanctions both more and less severe than if they occurred offline. For a norm to be enforced, community members must know the norm exists and be willing to sanction people who violate it. Dennis Chong (2000) argues that sanctions are a key component of norm enforcement and internationalization because they help maintain the community’s boundaries as members know what is expected of them and what to expect of others. When enough people fail to enforce the norm, it loses its ability to secure the desired behavior and will eventually erode entirely.

Cristina Bicchieri and her coauthors (2022) argue that norms are “fragile” and liable to break if they are not consistently enforced (p. 60). For Chong (2000), “effective enforcement...depends on whether the targets of the norm are accessible to monitoring and regulation” (p. 205). That is, other people must be able to see or hear the violator break the norm for them to be able to punish someone for breaking it. Others, like Ann J. Abramowitz and Susan G. O’Leary (1990), found that “when punishment” for violating a norm “is delayed” it is less likely to effect change in the violator’s behavior or deter others from also violating the norm. The authors suggest that quick and visible punishment is more likely to secure the desired behavior modification and prevent norm erosion. However, much of the existing research on social sanctions focuses on in-person communities where breaking a norm is corrected through physical

cues, like a sideways glance, a sharp remark, or an elbow to the side which makes it easier for members to either learn from their mistake or from someone else's.

In Emilija Gagrčin and Miriam Milzner's (2023) study of online civility, the authors found that people often avoid enforcing norms online because they "tend to be in an unfocused shallow state of attention" where they either do not recognize norm violations or they do not want to expend the energy to punish others. The authors state that "continuing to scroll past" incivility online is "much less costly and more personally gratifying than engaging in intervention" (p. 9). Correcting norm violations is a costly act because it requires a person to make a claim about the way the world works (e.g., littering is not allowed) and the expectations about how a person should behave in it (e.g., people like *us* do not litter). When I tell another person that they have violated the community's shared values, I am putting my own reputation at risk because I could be misreading the situation or acting without all the facts and may be sanctioned by others for overreacting or misunderstanding.⁸⁵ As a result, users will often rely on "agreeable descriptive norms" such as "incivility is everywhere" and "intervention ends in conflict" to explain why they did not intervene when seeing incivility online (p. 8).⁸⁶

In other research on digital norms, studies show that people would rather self-police than risk incurring social sanctions from others. According to Bail (2022), users will go to great lengths to avoid posting their political views online if they think others will confront them either on- or offline. As previously mentioned, moderates are often sanctioned by those who disagree

⁸⁵ The phenomenon is termed the bystander effect and is a negative by-product of social comparison. People are less likely to intervene because they see that others are not and fear that people will think they are over-reacting or will judge them for getting involved (Bicchieri, 2006). Using interviews, Gagrčin and Milzner (2023) found that users often tried to "justify non-intervention, possibly to create emotional distance and minimize their role" in the situation and absolve themselves of feeling guilt or shame for not intervening (p. 8).

⁸⁶ Internal quotations omitted.

with them and by those who hold more ideologically extreme views which leads them to think that posting online is more trouble than it is worth. In their study, Brian E. Weeks, Audrey Halversen, and German Neubaum (2023) argue that “if someone exists in a more diverse online network, they may be aware that there are many people with whom they disagree” and therefore avoid posting their views online because they “perceive a more hostile opinion climate” than people with more insular networks. The authors found that when users are “fearful of social sanctions” they engage in greater levels of “political self-censorship” or in identity-hiding behaviors like using a pseudonym or posting anonymously (p. 2). However, research has shown that people are often more aggressive when posting anonymously, which makes community development more difficult, and that they frequently avoid discussing politics with others, which directly undermines their role as citizens in a democracy (Kim et al., 2023; Weeks et al., 2023).⁸⁷

Norm enforcement is effective “because, among other things, [people] dislike the social consequences of transgressing” (Bicchieri, 2006, p. 189). Violating a community’s norms results in unpleasant interactions with others that make us feel negative emotions like guilt, resentment, or shame. Joshua Greene (2014) describes guilt and shame as “self-punishing emotions” that help us learn from our mistakes. We naturally want to belong and find acceptance within our community which not only entails reciprocity, we must show care in order to receive it, but also a willingness to abide by the community’s rules. When we violate the community’s norms and are sanctioned for our transgressions, the guilt and shame we feel stay with us to remind us that we must behave accordingly if we want to remain a member. Bicchieri (2006) states that guilt

⁸⁷ This highlights that social sanction is effective for inducing normative compliance. If people did not care about social sanctions, they would behave the same way regardless of whether their posts were attributed to them or not.

and shame can “*signal* that a norm is in place,” but these emotions only have force if we believe “that [the] mutual conformity expectations are legitimate.”⁸⁸ If we do not view someone’s claim on our behavior as legitimate, we will not care if they sanction us, and the norm will have no effect. As a result, normative pressure is reduced “as social distance increases” because we feel less attachment and therefore “tend to care less and less for [their] preferences and expectations” (p. 25).

Paolo Parigi and Warner Henson II (2014) argue that technologically mediated connections, especially on social media, are typically distant and are not defined by their reciprocal nature. People are less likely to view these connections as meaningful and are therefore less likely to view the other person’s expectations as legitimate. Since these relationships are not formative, sanctions often fail to produce the same levels of guilt and shame that encourage people to modify their behavior to remain part of the community because the community holds no meaning for the violator. The person who violated the norm can always move on and find another community to join. As a result, even though online sanctions are common and people can receive angry comments, be downvoted on sites like Reddit and Stack Overflow, can be ignored, muted, temporarily or permanently banned from a group or platform, and, in extreme cases, be SWATed or doxxed, without affective attachment these punishments carry little normative power.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Emphasis in the original.

⁸⁹ SWATting refers to someone on the internet calling the police and stating that another individual is engaging in activities that would justify a SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) police response (Andone, 2019). Gagrčin and Milzner (2023) do not discuss either SWATting or doxxing in their article, but do state that a most people fear “personal attacks” and choose to either avoid posting online or self-censor to avoid sanction (p. 8). Social norms persist because people believe that others are willing to sanction those that violate them. Similar to online, people who break social norms offline also risk violence. For some people, this is enough of a deterrent to prevent them from breaking the norm.

Furthermore, many online communities, like those on Facebook, Twitter, Discord, or Reddit tend to be very large and have a diverse user base. Users on these platforms are more likely to self-censor because they fear social sanctions and use individualized solutions to deal with other users' problematic behavior. For example, most social media platforms allow people to mute or block users that post content the person does not want to see. Rather than engaging with a user who broke a norm, a person can hide them from their feed, leaving the norm violation unsanctioned. However, since norms rely on consistent enforcement, this signals to the community that the conditions of a norm – that it exists and that it should be followed by all community members – do not apply. The more the norm is ignored, the less force it has, and a new more feudalistic or extreme norm will take its place.

For instance, even though muting and blocking are functionally similar, they carry different normative implications. Muting is considered a less offensive method for dealing with unwanted content as it hides the violator's posts without informing them that they have been hidden. The offending user continues to believe that everyone can see their content and no confrontation is needed. The downside is that without confrontation the user has no way of knowing that they violated the community's norms, they are not made to feel guilt or shame and therefore cannot learn from their mistakes to become a more valued member of the community if they wanted to. As a result, muting is more likely to result in the creation of anti-social norms as negative behavior goes unpunished.

Alternatively, blocking is a more obvious sign that a person violated the community's norms. Like muting someone, if I block a person, I am no longer able to see their content, however, it also prevents the person I blocked from seeing my content, too. Blocking often has more real-world consequences than muting someone does as it is a more visible method of

avoiding unwanted content. For example, Bail (2022) found that people who blocked friends or family for posting objectionable content were often confronted, called out online, or bullied by others for blocking content they did not want to see. In his study of blocking, unfollowing, and muting on Twitter, Steffen Krämer (2024) found that most people block others in order to “regulate [their] emotional wellbeing,” but doing so may also threaten democracy and “societal cohesion.” By muting, blocking, or unfollowing, users can curate their online experience so they are no longer exposed to people who might disagree with them which reduces the “cross-cutting exposure and network bridging” that social and political life require (p. 5).⁹⁰

Sherry Turkle (2017) argues that “technology reshapes the landscape of our emotional lives,” because it changes how we interact with one another. How we communicate influences what we discuss and how we view others and ourselves because our identities, values, beliefs and interests are grounded in our attachments to others and developed through social comparison. When we communicate through technology, the structure and design of the platforms we use implicitly shape our connections and, in doing so, change how we create, adopt, and enforce social and democratic norms. Although online sanctions are common, they lack the affective attachment that encourages behavioral change and are therefore unable to sustain the norms necessary for social and political life. People are more likely to mute, block, or unfriend someone rather than confront them, which often means that it is only in extreme cases that a person’s online life impacts their offline one (Neubaum et al., 2021). Ultimately, a person

⁹⁰ Even if a person only uses their device to connect with people they know in real life, they are still influenced by the structure and design of the platforms they use, like the differences in emoji use previously discussed.

is connecting with their device first and another person second so “the performance of connection” is enough (Turkle, 2017, p. 9).

As discussed in Chapter 2.3, existing literature on community and norm formation were written before the many technological changes that have occurred. More recent studies have begun to make the connection between community and technology and show that technology has a significant impact on how we connect, how we view ourselves and others as well as on our memory, critical thinking skills, and emotions (Carr, 2020; Marantz, 2020; Nadler, 2020; Pariser, 2012). Yet, these studies often fail to directly address technology’s effect on how norms are created, adopted, and enforced, with Nathan Schneider’s (2024) book being a notable exception. To address this gap, I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with people aged 22-81 to better understand how technology influences social and democratic norms by changing how people connect and form community.

Appendix C Changing Norms



Figure C.1: Sunshine on the line

Note: Figure C.1 demonstrates the difference between in-person and digital interactions. The person interrupts a video call with people to answer one by nature indicating that they needed to touch grass.



Figure C.2: Descriptive norms across generations



Figure C.3: Subtly encouraging us versus them

Note: Figure C.2 and Figure C.3 reflect how memes have been used to subtly sow division. Memes like these are often shared because they are relatable, not because the person actually believes they are different or better than others. However, the underlying message, particularly in Figure C.3, is that *they* are different than *us* and *we* are better than *them*.



Figure C.4: Doge wallpaper



Figure C.5: Doge budget



Figure C.6: Doge healthcare

*Note: Figure C.4, Figure C.5, and Figure C.6 reflect three doge memes reflect the broad spectrum of uses to which the image was put. In the first image the Shiba Inu's face is hovering over an image of a grassy hill. The text mocks the image because, for many years, Windows' default background was a picture of a grassy hill. By saying things like "much green" and "such nature" the image mocks people who might find the image pleasing or nice enough to be used as their computer's desktop image. In the two following memes, politicians used the meme's format to mock parts of the political process of which they are a part. In Figure C.5, Representative Thomas Massie mocked the Congressional budget process, a role mandated by the U.S. Constitution. The meme does not make a reasoned argument, instead it simply makes fun of the process and the people (of which Massie was one) involved. In Figure C.6, a similar format was used by Representative Steve Stockman during his campaign challenging Senator John Cornyn by implying that Cornyn was not a *real* Republican because he supported the Affordable Care Act.*

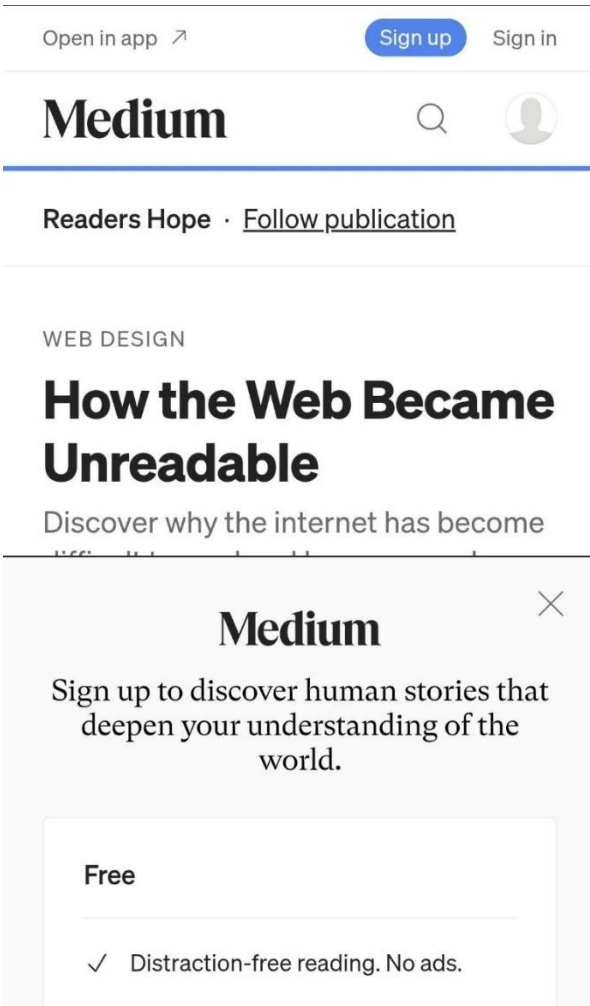


Figure C.7: How the web became unreadable



Figure C.8: Paywalls

Note: Figure C.7 and Figure C.8 reflect how paywalls have affected the internet. Figure C.7 is a screenshot demonstrating the irony of someone writing on Medium complaining about how paywalls have made the internet unreadable when the article itself is behind one. Figure C.8 is a tweet by Matt Jameson expressing frustration that if one wanted to verify content, it is likely that they would not be able to because reputable sources paywall their articles while right-wing or ideologically extreme outlets do not. People are unlikely to pay for content and instead will turn to these open sources for their news.

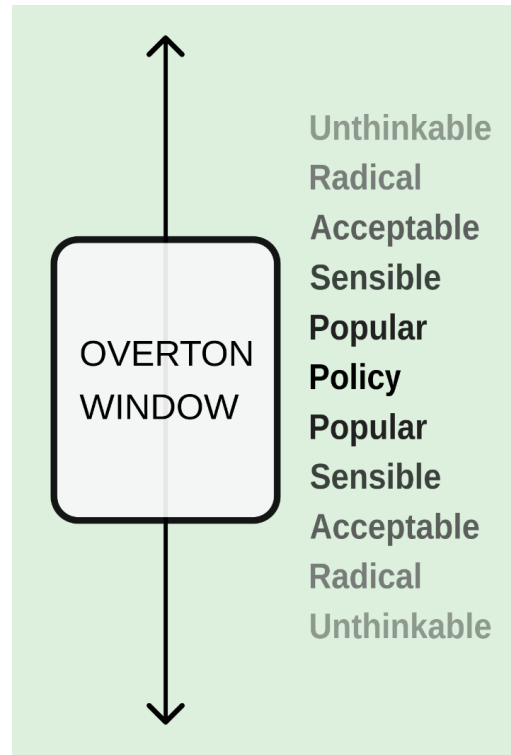


Figure C.9: The Overton window

Note: Joseph Overton argued that all policies fall within a certain window of acceptability. If the window expands, policies that were once unthinkable can become acceptable, sensible, or popular before finally being implemented. *Figure C.9* is a visualization of the Overton window.

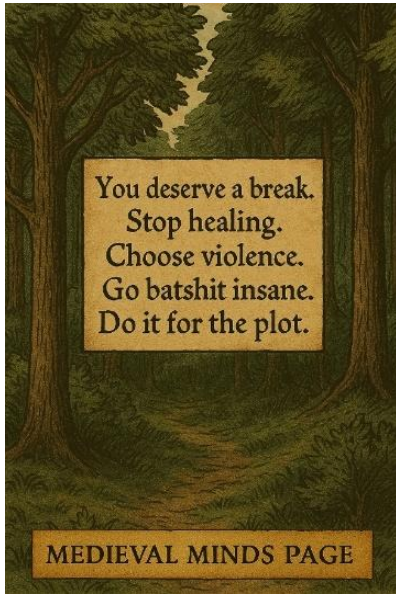


Figure C.10: Do it for the plot



Figure C.11: Violence is not plot

Note: Figure C.10 and Figure C.11 show how doin' it for the gram has changed overtime. People no longer suggest doin' it for the gram but will suggest others do it for the plot. Doing it for the plot memes demonstrate how technology places a barrier between people and the world. Doing something because it is meaningful, useful, violent, kind, or necessary is no longer relevant. All that matters is that it creates an action, as plot points are moments when a story is moved forward by the characters. It also reflects the overall sense of unreality that pervades technologically mediated communications. We are no longer people who engage in actions because that is part of what it means to be human. Instead, we act because we are characters in our own life-stories.

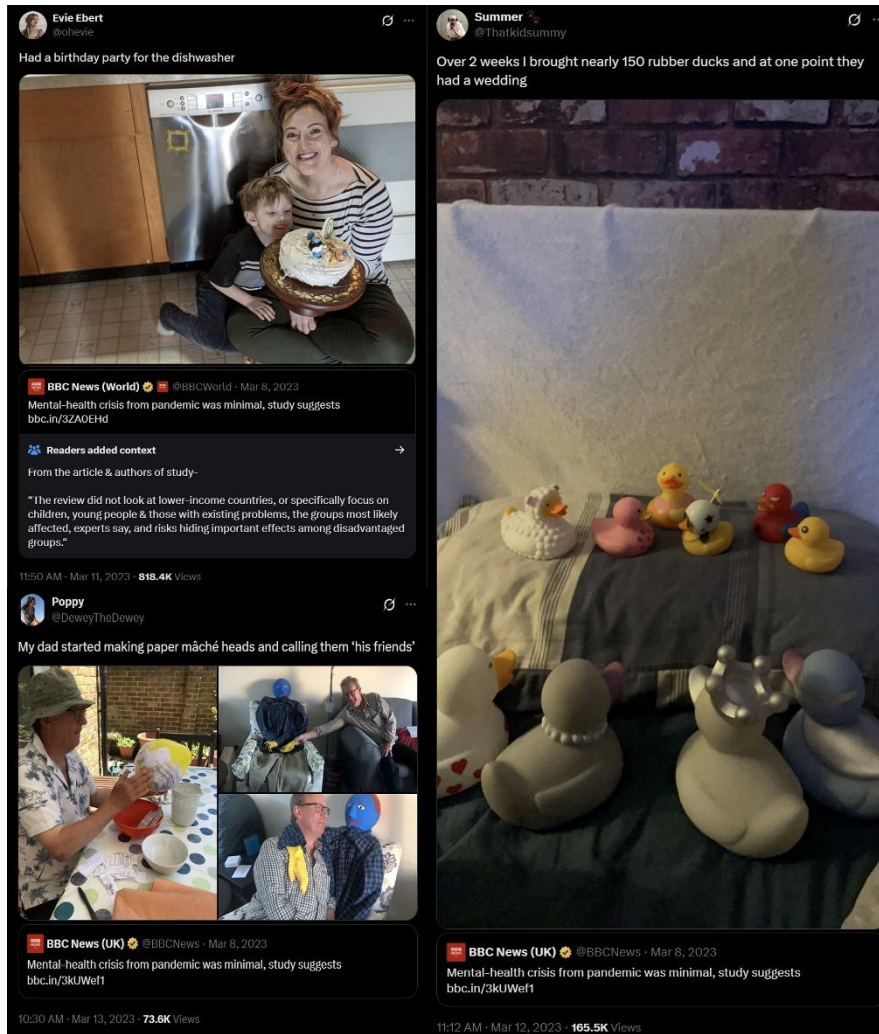


Figure C.12: People mocking the BBC's report on mental health during COVID-19

Note: Figure C.12 shows how social media users can call into question reputable news sources. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported on a study stating that the mental health effects of COVID-19 were minimal. Users responded by sharing instances that cast doubt on the study's findings. Users stated that they celebrated the birthdays and weddings of inanimate objects, like dishwashers and rubber ducks, as well as used paper mâché to create friends.

