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Digital Democracy and Social Media: Between Participation, Disinformation, and Accountability in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of social media has profoundly transformed the dynamics of citizen participation, political communication, and institutional accountability, giving rise to what is now known as digital democracy. This article presents a theoretical-comparative review of how digital platforms reconfigure the public sphere, balancing the potential for citizen empowerment with the risks associated with disinformation, polarization, and algorithmic manipulation. Eight recent studies are analyzed, addressing experiences in Korea, Africa, Brazil, Nigeria, the Middle East, and Europe, while articulating Fuchs's contributions on the digital public sphere, critical communication theory, and the Contextual New Medium Theory model. The findings reveal that social networks operate as ambivalent arenas: they foster visibility, deliberation, and citizen production—as seen in cases such as Korean feminism or Nigerian student participation—but also amplify surveillance, astroturfing, and informational inequality. The study concludes that digital democracy requires governance and transparency frameworks that regulate algorithms and strengthen institutional accountability.

Keywords: Digital Democracy, Public Sphere, Social Media, Disinformation, Digital Governance, Algorithms

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, digital democracy has become a central field of study in communication and political science, largely due to the impact of social media on the contemporary public sphere. These platforms have not only transformed processes of information and deliberation but have also reconfigured the dynamics of power, representation, and citizen participation. Recent scholarship converges on the idea that digitalization constitutes a structural rather than merely technical phenomenon, closely tied to the political economy of platform capitalism (Fuchs, 2023) and to the institutional and cultural conditions that shape its social effects (Hoff & Scheele, 2014).

Studies on digital democracy have identified a persistent tension between the democratizing potential of technologies and the risks associated with disinformation, surveillance, and algorithmic manipulation. Research such as that of Gillespie (2013) and García-Orosa (2021) demonstrates how digital environments can simultaneously expand participation and weaken public trust. From digital feminism in Korea (Kim, 2023) to youth mobilization in Nigeria (Nwankwo, 2021), platforms function as arenas for collective action, albeit ones marked by structural inequalities and regulatory tensions.

Despite growing academic interest, there remains a theoretical and empirical fragmentation in the comparative study of digital democracy, particularly between Global North and Global South contexts. Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research question: How do social media reconfigure digital democracy in differentiated contexts of the Global North and South?

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The general objective is to critically reflect on recent theoretical contributions and empirical evidence that explain this reconfiguration. The specific objectives are: to analyze the main conceptual models of the public sphere and digital democracy; to examine comparative experiences of citizen participation and oversight in Korea, Africa, Brazil, Nigeria, and the Middle East; and to identify contemporary tensions between empowerment, surveillance, transparency, and spectacle in the digital ecosystem.

The article is structured as follows: first, it presents the theoretical foundations on the public sphere, technologies, and digital democracy; second, it develops the comparative dimensions of the analyzed cases; third, it offers a critical discussion of the observed structural tensions; and finally, it formulates conclusions and future projections regarding digital governance and democratic accountability.

Theoretical Foundations

Public Sphere and Digital Democracy

The notion of the public sphere, originally formulated by Jürgen Habermas (1962), marked a milestone in understanding the relationship between communication, citizenship, and democracy. In its classical conception, the public sphere was a rational space of deliberation where individuals discussed matters of common interest, mediating between civil society and the state. However, this model—anchored in the European bourgeois experience of the eighteenth century—has been extensively revisited by later authors who point out its normative limitations and its structural exclusion of subaltern voices (Fraser, 1990; Dahlgren, 2005). In the digital age, the category is reconfigured and challenged by technological mediation and by the concentration of communicative power in the hands of transnational corporations that control the global communication infrastructure.

From this critical perspective, Fuchs (2023) argues that the digital public sphere is deeply conditioned by the logic of platform capitalism, in which citizen deliberation is subordinated to the commodification of data and the attention-based advertising model. Under this regime, the visibility and reach of public discourse are mediated by opaque algorithms that prioritize profitability over informational pluralism. This observation aligns with Zuboff's (2019) warnings about surveillance capitalism, in which personal data become raw material for predicting and controlling human behavior, and with Couldry and Mejías's (2019) concept of data colonialism, which interprets the massive extraction of information as a new form of structural domination.

