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## **Youth Political Activism in Countering Online Hate Speech: Perspectives and Representations in Contemporary Europe**

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## **Abstract**

This study explores how young political activists across Europe perceive and respond to online hate speech. Drawing on eight focus groups across seven European countries, it investigates how young activists conceptualize hate speech, navigate digital hostility, and build counter-narrative strategies. A thematic analysis reveals three interlinked dynamics: normalization of online hostility, hybrid activism that integrates social media and community work, and emotional labor embedded in civic engagement. The study documents innovative forms of resistance rooted in solidarity, care, and democratic ethics, while highlighting structural challenges such as precarity, visibility risks, and burnout. Policy implications emphasize the need for institutional support, emotional care frameworks, and youth-centered digital education. Findings offer new insights into youth-led resilience and democratic renewal in the face of rising online polarization and hate speech.

## **Keywords**

Youth activism; Hate speech; Digital democracy; Counter-narratives; EU policy; Civic participation; Activism

## Introduction

Digital communication ecosystems have profoundly reshaped civic participation in contemporary Europe. Social media platforms operate simultaneously as amplifiers of democratic expression and as vectors for hostile discourse. Young people, despite being among the most digitally embedded social groups, face multiple vulnerabilities: job precarity, unstable futures, and high exposure to online hostility. Still, early indicators suggest they represent a key democratic force against digital hatred. Yet scholarship has insufficiently examined youth activist experiences directly. This study addresses this gap, situating youth activism within European socio-political transformations, and analyzing activist representations, practices, and emotional experiences.

## Methods

A qualitative multi-country research design was adopted. Eight focus groups were run across Italy, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Hungary, Czech Republic, and Lithuania involving 39 activists aged 18-30. Participants were recruited through youth civil society organizations engaged in anti-hate speech work. A semi-structured interview guide explored: perceptions of hate speech, activist identity, strategies, and emotional experiences. All audio recordings were transcribed, translated, and coded using a hybrid inductive-deductive approach. Inter-researcher triangulation ensured analytic rigor.

**Table 1. Participant Distribution by Country**

| Country        | Participants |
|----------------|--------------|
| Italy          | 8            |
| Spain          | 7            |
| Greece         | 3            |
| Cyprus         | 3            |
| Hungary        | 5            |
| Czech Republic | 8            |
| Lithuania      | 5            |

## Results

Three overarching themes emerged: (1) hate speech as normalized digital experience, (2) hybrid forms of civic resistance, and (3) emotional labor in activism. Participants described algorithm-driven amplification of hostility, strategic use of counter-narratives, and the importance of collective empowerment. Yet they also emphasized feelings of exhaustion, vulnerability, and risk. Activism is perceived as a transformative journey that fosters agency, solidarity, and belonging.

## Figure 1. Conceptual Model of Youth Activism Against Hate Speech

[Conceptual diagram placeholder: normalization → activism → resilience]

## **Discussion**

The findings underscore the paradoxical environment young activists navigate: digital platforms expose them to hostility while simultaneously serving as arenas for participation and advocacy. Their activism blends moral motivation with pragmatic interventions such as content creation, dialogue facilitation, and community-based initiatives. This research highlights the importance of recognizing emotional fatigue not as weakness but as evidence of deep civic commitment. European institutions must invest in youth-led infrastructures and emotional support mechanisms to sustain engagement.

## **Conclusion**

This study provides one of the first transnational qualitative examinations of European youth activism against online hate. It demonstrates how young activists construct resistance through solidarity, empathy, and critical engagement. To safeguard digital democracy, long-term institutional and educational commitments are necessary to protect, empower, and sustain young defenders of online pluralism.

## **Operational Recommendations**

- Develop EU-level emotional resilience programs for youth activists
- Fund grassroots digital activism beyond short-term cycles
- Launch youth co-designed media literacy and counter-narrative campaigns
- Establish safe reporting and legal support channels
- Integrate activist perspectives in EU digital policy design

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# Youth Political Activism in Countering Online Hate Speech: Perspectives and Representations in Contemporary Europe

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## Introduction

The growing development of digital platforms and social media has profoundly transformed the European communication landscape, creating new opportunities for democratic expression but at the same time opening up new spaces for the proliferation of online hate speech. In recent years, the spread of online hate speech has grown exponentially, with its impact manifesting itself at the individual, social and political levels. Social networks are in fact a 'double-edged sword' for the promotion and protection of human rights: on the one hand, they encourage freedom of expression and opinion, but on the other, they create spaces for the proliferation of hatred and stigmatisation that threaten the right to tolerance and respect for the equal dignity of all human beings.