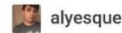


common sad girl
@sadgirlkm

does anyone remember when lol meant
"laughing out loud" instead of "this is to
indicate that this brief text isnt hostile"



Figure C.13: lol, this isn't hostile



alyesque

How do we explain to 40+ year olds online
that you can't just end every sentence with "..."
without conveying a really ominous vibe lol.



alyesque

i love that this post has informed me that
thousands of other people my age are terrified
by totally innocuous messages from parents,
professors, and bosses.

Source: alyesque

154,787 notes



Figure C.14: Ellipses are ominous



im lily reed
@bonesauce94

one time i referenced a meme to this
guy i was dating and he had never
heard of it so i showed him the meme
and his response was "so im just
supposed to memorize all your little
pictures in order to have a
conversation with you?" and not a DAY
goes by,

Figure C.15: All your little pictures

Note: Figure C.13 reflects how digital meaning can change over time. When the acronym "lol" began it was an easy way for users to indicate that they found a message or post funny. Overtime, as people began relying on technology more for connection and the number of messages we receive each day increased, lol became a way to soften a brief text as brevity is often interpreted as hostility. In Figure C.14, the generational differences are apparent. It is more common for users over 40 to use ellipses to indicate they are still thinking and that they are still invested in the text message exchanges. However, younger generations perceive the ellipse as unnecessary and even ominous. Figure C.15 is one woman's experience trying to connect with her partner and shows how technology places a barrier between communicating parties. The woman was speaking a language (one of memes) that the man did not, making it more difficult for them to connect with one another.

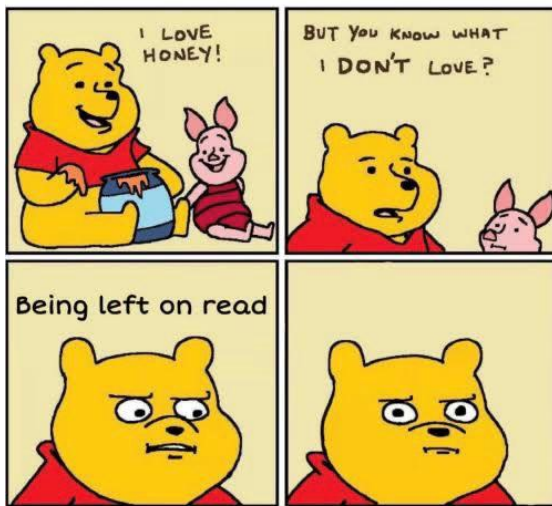


Figure C.16: No one likes being left on read

me trying to find my dignity after i
message someone and get left on
read



Figure C.17: Loss of dignity

Note: Younger generations often joke about being *left on read*. They express feelings of embarrassment and a loss of dignity (*Figure C.16* and *Figure C.17*, respectively), usually because they expressed emotions and the other person ignored them.

The best place to hide a dead body
is page 2 of Google search results.



Figure C.18: Hiding dead bodies

Figure C.19: Infinite scrolling – Extra Fabulous Comics



Figure C.20: Sponsored ads

Note: Figure C.19 shows a comic by Extra Fabulous Comics showing how infinite scrolling exposes users to atrocities, humor, and cute content all at once. Infinite scrolling makes it more difficult for people to connect their online experiences with their offline responsibilities and obligations as it is difficult to know whether one should get involved or care about what they see on the screen. Infinite scrolling was introduced because researchers found that reducing the number of clicks a person has to make increases the likelihood that they will stay on the website. Figure C.18 is an example of how users have joked about infinite scrolling – no one clicks through to page two of Google’s search results making it the best place to hide a dead body. Figure C.20 uses lyrics from Tears for Fears’ song *Mad World* to highlight that the only thing that breaks up infinite scrolling are sponsored ads.



Figure C.21: Cultural differences between out-of-office replies



Figure C.22: Digital Immediacy



Figure C.23: Immediacy is not compatible with how humans live

Note: Figure C.21 demonstrates how norms of immediacy vary depending on the political system or culture within which they arise. European employers are required to provide paid time off to workers whereas U.S. workers have no such guarantees. The underlying value of time off from laboring is different and is reflected in the norms surrounding out-of-office replies. Figure C.22 and Figure C.23 show how users are pushing back against the false sense of immediacy that technology imposes.

● dragonsblowingoutbirthdaycandles

your life is not an optimization problem

● dragonsblowingoutbirthdaycandles

as in you'll never achieve the perfect daily routine, sleep schedule, coping mechanisms, mannerisms, fashion sense etc. even after years and years of healing and improvement and self-discovery. you will never be so good at life that you manage to utilize every waking moment. its great to be productive and all but sometimes you'll suck ass. sometimes you'll take eight hours to be done with a twenty minute job. you'll prioritize the wrong thing. you'll sleep for 12 hrs just to avoid being awake. you'll relapse. and you'll relapse again. you'll forget to turn in the assignment. you'll order too little food. life is far too large and complex for you to even experience it completely, much less try to make sense of and control it. you can't. please give up on that and be at peace with the hours you lose. they are not separate from your life.

Figure C.24: Your life is not an optimization problem

Note: Figure C.24 demonstrates that viewing one's life as an optimization problem inherently devalues it. It also reflects the role norms play in believing one's life can be optimized at all.



Figure C.25: Open – Webcomic Name



Figure C.26: 15-day trial

Me: "Hey! I had an awesome time tonight!
Maybe we can do it again sometime?"

Them:

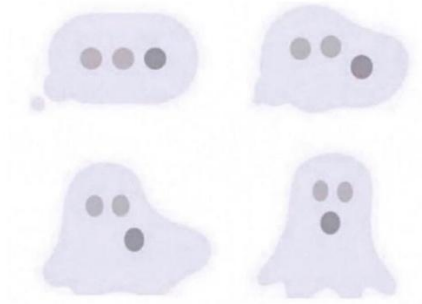


Figure C.27: Ghosted

Note: Figure C.25, Figure C.26, and Figure C.27 are examples of how ghosting has appeared in popular culture through memes. Ghosting refers to intentionally not responding to someone because a person does not want the relationship to continue or because the person shared too much information. It is common on dating sites where it is easier to stop responding than it is to let the person know why they are incompatible.



Figure C.28: Filters – @JosephineLivin

*Note: Figure C.28 shows how technology makes detecting fake or filtered content extremely difficult. Filters are widely available and used to change a person's appearance. Some filters are obvious, *top left*, whereas others are more subtle, *top right* and *bottom left*.*

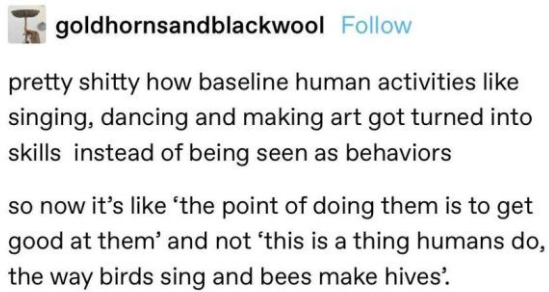


Figure C.29: Baseline human activities



Figure C.30: Tech bro discovers hanging out



Figure C.31: Content killed art



Figure C.32: Businesses on Social Media – Webcomic Name

Note: Figure C.29 is an example of how online sentiments have slowly changed where people are starting to push back against the ironic detachment described by Jedediah Purdy (2000). *Figure C.30* takes the sentiment further by mocking tech bros (a derogatory term for a subset of men who work in the tech industry) for inventing *hanging out*. Hanging out is an inherent human activity. We naturally seek out others with whom we can form affective attachment. *Figure C.31* and *Figure C.32* show how sentiments have also changed regarding the purpose of posting online. *Figure C.31* shows how the push to create *content* has changed people's relationship with art. Artistic expression is a baseline human activity, like how birds sing, yet, when the motivation is to create content, art is no longer about expression but about monetization. *Figure C.32*, by Webcomic Name, also shows how businesses use social media to monetize things people naturally do, like form connections with others or create art.



Figure C.33: On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog – Peter Steiner

Note: Peter Steiner's comic, *Figure C.33*, demonstrates how connection is sometimes more difficult when it is mediated. People can connect with entirely fictitious identities or, as the comic suggests, even dogs.

4 It was a Different Kind of Bad

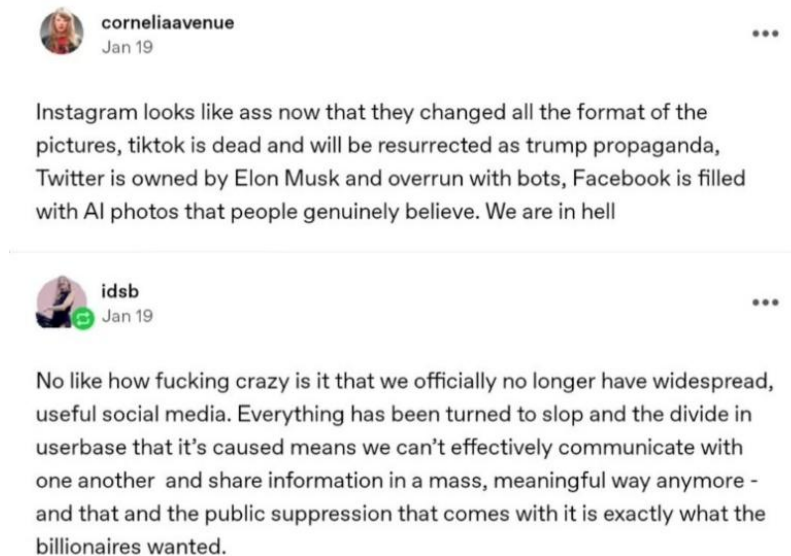


Figure 4: Hell

Measuring community and norms is not always a straightforward process. Most extant literature on community focuses on a particular geographic location, like counties in Iowa (Lekwa et al., 2007) or new housing developments in Australia (French et al., 2014), and often use specific features (e.g., public places or third spaces Boessen et al., 2018; Oldenburg, 1999, respectively) or overall accessibility (e.g., Lund, 2002 investigated whether places are pedestrian or bicycle friendly) as proxy for community cohesion. Although invaluable, focusing on a person's physical environment fails to account for the various ways in which people now connect via digital technology that are neither bound to a single location nor limited by time.

Within the social sciences, researchers seeking to understand normative behavior often rely on survey methodology to trace public opinion about specific actions over time, as is the case with the World Values Survey, America's Barometer, and Bright Line Watch. Within these surveys, participants respond to a battery of questions meant to uncover whether they believe

certain actions are justifiable and under which conditions. For example, the World Values Survey (WVS, n.d.) asks respondents whether they think suicide is ever justifiable. The question's aim is to understand how public opinion on issues like physician-assisted suicide have changed over time, which can be indicative of changing social norms.⁹¹

Other surveys, like America's Barometer (Center for Global Democracy, n.d.), try to ascertain people's knowledge of and support for democratic norms. For example, in 2023, America's Barometer asked participants to state whether they believed it was "justifiable for politicians [the participant] support[s] to act outside the law" if politicians "on the other side act outside the law," too.⁹² The question is designed to better understand whether people will support anti-democratic actions to further their ideological goals. That is, are people willing to break democratic norms to achieve political victory.

The problem with survey questions, however, is that they presuppose people consistently have beliefs, values, and interests that are already pre-formed and can be properly captured through a specific set of responses. As argued throughout the previous chapters, a person's beliefs, values, and interests are influenced by their social lives. Communities are a vital source of social, political, and normative education and it is difficult to ascertain their impact on an individual's belief systems (a notable exception being: Sinclair, 2012, who investigated the impact of social ties on a person's political beliefs and behaviors using nationally representative data).

⁹¹ See: *Figure D.1* in Appendix D for a graph reflecting the change in people's opinion about physician assisted suicide.

⁹² See: *Table D.1* in Appendix D for a cross-tabulation table for this question.

Although Sinclair (2012) was able to uncover network effects using data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), she admits that, while suggestive, causality remained difficult to establish because someone who donates money to a campaign, for example, may influence another to donate or the second person may have donated regardless of their attachment to others. In the latter case, Sinclair states it is possible that the reason her results show that two people who know each other often donate to political campaigns is because people with the means to donate often associate with one another, regardless of their willingness to donate or their impact on one another. Sinclair (2012) and Chris Bail (2022) have argued that one of the biggest challenges in studying a person's social network is homophily, or the tendency for people to associate with others who are similar to them.

Survey methodology and the causal inferences that are made through statistical tests are invaluable for social sciences. However, while surveys can tell researchers *whether* something occurred, it is more difficult to discern *why* something occurred. Using the donation example, surveys can tell us that two people have donated to political campaigns, but they cannot tell us why they did it. Sometimes surveys will use open-ended questions that allow respondents to enter reasons for their answers in a text box. These short response areas are often ignored or misused, wherein participants will use the space to discuss something unrelated to the project's scope or the question referenced. If participants do provide reasons, researchers may have difficulty drawing connections between respondent's answers due to language differences or depth of response. Furthermore, scholars often have to infer what a participant might have meant because they are unable to follow up or clarify what a person has written once the survey is completed.

Alternatively, interviews allow researchers to connect with their participants in a one-on-one setting and ask any clarifying questions in real time. Interviews are also better for uncovering the *why* behind a person's beliefs, values, or behaviors. In a survey, a person can tell a researcher that they have unfollowed others online, but an interview can elicit an in-depth response as to what prompted the action. Finally, unlike survey methodology, which presupposes people have beliefs, values, and interests that are already pre-formed and can be properly captured through a specific set of responses, interviews allow researchers to uncover where a person developed their beliefs and values and whether participants think it impacts their relationships or politics.

As such, I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews to explore in-depth how people understand both their position and role in their social and political lives.⁹³ I developed a set of questions that allowed me to investigate people's behavior both online and in-person and whether they saw these two modes of connection as interchangeable.⁹⁴ As previously mentioned, online sanctions are often more severe (blocking) than they are in-person (avoiding someone). The questions I asked allowed me to examine whether participants consider the various methods of disconnecting (ghosting, muting, blocking, unfriending) as having different use cases.

Furthermore, I formulated questions that directly asked participants what they would do when exposed to different behaviors both on- and offline to uncover whether technology makes it more difficult for people to connect their online experiences with their responsibilities as community members and democratic citizens. By using a robust set of questions about a person's

⁹³ University of California, Irvine Institutional Review Board affirmed exempt status on May 16, 2025.

⁹⁴ See: Interview Questions in Appendix E for the list of questions used during interviews.

relationships, their community, their online experiences, and their political beliefs I was able to elicit responses that illuminated the complex social negotiations that occur within the social sphere, how these negotiations have become more common online, and how that has impacted the creation and maintenance of a robust democratic culture in the United States.

Since technology has advanced exponentially in the last 30 years, my target population consisted of adults (minimum age 18) who live or work in the United States. By having a broad population from which to choose, I could recruit participants from different generations. Older generations, like the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, and Generation X, grew up in a time prior to the internet and cell phones. Millennials provide a different perspective since the oldest Millennials would remember a time before the internet and the youngest members would remember their lives prior to on-demand content. Finally, Generation Z has only known a world of hyper-connectivity. As my dissertation is focused on how technology has changed our social relationships which, in turn, affects our political lives, it was not necessary to restrict the target population to United States citizens because documentation is not a prerequisite to understanding what role a person's family and friends play in the formation of their beliefs, values, and interests. As such, the only geographic limitation was that participants must either live or work in the United States.

During recruitment, I used Millennials (born between 1981-1996) as a reference category because this generation is balanced between the old ways of connecting and forming community (in-person or through a landline phone) and the new ways of connecting through text messaging, social media, and synchronous video meeting software. Using Millennials as the middle ground, I segmented the generations into Pre-Millennial, Millennial, and Post-Millennial with the goal of recruiting 10 participants from each category, for a total of 30 interviews. Although useful during

recruitment, these categories are nominally important as each generation has experienced at least one technological innovation within their lifetime that has impacted how people connect and form community.

Table 1: Referral Methods

Source	Number of Participants
Referral	16
Discord	7
Facebook	3
BlueSky	2
Instagram	2
Not Scheduled	2

To recruit participants, I relied on online snowball sampling by posting a flyer on social media apps including Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Bluesky (Twitter alternative), and Discord.⁹⁵ The flyer was also shared with professors at the Universities of California, Irvine and Davis, Texas Tech, Georgetown, and Stanford Universities who shared it with their undergraduate students. In addition, participants were encouraged to share the flyer with friends and family whom they thought might be interested in participating. All participants received a \$25 Visa gift card to compensate them for their time. Most of my participants were referred to the study by friends or family (n = 16), seven were recruited through Discord, three were recruited from Facebook, two participants each were recruited from Bluesky and Instagram. Of the 30 interviews sought, two participants failed to schedule an interview after initial contact. See *Table 1: Referral Methods* for a breakdown of these categories.

⁹⁵ See: *Figure E.1* in Appendix E for a copy of the recruitment flyer.

Interviews were semi-structured with three core questions: 1) How are people connecting and forming communities? 2) Do participants recognize normative behavior? 2a) If so, how do they understand and enforce norms in person and online? 3) What obligations and responsibilities do participants think they owe to others as community members and as citizens? Twenty-nine interviews were conducted via Zoom and were recorded and transcribed using Zoom’s built-in features. One interview was conducted in-person and was recorded using a voice note on a cell phone that also included a built-in transcription feature. Transcripts were manually verified and minimally cleaned by removing stop words, like “um,” “err,” and “like,” and to improve clarity. Finally, select quotes were extracted using Atlas.ti, a robust qualitative coding software.⁹⁶

Table 2: Participant Statistics

Generation	N Participants	Category	Participant Age Range
The Silent Generation (1928-1945)	1	Pre-Millennial	49-81
Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	2		
Generation X (1965-1980)	2		
Millennials (1981-1996)	19	Millennial	30-40
Generation Z (1997-2012)	6	Post-Millennial	22-27
* Note: The years for each generation come from Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, 2019). ** I have not disaggregated by gender identity due to the small sample size. It is not possible to maintain participant privacy and identify gender identity within each generation or category.			

⁹⁶ The limited number of interviews and question construction meant it was not necessary to develop a detailed coding scheme as I was the only coder. I highlighted pertinent answers and used Atlas.ti’s built-in tagging feature to tag different platforms mentioned within the transcripts.

The target length of the interviews was between 1 and 1.5 hours, with the shortest interview lasting 26 minutes and the longest being 2 hours and 45 minutes. The average interview length was one hour and 17 minutes. Participant ages ranged from 22 to 81 (Generation Z to the Silent Generation, respectively), with a majority being Millennials (n = 19).⁹⁷ I did not reach sample saturation within my three categories, however I was able to obtain a diversity of participants across generations, gender identities, locations, and lived experiences.⁹⁸ Within my sample, 17 identified as female, 10 identified as male, and three identified as non-binary, non-gender conforming, transgender, or other. Descriptive statistics about participants are available in *Table 2: Participant Statistics*.

All respondents answered each question either directly or as part of their response to another question. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, I did ask additional questions for clarification and to uncover underlying motivations and beliefs associated with a person's answers. As such, some questions were not standard across interviews.

In relation to my three core questions, nearly every interviewee, regardless of generation, shared similar views on how the internet has changed how they connect and form community, whether they are more likely to recognize and enforce norms in-person or online, and their

⁹⁷ Significant effort was made to recruit more participants from Generation Z. However, most potential Gen Z participants declined to participate because they believed that one hour spent on Zoom was too long. Instead, several stated they would be potentially willing to answer a few questions in a survey. This response is telling considering the answers given by members of Gen Z who were willing to participate. Several Gen Zers who participated in an interview expressed that they did not use technology in the same way that their friends do, often pointing to a dislike of short form content and desire for more in-depth communications with others through voice or video calls or, better, in-person. See: *Figure E.2* in Appendix E for an example of the type of responses received from members of Gen Z that declined to participate.