In response, Fuchs (2023) proposes the idea of a public service Internet as a normative alternative for reconstructing a communicative space oriented toward the common good. Just as traditional public media have historically guaranteed access to plural information and civic deliberation, the contemporary challenge lies in transferring these principles to a digital environment dominated by private interests. This requires not only the development of public and cooperative infrastructures but also the establishment of international regulatory frameworks ensuring transparency, equity of access, and effective mechanisms of democratic accountability.

Nevertheless, this approach faces structural limitations that are difficult to overcome. The global digital infrastructure—servers, networks, algorithms, and platforms—belongs largely to private corporations operating under financial and geopolitical logics beyond public control. Consequently, the realization of a public service Internet demands not only national policies but also transnational digital governance capable of contesting the power of major technology companies. As long as such an institutional architecture does not exist, digital citizenship will remain fragmented and asymmetric, with some groups enjoying visibility and participation while others remain systematically marginalized.

In this sense, reconceptualizing the digital public sphere involves recognizing its contradictory nature: a potential space of emancipation but also of domination. Fuchs's proposal gains value as a regulative horizon rather than a fully realizable model under current conditions, reminding us that digital democracy can only be sustained on principles of transparency, equity, and citizen control over the communicative infrastructure.

Theoretical Models: Contextual New Medium Theory (CNeMT)

While Fuchs (2023) emphasizes the critical and structural dimension of digital democracy—focused on the power relations inherent to platform capitalism—Hoff and Scheele (2014) propose a complementary approach that shifts attention to the social and institutional contexts in which technologies are implemented. Their model, the Contextual New Medium Theory (CNeMT), assumes that technology is neither inherently democratic nor authoritarian; its effects depend on its interaction with political, cultural, and organizational factors.

The CNeMT model is organized around three interdependent dimensions: the actors who adopt and manage technologies (governments, institutions, organized citizens); the discourses that legitimize their use (narratives of modernization, transparency, or control); and the technological affordances, understood as the possibilities and limitations that platforms offer for collective action and institutional management. This model can be visualized as a triangular framework, with actors, discourses, and affordances at each vertex, and "contextual interaction" at the center, defining the democratic impact of technology.

In its empirical application, Hoff and Scheele (2014) analyze the municipality of Odder (Denmark), where the digitalization of public services did not automatically lead to greater participation but rather depended on a combination of political will, administrative culture, and civic engagement. This finding demonstrates that technological innovation acquires democratic significance only when embedded in receptive institutional structures and inclusive cultural contexts.

The analytical value of the model lies in its comparative capacity. Unlike structuralist approaches rooted in European theory, CNeMT makes it possible to examine how the same platforms produce divergent effects in different environments: for instance, fostering community empowerment in Nigeria (Nwankwo, 2021) or digital feminist mobilization in Korea (Kim, 2023), while in other contexts—such as certain e-government programs in Latin America—they reproduce dynamics of bureaucratic control or digital exclusion (Winocur & Sánchez Vilela, 2016; Sorj, 2019). These differences confirm that digital democracy is a situated construction, dependent on institutional frameworks, cultural resources, and local power relations.

For the comparative analysis developed in subsequent sections, the CNeMT model serves as a transversal interpretive framework to assess democratic digitalization experiences in Korea, Africa, Brazil, Nigeria, and the Middle East. Its contextual approach allows for the identification of common patterns and structural variations, offering a theoretical foundation for understanding how actors, discourses, and technological affordances interact in shaping the diverse configurations of contemporary digital democracy.

Waves of Digital Democracy

Digital democracy has not evolved linearly but rather through differentiated phases associated with the technological, political, and cultural transformations of each period. García-Orosa (2021) conceptualizes this process in terms of four waves (Table 1), which help trace the historical trajectory of the relationship between the Internet and politics, from its beginnings to the contemporary dynamics dominated by artificial intelligence.

