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Welcome back to the Unfinished newsletter, where we explore the intersection of tech, ethics, and social impact.

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Democracy in the time of social media

“If we do not make major changes soon, then our institutions, our political system, and our society may collapse.”

These are the alarming words of [Jonathan Haidt](#) in [his article in *The Atlantic*](#) about the structural stupidity stemming from digital spaces like social media.

The author of [*The Coddling of the American Mind*](#), [*The Righteous Mind*](#), and a professor of ethical leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business, Haidt is one of the leading thinkers about how people and societies work across lines of moral difference. [Project Liberty](#) has launched a partnership with Haidt and his organization, [Heterodox Academy](#), to address with urgency the threat that current technology poses for liberal democracy and the need to repair our fractured systems.

At Unfinished Live last year, Haidt spoke about his recent research into the ways the architecture of social media undermines democracy, and what to do about it. You can watch the entire talk [here](#). Haidt is one of the most prescient minds focused on the intersection of technology, democracy, and human resilience and fragility, so we're dedicating this newsletter to further exploring his ideas.

Let's dive in 📌

The rise and fall of democracies

After the Berlin wall fell in 1989, there was a belief—among some in the west—that all political systems were moving in the direction of liberal democracy. The Arab Spring was [an example of this techno-democratic optimism](#), and the period of 2006 to 2012 was a time where there were more democracies than at any other moment in history. But since 2012, the [number of democracies has been in decline](#).

Social Networking → Social Media

Around the same time, there were changes to the architecture of our social media platforms that ushered in a new era: less about networking and more about performing, less about connecting and more about media.

- Twitter's retweet button was announced in 2009 (check out [the original Twitter blog post announcing it](#))
- [Facebook rolled out threaded comments](#) in 2013, which enabled us to pick fights with people we don't know in the comments under every post
- Algorithms began to shape both our attention and what we shared, with [data proving](#) that the posts that incited the most emotion and anger were the ones that were most shared (which aligned with social media platforms' interests in keeping people on their sites)

In theory, if social media gives everyone a voice, then it's easy to understand how it could be considered a net positive for democracy. But *in practice*, social media didn't give everyone a voice. It amplified extremists and trolls. Its incentive structure and architecture made it easier for people to attack each other. We gave each other dart guns, not megaphones.

Haidt puts it this way at Unfinished Live: "What Silicon Valley did was take a technology of connecting people that could generally be good for democracy

and turned it into a cage-match. Let's all talk in the middle of the Roman Colosseum where the stands are full of people who paid to see blood, and you're the entertainment. That is not compatible with liberal democracy."

The consequences for our democracy

Haidt connects the architecture of social media platforms directly to the decline of democracy. Stuck in the echo chambers of confirmation bias, the far left is best positioned to attack the moderate left, and the far right is best positioned to attack the moderate right. Over time, "the dart guns of social media give more power and voice to the political extremes while reducing the power and voice of the moderate majority. By giving everyone a dart gun, social media deputizes everyone to **administer justice with no due process.**"

Last year, the political scientist David Polansky tweeted about the warped sense of accountability in society. He wasn't directly implicating social media, but the dynamics Haidt describes on these digital platforms is reinforcing the accountability crisis...



Three recommendations

So what do we do? Haidt has three recommendations to save democracy (and ourselves):

1. **Harden democratic institutions to make them more resilient** by reducing the influence of angry extremists and making legislators more responsive to the average voter. From replacing closed-party primaries with open ones to de-politicizing the ways that elections are supervised and electoral districts are drawn, we need to strengthen institutions for the digital age.
2. **Reform social media to be less toxic** by reducing platforms' algorithmic amplification of the extreme fringes, while giving more voice to the majority of users who aren't sharing incendiary content. It's possible to make viewpoint-neutral, content-neutral changes to these platforms like requiring user verification before those users can post to millions of people. Frances Haugen, the Facebook whistleblower, has advocated for limiting the number of times someone can share a

Facebook post. ([Project Liberty](#) is working with Haugen on her [Duty of Care Initiative](#).)

3. **Prepare the next generation** with the skills and understanding of social media's harms to rise to protect our democracy. Haidt highlights how childhood has become more restrictive in recent decades, leading children to have less unsupervised play where they learn to cooperate and compromise with each other (skills relevant for digital spaces, too). There is also the correlation between teens moving their social life onto social media and the [sharp rise in rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm](#) amongst adolescents. [Social media is likely a contributor](#), and Haidt suggests keeping children off social media until age 16. Building resilience and [reducing fragility of younger generations](#) is one of the most important projects in strengthening our democracy.

While the picture that Haidt paints is dire, his talk at Unfinished Live ended on an optimistic note: he's confident that we have what it takes to rise to the challenge before us and make changes. Collectively, we have the power to shape our digital future.

To find more of Jonathan Haidt's writing about social media, check out his site [here](#).



Other notable headlines

🚫 **Artificial Intelligence and academic cheating.** [Ars Technica reports](#) that amid fears that students could use OpenAI's artificial intelligence chatbot, ChatGPT, to cheat on assignments and undermine the learning process, New York City Public Schools have banned the chatbot on its network and all of its devices. But in a [New York Times op-ed](#) from earlier this week, the technology columnist Kevin Roose argues that instead of banning ChatGPT, we should learn to teach with it.

🇪🇺 **The end of surveillance capitalism.** To be able to use Meta's products like Facebook and Instagram, users need to agree to Meta's terms of service, which includes consent for Meta to send a user personalized ads. But in a recent EU ruling, bundling consent to personalized ads and a platform's terms of service is a violation of GDPR, according to [an article by Morgan Meaker in WIRED](#). This ruling is a blow to big tech and might require platforms like Meta to explicitly ask users if they want to be tracked. The future could be defined less by surveillance capitalism and more by opt-in digital spaces.

🖥️ **The lack of transparency in Google's ad business.** Google runs the world's largest ad network — placing ads across more than 2 million websites and mobile apps. But [a recent podcast from Tech Policy Press](#) highlights the ways that [Google funds disinformation](#) around the world, claims it has banned gun ads, but [still makes money off of them](#), and has allowed a sanctioned Russian ad company to harvest user data. The podcast interviews the ProPublica journalist Craig Silverman, whose extensive journalism has

[exposed the lack of transparency and fraud](#) at the core of Google's ad business.

🇧🇷 **The digital playbook for political insurrections.** Almost two years to the day since the January 6th insurrection in the US, riots broke out in Brazil's capital as pro-Bolsonaro supporters claimed that the recent Brazilian election was stolen. According to [an article by Sheera Frenkel in The New York Times](#), both insurrections followed a similar digital playbook of tech platforms being used to spread conspiracy theories, foment mass delusion, and strategically organize and unify protestors.

🧠 **Unfinished Network Partner News**



Today in Boston, Hank Willis Thomas, co-founder of [For Freedoms](#), an Unfinished Network Partner, is unveiling a 22-foot-tall bronze sculpture titled "[The Embrace](#)" at Boston Commons. "The Embrace" was inspired by a photograph of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King hugging after they learned the civil rights leader had won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. Check out this [CBS Sunday Morning segment](#) where correspondent Nancy Giles talks with artist Hank Willis Thomas, and with Imari Paris Jeffries, executive director of Embrace Boston, about the effort to create a monument to love, belonging, and hope.

Thank you for reading.

Follow Unfinished ([@byUnfinished](#) on Twitter and [@thisisunfinished](#) on IG) for ongoing chitchat on the changing web.

Have a great, restful weekend.

The Unfinished team

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