⁹⁸ The demographic questions were intentionally limited to birth year and gender identity to protect interviewee privacy as much as possible given the Trump administration's assault on people with disabilities and non-citizens. I retained gender as a demographic question to use proper pronouns when quoting participants.

understanding of their obligations and responsibilities as members of both a community and a democracy. Although most users stated that technology was their primary way of staying in contact with friends and family, a recurring theme was that the internet, and social media in particular, no longer promoted social connections and instead privileged bots, spammers, and corporations. Additionally, many interviewees stated that they would intervene if a friend broke a norm in-person but would not if the violation occurred in a digital space.⁹⁹ Finally, all participants stated that they believed the United States was going in the wrong direction and that the nation's political community was fractured. In the following sections, I discuss the specific questions I asked, how participants responded, and what it means within the project's larger context and implications.

4.1 It's no longer about connection

The first thing to establish when attempting to answer my core questions is how people view themselves in relation to their social circle. To do so, I asked participants how many close friends they had, whether they believed that social relationships were important in a person's life, and whether they felt a sense of belonging and membership in the place where they currently live. The motivating logic behind these questions is two-fold. First, it allowed me to build a rapport with my interviewees as it gave them an opportunity to discuss the people and places with which they felt the most affective attachment. Second, it illuminated how people viewed their social connections and whether they believed these connections were influential in their conception of themselves as members of a community and a democracy.

⁹⁹ I am unable to quantify the exact number because some participants did not answer these questions, or they answered in passing while responding to another question. However, there is a consistent pattern across interviews where offline sanctions were seen as more dangerous and online ones were not worth the effort.

As discussed in Chapter 2, people are evolutionarily predisposed to consider their family and friends before considering other community members. Existing research shows that a person's beliefs and values are influenced by the socialization they receive from their family members, so it is important to consider whether the impact of online communities is eclipsed or even replaced by the norms that are created and enforced within the family (Barker & Tinnick, 2006; Hyman, 1959; Jennings & Niemi, 1968, 2014). Early studies sought to investigate whether a child's political views were a "carbon copy" of the parent's and found that, while parents exert considerable influence on a child's political views, the socialization process is varied and complex (Jennings & Niemi, 1968, p. 183). Richard Niemi and M. Kent Jennings (1991) argue that direct transmission of a parent's beliefs to their child is unlikely, but that "parental party loyalties surely [have] much to do with the direction of their children's initial pathways" (p. 986). That is, a child is likely to adopt similar beliefs to their parents, but those beliefs will change through the life cycle as the child becomes more socially and politically mature.

M. Kent Jennings and Richard G. Niemi (1968) also argue that children's political views change in response to "rapid socio-technical" progress. In 1968, when the authors were writing, television had quickly become the dominant medium by which people learned about others and the world. Pictures and stories from the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement streamed into people's houses and allowed them to experience the suffering of people whom they were unlikely to meet and see places they were unlikely to visit. Television transformed how people viewed themselves and the world around them and how they interpreted their role in it.

Recognizing the media's transformative power, Niemi and Jennings argued that "the content and form of the mass media and communication channels" also have significant impact on children and are "phenomena over which the family and school have relatively little control" (p. 184).

The internet has similarly transformed how we view ourselves and others, as discussed in Chapter 3, by becoming the primary way in which people connect with others, form community and consume the news. A parent's influence on a child's political views, while significant, is waning, because children can live entirely distinct lives in digital spaces without their parent's knowledge or influence.

For example, throughout 2023 children actively protested on video games like Roblox and Minecraft against the United States' support of Israel. Many joined online demonstrations because they were not allowed to attend in-person events, either out of concern for their safety or because their political beliefs were different than their family's. Although it would be easy to dismiss digital protests as meaningless, many children are using online spaces to be politically active in a world where "adults – or those who have political power – try to depoliticize" them (Maloy, 2023, para. 11).¹⁰⁰ Even though parents, families, schools, and friends are all sources of political socialization, research has long held that the media also plays an important role in the development of political beliefs and willingness to be politically active (Gierzynski, 2018; Jennings & Niemi, 1968; Postman, 2005). As we become more reliant on digital technology, it is likely that digital spaces will become greater sources of political socialization. Therefore, it is critical to track these transitions and their impact on how political and social norms are developed and enforced.

Once I established a rapport with the interviewees, I asked them more pointed questions about how they connect and form community, with an emphasis on in-person versus online

¹⁰⁰ Quote by Jacquelyn van Stekelenburg, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, as cited in *The kids are alright: why young people are protesting in virtual worlds* (Maloy, 2023).

connection and community. The questions were designed to uncover how and why interviewees used technology to either meet or stay in touch with others and whether they believed in-person and digital connections were interchangeable. Most participants stated that technology has allowed them to keep in touch with people whom they would have otherwise lost contact, but it was not a substitute for in-person interaction where they could get the full experience of being in another's presence.

Finally, I asked participants about their platform use. Many platforms are functionally interchangeable (e.g., TikTok versus YouTube Shorts versus Instagram Reels, all of which are short-form video content), yet there are generational differences both between and within platforms. Interviewees were more likely to have private accounts where they can choose who has access to their content and are more likely to connect and form community using invite-only platforms, like Discord, because they no longer feel like the internet or social media is for people. Instead, many stated that the internet has become overrun with bots, ads, and corporations that have transformed it into something necessary, but less fun than it once was.

Interviewees reported that they had between one and 15 close friends with six being the average number. However, the number of close friendships only reflects a small portion of what these relationships mean to the interviewees, if anything at all. For example, when asked whether he believed that friendships are important in a person's life, Steven,¹⁰¹ a Millennial, stated, "I know that they are, but, like, it doesn't feel as much to me." According to Steven, he has six close friends, but that his "wife actually needs to actively encourage me to maintain relationships" because "when people leave my life, it's not a big deal." Thus, while Steven has

¹⁰¹ All names have been changed to protect interviewee privacy.

several people whom he calls his close friends, he does not view those relationships as either necessary or formative.

When asking participants to define what friendship entailed, some said they had never thought about it, while others, like Joseph, a Pre-Millennial, gave a negative definition of friendship at first.¹⁰² Joseph stated that he thinks “it’s a misnomer to think that your family, or particularly in my case, my wife, can be everything, even though they’re, you know, [of] utmost importance, and who I would speak with, just in general, about everything.” For Joseph, friendships were important because family and significant others could not be “everything” to someone.

Yet, when I asked Joseph how many close friends he had, he noted the irony and said he had one close friend, his wife, because his “definition of friend is pretty tight, pretty close.” Even though he has a “pile of acquaintances” with whom he has spent “years and years and years and years” with he still considers them acquaintances. He admitted that “many people would say, ‘well, they’re your friends,’ and it’s like, ‘well, yes and no, my idea of friend is pretty narrow.’” When pressed on what makes his wife a friend and other people an acquaintance, Joseph replied, “she’s stuck with me. I’m not sure anybody else is.”

Joseph has complicated feelings about friendships. He states that having other people’s support is valuable, because “cheerleading turns out to be pretty important in the end,” but when I asked why it is important, he focused on the material aspects of friendship. Joseph said that a lot of the people he meets are related to his current business project, so other people’s support is

¹⁰² I have opted to use the Pre-Millennial descriptor for members of this category to protect privacy. One participant was from the Silent Generation (1928-1945) and there were two participants in each the Baby Boomer (1946-1964) and X Generations (1965-1980) as reported in *Table 2: Participant Statistics*.

important because “it gives me a sense that we’re heading in the right direction from a marketing point of view, from a market point of view, from a utility point of view, and so those things are all important.” I asked Joseph whether his acquaintances mattered from an attachment point of view or whether he felt any fondness or care towards them. He quickly responded, “oh, of course. I mean I wouldn’t be human if I didn’t, but that doesn’t mean they’re going to run into a burning building [to rescue me]. Maybe, maybe somebody would, I don’t know.” Although Joseph acknowledges that caring about others is part of human nature, he maintains that friendship entails an obligation to remain loyal to the point where someone would risk their life, whether literally or metaphorically, for another person.

Charlie, a 32-year-old Millennial, also defined friendship in instrumental terms. Charlie believes that friendship is about sharing resources with one another, stating that “it’s really important to have a strong collection of friends, because I think they can provide alternative viewpoints, and they can provide help and resources when you need [it].” However, unlike Joseph, Charlie often finds it “hard to draw the line between the ways I develop community and friendship, in some ways” because “there’s like a sudden level of value sharing that is necessary for community” that is often stronger for friends. The “shared values” they have with their friends “will often also come with commitments to other people in the community” and it is difficult to distinguish where friendships end and community begins.

Similarly, Trevor, 26 and a member of Generation Z, stated that friendship is “above all else, some common ground, being able to share, whether it’s ideas or interests or any kind of like common ground that you can relate to someone” or at least “as long as you relate to someone, I think there’s potential for friendship.” For Trevor, friendship is more than the exchange of goods and services, it is choosing to have someone in your life, its “volition or drive that brings you to

that person” rather than “circumstance.” Nicole, who is at the very end of the Millennial generation, also believes that friendships are “extremely important” and “necessary for life” because “God created us to be social creatures.” We are driven to connect with others and “we thrive with others and are meant to be with others” because it “take[s] a village to support people and raise people and, you know, help people get through life.”

When asked to describe what made a group a community, interviewee answers ranged from the physical location where they lived to more abstract conceptions. One interviewee, Charlie, had moved a lot for both education and work. They had lived on multiple continents and told me about how American norms were oftentimes different from the places where they lived. As a child, Charlie resisted their country’s “anti-exceptionalist” norm where “anyone being super successful, unless they’re a sports person, is generally considered to be like false,” as in a fake or untrustworthy person. However, they stated that “being away from a space in which that was the norm has made it more apparent to me how much I did actually have that norm.” It was only when Charlie left the norm that they realized how much they had internalized it.

For Charlie, a shared set of values or norms is all part of community membership and “going back to a place where I’d be surrounded” by people who shared those values and norms “would be home” to them. Charlie’s answers illuminated how communities are defined by the shared values, interests, and norms that bind the group into a cohesive unit, as discussed in Chapter 2. The sense of belonging Charlie feels when they are around people with similar ideals was a common theme among participants.

For example, Janet, 40, stated that community is about putting her faith and care into the people in her life whether they are online or in person, though she stated that she feels better when she is with “her people” in-person. When making her point, Janet referenced a popular

movie, *Thor: Ragnarök*, stating that community “isn’t a place, it’s a people.” Janet explained that she had moved a lot during her life which is how she “learned the impermanence of place” in addition to the “historical trauma of impermanence in place” that she shares with other members of her culture. She stated that when she is with other members of her culture, she is home, or when she is with her husband and dogs, she is home, or when she is with her friends, that becomes her home and her community. Community, to Janet, is the affective attachment one feels towards the people in their life regardless of whether they live in physical proximity to one another.

Like Charlie, Janet believes it is the shared interests and values that people have with one another that are maintained through norms that determine whether someone is part of a community, which is not necessarily tied to one’s physical neighborhood. Janet stated that it is possible to form community online, especially considering she met her husband through an online video game, but she feels more at ease when she is physically present with those whom she considers to be part of her community. Janet’s community can be where she currently lives, visiting friends or family, or when she is back in her home state as long as the people who she considers members are there, too.

I asked interviewees whether it was possible to form community with people they have never met in person. Many said it was possible, but that it was often more difficult because, as Nathan states, “on Discord, where you can’t see anybody else, or in a Teams meeting at work, where you don’t really see their face, because no one has their camera on, it can be a little harder to open up” in a way that allows for relationships to form. Nicole and Kristen held similar views about in-person versus technologically mediated connections. For Nicole, something is missing when talking to someone online. She stated that “seeing people face-to-face, the emotions,

talking, walking, and exploring the world together” is “more feasible in person than it is online” and it often feels more real than just communicating with someone online. Kristen, 22, stated that “the real connection is when you’re in person, and that’s kind of when all the technology is just biding your time until you get to that.” Technology, for Kristen, is a tool that helps people stay in contact until they can meet up in person. Although Kristen does have people in her life that she only talks to through technology, she states that they are more “one-on-one connections, rather than a full-fledged community.”

Kristen also says it is “absolutely possible” to form community online, especially when someone does not have an in-person community upon which they can rely. She told me about a friend of hers that lives in a repressive community where her friend is unable to fully express himself. The people in his physical community would not accept him if he shared certain aspects of his personality or identity, so connecting online is “definitely a mechanism for survival.” Online has become “his safe space” where “he can join an actual community of people that he identifies with, and he can feel welcomed and safe.” Trevor expressed a similar reason for forming community online. According to Trevor, family and friends are extremely important to a person’s life but admitted that he is careful not to share some aspects of himself with the people he knows offline for fear of being judged. Trevor’s interests are important to him but often carry social stigma that he “doesn’t want to deal with.”

Instead, he chooses to find like-minded people online rather than try to change the minds of those he knows in person. When I asked whether he believes hiding certain parts of himself has impacted his relationships with his friends or family, he hesitated and stated that “I am as genuine as possible. I’m just careful about which parts that I show,” which is common for people to do both in-person and online. As discussed in Chapter 3.3, people often choose different

aspects of themselves to share in varied social settings to find the people with whom they can connect and form community. It is only when these communities impact a person's ability to relate to non-members that selective sharing becomes problematic; a problem that Trevor does not seem to have.

According to Trevor, he feels a sense of belonging with the people he knows in-person as well as the people he only knows online because it is sometimes easier to post something, "close the app and forget about it," and "then open it later, when I'm ready mentally." Another member of Gen Z, Taylor, stated that they "used to only prefer talking to people online" because they "felt like [they] were getting misconstrued often" in their face-to-face interactions. Digital communications provided a barrier between themselves and others that gave them greater control over how they were perceived. Generation Z is the second of the Digital Native generations, which also includes Millennials (1981-1996), Generations Alpha (2013-2024), and Beta (starting in 2025), and have only known a world of hyperconnectivity. Several members of Gen Z that I interviewed shared a similar, yet paradoxical, relationship with technology.

For example, Taylor joined Instagram, a popular photo sharing app, when they were 12 years old before they reached the platform's age of consent.¹⁰³ When asked about it, Taylor laughed and said, "yeah, I straight up lied." They stated that their relationship with the app is "kind of complicated" because at first, "I had my own personal account, and then I found out about like fandom accounts" where people post memes or niche-specific content and often amass thousands, if not millions, of followers. When Taylor first joined Instagram, they had a personal

¹⁰³ Most social media platforms operate on an honor system where the user inputs their date of birth as a form of age verification. Many children lie about their date of birth so that they can join these sites as most social media sites require users to be at least 13 years old to join.

account, but sometime during middle school they “converted” their personal account to a fandom one and “made a second personal account for other people to follow.”

I asked what motivated the change causing Taylor to laugh and say they were “after the number count online,” not necessarily to get “the attention from followers,” but rather as a form of street credibility in-person. “What I was doing in middle school,” Taylor continued, “by the way, is super lame, was walking around like ‘I have an account on Instagram that has 2,000 plus followers.’ But, like, what’s awful about that, which makes it worse, is that I was going to middle school with kids who had like 500 to 700 followers naturally.” According to Taylor, they “wanted to have that massive following,” but knew they were not “going to get it through having friends, so I tried to get it through strangers.” In my interviews with Gen Z, it became apparent that social media was not necessarily meant to connect people with each other to help them develop formative relationships. Instead, the number of followers a person has become its own descriptive norm. Users with high follow counts have “bragging rights” that allow them to gain credibility or acceptance with others in their age range.

Taylor’s relationship with social media is still complicated. They currently have two active Instagram accounts, one for friends and one for family, because, as they put it, “my family doesn’t mind their own fucking business.” Part of the reason for the dual accounts is because Taylor wants to share some things with their friends that they do not necessarily want their family to see. Another part reflects a deeper reliance on technology that is sometimes in conflict with the platform’s purpose. One of the main reasons for social media sites is to share content with friends and family and have them react, either by liking or commenting. However, for Taylor, this behavior annoys them. They do not mind if someone likes their post, but “if I post to my story or whatever, and somebody swipes up and like replies to it, and it opens a personal DM

[direct message], I'm like 'get the fuck out of here.'" When I asked why it bothers them, Taylor stated, "I don't like when people talk to me about my life." For Taylor, the purpose of Instagram is not to amass followers or get likes anymore. Now, they prefer to use it as a digital diary where every few months they will sign in, "dump a bunch of photos and disappear for a couple more months."

I asked Taylor why they posted on Instagram at all if they did not want people to interact with their content or, at least, why they did not turn off commenting on their posts. Taylor stated, "I don't know, because sometimes it's harmless, sometimes it doesn't matter," reflecting a mixed relationship with technology. On one hand, Taylor shares intimate details of their life on Instagram, like when they "posted a memorial for my dog" after he had passed away. On the other hand, when they posted the memorial, they were "kind of hoping nobody would interact with it." They "wanted [people] to see it and to know that my dog had passed and that he wasn't with us so that they wouldn't ask, but I also didn't want them to be like my condolences, because I just don't need that." Instagram is a public diary where Gen Z can share their most intimate and vulnerable moments with others, but it is not meant to be where others can share in the grief, joy, or meaning with them. Posting online is like sending a family newsletter at Christmas or putting up a flyer, it is meant to update others, not create community.

Interviewees stated that Instagram was the most commonly used platform across generations with Facebook being the second most common. However, many users noted that they no longer used their Facebook accounts because of design changes to the platform. Nathan, 31, said he stopped using the platform "when they rolled out their 'Hey! It is now mandatory for all your stuff to get fed through A.I.'" policy because he disagreed with it. Facebook's A.I. policy was the last straw, Nathan says, because before that it had become "more and more inauthentic. I

can see things in the order of importance, but it's not even importance to me. It's importance that has been ascribed to what I would find important, and it's not normally correct or accurate."

Generation Z was less candid in their disdain for the site. Kristen, 22, said "Facebook was always just very like old fashioned in my head" and "[it] is just, like, a dumpster fire of a social media site now." Millennials and Gen-Z both stated that they thought Facebook was geared more towards older generations, especially Baby Boomers. However, in my interviews, Pre-Millennials were equally likely to state that they had stopped using Facebook. Caroline, a Pre-Millennial, stated that there's "you know, just chit chat. 'Here's the meal I had at Red Robin' and it just doesn't interest me." For Caroline, Facebook is just something to check to see "which of my friends have died or are sick or whatever," echoing Taylor's sentiments about Instagram. The social aspect and community building potential of the site had disappeared. As a result, even though Facebook is one of the most dominant social networking sites, interviewees expressed that it was no longer for connection and was instead a way for Meta to collect user data or push advertisements on them.

Since the two main social media sites, Instagram and Facebook, are no longer used for community building, many have turned to texting through short-message systems (i.e., their cell phones, $n = 19$), Discord ($n = 16$), WhatsApp ($n = 9$), and Facebook Messenger ($n = 8$). The difference between platforms like Facebook and Discord is that the latter is invite-only and is often seen as more controlled or intimate. Although Discord servers can have thousands of members, users have to either know someone or be part of the same community (e.g., a UCI student) to be able to join. Interviewees stated they preferred to reach out to people directly rather than, as Steven put it, "talking at people" through social media or forum sites like Reddit.

However, research on physical communities, as discussed in Chapter 2.2 shows that private spaces are not sufficient for engendering the cross-demographic coalitions that foster an overall sense of belonging and attachment to one's community. A group chat or Discord server is the online equivalent of a gated community or private space, like paid gyms and coffees shops where access to the space is controlled. Curated online spaces also limit the types of connections that form between people, because it is difficult to filter out what matters. Even in smaller Discord servers comprised of friends and friends-of-friends, Ethan stated he does not "pay attention to the general chat, because it's like a bunch of schizophrenic children shot gunning each other. Like this is insane." For Ethan, there is too much information to keep up with, unless a person chooses to constantly monitor the chat.

Ethan's observation about Discord was reflected by others when asked whether they believed the internet has changed since they started using it. Caroline, who started using the internet around 1995 when America Online was popular, said the internet has "changed in the way that there's just so much more out there. There's so much stuff out there, so many people, everybody's talking and putting in their two cents and I think you just see the world, you see the extremes." One interviewee, Eileen, 30 and a Millennial, said the amount of information available "does sort of dehumanize the person that you're talking to, because they're just kind of flattened into another profile" that makes it easy to ignore "the completeness of that person." I return to the idea that people are dehumanized online in Section 4.3 when discussing how technology has made it difficult to connect what happens online with our responsibilities and obligations as members of a community and a democracy.

