

WINNING THE FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE OF INFORMATION

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*A progressive
to-do list for
safeguarding
the information
environment*

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INTRO

THE TO-DO LIST:

- 1 Be as Political as Possible

 - 2 Big Tech is Too Big

 - 3 Look for Allies Everywhere

 - 4 Create Solutions, Don't Just Raise Problems

 - 5 Concepts of Communication Must Change

 - 6 Reimagine Journalism, Don't Recreate Traditional Media
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When I finished writing my recent essay *Sword & Shield: AI, Democracy and the Future of Information* I got some common feedback.

'It's well written,' people said.

'But I still can't tell what you actually think needs to happen'.

So in this short epilogue I have tried to be much clearer about what actions I might prescribe to ensure progressives win the battle for the future of the information environment.

The good news is that many of these things are already happening. The less good news is that these initiatives are not always getting enough support. The bad news is that some of the most critical political steps are not being taken.

Here's how I see it.

We are living through a radical restructuring of the information environment that began with the arrival of the internet, manifested itself in the rise of smartphones and social media and will accelerate yet again with the widespread adoption of AI.

Modern digital information environments are much more complex and far less regulated than our old analogue ones.

This matters to all of us because the health of the information environment has a direct relationship with the legitimacy of our democracies.

It is not a coincidence that democracies (and arguably progressive political movements) have become weaker during a period of disruption within the information environment. There is a lag between the way new technologies change the rules of the information game and our collective and individual ability to adapt to that change.

Well funded climate deniers, xenophobes, autocrats and populists are better resourced to exploit the potential of new technologies to meet their goals than cash-strapped civil society organisations, bureaucratic democratic institutions and risk-averse politicians.

We need to move quickly to understand when and where it is appropriate to adopt new AI technology as part of an effort to avoid regressive political outcomes from the adoption of these technologies more broadly.

Artificial intelligence will, in time, fundamentally change how we communicate - as individuals and organisations. This will in turn impact democratic discourse and, if not handled well, undermine democratic legitimacy.

It's too late to 'prepare' for this change. It has begun. So we must learn and adapt in an environment of constant flux.

I've written elsewhere about what I think this adaptation will look like but if I had a magic wand that could cast one spell on the leaders of progressive organisations and democratic institutions, it would re-programme their conception of communications away from media-centric, top-down, text heavy broadcasting towards influence-savvy, community building, multimedia first approaches that constantly pursue two-way engagement. They'd also be working out how to use AI.

This would not only ensure progressive narratives enjoy more leverage with the wider public but, in time, serve as a powerful antidote to issues with public trust in institutions.

What you are about to read is a miscellaneous progressive to-do list when it comes to safeguarding the information environment.

There is a separate to-do list when it comes to governments getting AI policy right. I'm not going to write that one - many people know much more than me.

This list is formed after five years of thinking professionally about little else but these issues. My decision to get them down on paper is driven by a desire to move from thinking to doing.

If you want to help me do that, please get in touch.



Jonathan Tanner,
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BE AS POLITICAL AS POSSIBLE

Maintaining a healthy democratic information environment must be a cross-party priority. Campaigners should aim to build consensus across the political spectrum by:

1. Establishing shared perspectives on key threats such as:
 - Disinformation as a strategic attack on democracy.
 - The autocratic potential of AI technology.
2. Supporting politicians who align with these perspectives and enabling them to secure influential positions. This is a strategic move, not a partisan one.
3. Elevating the public profile of digital issues, as politicians will prioritise matters with high public concern. Increased public awareness should be both an immediate and long-term goal.

WORK THAT NEEDS TO BE DONE:

- Research the framing and language that resonate across political ideologies to emphasise the urgency of safeguarding democracy
 - Develop political strategies that drive the issue of democratic safeguarding up the policy agenda, ensuring it is framed as a cross-party effort
 - Build long-term networks with political professionals and policymakers to foster international cooperation and create feedback loops for strategy adaptation across different contexts (e.g., EU, UK, US)
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BIG TECH IS TOO BIG

Major technology companies have repeatedly acted against democratic interests, engaging in ethically questionable practices (e.g. anti-competitive behaviour, product safety concerns, supply-chain shortcomings, copyright violations, environmental impacts). Given this track record, it is reckless to allow these companies to lead AI development without more oversight.

While critiques focusing on child safety and privacy are helpful, they alone are insufficient to address the core issues of power and accountability. Political action is essential but requires increased public and elite awareness. Greater transparency and accountability requirements on these companies are especially urgent.