Table 1. Evolution of the waves of digital democracy

Wave	Approximate Period	Main Characteristics	Dominant Technologies	Illustrative Examples
First Wave	1990s	Early digitalization and one-way informational use of the Internet. Predominance of institutional websites and electronic newsletters.	Web pages, email.	Local governments in Chile and Mexico created their first public transparency websites.
Second Wave	2000–2010	Consolidation of social networks as spaces for political interaction; citizens shifted from receivers to producers of content.	Blogs, forums, Facebook, YouTube.	Social movements in Brazil and Mexico used networks for civic oversight.
Third Wave	2010–2015	Intensive use of big data, microsegmentation, and digital marketing. Professionalization of online political campaigns.	Big data, microtargeting, Twitter.	Digital electoral campaigns in Chile (2013) and Brazil (2014).
Fourth Wave	2016–present	Predominance of algorithms, AI, bots, and astroturfing. Political polarization, disinformation, and automated manipulation intensify.	Artificial intelligence, algorithmic platforms, automation.	Disinformation crises during Latin American elections (Mexico 2018, Brazil 2022).

In this periodization, the fourth wave represents a critical turning point. It is characterized by the increasing sophistication of digital manipulation techniques: the mass creation of fake accounts, automated messaging, and the simulation of citizen movements. These phenomena have eroded trust in democratic processes, intensified political polarization, and blurred the authenticity of citizen participation. In this scenario, digital democracy becomes an ambivalent terrain where expanded access to information coexists with the consolidation of a new regime of algorithmic power.

Recent examples in Latin America—such as the circulation of disinformation during the Mexican elections (2018), coordinated attacks in Brazil (2022), and the political instrumentalization of social media in Chile during the constitutional process (2021–2022)—show that the risks identified by García-Orosa (2021) extend far beyond the European context. In these cases, social networks not only amplify participation but also exacerbate informational asymmetries and the emotional manipulation of citizens.

In summary, the notion of "waves" allows us to understand digital democracy as a discontinuous and conflictive process in which technological optimism coexists with persistent threats to public deliberation. The current fourth wave poses the challenge of building mechanisms for algorithmic accountability, policies ensuring

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transparency in data use, and media literacy strategies capable of sustaining deliberative ideals within an increasingly automated and unequal environment.

Gender Narratives and Digital Activism: Transmedia Feminism in Korea

The analysis of digital democracy cannot be limited to institutions and technologies alone; it must also incorporate the cultural, symbolic, and gender dimensions that shape contemporary political communication. In this regard, Kim (2023) examines the case of South Korea, where feminist movements have used social media as tools for collective action and the production of alternative narratives that challenge dominant patriarchal discourse. This phenomenon aligns with what scholars such as Fotopoulou (2016) and Banet-Weiser (2018) call transnational digital feminism: a network of communicative practices that merges the political, affective, and media dimensions while redefining the forms of participation in the global public sphere.

Korean feminist activism is distinguished by its transmedia nature, as it integrates traditional media, digital platforms, and physical spaces to make inequalities visible and question existing power structures. Kim (2023) proposes the metaphor of the gwangjang—the digital "public square"—to describe how women transform online spaces into realms of deliberation and collective resistance. Within this environment, activists build cross-border communities and resignify political languages through visual, narrative, and performative strategies that expand the boundaries of the Habermasian public sphere.

From a comparative perspective, the Korean case illuminates universal tensions within digital democracy. Similar processes can be seen in feminist movements in Chile, where social media were key to the global spread of the performance A Rapist in Your Path; in India, where the #MeTooIndia movement exposed structural violence in professional and media contexts; and in Nigeria, with the #BringBackOurGirls campaign, which turned the denunciation of gender violence into a global public issue. In all these cases, the digital space functions as a field of political struggle where visibility and vulnerability coexist, and where communicative empowerment intersects with algorithmic misogyny and online harassment.

Through hashtags, memes, live streams, and viral narratives, digital feminisms not only denounce inequality but also propose new models of citizenship and democratic deliberation grounded in horizontality, solidarity, and interconnection. However, these experiences also expose the limits of the digital space as an inclusive public sphere, as activists face coordinated attacks, censorship, and disinformation campaigns.

In sum, Korean transmedia feminism, in dialogue with other Global South experiences, demonstrates that social media are simultaneously spaces of emancipation and risk. Its analysis reveals how gender narratives not only broaden the horizon of digital democracy but also critically challenge it by placing equality, the body, and everyday experience at the center of the global public debate (Kim, 2023; Fotopoulou, 2016; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Dimensions of Comparative Analysis

Citizen Participation and Empowerment

Citizen participation constitutes one of the central axes of digital democracy, as it represents the practical translation of connectivity into political engagement. In the case of South Korea, Kim (2023) analyzes how feminist movements found in the digital space a symbolic extension of the gwangjang, or traditional public square. Through social networks and transmedia narratives, activists were able to make historically marginalized demands visible, transforming the digital sphere into a space of encounter, resistance, and political reconfiguration. This example demonstrates a high degree of autonomy (independent organization), interaction (networked participation), and influence (public impact on gender policies).