Many interviewees expressed how the internet has become almost soulless, where real-human people were being pushed out in favor of advertisements and artificial intelligence.

Kristen, a Millennial, reminisced about how on the internet “you used to be able to find websites that were just pure passion projects, and now it’s like people have to post their blogs on Substack or Patreon.” Substack and Patreon are both paywalled services where only people who are willing to pay can view the content that someone else posts.¹⁰⁴ Taylor, who started using the internet at around six or seven years old, expressed a similar disappointment over the asocial nature of the modern internet. Taylor believes “there’s less public spaces available online that aren’t, like, overrun by companies and ads.” Everything, they state, “is behind a paywall” and, more troubling, “there are no safe spaces for children online” where kids could talk to other children their age.¹⁰⁵

The internet’s current emphasis on advertising, artificial intelligence, and personalization were common reasons why people felt the internet was no longer about being social, even when using social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat. Interviewees across generations expressed nostalgia for the way the internet used to be. For Pre-Millennials, it was the size of the internet that they missed. When fewer people were on the internet, it felt more personal and like it was a real, global community. For Millennials, the internet was formative. Many stated that they were able to connect with and form long-lasting relationships with people on sites like MySpace in ways they were never able to do on Facebook, MySpace’s successor. Generation Z is still grappling with what the internet means to them, though they have

¹⁰⁴ Sites like Patreon and Substack often have a tiered system where subscribers get early access or premium content, which reinforces socio-economic divisions. Subscribers often have access to community Discords or community pages that non-payers do not, which also makes it difficult to form broad coalitions across different social and economic classes.

¹⁰⁵ *Note:* I am not sure the internet ever had safe spaces for children. Sophie, a Millennial, believed she was “too young” when she started using the internet because she would spend time in unsupervised chats using AOL instant messenger. The first thing many users did was put their age, gender, and location (e.g., 15/F/CA) in large chat rooms to see who would respond.

recognized that “there are more bots now” rather than real people. As Kristen put it, “there’s no more humanity, and there’s no more creativity with it. It’s not fun. It’s just kind of like a sad little place.” However, even though the internet is no longer fun and often feels like a “void,” Kristen noted that “we’ve intertwined [the internet] with our society so much it’s really hard to separate those things.” She found it difficult to experience the lack of humanity online while still maintaining her humanity offline.

The people I interviewed expressed similar feelings about using technology to connect and form community despite differences among generations. Whether explicitly or as part of another answer, interviewees acknowledged that technology makes it easier for people to connect and find people with whom they want to stay in contact, but that these connections were oftentimes less meaningful to them than their in-person connections. Older generations expressed that the barrier that technology erects between people makes it more difficult to interpret tone and meaning which can lead to misunderstandings. Yet, Generation Z participants, like Taylor, suggest that technology’s barrier makes it easier for them to connect because they have learned to employ it as a shield allowing them to selectively share information with target audiences.

Participants across generations stated that they transitioned away from trying to maintain many friendships through social media sites to only using technology to communicate with the people with whom they already have an established relationship. Instead of trying to build new relationships or form community online, the people I interviewed retreated from the digital equivalent of public life to gated communities where, as Nathan stated, “you can draw a graph of the people, and it will make sense. There won’t be any isolated dots that have just kind of arrived for no reason.” Interviewees said they felt safer expressing themselves in ways that allow communities to form within these gated spaces. Furthermore, participants stated they were more

likely to mute or block someone whose content they did not want to see in order to protect their mental peace. In the next section, I will discuss how this both impacts community formation and norms.

4.2 Why mute when you can block?

To answer my second core question,¹⁰⁶ I asked a series of questions designed to ascertain whether participants recognized normative behavior and, if so, whether they were more likely to enforce norms in person or online. I began by asking interviewees if they identified with their generation and, if so, what characteristics they identified with the most. Asking an open-ended question like this provided space for participants to highlight what the most important aspects of their generation are to them. Interviewee answers often focused on how technology and norms have changed throughout their lifetime.

As expected, Pre-Millennials highlighted the lack of technology available to them as children and were more likely to state that traditional community structures, like churches and organized activities, were important for learning how to behave as a community member. Millennials often mentioned in-person markers, like wearing skinny jeans or remembering 9/11, as well as early technology, like taking their home computer to a friend's house for a local area network (LAN) party or going to an internet café, because they did not have internet access at home, when delineating themselves from older and younger generations.¹⁰⁷ Alternatively, Generation Z was more likely to mention how engrained technology is with their life and the

¹⁰⁶ Do participants recognize normative behavior? If so, how do they understand and enforce norms in person and online?

¹⁰⁷ Local Area Networks refer to an enclosed network of devices attached to the same router or modem. During the early days of the internet people could only play multi-player games if they were physically in the same place or connected to the same network, which also required being physically proximate.

ease at which they can pick up new innovations. According to Trevor, these “titles are just arbitrarily decided by some person I don’t even know and will never know” and are less important than people think. However, throughout my interviews, the baseline understanding each interviewee provided about their own generation was illuminating, especially when asking participants about specific normative behaviors.

Next, I asked a series of questions to determine whether participants thought it was justifiable to violate a mild norm, like not returning their shopping cart to the collection area or taking up two parking spaces, and an extreme norm, like using racial or gender-based slurs.¹⁰⁸ These questions allowed me to compile suggestive evidence about how technology has impacted how norms are created and enforced.

Prior to this line of questioning, interviewees were told the same information:

Norms are behaviors that have certain expectations attached to them. For example, not littering is a common norm. In public places, you expect others not to litter, but you also think they expect you to behave in a similar way. When thinking about your answers to the following questions, think about what you expect from other people and what you think they expect from you.

Beginning with a disclaimer defining norms encouraged participants to think about the expectations they had about other people’s behavior as well as their own. By drawing attention to these expectations, I aimed to elicit responses to better understand whether technology has influenced norms both in person and online. Although this approach is unique, as most social

¹⁰⁸ Mild norm violations included (1) not returning one’s cart to the collection area, (2) taking up two parking spots with one’s car, or (3) driving in the emergency lane to avoid traffic. Situation three is the only one that is sometimes backed by legal sanctions. Most respondents were asked about situations one or two to directly address normative pressure rather than state pressure to conform. The example of an extreme norm violation was someone using a racial or gender-based slur. I unable quantify the number of interviewees that would enforce each norm as some answered using hypotheticals or failed to answer the question altogether. The findings reported in this section represent the major themes present in respondents’ answers.

science research on norms relies on experiments (e.g., Bail, 2022; Bicchieri, 2006; Bicchieri et al., 2022; Cialdini et al., 1990), interviews allowed me to interrogate inconsistencies in interviewee's answers to uncover the underlying motivations for creating, adopting, or enforcing different norms in ways unavailable through experimental methods.

Near the beginning of my interview with Isabel, she stated that she felt like she belonged to Generation Z because "I know the social standards to use online. I know what will be perceived as funny versus what will be perceived as like, you know, old stuff." She distinguished herself from Millennials, who she stated, "have a little bit less literacy, not of how to use media, but just like those sort of unwritten rules when engaging in online spaces." I asked Isabel what unwritten rules there were, and she said "it goes into posting, like, how often do you post? What are you posting? What things are acceptable?" According to Isabel, many of the unspoken rules directly relate to whether a post could be seen as authentic or inauthentic.

For example, if someone posts content that violates the norms of the platform, like "adding a bunch of filters," it is "cringy and bad" because it seen as "inauthentic." Isabel related a story about how she once saw someone post a picture of "a sink, like, just a picture of sink" on their "main story." Another one of Isabel's friends, Eleanor, excitedly showed Isabel the photo of the sink and said "like, I wish I posted stuff like this. Like that. She just doesn't care" when referring to the friend that posted the sink. My interviews suggest that within Generation Z there is significant pressure to be "authentic" because everything is "performative," but there is also significant cross-pressure to be just the right amount of authentic because something like posting a photo of a sink "can go over really well [and at] other times it can lead to perhaps bullying."

Through my interviews, it became clear that different generations recognized and interpreted platform specific norms differently. When I asked Annabelle, a Pre-Millennial, if

there were differences in things she might post on Instagram versus Facebook, she stated, “no, there wouldn’t be a difference, because I wouldn’t post anything I didn’t want to post.” Unlike Gen Z, whose motivation to use Instagram is to be accepted, Annabelle’s main motivation for using social media is to see what her friends and family are doing without necessarily having to engage in conversation. She stated that “posting means, it’s just nothing,” so it did not matter whether someone posted the so-called wrong content on different platforms because all online posting is meaningless.

Millennials also reported there were differences between what content was acceptable on which platforms, but this age group was more likely to ignore content that violated the platform’s norms than they were to confront the person or talk to someone else about it. Nicole stated that Facebook is “is more for life updates or seriousness,” where people post to update their family, whereas Instagram is how they update their friends. I asked Nicole what she thought of people who posted more youthful content to Facebook, and she said that she would think “like ‘okay, you’re putting Instagram content on Facebook,’ but at the same time, whatever. I mean it’s meant to be diverse.” One reason could be that Millennials remember a time when the internet was full of diversity. There were thousands of niche websites that a person could visit, and it was common for content on one site to make its way onto another. In my sample, Millennials recognized that websites (and apps) now have specific purposes, but part of the reason the internet was fun for them growing up was finding a niche website and being able to share it with their friends in person, in a chat room, or on their MySpace page. As such, it does not matter if a person follows the posting norms of a platform, because everything is meant to be shared.

Alternatively, Generation Z has only known a diversified media landscape where new apps are being developed every day that, while functionally similar, carry different normative

implications. For example, Isabel admitted that her older cousin, Barbara, 40, “breaks all sorts of rules” because she posts “the weirdest A.I. images” on Instagram. Isabel continued, “I feel like A.I. images are definitely something that’s not cool to post. It definitely goes against the standard.” There was a sense of incredulousness in her tone, as though not posting A.I. images was a common enough norm that seeing one posted by a family member was like seeing someone with two heads. The same cousin would also “do a main story post, and it’s just a picture of text, and it’s a life update and it’s like, that’s not how you’re supposed to be using it.” According to my Generation Z participants, they implicitly knew what content was acceptable on different platforms because their formative years were spent navigating the complexities of having both an in-person life and a digital one. Like Taylor’s story in the previous section (4.1), Generation Z learned how to incorporate online norms, like follower count and acceptable content, into their in-person relationships so that they could form meaningful attachments to others and develop community.

One way in which Gen Z negotiated these boundaries is by having multiple accounts on the same platform. While Taylor had two accounts in order to prevent their family from seeing them engage in more illicit behavior, like “smoking weed, for one,” Kristen noted that many Gen Zers have a “main” Instagram and another, often referred to as a “finsta,” or fake Instagram.¹⁰⁹ Finstas can be used to avoid family scrutiny, but they are more often used as “proof of life” for people that someone does not keep in contact with very often. The content is “not high stakes,” and people are free to post “just kind of like, here’s what I’m up to” content, like “here’s a

¹⁰⁹ Older members of Gen Z, like Taylor, would call finstas “spam accounts, which is the same thing, but it’s meant for spamming memes and other ‘non-main worthy’ pictures.”

picture of my dog. Here's another picture of my dog from another angle." Alternatively, Kristen explained, a person's main account is "way more curated" and any content that ends up as "main worthy" is "like art gallery level." As a result, content on a person's main account is more likely to be edited or staged and specifically chosen to be there, whereas their finsta can have "a lot more of a casual vibe."

Kristen has noticed that there is a shift happening in her generation where "cringe culture is making a revival, where people aren't as afraid to be embarrassing," so the distinction between a person's main and fake Instagram accounts is blurring. For Gen Z participants, the *cringe culture revival* is form of resistance within their cohort as a direct result of growing up hyper-connected.¹¹⁰ Most people in Generation Z do not remember a time before smartphones where anything a person did or said could be filmed, recorded, screenshotted, and then posted online for all to see.¹¹¹ During their formative years, Gen Z had to learn to control the flow of information where on one hand a person who did not use social media was seen as an outsider, but those who did use social media had to present carefully constructed versions of themselves.

In response to these dual pressures, Gen Z created a bifurcated social media presence where one could be both highly curated and free by controlling who had access to which profile. Kristen believes the cringe revival is a good thing. "It's a lot more of a freeing experience," she said while telling me how the boundary between her main and finsta accounts is slowly eroding. For Kristen, someone "can't really be free as a person unless you're cringey and embarrassing,"

¹¹⁰ The cringe culture revival is growing online, as well. Users are posting on sites like Twitter and Tumblr that it is necessary to be *cringe* to be known. See: *Figure E.3*, *Figure E.4*, *Figure E.5*, and *Figure E.6* in Appendix E for examples of how attitudes about *being cringe* are changing.

¹¹¹ The idea that it is unacceptable to record someone without their consent is gaining traction online, see: *Figure E.7* Appendix D Appendix E as an example.

even it means her “follow count has been going down” because she has “been posting, like, trashy things.”¹¹²

Kristen attributes the change to maturity, while Taylor says that it is partially due to COVID-19 “because nobody could see you at all” so posting became less about gaining acceptance and more about curing boredom. Isabel, on the other hand, “[spends] more time critically thinking about what [she] would post,” a habit she says she picked up in college when “a lot more people were following” her account. Even within a single generation it only takes a few months to a year between people’s ages for there to be differences in how they use technology and what behavior they think is appropriate. Taylor is 23 and both Kristen and Isabel are 22 and each has a distinct understanding of the normative implications associated with using Instagram and other social media.

My interviews provided suggestive evidence that generational differences between online norms make it difficult to establish communities across age ranges. While Gen Z has the knowledge and skills to navigate the internet’s unspoken rules, the consequences for violating digital norms are greater for their in-person lives. Millennials also understand there are online norms but violating them is more likely to engender an eyebrow raise than it is to cause any real sanctions. Alternatively, the Pre-Millennials in my sample did not know that different platforms had specific use cases and were the most likely to violate platform norms. On the surface, these differences are slight, but as Isabel pointed out, it can sometimes lead to bullying, making it difficult for people to connect and form meaningful relationships with one another.

¹¹² “Trashy” is highly subjective. Kristen noticed her follower count had decreased because she posted a t-shirt that said “Super-Cali-Swaggalistic-Sexy-Hella-Dopeness,” a variant of supercalifragilisticexpialidocious from *Mary Poppins*, that she found “hilarious” and that other people found “really ugly.”

For example, Isabel told me about her cousin, Barbara, who frequently violates the unspoken rules of Instagram. Isabel stated that she “would never talk to her [cousin] about it” choosing to “talk to my other family members,” particularly her sister, instead. Isabel said that she and her sister frequently screenshot posts and send them to each other to laugh about. When I asked her why she did not say something directly to Barbara, Isabel deflected stating, “I mean we’re not super close, so I feel like maybe she would get offended. Maybe we would hurt her feelings. I don’t want to make her feel bad at all” while also acknowledging that Barbara is “in a different age group, so maybe this is what people her age are posting.”

Isabel’s response is informative because it highlights dual pressures people experience when faced with norm violations. On one hand, confronting someone about their behavior may cause them harm. While on the other hand, there is this belief that the one who sees the violation might be incorrect, which contributes to normative uncertainty. For example, when I asked Kristen, a member of Gen Z, if she would say anything if she heard one of her friends use a racial or gender-based slur, she quickly stated that “with the R-word, I always call people out on it,” referencing a common slur for someone who is developmentally delayed. Yet, when I asked her whether she would say something if someone specifically used a racial or gender-based slur, she became more circumspect in her answer. Intervening was no longer as imperative as it was if someone were to use the R-word.

Instead, whether Kristen spoke out depended on the race and age of the person using the slur. She explained that if someone used a racial slur, like the N-word, she would not speak up even though she believes that racial equality is inherently valuable. “I would never say it,” Kristen said, but “I just don’t think I would police anybody on it, because I’m not the matter of authority in that case.” In the interview, she acknowledged that “it’s probably very taxing on

people who are Black to consistently call people out and being the only ones to do it and being alone,” but she maintained that she did not think it was her place to correct someone for using the slur.¹¹³

Kristen’s answers also suggest a growing ambiguity surrounding gender-based slurs, like the C-word (a derogatory word for a woman) and the F-word (a derogatory word for a gay man), because sometimes these words are used as terms of endearment within certain groups. “Thinking of misogynistic slurs,” she said, “sometimes people use it with a positive connotation” especially within her age group who often uses the B-word (another derogatory word for a woman) “as a positive term. People call their friends the B-word.” When I pressed Kristen on whether she would intervene if it was clear that someone was using one of these words as a slur, rather than a term of endearment, she said that “people get very aggravated when you try to police what they say. They think you’re encroaching upon them and like you’re trying to destroy their rights,” so she does not know if she would “have the balls” to speak up, especially if a stranger was using the slur.

In Chapter 2.3, I discussed how ambiguity surrounding whether an action violates a norm often contributes to its erosion. My interviews suggest that we are currently experiencing a period of intense normative ambiguity brought on by the loss of a common identity binding people together that is exacerbated by technology’s fragmented nature. Although participants stated they would hesitate before correcting someone for using a racial or gender-based slur in-person and online, their answers suggest that the hesitation they feel is because they do not know

¹¹³ In Chapter 5.3, I discuss how race influences norms. Kristen’s answers were characteristic of people in my sample who said that they did not feel like it was their place to correct language from people in other racial, ethnic, or religious groups.

whether the norm applies because they are not a member of the slur user's community. That is, participants were more likely to assume that racial and gender-based slurs were allowed in the user's community, even if it would not be permissible in their own.

Most participants were quick to tell me that they hoped they would not be friends with someone who violated mild norms, like not putting their cart away or taking up two parking spaces, and they were certain they would not be friends with someone who violated an extreme norm, like using a racial or gender-based slur. Yet, interviewees struggled to reconcile their beliefs about the importance of maintaining normative boundaries with their actions both in-person and online.

For example, Ethan, a Millennial, stated that he believed racial equality was an important value in society, but when I asked whether he would say something if someone in a group chat or Discord server used a racial slur, he said he would not. He explained that "some of the friends I have think that it's really funny to make racial slurs and I'm also amused when they do it, so that's why I don't call them out on it." It is possible that Ethan told me that he believes in racial equality because it is something he feels he is expected to say. However, later in our interview he told me another story about a discussion he had with two of his friends about how people should behave in public, suggesting that there is a difference in whether he thinks norms should be enforced in person versus online.

According to Ethan, one of his friends, Irving, had gone to the movies and there were several teenagers being disruptive throughout the screening and who were eventually kicked out by theater staff. Irving was annoyed because he just wanted to take his kids to see a movie, not deal with rambunctious teenagers. The other friend, Carl, started sarcastically telling Irving, "Oh, how dare they try to go out and have a good time," implying that the teenagers did nothing

wrong. It was at this point that Ethan entered the conversation and “got into, not a heated debate, but like a decent little argument” about whether the teenagers had a right to have fun at the expense of other theatergoers. According to Ethan, Carl was trying to say that “[the teenagers’ rights] are more important than somebody else’s rights and like, no, that’s inappropriate behavior,” because “there’s a social agreement that you have with people that when you leave your house, you’re not going to step on their toes,” which the teenagers violated with their actions. I asked Ethan if he would have said something to the teenagers if he were there during the disruption and he said he would because it was behavior that was “ruining everyone else’s time.”

