

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

BUSINESS AND DIGITAL DEMOCRACY: OBSERVATIONS FROM THE SUMMIT FOR DEMOCRACY

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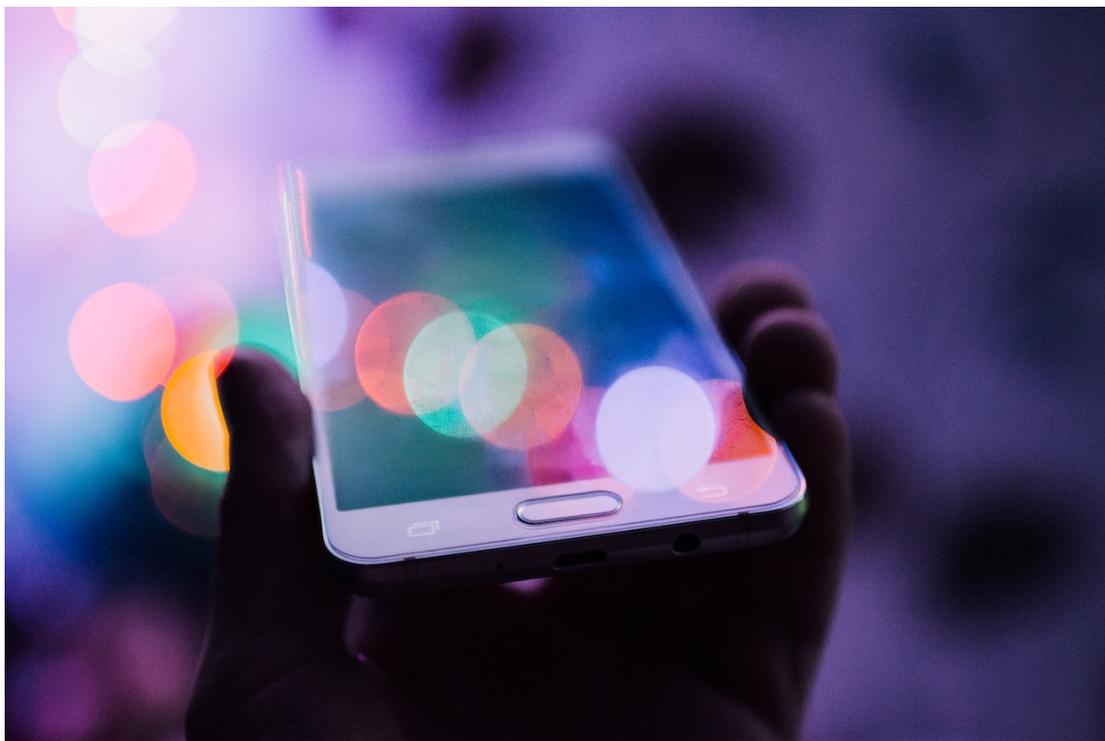


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The protection and improvement of digital democracy has never been a more serious, alarming, or even existential theme as the world careens from one environmental, biological, and geopolitical crisis to another where the exponential explosion of digital everything is suffusing our daily lives.

Without facts you can't have truth, without truth you can't have trust, without trust we have no shared reality, no democracy and it becomes impossible to deal with the existential threats of our times—climate, coronavirus, now the battle for truth.” -Maria Ressa, CEO of Rappler and 2021 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, in a speech on December 10, 2021.

Indeed, I would add to Ressa's list that, without each of the above, we cannot have the fundamentals of fair, equitable, stakeholder-centric, regenerative capitalism. In other words, market economics, entrepreneurship, and responsible innovation depend on truth, trust, a shared reality, democracy, and the collective resilience to meet the existential crises of our times.

Ressa's words couldn't ring any truer to our current moment and to the topic of protecting, improving, and expanding the digital aspects of democracy—and to the role of business in that process—whether you're a small, medium, or large enterprise at the local, national, or international level.

While the **Summit for Democracy** had many critics before, during and after, it underscored the criticality of protecting and expanding good democratic governance in digital spaces: those aspects of democracy manifested through the internet, social media, digital data, software, hardware, etc.—what I am loosely calling “digital democracy.”

The protection and improvement of digital democracy has never been a more serious, alarming, or even existential theme as the world careens from one environmental, biological, and geopolitical crisis to another where the exponential explosion of digital everything is suffusing our daily lives like never before.

Case in point: check out the data below. Exponential doesn't begin to describe it.

WHAT HAPPENS ON THE SURFACE WEB EVERY 60 SECONDS		
4.5 billion Active Social Media Users Globally	Facebook	150,000 messages shared
	Facebook	147,000 photos uploaded
	WhatsApp	41,666,667 messages shared
	Instagram	347,222 shares posted
8.8 billion Average Social Accounts Per Person	Twitter	319 new users joined
	YouTube	500 hours of video uploaded
	Reddit	479,452 people engaging with content
	TikTok	2,704 new users gained

Source: Statista and Domo 2021.

The explosion of all things digital keeps moving at a velocity, ferocity, and volume unparalleled in human history. Put that together with two other major developments: (1) the slow but steady degradation, attack and/or deconstruction of “analog” democracy in many places (illustrated by recent reports at Freedom House and The Economist) and (2) the tsunami of digital (cyber and other technological) means of attack on democracy and we have ourselves an unprecedented crisis in global democracy.

There are two very different but equally dangerous forms of attack on the openness, security, and/or resilience of digital democracy:

In the developed world and/or more established democracies, typically there is a more solid internet infrastructure and many forms of data exploding (as the social media example above illustrates). But we also see a growing avalanche of cyber-attacks, digital theft, and other forms of digital manipulation and/or attempts at destroying democratic institutions, norms, and trust through disinformation campaigns and social engineering. In this scenario, business is often a target of the most severe forms of cyber-attack and theft.

In the developing/less developed world and/or in more autocratic regimes we see a different phenomenon: internet infrastructure is either weaker, less secure, or easily subject to government interference and manipulation, with their populations often confronting accessibility, affordability, and predictability challenges. Under this scenario, businesses are severely hampered, unable to operate or compete effectively in the marketplace because they are deprived of the basic tools of a modern, digital economy.

THE ROLE OF BUSINESS IN “DIGITAL DEMOCRACY”

Business usually flourishes in open economies with proper, non-corrupt, and rational regulatory frameworks, as well as predictable rule of law and human rights protections.

To protect and develop the digital aspects of democracy, key measures businesses anywhere should undertake include:

- Protecting people, privacy, and their digital data.
- Ensuring company values and strategy are aligned with key stakeholder interests.
- Protecting against unauthorized, unlawful, undemocratic government digital intrusion.
- Deploying best in class cyber-security risk governance.
- Engaging in public/private partnerships that respect and protect privacy, security, and transparency.
- Ensuring algorithms, software, and related technologies are ethically and inclusively developed and applied.
- Working with underserved local communities to develop affordable, accessible, and dependable digital resources.

Business has a huge role to play in, and major benefits to reap from, digital democracy. The more the digital aspects of democracy are protected and extended, the better the stakeholder relationships (including with employees and customers), the more positive the community impact, the greater the reputational opportunity, the more preparedness for adverse events, and the steadier, more resilient and even robust the financial returns.

Democracy may be the worst system except for all others, according to Churchill—and that is exactly why, as we speed towards the Metaverse and other techno-unknowns, all hands must be on deck to not only secure analog democracy but its digital manifestations as well.

*About **Andrea Bonime-Blanc**:*

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