WORK THAT NEEDS TO BE DONE:

- Build coalitions advocating for greater transparency, anti-monopoly regulations, and accountability, including legal expertise and engagement with regulatory bodies globally
 - Commission research to provide evidence of the systemic harms caused by tech product design (as opposed to use), building a robust evidence base to bolster advocacy campaigns
 - Launch creative public awareness campaigns to educate the public on the implications of unchecked tech power, focusing on both immediate risks (e.g., privacy, disinformation) and long-term threats (e.g., democracy)
 - Develop training programmes for activists and civil society leaders to equip them with the skills to effectively engage legislators, regulators, and the media in pushing for reform.
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LOOK FOR ALLIES EVERYWHERE

The information environment is not the only critical component of democracy. Many democracies are under pressure on multiple fronts.

This means there are lots of people looking for ideas and solutions to other modern problems that can contribute to democratic decline.

There are also progressive causes who have decades of experience of attempting to tackle major societal problems that are being exacerbated by corporate actors (climate change, anti-smoking, gun control, workers rights).

These causes have been tripped up by corporate tactics to support the development of ultimately powerless political talking shops, bog change down in regulatory weeds, fund academic research to develop an 'evidence base' for lobbying or hoard data that is in the public interest in order to prevent themselves being held to account.

Organisations working on relevant digital issues should proactively seek to learn from these movements and ensure their own tactics do not replicate previous mistakes.

WORK THAT NEEDS TO BE DONE:

- Commission research to analyse successful public policy debates and cross-sector coalitions (e.g. health, environmental movements) to identify strategies for digital governance
 - Create a multidisciplinary, global forum for progressive narratives that connects issues like AI, information environments, and climate change into cohesive, emotionally resonant stories
 - Form alliances between digital democracy advocates and other progressive movements to amplify shared goals and develop collaborative campaigns.
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CREATE SOLUTIONS, DON'T JUST RAISE PROBLEMS

It is not enough to simply highlight the problems with AI and the wider information environment. Campaigners and clued-up actors need to be able to share a vision for how these technologies can be used in alignment with democratic and progressive values.

There is really strong deliberative and democratic potential in AI technology that could be used to broaden and deepen people's engagement with democratic processes and institutions. These types of application for AI should be strongly supported.

More broadly, it is important to support civic technology initiatives that can pioneer and promote alternative technological solutions to social problems which are not part of big tech. These need to be grounded in a strong understanding of what people actually want from collective technology.

WORK THAT NEEDS TO BE DONE:

- Develop pilot projects that showcase AI applications for democratic processes, such as deliberative polling and participatory budgeting
 - Fund civic tech initiatives that promote open-source alternatives to proprietary AI, ensuring these technologies are aligned with democratic values
 - Disseminate a public narrative that highlights AI's positive potential in governance, focusing on its ability to deepen citizen participation and enhance transparency.
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CONCEPTS OF COMMUNICATION MUST CHANGE

Stories remain the most powerful mechanism we possess to unify and persuade people around ideas. Communicating stories effectively in the age of AI will require a willingness to use AI. Being slow to get to grips with AI risks leaving space open for regressive narratives to gain traction with the support of AI technologies. Progressive organisations are unlikely to be able to move at pace around AI if their leaders are not well informed about how to do so. This makes executive education, white label organisational policies and positive use-case examples especially important. Effective use of AI will require other adjustments (e.g. around organisational use of data).

WORK THAT NEEDS TO BE DONE:

- Develop executive education programmes on AI and modern communication tailored to leaders in progressive organisations
 - Support the creation of AI-driven tools that enable personalised, community-focused content to scale progressive messaging effectively
 - Document best practices and case studies of AI in communication to foster peer learning and exchange of successful strategies
 - Partner with AI experts to co-create ethical, transparent communication tools that align with progressive values.
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REIMAGINE JOURNALISM, DON'T RECREATE TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Access to good quality information for all citizens is important in democratic society.

Journalism and media organisations are how this was broadly achieved in the 20th century.

It is intuitive but risky to assume that financially supporting media organisations rather than journalists will ensure access to good quality information in future democracies.

Increasing numbers of journalists are working independently, using a mix of multi-channel approaches to their story-telling and drawing on crowdfunding for their work.

The increasing number of people getting their news from social media mean that more journalists are likely to be incentivised to do this.

All journalists will need access to specialised skills (cyber security, data science, avatar development, algorithmic forensics etc) to help them build stories based on digital sources.

It may make more sense to fund centres of technical investigative expertise that can work in partnership with independent journalists than trying to embed these skills in economically unsustainable media organisations.

WORK THAT NEEDS TO BE DONE:

- Research and develop innovative funding models to support independent journalists, such as crowdfunding and subscription-based services
 - Establish technical investigative centres specialising in cybersecurity, data science, and AI to collaborate with independent journalists
 - Develop open-source tools for journalists to enhance transparency and accountability in reporting
 - Explore and support alternative media models that emphasise digital-first, multimedia storytelling to engage diverse and younger audiences.
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Stay Connected

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Rootcause equips progressives to succeed in the AI age. We bring together artificial intelligence, data and deep experience to help our clients gain an edge in highly-contested narrative environments.