On one hand, Ethan’s online community thinks that using racial slurs is funny and since the group chat is insulated from the larger online community, he did not indicate that he considers using racial slurs online to be a norm violation. On the other hand, Ethan strongly believes that if a person’s behavior begins to affect other people’s ability to live their life offline, then a norm violation has occurred, and it is necessary to step in and enforce the boundary. However, in-person norm enforcement is complicated by the implicit threat of violence one faces if they choose to correct someone else’s behavior. Throughout my interviews, women-identifying participants were more likely to state that they would not correct an in-person norm violation because they feared for their safety. For example, Michelle, a Millennial, stated that “confrontation is scarier in person because the person in front of you can physically hurt you,” meaning she was more likely to correct a norm violation online because she did not have to risk her personal safety. I did not ask participants about violence directly, but it was a common theme throughout their answers that warrants further research.

Yet, what Ethan's stories do suggest is that norms are both community specific and that there are some behaviors that are not permissible in public, but which might be allowed online. This, in part, may be because technology makes enforcing norms more difficult online because users can ghost,¹¹⁴ mute, block, or unfriend¹¹⁵ anyone whose content they do not want to see. Interviewees frequently told me that they were more likely to mute or block someone if the person violated an online norm, like posting content that was uninteresting or posting too often. Muting and blocking are functionally similar, but in my interviews, there were differences in when someone would use each action. For example, both Nolan, 31, and Kelly, 27, use muting as a way to prevent themselves from using their phones. Nolan stated he rarely mutes individuals, but he will mute entire chats because "if my phone dings, I want to know why. Why did it ding? Who's messaging me?" He admits he is "really bad about that," but he feels a compulsion to check his phone when he receives a message notification. If the messaging app has a bug that prevents the unread icon from disappearing, he has noticed that his mood is often worse because

¹¹⁴ None of my interviewees reported that they used ghosting to end a relationship that they considered meaningful or important in their life. Instead, interviewees, like Christine, a Millennial, stated that "ghosting is more for people that I don't care to ever talk to again, and it's not that big of a deal to me." For interviewees in Generation Z, ghosting was used to break contact with someone they had met on a dating site "just because I didn't want to meet up," according to Taylor, or they "didn't really want to see them again," according to Isabel. However, Ruth, 30, stated that she did ghost someone that lived near her. Ruth said the woman "wasn't being very honest with people and she was kind of being very gossipy and negative, so I never really gave her a reason why I stopped talking to her, but I did stop responding to her messages" and the relationship ended.

¹¹⁵ I asked under what circumstances would interviewees unfriend someone. Interviewees discussed unfriending almost in quaint terms, like a method of disconnection from a by-gone era. During the early days of social media, when MySpace was popular, the platform allowed users to rank their top eight friends. Those within a person's *top eight* were considered the most important people in that person's life and it mattered when someone's rank changed. Modern social media sites like Facebook and Instagram, and chat apps like Discord, no longer have a ranked friends list, so unfriending or unfollowing has become less serious over time. For example, Isabel has over a thousand followers on Instagram and admits she does not consider most of them to be her real friends because "I just can't know 1,700 people well." Isabel is hesitant to purge her follow list because many of them are people she knows and wants to share with, but she also does not "want to overwhelm people." Instead of unfriending or unfollowing, Isabel uses Instagram's *close friends* list to adjust how much content she shares with different people in her life. Instagram's *close friends* list differs from MySpace's *top eight* because the former is private to the person who created the list while the latter was public. As a norm, unfriending has eroded to the point where the pressure to conform is no longer present.

seeing it when he has no messages annoys him. Similarly, Kelly said she usually uses “mute so that I don’t have to feel like I have to check my phone consistently” because when she gets a notification, she also feels like she has to look at it.

Others, like Eileen, 30, mute people to get “them and [their] content out of my feed.” Eileen clarified that “it’s not the relationship that I want to block” as she still cares for the person, she just does not want to see their content anymore. Sophie, also a Millennial, uses muting to give herself mental space so that she is not forced to see what other people are posting. Sophie stated, “this is what I’m seeing in my brain, on my phone” and “it’s just annoying to me,” “I don’t want to keep seeing the same shit that you’re posting,” admitting that she regularly mutes people. Throughout the interviews, it was common for people to use muting temporarily or when they did not want to end the relationship entirely but needed to either protect their mental well-being or distance themselves from someone who was posting too much, suggesting that norms exist around both quality (i.e., the content of posts) and quantity of online posts.

Alternatively, blocking was seen as a more serious action, but whose use was consistent across generations. For example, Helen, a Millennial, stated that she prefers not to block people because she does not “generally make finite moves, unless the person is, in my eyes, irredeemable.” Helen’s views were shared by other interviewees who also viewed blocking as a final action only to be used in extreme cases. Trevor, part of Gen Z, said that he will bring out the “blockenheimer” when he thinks that “there’s really no hope in changing that person’s mind” about something. According to Eileen, the relationship has to feel “like it was beyond repair” before she would consider blocking someone. She stated, “I don’t just block people that I have a random disagreement with, but if there’s a pattern, if there’s some sort of abuse, if there’s anything like that then I don’t have any problem blocking” someone. Similarly, Janet, a Pre-

Millennial, stated that she has “an extensive block list on Facebook and Instagram” that includes “people that I know seek to do me harm,” including ex-boyfriends and some family members with whom she no longer associates.

Isabel told me a story about how when she was in college she found out that her boyfriend was cheating on her with someone she knew and when she confronted him, “he blocked me on everything, which was crazy” because “I hadn’t hurt him. He’d hurt me, like he cheated on me.” For Isabel, the person who is wronged should be the one to decide whether or not to block the other person, suggesting that blocking entails additional normative considerations about who is justified in using the action. She said when her now ex-boyfriend blocked her, it “just didn’t seem appropriate, like that could have been a conversation. Like an ‘I’m sorry’ maybe, but instead he clearly didn’t want to deal with it, so he blocked me on many, many platforms,” including Co-Star, an app that teaches users about their Zodiac sign.

Even though muting and blocking achieve similar goals, in that they both hide content from a person’s feed, my interviews suggest that blocking was considered more serious because it also prevents the blocked person from seeing anything the blocker posts. Taylor states that the reason they would block someone over muting them is because “I didn’t want [them] to have any contact, any access to me in my life, at all, whatsoever.” Interviewees used muting when they cared about maintaining the relationship and blocking when they wanted to cut someone out of their life entirely.

For example, I asked Nicole how her friends would respond if someone in the group did something to offend another member to try and understand whether disconnecting online had ever impacted her in-person relationships. Shaking her head, Nicole stated, “lately I just feel like you’ll get ghosted, you know, cut really fast, or just like, ganged up on, mob rule, mob

mentality.” The sadness she felt stemmed from the belief that people were no longer learning how to sustain meaningful relationships because of how easy it is to disconnect through technology. She no longer thinks “people do the hard work part of relationships,” because people can ghost, mute, block, or unfriend each other without warning. Online connections, she said, “help you find a community of sameness, but the depth is missing. I think that’s where we’re going south, is that people are missing the real depth of relationships, the hard, the freaking nitty gritty of relationships, the fights, or whatever. How hard it is to actually sustain a friendship over years.”

Even though Nicole says she has some online relationships that have gone on for decades, she knows they are unlikely to ever become real relationships “because we’re just on social media. I’m never going to fight with them. I’m never going to have these real relationship moments that I think make a friendship deep and good or like a family member deep and strong and connected.” The internet, according to Nicole, has “diluted” what it means to be a friend or member of a community because if one person does something annoying or upsetting, people can find someone else to talk to or another community to join. While talking to Nicole, it became evident that she was frustrated by what Anand Giridharadas (2023) called “the culture of the write-off”, where people are more likely sever ties with others than they are to engage in dialogue or try to find common ground (p. 4).¹¹⁶

Technology makes it easy for people to connect with others, but both Nicole and Giridharadas argue that these relationships lack the depth of their offline equivalents. The effect is two-fold: First, online spaces become more extreme as moderate voices are more likely to

¹¹⁶ See Chapter 3.1 for a more detailed discussion of write-off culture.

disconnect than they are to engage in dialogue, as discussed in Chapter 3. This makes it difficult to form community as we are more likely to view people as a *them* as distinct from *us*. Second, relationships are less meaningful because they are easier to leave. Both are problematic as communitarians have long warned that shallow relationships, like those that form online, do not encourage people to consider the interests and needs of others in the way that is required for both social and political life, as discussed in Chapter 2.

In the next section, I provide suggestive evidence demonstrating how the ease with which people can disconnect online also makes it difficult for them to connect their online experiences with their offline lives. This, in turn, undermines our ability to form a robust community strong enough to sustain democracy.

4.3 Whose responsibility is it?

To answer my last core question,¹¹⁷ I relied on the normative questions discussed in the previous section as well as a series of questions designed to elicit whether participants thought people had any responsibilities towards each other as members of a community and a democracy. The latter set of questions included asking interviewees whether they would offer to help someone (friend, acquaintance, or community) seeking assistance and whether it mattered if the request was made online or in the physical world.¹¹⁸ In each of the interviews, participants

¹¹⁷ What obligations and responsibilities do participants think they owe to others as community members and citizens?

¹¹⁸ A low-cost intervention would be reaching out to someone if the interviewee saw that the person was having a bad day. The intervention is considered low cost because it does not require substantial effort from the interviewee, but it is easy to ignore, especially when the person having the bad day is online rather than physically proximate. A high-cost intervention would be volunteering to help someone move, which requires significant time and effort. I asked participants whether they were likely to help if they saw a friend post online asking for assistance, then an acquaintance, before finally a stranger. I also asked a similar set of questions regarding whether interviewees would volunteer to help if they saw their neighborhood ask for people to help with cleaning a park or painting a wall.

indicated that it was easier to ignore requests for help, whether it was reaching out to a friend who was having a bad day or helping clean up the local park, if they saw the appeal online rather than in person. Interviewees frequently cited that the barrier placed between them and the person asking for help online made them think twice before reaching out.

Participants' answers reflected geographic, relational, and technological considerations when determining whether they had any responsibilities or obligations towards others. In my sample, interviewees stated that it was difficult to ignore requests when the person asking for assistance was physically present. This was partly because it is difficult to say no to someone directly and partly because seeing the need made it easier to trust that the request was legitimate. The most common reason participants gave for thinking twice before helping someone – whether online or in person – was because they worried the person asking for help was scamming them.

Within my sample, the relationship participants had with the person requesting help was the greatest determinant of whether they would reach out to them. The more intimate the relationship, the greater the likelihood that participants in my sample would reach out to help. For example, if a participant's close friend posted on Facebook or in a Discord server that they were having a bad day, most participants would text or call the person to see what they could do to help. However, the more distant the relationship, the less likely it was that participants would reach out, which is not unusual. We are predisposed to consider the responsibilities and obligations we have towards our close family and friends before we consider those with whom we are more distantly connected (Greene, 2014; Tomasello et al., 2012).

Yet, in online spaces, this is further stretched as the bystander effect, where people in a group think that someone else will act and therefore do not intervene, also plays a role (Hortensius & de Gelder, 2018). In my interviews, participants stated that if an acquaintance

posted online or on a Discord server that they were having a bad day, they would be less likely to reach out because participants assumed that someone else would reach out to the poster instead. The combination of physical and relational distance was exacerbated by technology because the request could be easily ignored. Most participants stated that they would help strangers or acquaintances in-person but would think twice about helping them if the request were made online. This suggests that technology makes it more difficult for participants to connect online experiences with their responsibilities and obligations as members of a community and a democracy.

For example, Helen, a Millennial, said she often relies on TikTok, an app dedicated to short-form video content, to get information because it allows her to see “all the things that are happening around the world that I wouldn’t see otherwise.” “I’ve seen at least two separate videos,” she continued, “of someone recording themselves making food or something and they’re in Palestine and a bomb drops next door and they run for their life.” According to Helen, they “can’t really report that on the news either, because like people died, and you can’t put that on the news because it’s traumatic,” so TikTok is the way she learns about global issues.

I asked Helen if she felt any pressure to get involved or help the Palestinian people she saw in the videos she watched. “I am sad for them, I would like to help them,” she said, “like if I knew something that I could do that would help that person I would love to do that,” but what prevents her is not knowing whether “they’re true or not.” Even though she watched the video and saw the bomb fall, she says she does not “know if this person is going there and giving this person the thing or if they’re just, you know, throwing it in the garbage so the support doesn’t get there.”

The apprehension Helen feels is not unreasonable. There are thousands of examples online where someone started a crowdfunding campaign only to misuse the funds or a YouTuber posted a video where “they’re like, ‘look at this homeless man over here, I gave him \$500, look how happy he is,’” but then may have taken “it from him after that, when they stopped recording.” Helen would rather err on the side of not helping someone than inadvertently funding corruption or “duplicitous[ness],” which prevents her from feeling any obligation to intervene when she sees calls for help online.

I asked her if she would donate to a verified charity like Doctors Without Borders or a crowdfunding campaign posted by Palestinians she saw in the videos she watched. She said “yeah, for sure, especially if the organization doesn’t have a long history of abusing funds in some way,” but she does not know what it would take for her to trust an individual crowdfunding campaign where the money may not actually go to helping the person it is designed to help. Helen qualified her statement and said that “there’s so many people across the world, not just in Palestine, who are suffering, and there’s nothing I can do about it.” She said that for her to help, “I would have to focus on something much closer to home that I can see” like picking up trash or helping a neighbor.

The reliability of digital information was a common theme in my interviews. For example, Ethan stated it was more difficult to trust anything he saw online. “The internet is almost like a giant lie to me, where there’s so much stuff going on that is all just for show,” he said, “like there’s been so many times when it’s like ‘oh, this person did this thing,’ that they cried and carried on, and it turns out it’s all fake.” According to Ethan, he’s “extremely suspicious” of anything he reads online, especially if it is someone asking for help and he has no

other way of reaching out to them, like “I don’t have their phone number to text message them or something.”

Yusef, a Millennial, thinks that “part of living in a civilized society is helping people who need help.” He said that “while I don’t consider myself particularly religious anymore, the parts that I’ve retained are, you know, it’s not my place to decide if somebody needs help. It’s not my place to decide if somebody is deserving of help. If somebody asks me for help, I should help in whatever capacity I can.” Yusef used the example of someone asking him “for spare change,” and said, “it’s not my job to look at them and say ‘No, you’re just going to use it on drugs’” because then “I don’t think I’m doing my part to earnestly try to make society better.” For Yusef, “people, as humans, have a duty to help each other out and to not be too judgmental.” He stated that “obviously there’s going to be limits to that,” like not putting oneself in danger or enabling people who repeatedly abuse other people’s help. However, later in the interview it became clear technology was also one of those limits.

I asked Yusef if he would reach out to someone that posted that they were having a bad day in an online forum like Reddit. Yusef said if he saw a post like that in a public online space he would “feel a bit more hesitant” about reaching out because “there is definitely the possibility of someone ‘karma farming.’ Or they’re just kind of trying to get attention, trying to get their internet points.”¹¹⁹ Yusef laughed when he caught what he had said and asked, “does that make me a bit of hypocrite for saying ‘Oh well, you’re just going to spend your internet points on drugs. You know, you’re just going to spend your internet points on serotonin?’” Before I could

¹¹⁹ On Reddit, users can upvote posts that they believe more people should see. In return, the poster receives *karma* or internet points for posting quality content.

answer, he continued, saying that “it feels a little impersonal, I guess, that’s how I can reconcile that with, you know, ‘help people who ask me for help.’” He maintains that it is different when someone asks for help in person, because “it’s in my face. They’re directly asking me. It’s a lot more, a lot more personal.”

The disconnect between someone saying they would reach out in person but would not online is a difficult one to reconcile. Offering a kind word to someone online is ostensibly less costly than offering support in person because it requires less “emotional bandwidth,” as Ruth, a Millennial, stated. Yet, part of the problem is that “online there’s just so much noise.” Ruth said, “I guess it is that bystander effect. You’re like, ‘well, I hope someone they actually know might reach out’” to help them. Many interviewees believed that it was not their place to help someone by reaching out online because, as Nathan put it, “it can come across as a little insincere.”

Nathan stated that sometimes it feels like the person who is reaching out is “obviously just doing what they think they’re supposed to do,” that is, abiding by a norm. He said, “I’ve rolled my eyes at a few messages that have been thrown my way” because “it’s like, I know you, you don’t care. You’re doing this because you feel like you’re supposed to, and you don’t want to feel bad as a person. This is kind of your opportunity to help yourself feel good about yourself and not really help me feel good about myself.” In Nathan’s case, he thought that “the more I know someone, the more history I can bring” the “easier [it is] to make it obvious that I’m being sincere.”

For Nathan, the bystander effect also influenced whether he would correct someone for violating other norms. When asked about whether he would speak up if he saw someone take up two parking spots or not return their shopping cart either in-person or online, Nathan stated he would not get involved because “other people will.” Nathan’s response was common among my

participants, particularly in relation to online norm violations. According to Nathan, he would not correct someone if he saw them violating a norm online because there was “probably not going to be anything extra I can add to the conversation” that someone else had not already said.

However, when I asked participants whether they would correct a norm violation online or reach out to someone asking for help if no one had commented on the post yet, many stated that it was easier to ignore both the violation and the request than it was to get involved.

According to Annabelle, “there’s a barrier there” that makes it difficult to fully connect with another person through technology which often contributes to a feeling of insincerity. With technology, she said, people can “just turn it off, like turning off the TV. If you don’t want to listen to something,” you do not have to. Nolan echoed this sentiment stating that “it’s easier to dehumanize someone when they’re not a literal human standing in front of you,” which is why it is easier to ignore online appeals versus in-person ones, even if the former are easier to fulfill. Therefore, even though participants stated that people had a responsibility and obligation to follow common norms, like fairness, tolerance, and consideration as members of a community and democratic citizens, most said it was difficult to maintain these norms online.

For example, Mirabel, a Pre-Millennial, thinks that certain values should “carry over everywhere” and should not be limited to the people that someone considers part of their community. Mirabel believes strongly that people should “treat others as you want to be treated and try to make the world a better place.” In other words, all people should be treated with kindness. Similarly, Sofie, a Millennial, said that everyone should “do what you can to help each other out. If you have more than you need, then you should share that. Because how much does one fucking person need when somebody else next to you doesn’t have that much?” Mirabel and Sophie’s answers are reflective of the answers other interviewees offered. Interviewees thought

that these values were necessary for both social and political life, even if they would not abide by them in the situations I asked about.

It is not surprising, then, that when asked what democracy means to them, interviewees were both caught off-guard and relied on the institutional or formal characteristics of democratic systems rather than the responsibilities citizens have to uphold democratic values and norms. In the current political climate where executive power is being consolidated and both the judicial and legislative branches appear to be abdicating their duty; it is possible that interviewees truly believe that what makes democracy healthy are the institutions that define it. Yet, when talking about democracy in the United States, the overall impression was that the people in my sample understood that democracy was rule by the people but never considered what that meant beyond being informed and voting.

For example, when I asked Ethan what responsibilities he thought citizens had, he said, “I’ll put this out [there], like I am mostly a single-subject voter, so if the person I am voting for supports what I want, I’m going to vote for them. If they’re on the wrong side of the train tracks from what that single subject is, I’m not going to vote for them. No way, no how. I’ll even abstain from voting. If there’s nobody to vote for, I’m not voting. I won’t.” I asked if he thought being a member of a democracy is mostly voting and registering one’s opinion. “It’s definitely more than that,” he responded, “that’s like, the minimum level of participation, and broadly speaking, it’s enough for the most part, for most people. But, participating in a democracy and wanting to see your change happen, that’s nowhere near enough.”

According to Ethan, if someone wants something to change, they have to do more than vote. They have to participate with “the political parties” or “going and even running for office, and, gosh, even something as simple as getting involved with running one of the voting centers

that's something somebody's gotta do." I tried to press Ethan on whether there was anything regular people needed to do since all the things he mentioned were things someone could do if they were passionate about a specific cause. I asked if democracy was just "this is what I vote for, this is what you vote for. Now we live with the consequences." He said he felt "like it would be nice if we were more of a community about it, and people did a better job of trying to look at what is more beneficial to the group, but really your responsibility does basically end with educating yourself and voting."