### *The European debate on hate speech: regulatory developments and contemporary challenges*

At the European level, the debate on combating hate speech has taken on particular relevance in recent years. As highlighted by Peršak (2022), in 2020 the EU Commission announced plans to expand the list of EU crimes to include all forms of hate crime and hate speech. The plan aimed to classify such offences as 'other areas of crime' under Article 83(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), citing their serious nature, cross-border impact and evolving patterns of criminal activity as justification.

Following the rise of digital technologies, the EU began enacting regulations and directives addressing hate speech and the responsibility of digital platforms to protect individuals' rights and moderate offensive content (Battista & Uva, 2024; Farrand, 2023; Nave & Lane, 2023). The E-Commerce Directive (2000/31/EC) laid the groundwork by defining online intermediaries as responsible for their hosted content, while ensuring that they were not held liable for user-generated content. The Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD), first introduced in 2010 and revised in 2018, expanded regulation to include audiovisual services, such as video-sharing platforms, requiring them to implement measures to protect the public from harmful content such as hate speech.

The EU Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online (2016) was a significant step forward, promoting collaboration between the EU and large online platforms (VLOPs) such as Facebook and YouTube to adopt rapid content removal processes and promote transparency in the management of hate speech. Legislative progress also included the Digital Services Act (DSA) of 2022, which provided a comprehensive regulatory framework for addressing illegal content online and introduced a 'co-regulatory strategy', allowing national authorities to issue orders for the removal of illegal content.

A comparative analysis of European national legislation reveals significant discrepancies in the approaches adopted by individual Member States. For example, Kapelańska-Pręgowska and Pucelj (2023) highlighted significant differences between Poland and Slovenia in their approaches to combating hate speech. In Poland, the term 'hate speech' is not explicitly mentioned in legislation, and although the Constitution (Article 32) prohibits

discrimination, it does not extend this protection to sexual orientation or gender identity. In contrast, in Slovenia, hate speech is defined both in the Constitution (Article 63) and in the Criminal Code (Article 297), with legislation more aligned with international standards and more proactive public policies.

### *Hate speech and human rights violations: conceptual and regulatory dimensions*

From a conceptual point of view, hate speech is defined as 'language that attacks or uses derogatory or discriminatory terminology with reference to a person or group based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor' (United Nations, n.d.). This definition highlights the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon, which cuts across different identity categories and can manifest itself in increasingly sophisticated forms in the digital environment.

The fundamental tension in the contemporary debate focuses on the difficult balance between protecting citizens' rights and preserving freedom of expression. As Feldman (2013) points out, there is a complex relationship between hate speech and democracy that requires careful consideration of fundamental human rights principles. The difficulty of combating radicalisation in coded communications on social media platforms has been highlighted by Farrand (2023), who pointed out that subtle or coded forms of hate pose a particular challenge for content moderation.

As highlighted by Immenkamp (2024), in a scenario characterised by a marked increase in hate speech and hate crimes, it becomes crucial to develop effective strategies to safeguard the cohesion of a democratic society, the protection of human rights and the rule of law. A review of the literature shows a marked increase in the discussion of online hate speech in Europe, with most studies published recently, highlighting how the academic debate on combating hate speech has followed technological progress (Paz et al., 2020).

### *The emerging role of political activists in combating hate speech*

In this complex and rapidly evolving context, the crucial role of political activists, particularly the younger generation, in combating hate speech is becoming increasingly apparent. However, analysis of the living conditions of young Europeans reveals significant limitations in their participation in traditional models of civic activism. Contemporary young Europeans face unprecedented challenges: they are more prone to anxiety due to a weaker welfare state and the threats posed by an uncertain geopolitical landscape and the consequences of climate change; they are more precarious than previous generations, as they enter a world of work where stable employment and wages sufficient to guarantee a decent life are increasingly rare.