On the African continent, Nwankwo (2021) explores how social networks have functioned as instruments of democratic transition, particularly in Nigeria and Uganda. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have enabled citizens to organize protests, denounce abuses, and articulate demands for political openness. However, the author warns that this democratizing potential coexists with digital repression, state censorship, and platform co-optation—factors that restrict autonomy and undermine the sustainability of achieved gains.

Youth political participation is also evident in the university sphere. Ojo, Edwards, and Oyewole (2025) show that in Nigeria, students use WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook not only as tools for socialization but also as spaces for civic education and political deliberation. These platforms strengthen their democratic engagement and expand their capacity for collective action, although limitations persist due to the digital divide and the lack of media literacy.

In the Middle East, Gillespie (2013) documents BBC Arabic's G710 program (2010), a pioneering experiment in co-production between media outlets and Internet users prior to the Arab Spring. This model opened programming to citizen voices, but its early cancellation revealed the structural limits of openness when corporate and political interests come into conflict.

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Table 2. Comparative experiences of digital citizen participation

Country / Region	Main Actors	Platforms	Outcomes / Achievements	Limitations	Empowerment Indicators
South Korea	Feminist movements	Twitter, YouTube, Instagram	Visibility of gender-based violence; expansion of public debate	Digital attacks; algorithmic misogyny	High autonomy – High interaction – High influence
Nigeria / Uganda	Pro-democracy activists, students	Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp	Citizen mobilization; exposure of corruption	State repression; Internet shutdowns	Medium autonomy – High interaction – Medium influence
Middle East (BBC Arabic)	Citizen producers, journalists	Television platform + social networks	Media participation; editorial innovation	Institutional censorship; program cancellation	Low autonomy – Medium interaction – Low influence

Taken together, these cases reveal convergent patterns (Table 2): digital platforms function as new hybrid public spheres where citizen participation depends on three key factors—organizational autonomy vis-à-vis state and corporate actors, the capacity for horizontal network interaction, and actual influence on the political agenda. However, these experiences also show that digital empowerment is fragile and conditional, since the very environments that enable citizen expression can also become spaces of surveillance, control, and disinformation.

Thus, digital democracy emerges as an ambivalent process in which the expansion of connected citizenship coexists with new forms of exclusion. Understanding these contrasts is essential for evaluating the conditions under which technology can sustain—and not merely simulate—democratic participation.

Challenges and Risks of Digital Democracy

The initial optimism surrounding social media as engines of citizen participation has been tempered by the recognition of multiple democratic risks. According to García-Orosa (2021), the fourth wave of digital democracy is characterized by the spread of disinformation, understood as the deliberate dissemination of false or manipulated information for political purposes; the proliferation of fake news, or fabricated news stories that mimic journalistic formats to deceive; and the systematic use of astroturfing, the practice of simulating spontaneous citizen movements that are, in reality, coordinated strategies of political or corporate manipulation. These phenomena undermine public trust, distort democratic debate, and erode institutional legitimacy.

Another central challenge is social polarization, amplified by recommendation algorithms that create so-called filter bubbles. These bubbles select and prioritize content aligned with users' preexisting beliefs, generating closed and homogeneous communities. Instead of fostering plural deliberation, platforms tend to reinforce biases, fuel hostility, and intensify ideological radicalization in the digital sphere (García-Orosa, 2021).

Moreover, the extensive use of big data and artificial intelligence (AI) in political campaigns raises significant ethical and democratic concerns. From Barack Obama's 2008 campaign to episodes such as Brexit (2016) and the Cambridge Analytica scandal, it has been demonstrated that the mass exploitation of personal data enables the microtargeting of political messages in ways that remain invisible to voters. This type of algorithmic segmentation, based on psychographic predictions, calls into question transparency, informed consent, and electoral fairness.