For the generations I interviewed, it was common for participants to struggle to connect their social responsibilities with their political ones. When I asked Joseph, a Pre-Millennial, if he thought the United States had a strong political community, he stated that "my experience is that the folks on the other side politically, we aren't so different." He thought that "if you really talked about what's important, you keep politics out of it," but the important topics he mentioned only included the "business of the day," people's children, and "work schedules." I asked Joseph if he thought there was a time when the social ever became the political. "Yeah, that's the limit you know," he said, "that's the living and the dying in these towns, not whether you support a political agenda or not," before adding that "there's plenty of reasons to disagree about 100 things that don't have to do with politics. So, you try to do your best." For Joseph, the best way to maintain the political system was to not talk about politics, even though he admitted he "rants" about political issues daily.¹²⁰ Charlie reframed the question and said, "I think that this is less what [citizens] owe to each other, but more what they owe to democracy, [which] is a level of

¹²⁰ People have pushed back against saying that instead of being told not to talk about politics, we should be teaching people how to discuss difficult topics. See: *Figure E.8* in Appendix E as an example.

critical thinking and engagement” with the political system, again reflecting an understanding of what democracy formally requires.

As discussed in Chapter 2.1, institutions are necessary but not sufficient to secure a healthy democratic system. Democracies also require a minimum level of support from the public and function best when they are supported by a robust political community. Amitai Etzioni (1997) argues that communities are formed, in part, by a shared frame of reference that stems from the affective attachment between members. This frame of reference includes the values and norms that bind the group together as a cohesive unit. Democracy is particularly reliant on the shared affective attachment between people and their willingness to uphold the political community’s norms. Democratic norms require people to consider others with whom they have little contact and with whom they may disagree strongly and, as such, are more difficult to teach. Social norms provide the foundation for democratic ones, and it is through community that people learn to compromise, be tolerant, respect others, and behave fairly, which are all necessary for democracy. These norms facilitate the democratic process as people in a democracy must sometimes forfeit their individual interests in order to secure a common good.

I asked participants where people learned the values they stated were necessary for community, like fairness and tolerance, and those required for democracy, like voting and being informed. Most interviewees said it was up to a person’s family to teach them how to be a community member and democratic citizen. For example, Ethan admitted, “I try to avoid freaking jury duty, just like everybody else does,” because his parents taught him that is what people do. As discussed in section 4.1, research shows that political socialization is complex and occurs through multiple channels (Hyman, 1959; Jennings & Niemi, 1968). A person’s parents or guardians have the greatest impact on their beliefs or behaviors, as is the case with Ethan who

learned how to avoid his civic duty from his parents. However, maturing, friends, the media, and a person's education all influence what responsibilities and obligations she believes she has towards others as a community member and democratic citizen.

According to Christine, a Millennial, "school is supposed to teach you" how to be considerate, though she states, "it doesn't really anymore, from what I've heard." One of her family members is a K-12 teacher and she says all the teachers do is give students "worksheets with the answers and say, 'here's your test.'" Christine became aggravated stating "like, how does that build character at all? How does that build consideration? How does that build anything?" She was upset that children are no longer learning how to consider others. She used the example of cutting in line. If she were to cut in line during her time in school, she would get into trouble and learn that line cutting is inconsiderate and unacceptable. A short time later, Christine said she disliked when people were rude to waitstaff at restaurants, but when I asked her how people learn to be considerate to service workers, she said, "I can't teach anyone to be more considerate. You gotta learn that yourself," while failing to recognize that if children are not learning consideration in school and no one is teaching them later, then no one is going to learn it.

However, consideration is a key democratic norm as there are many policies that do not affect an individual directly but have significant impact on the broader political community. For example, in Chapter 2.1, I used the example of someone supporting higher taxes to fund medical care for the elderly. I may not need government-supported healthcare, but I love my grandparents who may need the service and I can recognize that others may also need it as well. The affective attachment I feel towards my family may lead me to support initiatives that raise my taxes to fund healthcare programs so that my grandparents, and others like them, have access to essential

services. No one is born knowing how to be either a community member or democratic citizen. It is only through family and community that we learn how to consider other members with whom we have little or no direct connection, like the waitstaff in Christine's example or the healthcare example in Chapter 2.1.

Christine's answer is indicative of a broader pattern within my sample. Nearly every participant stated that there were important values people should have and certain norms by which they should abide, but that teaching people them was someone else's responsibility. Most said it was not their responsibility to correct someone who violated a social norm, and many chose not to enforce democratic ones, especially on the internet. For example, Ethan stated he "was getting into arguments" with other users that "were just like, I guess we're all doing it for fun, but we're also being hyper-aggressive with each other." Many of the arguments were not intentionally political, but they often became that way because they dealt with issues like firearm restrictions and military life. Ethan only realized how bad it had become when he ended up "cutting off someone that I considered to be a very close friend because we were arguing about stuff online." Chad, the person Ethan cut off, was a long-time friend who had been his roommate earlier in their relationship. According to Ethan, he does not "dislike Chad inherently," but Facebook "irreparably damaged a friendship" which "is no good for anybody."

I asked Ethan if he thought the United States has a strong political community, in that the nation has shared values and norms and is working towards similar goals. He said, "I think parts of it are strong, but I don't think the general population has very strong engagement with their political community." Ethan thinks the two major parties are ideologically closer than people realize, but that they have picked "five topics we're going to disagree about and we're going to be hellfire and brimstone about that, but all this other stuff we 100% agree on." He believes the

division is among political leaders as well as the public, so I asked whether he thought there were any responsibilities citizens had towards one another to overcome this division. Ethan believes that democratic norms, like legitimacy of the opposition, which prevents people from seeing others with whom they disagree as existential threats, should be taught by families, public education, and, in part, through “maturity.” Most people in my interviews held similar views. Some argued that elites needed to do more to stand up to our autocratic President, some said they learned their responsibilities towards others through media portrayals of bucolic community life, while others stated that teaching norms was the responsibility of a person’s family and friends.

In all but one interview, participants failed to connect their social responsibilities with their obligations as citizens. It was only in the last interview that one of the participants recognized the purpose behind my questions regarding norm violations in person and online. I asked Sophie the same questions I asked other participants: would you reach out to someone that posted online that they were having a bad day? Sophie shook her head, “I don’t know them. I don’t know what I can offer them. I don’t know, like are they having a bad day because somebody, you know, died and now, I’m offering you some support?” Sophie stopped mid-answer and exclaimed, “Oh my God, I’m an asshole!” We stared at each other for a minute before she said, “oh, okay, cool, thanks, just contradicted my whole like ‘we owe each other things’” statement that she had made earlier in the interview. Sophie stared at the ceiling while I asked if she would reach out if she saw someone on her community’s Instagram page asking for people to help them move. “Yeah, Liz, I wouldn’t do that. Yep. Just fast forward through this because I get it,” she said, using her hand to move me along. Sophie did not answer the remaining questions because she figured out that the purpose of the questions was to see whether people could connect what they saw online with what they owe other people in person.

It is not surprising that only one participant made the connection between their on- and offline lives. Modern technology makes it easier for people to connect with one another, but existing research and my interviews suggest that the norms that develop within digital spaces are specific to certain apps and within certain generations. This, in turn, makes it difficult to establish a common identity or a common set of values and norms that bind the group together as a cohesive unit. Generational differences have always existed, and each generation creates a new code of conduct that is, in part, a resistance against the old ways of doing things. The danger is not that different generations have unique ways of interacting with others and with technology, but rather that technology makes it difficult for people to connect their experiences online with the responsibilities and obligations they have as community members and democratic citizens.

Democracy is a social form of government that requires public support for its maintenance. Citizens must not only believe that democracy is worthwhile but also be willing to uphold the values and norms that sustain it. However, technology has changed how people connect and form community, which, in turn, impacts how people create, adopt, and learn these vital norms. The people I interviewed recognized that certain behaviors were necessary, or, as Nolan put it, “we’re in a society. Do the thing. It’s not hard,” while also indicating that they would neither follow nor enforce these behaviors. Most interviewees stated that it was important to uphold common norms, like fairness, tolerance, and consideration, but when asked about whose responsibility it was to teach people these norms, they said it was someone else’s or some institution’s responsibility, rather than their own. This presents a distinct danger to social and political life in the United States because norms erode when they are not enforced.

Furthermore, my interviews suggest that people have difficulty connecting their online lives to their responsibilities and obligations as members of a community and a democracy.

Technology places a barrier between people that makes it easy to dehumanize and ignore others, contributing to the *us versus them* thinking discussed in Chapter 2.1. When I interviewed Isabel, she stated that she gets that “technology is in every aspect of my life, but I also have a lot of relationships that flourished and that have been really important outside of technology. I feel like with the younger generations, they’re losing that more and more.” It is true that younger generations will likely be more reliant on technology for connection and community than Isabel’s generation has been. Yet, without significant changes to how people connect, younger generations are also less likely to learn the norms necessary to sustain either community or democracy as a result.

By using interviews, it was possible for me to analyze the complex reasons people have for using technology to connect and form community. This, in turn, allowed me to uncover what norms and values interviewees believed were necessary and how they would respond when confronted with norm violations in person and online. Furthermore, by using a semi-structured format, I was able to follow up on inconsistencies between what participants said they would do with what they thought people ought to do. In turn, this allowed me to uncover suggestive evidence for the underlying motivations behind norm creation and compliance. Finally, the questions I developed allowed me to provide deeper insight into how people negotiate the disconnect between what they see online and their responsibilities and community members and democratic citizens.

As a result, this dissertation contributes to previous research on social norms in two ways. First, I explicitly link the creation, adoption, and enforcement of social norms with democratic ones. Previous research has often treated social and democratic norms as distinct and only tangentially related. Second, I added to previous research on the internet’s impact on community

formation by moving beyond content analysis to provide suggestive evidence about how technology mediated connections have undermined people's ability to connect with one another, establish formative relationships, and create the type of culture upon which democracy relies.

Appendix D Supporting Data

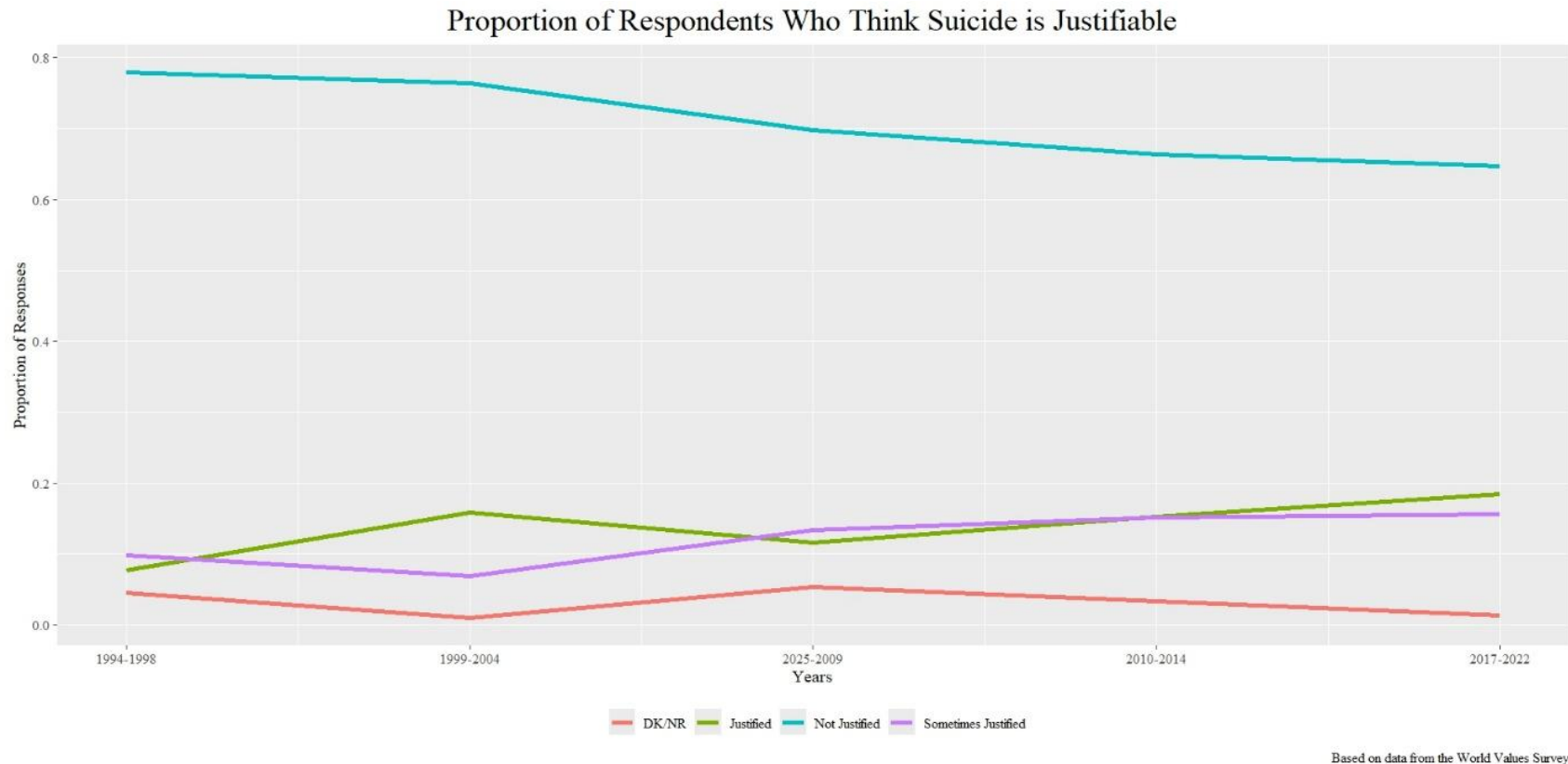


Figure D.1: World Values Survey – Suicide

Note: The graph (*Figure D.1*) shows that since 1994, when this question was first asked to U.S. participants, the proportion of people who responded that physician-assisted suicide was *not justified* has decreased and the number of people who think that it is *justified* has increased. One interpretation is that the norms surrounding physician-assisted suicide are changing.

Table D.1: AmericasBarometer

How often do you use social media?		If politicians on the other side act outside the law, it is justifiable for politicians I support to act outside the law.				
		Yes, it is justifiable	No, it is not justifiable	Decline to answer	Missing	Total
Daily	Count	58	470	54		582
	Column; Row % ⁽¹⁾	40.8%; 10.0%	41.4%; 80.8%	24.3%; 9.3%		
A few times a week	Count	53	336	51		440
	Column; Row %	37.3%; 12.0%	29.6%; 76.4%	23.0%; 11.6%		
A few times a month	Count	19	117	32	1	169
	Column; Row %	13.4%; 11.2%	10.3%; 69.2%	14.4%; 18.9%	100.0%; 0.6%	
A few times a year	Count	4	59	18		81
	Column; Row %	2.8%; 4.9%	5.2%; 72.8%	8.1%; 22.2%		
Never	Count	8	152	66		226
	Column; Row %	5.6%; 3.5%	13.4%; 67.3%	29.7%; 29.2%		
Missing	Count		1	1		2
	Column; Row %		0.1%; 50.0%	0.5%; 50.0%		
Total	Count	142	1,135	222	1	1,500

⁽¹⁾ Columns and rows percentages

Note: The table values indicate that people who use social media daily are slightly more likely (41.4%) to state that it is not justifiable for their preferred politician to act outside the law if a member of the opposition also acts outside of the law. Overall, most participants in the 2023 AmericasBarometer survey do not think that it is justified for their preferred politician to act outside the law if politicians on the other side do so first. This indicates that the democratic norm, legitimacy of the opposition, is still recognized and enforced.

Appendix E Connecting With Others

Interview Questions

Note: Interview questions were separated into different categories, including demographics, community, technology, norms, and politics. Not all participants were asked every question due to the semi-structure nature of the interviews.

Demographics

- Birth year
- Gender
- Do you live in the same area where you grew up?
- Do you think of yourself as someone who “goes it alone” or do you feel like you rely on the people in your life?
- How important do you think friendships/family are in a person’s life?

- Do you think community is important?
 - Do you think you can have community without being in person?
- How close would you say you are to your family?
- How many close friends would you say you have?
- Are you active in any organizations, in person or online?
 - If yes, what kind of organizations?
- How do you feel about the neighborhood/city/town where you live?
- Do you feel a sense of responsibility to or closeness with your community?
- How do you normally get information about your community, friends, politics?

Community

- How often do you hang out with your friends in person outside of school or work?
 - Would you say that your in-person friend group is diverse?
 - How did you meet [PERSON]?
 - Do you feel that you have a lot in common with [PERSON]?
 - What kinds of things do you like with [PERSON]?
- How often do you talk to your friends online or through text?
- Do you mostly talk to people you know in real life? Strangers? People you’ve met through the internet on social media or in video games?
- Would you say that your online friend group is diverse?
- Would you say that you are closer to your online friends than your in-person ones?
- Which are you more likely to turn to for advice? To discuss politics or current events?
- Do you prefer to talk to people online or in person? Why?
- Do you share similar things (content, personal info) with your in-person and online friends?

- Do you ever attend community events like a street fair or farmers' market?

Technology

- What platforms do you use?
 - Social media: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
 - Chat Apps: Kik, Discord, Slack, Teams
 - Sites: Reddit, Stack Overflow, 4chan
- What is your primary motivation for using [PLATFORM]?
- Have the platforms you used changed over time? Why?
- What age were you when you first started using the internet unsupervised? Did that impact which platforms you used or what you posted/reacted to?
- Do you mostly follow/are followed by people you know in real life? Family? Acquaintances?
 - About how many people you follow are in [GROUP]?
 - About how many people follow you do you think are in [GROUP]
- Are there differences in the content you post on [PLATFORM 1] versus [PLATFORM 2]?
 - What kind of content do you think is appropriate for [PLATFORM]?
 - What do you think when you see someone post [NOT APPROVED CONTENT] on [PLATFORM]?
- When thinking about both things you post and things you don't post, have you modified your [PLATFORM] use to avoid certain reactions or to get certain reactions?
 - Do you avoid talking about politics online because you're afraid of how people will react?
- Have you ever modified a photo or video to make yourself look better or exaggerated a story to make it funnier or more upsetting?
- Have you heard of doxxing? [IF NOT it's sharing someone's home address and phone number online without their consent in response to something they posted online.] With doxxing as an extreme example, has anything you posted online affected your life offline? For example, have you posted something online and someone in-person has asked you about it or wanted to discuss it more with you?
 - Have you seen this happen to someone you know personally?
 - Have you had difficulty communicating with people in-person or across platforms because they didn't know the etiquette, as in they used emojis, ellipses, or acronyms differently?
- Do you have multiple accounts on the same platform? Why?
- Have you ghosted, muted, blocked, or unfriended someone online?
 - BOTH: was it someone you knew in-person or was it someone you only knew online?
 - IF IN PERSON: did it affect your in-person relationship with that person?
 - What do you think about each of these actions? Are some more severe than others?

Politics

- How often do you discuss politics with people online? In-person?
- Do you and your in person / online friend groups have similar views?
- How do you feel about democracy? Do you think that, despite its flaws, it is worthwhile, or would a different government type be better?
 - What does democracy mean to you?
 - Do you think members of a democracy have any responsibilities or obligations towards one another?
- Would you consider yourself interested in politics, like following the news, voting in elections, attending demonstrations, or city hall meetings?
- Would you say that the US is going in the right or wrong direction? Why?
- In your opinion, does the US have a strong political community?

Norms

- In your friend group [IN PERSON/ONLINE], if someone does something that offends someone, how does your group handle it?
- If you see your [FRIEND/FAMILY/NEIGHBOR] post something you disagree with, do you ignore it, confront them, or talk to others about it?
 - FOLLOW UP: What if they post something mild, like they don't return their shopping cart to the corral? What if it's something more extreme, like [SUPPORTING/NOT SUPPORTING] deportations?
 - Now if someone says this offline, what do you think you would do?
- Do you think you're more likely to speak up online or in-person? Or equally?
- Do you think it's better to confront people or just ignore them?
 - FOLLOW UP: if you see someone post online that they're having a bad day, do you feel like you should reach out to them?
 - What about if they post that they need help moving? Would you offer to help?
- If you see that your local neighborhood is calling for people to help with cleaning up the local park, do you feel like you would volunteer, or does it feel like something "other people" do?