Due to job insecurity, these young people are also less free to manage their own time, as they are forced to work more than one job to support themselves. Under these conditions, it is clear that the model of civic mobilisation and activism offered by most civil society organisations – based on free time, unpaid voluntary work and activities with a medium/low level of specialisation – is often not very attractive, as available time is limited and incomes are precarious.

Added to this is the fact that European societies are becoming increasingly mixed and multiracial, making it difficult to develop structured proposals for activism or volunteering that are capable of accommodating increasingly complex types of young people (with

migrant backgrounds, non-binary, with disabilities, etc.). This transformation of the social landscape requires new methodological and theoretical approaches to understand and support youth engagement in activities to combat hate speech.

### *Research needs and gaps in the literature*

Despite the growing relevance of the phenomenon and the recognised importance of the role of young activists, there is clearly a significant gap in the scientific literature. As highlighted by the scoping review conducted within the Hate Trackers Into Action project, although various strategies have been implemented in Europe to address hate speech and its impact on societies, there is still no comprehensive mapping of these interventions. More specifically, the existing literature does not seem to include studies that have directly involved young political activists in understanding the phenomenon of hate speech and strategies to combat it.

This gap is particularly significant considering that, as pointed out by Zollo and Loos (2017), 2013 marked the beginning of the 'No Hate Speech Movement', a youth campaign launched by the Council of Europe to combat hate speech by mobilising young people to defend human rights and democracy online. Despite growing academic interest in hate speech since 2014 (Paz et al., 2020), the direct perspective of those on the front line of this battle – young political activists – remains unexplored.

Analysing studies that have explicitly identified their geographical scope at the national level, distinct priorities can be found, with some countries seeming to have received more interest than others. The German case is among the most studied (n = 7), with research focusing on educational programmes and strategies, national regulations, as well as organised and individual counter-speech initiatives. Studies discussing the Spanish context (n = 5) focus on counter-speech initiatives, while those on the United Kingdom (n = 5) show significant interest in discussing both offline and online regulation of hate speech. However, in none of these cases is there a specific focus on young political activists as direct research subjects.

To fill this gap, a qualitative methodological approach is needed to explore in depth the representations, experiences and challenges faced by young activists in combating hate speech. Qualitative research is the most appropriate approach for investigating the complexity of this phenomenon, allowing us to capture the nuances of lived experiences, the motivations that drive activist engagement, and the strategies developed by these young people in their countering activities.

This study fits into this scenario, forming part of the 'Hate Trackers Into Action' project, funded by the European Union through the Erasmus Plus programme. The project involved seven civil society organisations in seven European countries (Italy, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Lithuania), representing a unique opportunity to explore the perspectives of young activists through a transnational comparative approach. The specific objective is to explore the representations of young political activists on the issue of combating hate speech, investigating in particular their perception of the phenomenon, their role in the current social landscape and the challenges and opportunities they encounter in their work to combat online hate speech. Effectively combating the spread of hate requires a coordinated, multidisciplinary and multi-level governance approach to preserve the integrity of our democracies.

### *Objective and purpose*

The overall objective of this study is to explore the representations, practices and challenges of young activists engaged in combating hate speech in European contexts, with the aim of understanding how they interpret the phenomenon, what intervention strategies they adopt and what resources and obstacles they encounter in their civic action work. More specifically, the study aims to investigate:

- the representation of online hate speech by activists;
- the role attributed to political activists in preventing and combating hate speech;
- the perceived challenges and opportunities in the processes of activation and practical actions (e.g. counter-narratives, advocacy, community interventions);
- the mapping of stakeholders and potential support at national and local level useful for sustaining youth activism.

The choice of a qualitative design is motivated by the need to capture the meanings, intentions and practical processes that characterise the actions of activists and which quantitative surveys do not allow to be examined in depth (Scoping Review, 2025).