In response to these threats, several countries and supranational blocs have implemented regulatory frameworks to mitigate digital manipulation. The European Union has enacted the Digital Services Act (2022), which requires platforms to moderate illegal content and make their algorithms more transparent. Brazil, through its Law on Freedom, Responsibility, and Transparency on the Internet (2023), seeks to curb disinformation during electoral processes. Canada, in turn, has promoted the Digital Charter Implementation Act (2021), which regulates the political use of personal information. These initiatives reflect an emerging consensus on the need for democratic governance of digital environments.

Table 3. Main risks of digital democracy and mitigation strategies

Identified Risk	Description / Democratic Impact	Recent Examples	Possible Solutions / Regulatory Policies
Disinformation and Fake News	Erosion of public trust, manipulation of opinion, and weakening of democratic institutions.	Disinformation campaigns during U.S. (2016) and Brazilian (2022) elections.	Content verification laws; media literacy programs; algorithm transparency (EU, Brazil).
Astroturfing	Simulation of grassroots movements or organic campaigns to manipulate public perception.	Politically coordinated bot campaigns in Mexico and the Philippines.	Regulation of bot usage; traceability of funding; sanctions for digital manipulation.

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Polarization and Filter Bubbles	Fragmentation of the public sphere and loss of plural dialogue.	U.S. elections (2020), Chilean referendum (2022).	Design of transparent algorithms; promotion of informational pluralism.
Microtargeting with Big Data and AI	Invisible manipulation of the electorate through personalized political advertising.	Cambridge Analytica case (United Kingdom, 2018).	Personal data protection; algorithmic auditing; limits on personalized political advertising.
Surveillance and Data Exploitation	Loss of privacy and commercial/political use of citizens' information.	State surveillance programs (China, U.S.).	Privacy laws (Canada 2021); ethical AI governance; government transparency.

In sum, digital democracy today faces systemic risks that compromise its deliberative function. Regulation, digital literacy, and algorithmic transparency emerge as indispensable conditions to ensure that technological innovation strengthens—rather than distorts—the principles of democratic participation.

Institutions and Accountability

The role of public institutions within digital democracy is a central issue of debate, particularly regarding accountability. According to Schedler (1999), accountability entails the obligation of public officials to inform, justify, and accept the consequences of their actions before citizens. Complementarily, Bovens (2007) defines it as a social relationship of oversight in which one actor must explain its conduct to another who holds authority to evaluate and sanction it. Fox (2007), in turn, distinguishes between soft accountability—focused on visibility and information—and hard accountability, linked to effective capacities for response and sanction. In the digital environment, these principles are transformed by technological mediation, which redefines public communication and the interaction between the state and citizens.

In this regard, Silva and Almeida (2022) analyzed the online presence of Brazil's Tribunal de Contas da União (Federal Court of Accounts, TCU) and the Ministério Público Federal (Federal Public Prosecutor's Office, MPF) on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Although both institutions succeeded in increasing their visibility and improving information dissemination, the results showed that a stronger digital presence does not automatically ensure greater transparency or effective accountability. Institutional communication on social media often leans toward self-promotion rather than deliberative interaction or civic oversight.

This pattern is not unique to Brazil. In Spain, the Tribunal de Cuentas and the Defensor del Pueblo use social media to disseminate reports and rulings but maintain low responsiveness to citizen inquiries (Sánchez-Cuenca, 2021). In Chile and Mexico, public ministries and oversight agencies have implemented digital transparency strategies, yet their interaction remains largely one-directional, focused on data publication rather than building public dialogue. By contrast, some European institutions—such as the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) and Portugal's Court of Accounts—have begun implementing digital traceability mechanisms that allow users to track the progress of complaints or audits online, representing an advance toward more substantive forms of accountability.

To evaluate digital accountability, three key indicators can be considered. The first is responsiveness, defined as the institutional capacity to answer and address citizen demands in digital environments. The second is interaction, which measures the degree of horizontal dialogue, participation, and feedback between institutions and citizens. The third is traceability, referring to the ability to follow management, complaint, or audit processes over time, ensuring transparency and public control.

These indicators help distinguish between merely informational transparency, centered on data visibility, and participatory and verifiable accountability, in which technology becomes an instrument of citizen oversight and democratic strengthening. Thus, the key question is not whether social media expand institutional communication, but whether they transform power relations between the state and society by enabling new forms of control, participation, and democratic legitimacy.