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Lead Researcher Liz Muehlmann from the Political Science Department at the University of California, Irvine is recruiting participants for a research study about how people connect, form community, and learn norms through technology.

DETAILS

- You are eligible if you are 18+ and live or work in the US
- 1-1.5 hour long interview over Zoom
- Participants will receive a Visa gift card as compensation for their time

TOPICS TO EXPECT

- Your family, friends, and community
- Your feelings about democracy
- How you use technology to connect with others
- On- and offline behavior

TO PARTICIPATE, EMAIL LIZ

Please include the following information:

- How you heard about this study
- Name
- Age



If you are interested in participating, please email:

liz.muehlmann@uci.edu

Figure E.1: Recruitment Flyer

Note: The recruitment flyer (*Figure E.1*) was shared on social media, with undergraduate students at the Universities of Irvine and Davis, and Stanford, Princeton, and Texas Tech Universities, as well as with participants to share with their social networks.

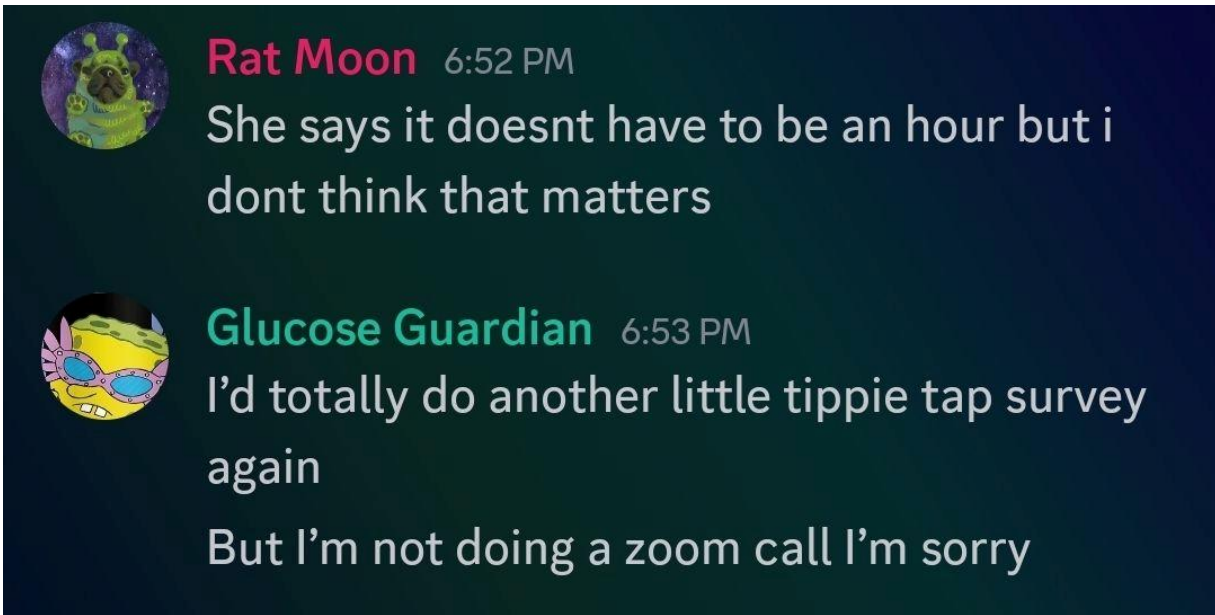


Figure E.2: Gen Z – Survey vs. Zoom

Note: Figure E.2 is a personal communication between two Gen-Zers. @Rat Moon participated in the survey while @Glucose Guardian did not. @Rat Moon attempted to recruit their friend using Discord. @Glucose Guardian's response was characteristic of other members of Gen Z that chose not to participate in the study. @Rat Moon and @Glucose Guardian consented to the image being included on August 29, 2025.



Figure E.3: Recklessness as counterculture



Figure E.4: Passionate dorks



Figure E.5: Embarrassment is part of connecting with others

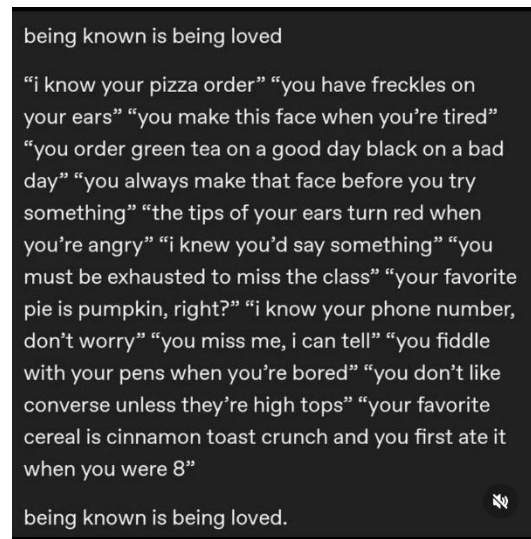


Figure E.6: Being known is being loved

Notes: Figure E.3 and Figure E.4 demonstrate how people appear to be leaning into the *cringe revival*, recognizing that in order to have truly formative relationships, one must first put themselves out there and be willing to look foolish. Figure E.5 and Figure E.6 suggest that to be loved we must be known, which requires revealing to others the good, bad, and embarrassing parts of ourselves.



Figure E.7: Agoraphobic generation

Note: Figure E.7 is an example of how people are rejecting the practice of recording people in public without their consent. Many content creators secretly record others and post them online without the person knowing. Sometimes it is good natured, like YouTubers giving gifts to strangers or engaging in harmless pranks, but many times it is recording very intimate moments between people online for likes, follows, and comments.

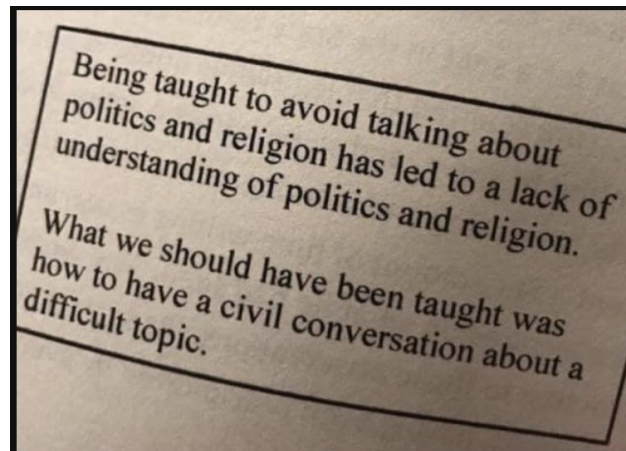


Figure E.8: Civil conversations

Note: Figure E.8 is an example of a popular image that is shared online that states we should teach people how to have civil conversations about contentious topics rather than being taught to avoid these issues altogether. Democracy requires people be able to have civil discussions about contentious issues. However, some believe that avoiding politics is the only way to ensure the political system remains intact.

5 Learning From Others



Figure 5: Life takes practice

Humans are naturally social. We seek out others with whom we can form affective attachments, and we use these relationships to find meaning and a sense of self-worth, form our identities, and develop a shared understanding of the world. Communities naturally form as people interact with one another because there are many things that individuals cannot do alone. Like the story of the Three Sisters in Chapter 2, humans can survive on their own, but we are better together. Social norms like cooperation, fairness, and tolerance help us thrive because they facilitate our interactions. Norms act as informal codes of conduct that allow us to connect and form community, as other members are likely to dress, talk, and behave like we do.

Social norms naturally develop as a by-product of community formation. As we interact with others, we create and learn a shared set of values and behaviors that bind the group together

as a cohesive unit. These norms form the basis for democratic ones, which guide a person's behavior as a member of a democracy. Democratic norms are more difficult to teach because they require people to stretch beyond the affective ties of their close community to consider others with whom they have little contact and with whom they may disagree strongly. Yet, democratic norms are essential because democracy is a social form of government. Citizens must believe that democracy is worthwhile and be willing to uphold its values and norms. Like social norms, democratic norms also erode when they are not enforced which can lead to democratic backsliding.

Considering others requires learning how to apply social norms to people who are different than us, allowing us to overcome our quick, but sometimes incorrect, judgements about others. When we learn to consider the needs, wants, and interests of others, we expand our circle of care. Our fellow citizens become part of our community and we acknowledge that we have certain responsibilities and obligations towards them. However, this takes practice. People are not born knowing how to be either community members or democratic citizens. Instead, the more we interact with others, the larger our community grows, and the more likely it is that we will consider them when engaging with the political system.

Yet, technological advancements have changed how people connect, form community, and learn these vital norms. People are no longer limited by time and space when forming community, meaning we can interact with more people than ever before. On the one hand, this makes it easier for people to find like-minded others while, on the other hand, the connections that form through technology often carry less meaning for us than their offline equivalents. Ultimately, technology places a barrier between communicating parties and reduces the formative potential of our relationships. This, in turn, undermines our ability to create the shared

values, beliefs, and norms that turn atomistic individuals into a community. Without this shared frame of reference, technology makes it more difficult for people to connect their online experiences with their obligations and responsibilities as community members and democratic citizens.

Many have argued that democracy is in decline, communities are disappearing, we are losing our shared values and norms, and the internet is increasing polarization (Bail, 2022; Bartels, 2023; Cortright, 2015; Marantz, 2020; Putnam, 2000; Winerman, 2022). Research in these areas persuasively demonstrates that support for democracy is waning, but most focus on a particular area: community, norms, or technology. Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that it is necessary to look at these things in conjunction with one another. It is not possible to discuss declining communities and norms without also looking at the way technology has changed how people connect. By changing how people connect, technology changes the communities that form and the norms that arise within them, with significant consequences for our social and political lives.

5.1 Building muscle memory

In Chapter 1, I connected a person's social life to their life as a member of a democracy. While I am not the first to claim this connection, I argued that it is time to revisit how people's social lives, particularly their behavior as members of a community, influence what obligations and responsibilities they believe they have towards other members of a democracy. Communities can provide a shared understanding of the world wherein individuals can develop their identity, find meaning and belonging, and create the norms that bind them together as a cohesive unit.

Communitarian scholars like Amitai Etzioni, Michael J. Sandel, and Benjamin R. Barber have all argued that community is political. The affective attachment one feels towards others

shapes their political beliefs, values, and behaviors. The democracy we create begins with the relationships we build with others. Our relationships give our lives meaning and push us to seek policies that improve both our own and our community's lives. By caring about our communities, we can move beyond individual, self-interested goals. While democratic institutions do the work of democracy, communities are democracy at work.

In Chapter 2, I argued that even though people can and do survive on their own, it is only together, through community, that ourselves and democracy thrive. Democracy is a social form of government. At minimum, its members must believe that it is worthwhile and be willing to maintain both its institutions and the culture necessary to sustain them. As such, democracy is particularly reliant on communities and the prosocial norms that arise as people interact with one another. No one is born knowing how to be either a community member or democratic citizen, instead we learn how to do both by interacting with others and by creating, adopting, and enforcing social and democratic norms.

Cristina Bicchieri (2006) calls norms the “grammar of society” because they facilitate interpersonal interactions (p. ix). Descriptive norms help us be recognized as community members, conventions allow us to be understood once admitted, and social norms, like fairness and tolerance, encourage us to cooperate with others, foster a sense of belonging, and allow us to thrive as members. Social norms are relatively easy to teach because we learn them from the people with whom we are already affectively attached, but they also form the basis for democratic norms.

Democratic norms include legitimacy of the opposition, which fosters the belief that democracy is a shared project rather than a contentious battle, and tolerance, which encourages us to see other members of the polity as part of our political community. Together these, and

other democratic norms, bridge the gap between democratic institutions and the people to whom they should be responsive. Yet, democratic norms are more difficult to teach because they require us to consider people with whom we have little contact and with whom we may disagree strongly. Social norms facilitate us in this task because as we learn prosocial behavior in our social lives, we also learn how to apply these norms towards other members of the political community. As such, the way people connect and form community, and the norms that arise within them, are vital to securing a healthy and robust democratic system. However, that is only the case if the social and democratic norms being taught and enforced are supportive of a healthy democracy.

In Chapter 3, I chronicled how technology has advanced and impacted the creation, adoption, and enforcement of social and democratic norms. While technological advancements mean that we are no longer bound by a particular time or place when forming community, online spaces are often feudal in their design wherein one person or a small group of people hold more control over the space's design than other users. This small group determines the rules and behaviors to which all other members must abide. According to Nathan Schneider (2024), this conditions people to accept arbitrary decisions by leaders because the only options users have include trying to oust the space's owner or leaving the community entirely. Schneider argues that the more we rely on technology, the more likely it is that we will believe that those in control are inherently deserving of the power they wield. When translated to the political world, these beliefs lead to an acceptance of leaders breaking democratic norms and increasingly adopting authoritarian behaviors.

Technology's structure also undermines our ability to form meaningful relationships with others as it encourages what Anand Giridharadas (2023) calls the "culture of the write-off,"

where it is easier to mute, block, or ignore people and information that one does not wish to see (p. 4). However, democracy relies on the public's ability to engage in constructive dialogue, consider others, and compromise, which becomes more difficult within the feudalistic spaces of our online lives. Furthermore, Nicholas Carr (2020) suggests that our brain's neuroplasticity, or ability to adapt to new stimuli, means we can learn new technologies quickly, but that we often lose other skills in exchange, skills necessary for in-person social interactions.

For much of human history, our lives and relationships were tied to our corporeality and communities were limited to those with whom we regularly shared physical space. Technology has eliminated these barriers, allowing us to create community with a near infinite number of other people. But it is also weakening our ability to read facial cues, body language, and other physical stimuli. This, in turn, may make it more difficult for us to connect with others and form meaningful relationships in the way that community and democracy require. Most research on community and norms was written before the technological changes that have occurred. Later studies have started to address technology's influence on community formation, but these studies often fail to directly address technology's effect on norm formation, adoption, and enforcement. To address this gap, I conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with people aged 22 to 81.

In Chapter 4, I discussed the common themes that arose during my interviews. Interviews were guided by three core questions 1) How are people connecting and forming communities? 2) Do participants recognize normative behavior? 2a) If so, how do they understand and enforce norms in person and online? 3) What obligations and responsibilities do participants think they owe others as community members and citizens? Since the interviews were semi-structured, I was able to ask follow-up questions and elicit more information than if data were collected through an experiment or survey, though the latter are more common in norms research.

In relation to the first question, participants indicated that they primarily connect with people through technology but have increasingly turned away from the public internet, like forums and social media, to the digital equivalent of gated communities, like group chats and Discord servers. Many participants discussed how they opted out of using social media platforms because they wanted to avoid other people's reactions to what they post. Social media, it appears, is no longer social. Instead, it is a place where one can share life updates with certain people without having to exert the effort to speak to them individually. My interviews suggest that people are becoming more insular even as they are connecting more with others. There is a generational divide with this development, with members of Generation Z (1997-2012) stating they use social media to broadcast information rather than form community.

In relation to my second core question, my interviews suggest that actions like muting and blocking carry their own normative pressures. Interviewees stated that muting was more commonly used when the relationship still mattered to them, but that they needed a break from seeing what the muted person posts. Muting was often temporary and was to be used when there were mild norm violations, like posting too much or posting irrelevant content. Alternatively, most interviewees stated that blocking was a serious action and is often used when the relationship is seen as irreparable. Most participants stated they blocked someone that had become too extreme in their beliefs or argumentative in their posts and comments. Blocking was seen as an end to the relationship where the person is cut out of their life forever. This suggests that there is a "culture of the write-off" in the United States, where people are no longer doing the difficult work of finding common ground, and that it is exacerbated by technological advancement (Giridharadas, 2023, p. 4).

I also asked participants about mild norm violations, like not returning one's cart to the collection area, and extreme norm violations, like using a racial or gender-based slur.

Interviewees stated that they would correct mild norm violations in-person but would most likely ignore the violation online. Participants frequently stated that correcting a norm violation online was too much hassle and that they were more likely to ignore it. Within my sample, the tendency to ignore content was more pronounced for political issues. Most participants stated that they avoid posting about or engaging in political discussions online, which aligns with Bail's (2022) findings. Like social norm violations, the most common reasons for avoiding politics online were that politics is easier to ignore online than in-person, online political discussions had become too acrimonious, and they felt they could not change the other person's mind.

According to Cristina Bicchieri (2006), people follow norms when they 1) know that they exist, 2) believe others think they should conform in this situation, or 3) believes if she does not conform, others will respond with punishment. My interviews suggest that digital technology makes it more difficult to know whether any of these three conditions apply. Technology often carries its own norms, as is the case with muting and blocking, but it also discourages norm enforcement. It is easier to ignore a norm violation online, meaning that people are unlikely to believe that either conditions two or three apply. Bail (2022) argues that when people remove themselves from online spaces, rather than trying to engage in conversation or correct norm violations, only the most extreme voices are left. Bail suggests that this provides us with an incomplete record of human behavior and a distorted understanding of ourselves and others. My interviews provide suggestive evidence that the exodus of moderate voices from the internet has also contributed to a period of intense normative ambiguity. Among my participants, people were

less likely to recognize or enforce norm violations online, suggesting that none of the three conditions have been met and norms are beginning to erode.

Finally, in relation to my last core question, most interviewees stated that technology placed a barrier between them and others which, like norms, made it easier to ignore requests for help and any responsibilities or obligations they would otherwise feel they owed others. I asked participants whether there were any responsibilities or obligations people owed each other as community members and democratic citizens and most stated there were, including common norms like fairness, tolerance, and cooperation. I then asked a series of questions to ascertain whether participants would help others either online or in person. Within my sample, participants said they were more likely to help someone in person because of the realness of the request. That is, it was more difficult to ignore someone in person than it was to ignore the request online.

In my sample, participants stated that it was not their responsibility to determine whether someone asking them for help in-person was lying about their situation. If a stranger asked them for money to buy food, for example, it was not their responsibility to decide if the stranger would use the money for drugs rather than food. Participants in my sample stated that if someone online made a similar request, they would not offer the same kind of help because they could not trust the information they saw. This suggests that it is more difficult to feel responsible or obligated to either get involved or help someone in need when the request occurs in an online space. In Chapter 3, I argued that technology places a barrier between communicating parties and makes it more difficult for people to connect their online experiences with their offline obligations and responsibilities. My interviews suggest that this is the case. Like norm violations, it is easier to ignore people online than it is in-person, which makes it difficult to know whether one should get involved or for people to find the motivation to act.

Based on the responses, I asked participants where people learn compassion, tolerance, and cooperation. Many stated that these were important norms, but that it was someone else's responsibility to teach them. It is true that parents, family, teachers, and friends are important sources of political and normative socialization (Eckstein et al., 2018; Hyman, 1959; Jennings & Niemi, 1968). However, socialization does not end once children become adults. If norms go unenforced once someone moves out of childhood, the norm is likely to erode because people will not know it exists, will not believe they should conform, and will not think others expect them to, either. Therefore, enforcing social and democratic norms both in-person and online among adults is as important as it is for children.

All my participants stated that democracy was worthwhile, but that the United States was headed in the wrong direction. Participants attributed the decline to the expanding executive branch and the abdication of duty by the legislative and judicial branches. This suggests that democratic norms, like legitimacy of the opposition and tolerance, are learned through watching elite actions. Larry M. Bartels (2023) argues that democratic erosion occurs because elites consolidate power, undermine institutions, and visibly or egregiously violate norms. When citizens are happy, he states, they do not mind the elite's behavior, but when citizens start to suffer, that is when they will protest or express their displeasure in other ways. As such, it is elites, not citizens, that contribute the most to democratic backsliding. I agree that elites, by the nature of being in positions of power, do have disproportionate influence over democracy's health.