### *Participants*

The study was conducted as part of the Hate Trackers – Into Action project, co-funded by the European Union, and involved young members of the Semiological Guerrilla Youth Groups (SGYG) set up within the partner organisations. The sample includes 39 young political activists (age range for SGYG: 18–30 years; average age of the sample: 23 years). Participants were recruited in collaboration with seven civil society organisations active in seven European countries (Italy, Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Lithuania). The selection was purposive, aimed at including active members of SGYG groups with direct experience in awareness-raising, content production and intervention against hate speech in their respective national and local contexts.

## **Method and procedures**

### *Design and tools*

The study adopts a qualitative approach based on focus groups as the main data collection tool. A total of eight focus groups were conducted across the seven countries involved. The focus groups were structured around a thematic agenda shared among the partners, which included the following areas of investigation: the identity and role of political activists today; the perception and description of hate speech in the national context; activism practices and tools in the country; assessments of the Hate Trackers project experience; problems encountered and opportunities identified; mapping of stakeholders and potential allies in the fight against hate speech. These areas correspond to the project's methodological guidelines for SGYG and allow for a systematic comparison between different national contexts.

### *Recruitment and conduct procedures*

Participants were contacted through partner organisations and invited to participate in focus groups on a voluntary basis. Prior to participation, an information form about the study was provided and informed consent was obtained (consent to audio recording, analytical use of

materials and anonymisation). The focus groups were conducted in the local language by moderators appointed by the partner organisations, with an expected duration of between 60 and 120 minutes depending on the context. All focus groups were audio recorded and supplemented, where appropriate, by field notes compiled by the researchers present.

### Transcript management and confidentiality

The recordings were transcribed in full and anonymised; to enable cross-national comparative analysis, the transcripts were translated into a common working language (English) or shared with contextual translations agreed upon by the partners. All identifying material was removed or pseudonymised to protect the privacy of participants and to comply with the ethical and data protection regulations applicable to the partner organisations.

## Data analysis

### *Analytical approach*

The data analysis follows a mixed thematic approach, which integrates an initial deductive coding structure (derived from the research questions and literature synthesised in the Scoping Review) with an inductive process aimed at bringing out recurring categories and themes directly from the data. This strategy allows us to compare the representations identified with the conceptual nodes already present in the literature on hate speech, while remaining open to innovative and specific elements of young people's experiences that may emerge in the practical context of SGYG (Scoping Review, 2025).

### *Operational phases*

- Familiarisation: in-depth reading of transcripts and field notes for each focus group.
- Initial coding: application of a preliminary set of codes referring to the planned thematic areas (representations of hate speech, activist roles and practices, obstacles and resources, perception of the project).
- Iterative code development: integration of emerging codes to capture concepts not covered by the initial set.
- Grouping and definition of themes: synthesis of codes into broader themes and development of a thematic map highlighting similarities and differences between countries and the individual trajectories of participants.
- Validation among partners: intersubjective discussion of preliminary results in research meetings among partners to verify interpretative consistency and translate national themes into categories that are comparable at the European level.

### *Robustness and quality considerations*

To ensure the quality and reliability of the analysis, researcher triangulation practices (multiple analysts involved in coding and comparing results), audit trails of analytical decisions and assumptions (documentation of the stages of code and theme development) and the use of analytical memos to record reflections and interpretations were adopted. The combination of deductive and inductive coding also allows interpretations to be anchored to empirical evidence and the theoretical framework outlined in the literature (Scoping Review, 2025).

## *Ethics and methodological limitations*

The study involved obtaining informed consent and measures to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Among the main limitations are the relatively small sample size and the non-probabilistic nature of recruitment, which limit the statistical generalisability of the results; however, these characteristics are consistent with the exploratory and interpretative objective of qualitative research aimed at producing an in-depth understanding of the processes and representations of young activists.

## **Results**

### *1. Perceptions and representations of online hate speech*

#### *1.1. Definitions and boundaries of the phenomenon*

The participants' narratives reveal a complex and nuanced view of online hate speech, which is often perceived as a widespread and 'normalised' phenomenon, whose definition is ambiguous and varies according to cultural contexts. Young people recognise the presence of hostile and discriminatory language but tend to distinguish between 'serious' forms of hate speech and a more everyday and ironic use of verbal aggression.

In several focus groups, it was noted that the tolerance threshold for hate speech has increased, a sign of a gradual habituation to communicative violence.