Alternatives and Proposals

In response to the tensions that permeate digital democracy, several scholars have proposed alternatives aimed at its structural and normative strengthening. Fuchs (2023) argues for the creation of a public service Internet, understood as a non-commodified communicative infrastructure based on the principles of universal access, pluralistic deliberation, and independence from corporate interests. This model seeks to ensure that the digital public sphere is not subordinated to the logic of capital but instead functions as a common good serving democratic needs.

In practical terms, this proposal is complemented by the promotion of policies for the democratic regulation of algorithms, open-data mechanisms, and technological sovereignty strategies aimed at reducing dependence on private platforms and strengthening state capacity to guarantee transparency and accountability. Experiences from digital public media such as Deutsche Welle (DW), France24, and the BBC World Service demonstrate that it is

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possible to develop hybrid models of public communication grounded in principles of service, plurality, and accessibility, where technology serves citizens rather than commercial profitability. These examples illustrate the feasibility of a global informational ecosystem that combines technological innovation with public responsibility.

For their part, Hoff and Scheele (2014), through the Contextual New Medium Theory (CNeMT), emphasize that digital democratization depends not only on technical infrastructure but also on the institutional and cultural frameworks guiding its use. From this perspective, governments, institutions, and civil society must contextualize the use of platforms according to local political needs and civic capacities, promoting inclusive, transparent, and sustainable practices.

Taken together, these perspectives converge on the idea that the future of digital democracy requires a dual strategy: a structural transformation of the global digital ecosystem—ensuring ethical regulation and equitable access to information—and a contextual and participatory adaptation that recognizes the plurality of political cultures in which technology operates.

Finally, this horizon underscores the urgency of advancing toward a multilevel digital ethics and governance framework capable of articulating national, regional, and international regulations to balance innovation, sovereignty, and citizens' rights. Only through transnational coordination—combining algorithmic accountability, data transparency, and corporate responsibility—will it be possible for technology to cease being a factor of inequality and instead become an instrument for deepening democracy.

CRITICAL DISCUSSION

Structural Tensions: Participation vs. Control; Empowerment vs. Surveillance; Transparency vs. Spectacle

One of the most consistent findings in the reviewed literature is the presence of structural tensions that permeate the experience of digital democracy. These tensions reveal that the relationship between technology and citizen participation is mediated by power relations operating at multiple levels—economic, institutional, and algorithmic.

The participation–control axis is clearly manifested in the case of BBC Arabic analyzed by Gillespie (2013). The G710 program opened an unprecedented space for citizen co-production, yet its premature closure reflected the limits of openness when institutional interests perceive risks to editorial governance. Similarly, in the African contexts studied by Nwankwo (2021), social media became simultaneously tools for civic oversight and instruments of state surveillance.

The empowerment–surveillance dialectic acquires a global dimension in Fuchs's (2023) critical proposal, which warns that the accumulation logic of platform capitalism transforms every act of interaction into a data trace subject to exploitation. This process—termed surveillance capitalism by Zuboff (2019)—involves the conversion of users into perpetual sources of commercial and political information. It is currently estimated that 70% of the data generated by Latin American users are processed by companies based in the Global North, consolidating what Couldry and Mejías (2019) describe as data colonialism: the systematic appropriation of informational resources from the South for the benefit of the North.

Finally, the transparency–spectacle tension is evident in Silva and Almeida's (2022) study of Brazil's Tribunal de Contas da União (TCU) and Ministério Público Federal (MPF). Although these institutions increased their online visibility, this exposure did not translate into greater accountability but rather into the creation of digital showcases aimed at self-promotion. In this sense, visibility replaces substantive oversight with a form of performative transparency, where institutional communication is aestheticized to produce symbolic legitimacy.

These tensions confirm that digital democracy cannot be assessed through the simplistic equation "more participation = more democracy." Each technological opening generates new mechanisms of control; each empowerment enables new forms of surveillance; and each attempt at transparency risks degenerating into spectacle.

Regional Differences: Experiences of the Global South vs. Global North

Comparative analysis reveals that digital democracy is not a homogeneous phenomenon but one historically conditioned by global power relations and technological asymmetries. From a postcolonial perspective, the North–South distinction does not refer merely to geography but to the persistence of epistemological and material hierarchies that determine who produces, controls, and benefits from digital knowledge.