However, in my interviews, participants often failed to recognize that members of a democracy had any obligations or responsibilities to one another at all. Most participants stated that educating oneself and voting were the only responsibilities democratic citizens have towards

one another. In Chapter 2, I argued that education and voting are important, but insufficient to secure a healthy democratic system. Voting is an institutional process wherein citizens register their preferences, but how those preferences come to be and knowing how one's preferences impact the political community occurs outside the ballot box. A democratic system that relies on institutional processes alone will, in effect, be a democracy in name only because these processes do not engender the culture that a robust democracy requires.

My interviews suggest that this is what is occurring. Interviewees did not recognize or understand that democratic norms, like legitimacy of the opposition, have social corollaries, like fairness. Nor did they recognize that by learning and maintaining fairness in one's social life, it also prepares them for being fair within the political system. Instead, it was easier to retreat to private spaces where other people are more likely to share similar values, norms, and ideals. This has always occurred. Robert D. Putnam (2000) argued that as people became more likely to engage in individualized activities, the less likely they were to participate in social activities. Overtime, social activities have become even more individualized and insular.

Technology makes it easier for people to retreat from public life because a person can maintain her social life online, with only people she knows without having to leave her home. Throughout my interviews, participants stated they left the public internet, where people are likely to disagree with one another or have differing views and approaches to topics and issues, to more gated communities like Discord servers and group chats, where there is a high degree of similarity between members. Like Putnam, I argue this undermines the cross-cutting social ties that a healthy democratic system requires.

5.2 Acknowledging limitations

Although my interviews provide suggestive evidence that technology has undermined community formation and the creation, adoption, and enforcement of social and democratic norms, there are several notable limitations to this study, including sample size, diversity, and accuracy in reporting the findings. First, time and budget limitations prevented me from recruiting more participants. I did not reach saturation within my three categories (Pre-Millennial, Millennial, and Post-Millennial) which limits the cross-generational conclusions I am able to draw from the data. Although my sample was small, there was a high degree of similarity among participant's answers which suggests that I likely reached topic saturation, thus reducing the need for further interviews. However, it is not possible to know topic saturation was reached without conducting more interviews, especially since participants were recruited using online snowball sampling techniques. My interviewees may have similar answers because they were from the same social circles and not because it is what most people believe.

Second, I did not collect detailed demographic data on participants and could not disaggregate along race or gender lines without jeopardizing interviewee privacy. Research indicates that gender “operates as a fundamental organizing principle in society” and influences how “social norms are produced, maintained, and transformed” within communities (Zia, 2023, p. 1). Similarly, Allison P. Anoll (2022) argues that race plays a significant role in how people view their civic obligations as well as their willingness to participate in the political system. Research also shows that people with higher incomes and who are more educated are more likely to participate in the political system and have more political knowledge (*see*: Brady et al., 1995). Thus, while I chose not to recruit participants according to their race or gender, demographic

characteristics do influence how people create, adopt, and enforce social and democratic norms making them critical to consider in future research.

Finally, interview research inherently faces two limitations: interviewer bias and accuracy in reporting. To minimize bias, I developed a series of questions intended to elicit answers without leading participants to certain conclusions. Similarly, I intentionally worded follow-up questions in such a way as to not assume the answer. For example, instead of asking “Do you think it’s wrong for someone to not return their shopping cart to the collection area?” I asked, “Do you think it’s ever justifiable for someone to not return their shopping cart to the collection area?” The former implies the action is wrong, while the latter allows for ambiguity. I am confident that this approach achieved honest responses as several participants stated it would be justifiable to leave a cart outside the collection area if it were a mother with small children, someone with a disability, or if the collection area was too far away.

Additionally, it is not possible to include all interviewee responses and, as such, there is the possibility of reporting bias. However, since I was the only person coding the transcripts, I was able to select quotes that best represented most participant’s answers. I have indicated throughout Chapter 4 when a response was atypical. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 4, minimal adjustments were made to the quotations as I wanted to stay as close to the original intent of the speaker. As such, I only removed stop words when they made the quote unclear.

Avenues for future research include conducting more interviews, collecting detailed demographic data, selecting participants within different demographic categories, asking more direct questions about political and norm socialization, and examining participant’s online behavior, like Bail’s study in 2022. The lack of detailed demographic data and the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. My participants were diverse, but different races

and genders may approach norm education differently. As discussed in Chapter 4, this is likely as one of my participants stated they would not feel comfortable correcting someone of a different race for violating a norm and women-identifying participants were less likely to correct an in-person norm violation out of fear for their physical safety. Ethnographic and interview research could uncover differences in how norms are created, maintained, and enforced within different racial groups and between genders. Alternatively, survey data can provide more generalizability as a larger sample size would allow for demographic disaggregation without risking interviewee privacy.

Normative and political socialization are complex fields of study. People learn to become members of a community and a democracy through a mix of lessons from their family, friends, colleagues, community, elites, and the media. Further study is needed on the role that the media, and technology more broadly, plays in normative and political education. Norm research that utilizes experiments and surveys often fail to consider the role technology plays in community formation and norm creation. Research on political socialization does consider how the media influences political beliefs and attitudes but pays little attention to how technology influences norms. As such, future research is needed, particularly mixed-methods research that leverages the generalizability of surveys with the context provided by either experiments or interviews.

Finally, Bail's (2022) study about online polarization provides an interesting roadmap for others who wish to investigate how technology influences community formation and norm creation, adoption, and enforcement. Bail gained access to people's social media profiles and was able to track how interacting with a bot influenced how the person spoke about politics online. His study sought to understand what happened when people were exposed to information that conflicted with their partisan identity. Bail found that, when exposed to information that does not

align with their partisan identity, people were more likely to reinforce partisan talking points than they were to engage with the new information. My interviews suggest that a similar phenomenon is occurring as people use technology to connect and form community. Future research could use Bail's study as a template for investigating when and why people mute or block others and what impact these actions have had on their in-person relationships. Follow-up interviews with participants could uncover more detailed information regarding the motivations behind these actions and their associated impacts on both our social and political lives.

5.3 How to practice

Most of our lives are spent learning how to be community members and democratic citizens. We are not born knowing how to do either. Instead, we learn by doing. The more we interact with others, the better we become at being social. Joshua Greene (2014) argues that we are born with a baseline understanding of fairness, tolerance, and cooperation because we need other people in order to survive and these norms allow us to both help others and be helped ourselves. However, like most things, prosocial behavior takes time, effort, and practice. Our fairness and tolerance only improve when we have to be either fair or tolerant. As such, we need community because it is through our relationships with others that we learn these vital norms.

Our first teachers are our family and friends. They teach us how to be better community members and citizens directly, by correcting us when we misspeak or misbehave, and indirectly, as we watch and learn from what they do or do not do, like helping someone in need, or trying to avoid jury duty. However, our normative education does not stop during childhood. As we progress through life, we learn norms from other community members, strangers, elites, and the media. In essence, we are always learning and adapting to different people and different situations. Who we choose to associate with has a significant impact on our social and political

beliefs and behaviors (Bicchieri, 2006; Sinclair, 2012). This means we also need to learn and practice how to interact with the larger, more diverse, political community.

Technology has changed how people connect and form community. In doing so, it has also changed how norms are created, adopted, and enforced. People are no longer bound by time and place, but the communities that form online often carry less meaning for us. Nathan Schneider (2024) argues that technology's structure discourages formative connections. My interviews suggest that the design of online spaces, including social media, discourage interpersonal interactions in favor of advertising and artificial intelligence. In effect, the internet makes it more difficult to find other people with whom we can connect and form community.

Yet, technology is how most people connect with others. My data suggests that people are more likely to talk to family and friends through technology, but also less likely to be active in online public spaces, like forums, comment sections, and social media. Instead, people are retreating from the digital equivalent of public life, which undermines their ability to learn the norms that guide behavior as community members and democratic citizens.

According to Schneider (2024), technology does not have to be this way. Hardware limitations that once dictated what was possible in digital spaces no longer exist. Companies and governments can choose to design and regulate technology in ways that encourage prosocial and prodemocratic norms and behaviors. For starters, giving people control over their data through simple privacy settings, preventing companies from mining and selling user data, and increasing digital transparency can empower people to make informed choices online (Pariser, 2012; Schneider, 2024). Additionally, moderators, community notes, and voting systems have proven useful in making technology more democratic (Schneider, 2024). These systems also encourage people to be more considered and thoughtful in their responses, which makes connecting and

forming communities easier. Rather than broadcasting information on Instagram or screaming into the void on Twitter, these platforms, like others, can be redesigned to encourage connection, community, and the adoption of social and democratic norms.

However, structural changes require corporations and governments to abandon practices that have so far been working for them. Tech companies benefit from lax privacy regulations because they make a lot of money mining and selling user data. By working with these companies, the government can influence elections (Bond et al., 2017), expand international and domestic surveillance (E. Graham, 2024), and monitor and censor opinions, either outright like China's "Great Firewall" or more surreptitiously, like when tech companies alter personalized algorithms to privilege some information over others (Pariser, 2012; Schneider, 2024).

Technological advancement is a boon for those in power, meaning substantive structural changes are unlikely.

Real change must come from the public and it begins by learning how technology changes how we connect and form community. The benefit of a people-centric approach is that we already have a roadmap on how to encourage prosocial and prodemocratic behavior: norms. Norms are informal codes of conduct that we create and enforce as we interact with others and that encourage us to behave in certain ways. In person, this means that if we violate a norm, someone will likely correct us with a snide comment or disapproving look. These social sanctions reinforce the normative conditions that Bicchieri (2006) described: we will know the norm exists, believe the behavior is important, and know that we will be sanctioned if we do not comply.

Shame is a powerful motivator, but it works best when we are affectively attached to the person correcting us or vice versa. That is, social sanctions work best when they come from

family, friends, and other community members. My interviews suggested that people are likely to sanction people they know more than strangers, but that their willingness to correct someone's behavior is reduced online. Respondents stated this was partly because they do not want to get into an online argument and partly because it is easier to ignore norm violations online. However, commenting or messaging someone that they have broken a community rule is important because without these corrections, the three normative conditions become ambiguous, and norms start to erode as people will not know the norm exists, that they should follow it, or believe that they will be sanctioned if they do not.

In Chris Bail's (2022) study, he showed that when people are confronted with information that conflicts with their beliefs, they are more likely to find ways to support their beliefs by reiterating talking points or avoiding discussion altogether, than they are to critically assess the information. Technology is not built for the nuanced, subtle approaches that sometimes work to shift people's beliefs in-person because it is easy to mute, block, or ignore unwanted people and content. As a result, attempting to change someone's mind using facts or logic may not be the best approach. Instead, expanding our communities and calling out norm violations may work better.

For example, in my interviews I asked participants whether they would call a friend out for bragging online about violating a mild norm, like not returning their shopping cart to the collection area or taking up two parking spots. Most people said they would ignore the post because it was not worth the argument. Instead of viewing the interaction as the potential for an argument people can use mild social sanctions, like posting "That's a weird thing to brag about!", to subtly suggest the person violated a norm. Shame can cause people to reassess their actions, or, at the very least delete the post, which may influence the poster's behavior and signal to

others that some behaviors are not acceptable. Norms work when they are enforced, and it is the community's responsibility to negotiate and uphold their group's preferred behavior both in-person and online.¹²¹

Encouraging prosocial behavior has also proven successful. Reddit and Facebook have conducted experiments on their platforms demonstrating that people can be moved to action if they believe their friends are behaving a certain way. Researchers released over a dozen artificial intelligence bots on Reddit to post like humans on r/changemyview. The researchers found that posts by A.I. were "six times more persuasive than those made by humans" and were more likely to sway public opinion as a result (B. Turner, 2025, para. 6).¹²² Subreddit users did not know the bots were active and therefore believed that the views expressed were held by other people.

The study is concerning for several reasons. First, the ethical implications of manipulating users without their knowledge on contentious issues should be thoroughly examined. Second, the use of bots masquerading as humans online brings the trustworthiness of online information into question. Users believed the bots were real people, demonstrating that it is becoming more difficult to discern human speech and writing from artificial intelligence. My interviews suggest that people are already suspicious of online information, despite it being the

¹²¹ Dr. Loretta J. Ross argues that calling someone out does not have to occur publicly and, may in fact, be better done privately. Dr. Ross calls this approach "calling-in" where instead of publicly shaming someone for accidentally violating a norm, it is better to talk to them privately "with love" (Bennett, 2020, para. 15). In Dr. Ross' definition, calling out would be more like shaming as a means to do harm, like posting "you're a bigot!" under a post where someone expresses a view with which we disagree. I agree with Dr. Ross that shaming someone with the intent to harm them is unlikely to work because it will most likely cause the other person to become defensive rather than receptive to conversation. The normative corrections I believe have a better chance of working are posting that the *behavior* is weird or bad *not* the individual. If someone posts something offensive online telling them that they are being offensive is unlikely to work but telling them that the offensive comment is an abnormal way of thinking about an issue may cause them to reassess.

¹²² The authors used upvotes, awards, and comments as a proxy for support. *See*: Footnote 43 in Chapter 3.2 for a detailed description of the experiment.

primary way in which people learn about the world. Advancements in A.I. will only exacerbate the problem. Finally, bots can be used by companies, governments, and other actors to effectively sway public opinion on complex issues like democracy, culture, gender, war, sexuality, and interpersonal relationships without the public's knowledge.¹²³ Manipulating online opinions can help shift public opinion on social, economic, and political issues by making users believe certain views are common. We naturally look towards others to form our identities, develop our values and norms, and to determine what responsibilities and obligations we have as community members and democratic citizens. Manipulating what is seen as socially acceptable can profoundly shape our social and political lives.

Similarly, Facebook conducted a voter turnout experiment by placing users into one of three conditions: social, non-social, or control and then showed them messages about voting according to what group they were in. The social condition received a vote reminder that included photos of their friends who had already marked that they had voted. The non-social condition was a reminder to vote, without information about whether others in their social circle voted. The control group received no reminder. Facebook found that voter turnout was highest among the social group. That is, when people were told that their friends had already voted, they were more likely to mark that they had voted, too.¹²⁴ Facebook's experiment is a continuation of common get out the vote experiments conducted within the social sciences (e.g., Rogers et al., 2017, investigating the effect of disclosing a person's neighbors' voting history to encourage

¹²³ The bots covered a broad variety of topics including male responses to rape, calls to violence, partisanship and polarization, economic policy, and criminal justice.

¹²⁴ For a more detailed discussion of Facebook's experiments, *see*: Footnote 43 in Chapter 3.2.

voter turnout). For both in-person and online studies of voter turnout, people are more likely to vote if their family, friends, and other community members also vote.

In online spaces, it is possible for individuals to encourage prosocial and prodemocratic behavior within their communities by sharing, posting, or commenting on this type of content. For example, if someone posts frequently online, they can post videos of them doing prosocial activities, like returning their cart to the collection area or attending a city hall meeting. Sharing or commenting on posts by people that are doing prosocial and prodemocratic actions can increase viewership as most online algorithms filter content based on how many likes, comments, and reposts it receives. It could be that the more common this content becomes, the more the norms will be reinforced.

In Bail's (2022) study, he exposed people to opposing viewpoints by having them follow bots. He found that forcing people out of their echo chambers does not increase fairness, tolerance, and cooperation. Instead, it may have the opposite effect and cause people to become more extreme in their beliefs. A similar experiment may be useful in uncovering whether directed online normative sanctions or encouragement can strengthen people's recognition and willingness to abide by prosocial and prodemocratic norms. There is evidence that this shift is occurring. People are turning away from influencers that prank or help strangers as part of their content and memes encouraging prosocial and prodemocratic behavior are becoming more common (Devoe & Fuentes, 2017; Mendez, 2024).¹²⁵

¹²⁵ See: *Figure F.1*, *Figure F.2*, *Figure F.3*, *Figure F.5*, *Figure F.6*, and *Figure F.7* in Appendix F as examples of how memes are being used to encourage and discourage behavior surrounding tech use, community formation, democratic participation, and norm adoption.

Generations Alpha and Beta are on track to be more reliant on technology than any previous generation. Without significant changes to how technology operates or without more people being willing to encourage and enforce prosocial and prodemocratic norms, these generations are also the least likely to learn their responsibilities and obligations as members of a community and a democracy. The formalities of democracy are not enough to sustain it. Instead, both people and democracy work best when we foster our connections to those in our social and political communities. As technology advances and both society and government become more complex, it is up to us to work towards maintaining our relationships with others. Each of us can encourage fairness, tolerance, and cooperation within our networks and, if we are lucky, we can secure a culture robust enough to sustain democracy.

Appendix F New Norms



Figure F.1: A.I. is for losers



Figure F.2: Making A.I. cringe

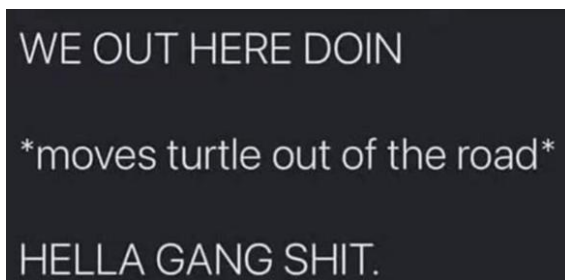


Figure F.3: Hella gang shit



Figure F.4: All my homies love sincerity

Note: Figure F.1, Figure F.2, Figure F.3, and Figure F.4 (along with Figure F.5, Figure F.6, and Figure F.7 below) are examples of how memes are being used to encourage or discourage behavior using norms.

Figure F.1 and Figure F.2 suggest that the only way that people can prevent artificial intelligence from destroying society and the environment is by shaming people who use it. Figure F.2 argues that people need to bribe influencers to create content that is anti-A.I..

Figure F.3 and Figure F.4 reflect how memes can encourage pro-social behavior. Figure F.3 reframes being in a gang from something violent or nefarious to a group that engages in prosocial activities, like moving animals out of danger. Figure F.4 is similar in that it suggests that homies, or a person's friends, love sincerity.

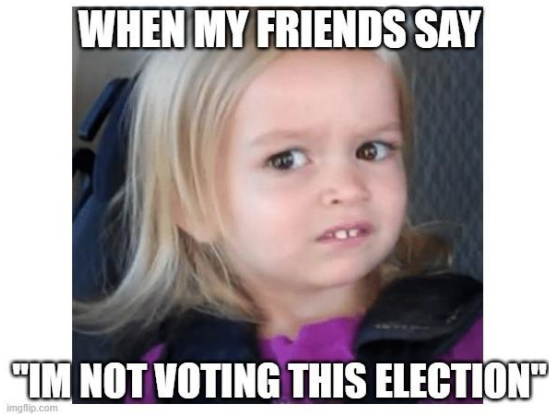


Figure F.5: Ew, you're not voting?

I AM ONCE AGAIN ASKING YOU
TO ACTUALLY GET OUT AND VOTE

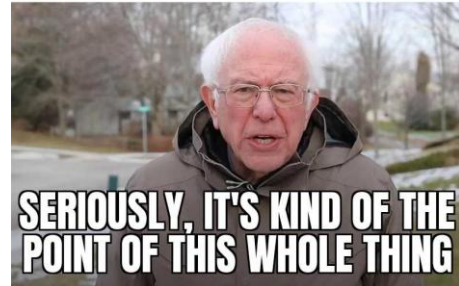


Figure F.6: Voting is the whole point



Relatable Insider
@relatableinsder

...

I hope manners is the next cool trend

Figure F.7: Manners as the next cool trend

Note: Figure F.5 and Figure F.6 encourage prodemocratic norms. Figure F.5 shames people for not voting by suggesting that they will be judged. Figure F.6 uses a common Bernie Sanders meme format from the 2024 election. The screenshot is from a campaign video in which Bernie Sanders was “once again asking” people to donate to his campaign. Figure F.6 uses this format to remind people that voting is a key component of democratic systems.

Finally, *Figure F.7* expresses the hope that manners (i.e., norms) start to trend, reinforcing the idea that norms are important for how we understand ourselves and others as both community members and democratic citizens.

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