'In Hungary, hate speech is very common. Almost everyone does it and it's not a problem here, nobody really cares' (FG Budapest, Sára).

"Many racist jokes or comments are taken as humour, but for me it's still hate. It's a subtle form, but it's still hate" (FG Vilnius, Agne).

#### *1.2. The subjective experience of hate and social normalisation*

Hate is described not only as a social phenomenon, but also as a direct or mediated emotional experience. Many young people have witnessed incidents of discrimination or offensive comments towards ethnic minorities, migrants, women or LGBTQ+ people. However, the majority perceive hate as 'part of everyday digital life', often trivialised or dismissed.

'In Cyprus, we are seeing a rise in the far right... Migrants and LGBTQ+ people are the most targeted groups' (FG Cyprus, Joanna)

'Sometimes it seems like hate is everywhere: in comments, videos, jokes. You get used to seeing it' (FG Turin, Francesca)

#### *1.3. Digital platforms as amplifiers of hate*

Digital platforms are unanimously considered ambivalent spaces: places of participation and visibility, but also of polarisation and radicalisation. Algorithms and the logic of engagement are perceived as factors that encourage the spread of aggressive content.

"Social media pushes you to react to the worst things. The more extreme a statement is, the more it is seen" (FG Turin, Omier).

"Algorithms can't even recognise Greek written in Latin characters..." (FG Cyprus, Joanna)

## *2. Youth activism as a civic response*

### *2.1. Motivations and meanings of engagement*

Activism is represented as a form of civic and moral participation rather than political participation. The motivations for engagement are rooted in the desire to 'do something concrete' and to counteract generalised indifference.

"I chose to participate in the project because I wanted to do something useful..." (FG Turin, Matteo)

'For me, activism is taking action to change something you believe is wrong' (FG Athens, Sofia)

### *2.2. Forms of activism and digital practices*

Activist practices take hybrid forms that combine offline interventions and online strategies. The focus groups reveal a strong awareness of the communicative effectiveness of visual languages and positive narratives as tools for combating hatred.

"We made T-shirts with the slogan 'More love and less hate'..." (FG Malaga, Danna)

"We started doing a podcast on hate speech..." (FG Athens, Georgia)

### *2.3. Activism as a space for empowerment and care*

Many participants emphasise the transformative value of activism, experienced as an individual and collective empowerment experience. Acting together and sharing alternative narratives generates a sense of belonging and mutual care.

"I used to have a negative view of activism... Then I realised that it is also about building" (FG Turin, Camila)

"When you talk to people, even if it's only online, you feel less alone" (FG Vilnius, Dominyka)

## *3. The challenges of online activism*

### *3.1. Perceived risks and vulnerabilities*

Young people recognise that online engagement exposes them to forms of vulnerability: hate speech in return, personal attacks and burnout. Activism is perceived as fragile, requiring a balance between visibility and protection.

"I thought about stopping posting because every time I do, I get more hate" (FG Cyprus, Joanna)

"It's difficult to be an activist on social media without feeling judged" (FG Budapest, Veronika)

### *3.2. Instrumentalisation and the 'trend' of activism*

Some participants denounce the tendency to sensationalise online activism, which is perceived as performative or linked to image rather than content.

"Today, many people are only activists to look good" (FG Turin, Francesca)

"Sometimes it's more important to make a post than to do something concrete" (FG Prague, Person 2)

### *3.3. Emotional fatigue and disenchantment*

Activism is also described as an emotionally demanding experience, marked by frustration and a sense of ineffectiveness. However, recognising this fatigue does not lead to giving up, but to a more realistic awareness of civic engagement.

"You feel small in the face of all the hatred that exists. Sometimes you think: is it really worth it?" (FG Athens, Georgia)

"After a while, you get tired, you don't see results and you feel like nothing is changing" (FG Vilnius, Erika)

## *4. Counter-strategies and future prospects*

### *4.1. Education, awareness and counter-narratives*

Education emerges as the main strategy for combating this issue. Young people call for awareness-raising and training programmes on the responsible use of media, but also stress the importance of spreading positive messages.

'The problem is that from an early age we are not taught how to socialise with differences' (FG Malaga, Lucas)

"Creating content that shows empathy is a way to change things" (FG Turin, Alessia)

### *4.2. The role of networks and community support*

Youth networks, NGOs and local groups are points of reference for feeling part of collective change. Belonging to a community of practice is associated with greater resilience and confidence.

"When you work with other young people, you realise you're not alone" (FG Turin, Matteo)

"Activism only becomes sustainable if you do it with others" (FG Athens, Sofia)

### *4.3. Visions of change and desires for the future*

Despite the difficulties, the focus groups offer a proactive vision. Young people imagine a future based on cooperation and the ethical use of technology.

"I would like social media to become a space for education, not just confrontation" (FG Vilnius, Gabija)

"Changing things does not mean erasing hatred, but learning to respond differently" (FG Prague, Person 4)

## **Interpretative summary**

Overall, the focus groups reveal a representation of youth activism as a hybrid space of resistance and construction, in which action against hate speech becomes a means of reaffirming civic sense and collective responsibility. The narratives show a balance between critical awareness and pragmatic hope, indicating the emergence of a youth culture of engagement oriented towards care, solidarity and social justice.

## *Discussion*

This research explored perceptions of online hate speech and forms of youth activism aimed at combating it in different European contexts, highlighting the complexity of the phenomena analysed and the tensions that animate young people's civic engagement. The results intersect with some existing lines of research, but also contribute to delineating areas of the literature that have been little explored.

### *Perceptions of hate speech and digital platforms*

The first theme highlighted — namely, the ambiguous definition and normalisation of online hate speech — confirms the difficulty of defining and drawing the line on hate speech in digital environments. As noted by Castaño-Pulgarín et al. (2021), there is no universally accepted definition of hate speech, and the prevalence of hostile language is now an integral part of online interaction. Young people perceive hate speech as an everyday and trivialised phenomenon, in line with studies that highlight widespread exposure to hostile digital environments (Martínez-Ruiz & Pascual-Jimeno, 2023).

The perception of digital platforms as amplifiers of hate mirrors the findings of Persily and Tucker (2020), who show how algorithmic logic and the pursuit of engagement can encourage the spread of extreme content. This highlights the need for critical digital education, capable of questioning not only content but also communication infrastructures.

### *Youth activism: motivations, practices and empowerment*

Youth activism emerges as a form of civic and moral participation rather than political participation. The results show that young people do not only react to hate, but also build spaces for dialogue and solidarity. Castillo-Esparcia et al. (2023) highlight how digital platforms represent new spaces for civic socialisation, while recognising the limitations of online activism in terms of depth and duration. This study contributes to this perspective by showing that activism is also perceived as a transformative and emancipatory experience.

### *Challenges of online activism*

Digital engagement involves risks and vulnerabilities: hate speech in return, burnout, and perceptions of ineffectiveness. These dimensions are consistent with the observations of Earl (2022), who speaks of growing 'digital repression' and psychological risks for online activists. Particularly interesting is the tension between authenticity and visibility, which echoes the debate on performative activism and the need for more authentic participation.

### *Counter-strategies and future prospects*

The strategies identified by young people — media education, counter-narratives, and support networks — are consistent with the literature emphasising the effectiveness of community and educational interventions (Windisch et al., 2022). In this sense, promoting safe and collaborative spaces appears to be fundamental to supporting activist engagement and reducing the impact of online hate.

### *Implications for research and practice*

The evidence suggests two main directions: in terms of research, the emotional dimension of youth activism and its evolution over time needs to be explored more deeply; in terms of practice, educational pathways and protection mechanisms need to be developed to make

online civic engagement sustainable. Youth organisations and institutions should recognise activism as a long-term process and not just as an emergency response to digital hate.

### **Limitations of the study**

The qualitative nature of the study does not allow for statistical generalisations, and the transnational nature of the focus groups implies cultural differences that may affect the interpretation of the results. However, the variety of contexts also represents a strength in understanding the plurality of young people's responses to hate speech.

### **Conclusion**

This study helps to shed light on the role of youth activism in combating online hate, highlighting its transformative potential and the challenges it faces. Activism appears to be a dynamic field for the construction of meaning, resilience and digital democracy.

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