In the Global North, cases from Korea and Europe reflect environments with robust infrastructures, advanced digital literacy, and consolidated regulatory frameworks. Kim (2023) demonstrates how Korean digital feminism transformed the gwangjang into a transmedia public sphere capable of influencing the public agenda. Likewise, Hoff and Scheele (2014) highlight that Denmark's digitalization of services developed within a strong

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institutional framework, where technology was integrated into policies of local governance and transparency. Within the European Union, the Digital Services Act (2022) and the AI Act (2024) exemplify regulatory efforts to democratize the algorithmic ecosystem.

In the Global South, by contrast, structural conditions are more fragile. Nwankwo (2021) notes that in Africa, social networks were crucial for citizen mobilization—such as during Nigeria's #EndSARS protests—but also vulnerable to digital repression and Internet shutdowns. In Nigeria, Ojo, Edwards, and Oyewole (2025) show that 62% of university students participate in online political debates, yet the autonomy of these interactions is undermined by weak data protection and the prevalence of echo chambers. In Brazil, Silva and Almeida (2022) reveal that despite greater institutional presence on social media, structural accountability deficits persist.

From a decolonial perspective, these differences demonstrate that while the Global North grapples with issues of democratic quality—regulation, ethics, pluralism—the Global South struggles to keep digital spaces of participation open amid socioeconomic inequalities, connectivity gaps, and technological dependency. Thus, digital democracy reproduces, in algorithmic form, the same core–periphery divide that has historically shaped global power relations.

Gender and Youth as Key Axes of Democratic Innovation

Democratic innovation in the digital sphere does not emerge solely from institutions but also from historically marginalized social actors—particularly women and youth—who transform the public sphere through their cultural and communicative practices.

In South Korea, the feminist struggles analyzed by Kim (2023) demonstrate how social networks have made it possible to bring gender issues to visibility and to contest the meaning of the political. Korean digital activism combines aesthetics, emotion, and strategy, turning hashtags and memes into tools of deliberation. According to data from UN Women (2023), 64% of feminist campaigns in East Asia between 2018 and 2022 took place primarily in digital environments, confirming the centrality of this activism in democratic renewal.

Similarly, in Africa, university youth represent a laboratory of digital citizenship. Ojo, Edwards, and Oyewole (2025) report that over 60% of young Nigerians use WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook for political organization, while Nwankwo (2021) notes that African urban youth have been engines of civic mobilization through decentralized digital strategies. These experiences show that online youth participation is not merely a reflection of leisure but a space of civic learning and emergent democratic action.

Both digital feminism and youth activism reveal that social media are simultaneously spaces of innovation and risk. On one hand, they expand the margins of inclusion and pluralism; on the other, they expose participants to symbolic violence, digital harassment, and algorithmic surveillance. Consequently, digital democracy cannot be conceived as a consolidated state but rather as a permanent field of contestation where subaltern narratives—of gender, youth, and the Global South—introduce alternative languages of emancipation and resistance.

CONCLUSION

Comparative evidence confirms that social media have become a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for democratic expansion. Their value lies in facilitating visibility, coordination, and deliberation; however, their outcomes depend on the sociopolitical and institutional contexts in which they operate. In Korea, the digital feminism analyzed by Kim (2023) transformed the gwangjang into a space of political contestation, though its effectiveness depended on the ability to sustain coherent narratives and resist the restrictions imposed by private platforms. In Africa, the studies by Nwankwo (2021) show that Facebook and Twitter enabled mobilization and the reporting of abuses, yet initiatives were constrained by state surveillance and the absence of protective regulatory frameworks. In Brazil, Silva and Almeida (2022) demonstrate that the growing digital visibility of institutions such as the TCU and MPF did not strengthen accountability but generated institutional showcases with low levels of citizen interaction. Finally, on the global scale, García-Orosa (2021) warns that the current "fourth wave of digital democracy," characterized by disinformation, astroturfing, and algorithmic automation, has multiplied the risks of manipulation and erosion of civic trust. Collectively, these findings confirm that social media are a point of departure—but not a guarantee—for the strengthening of contemporary democracy.

The present article proposes as its main contribution a critical matrix of the structural tensions of digital democracy, composed of three interdependent axes: participation–control, empowerment–surveillance, and transparency–spectacle. This matrix allows for an understanding of how processes of political digitalization are traversed by structural paradoxes that prevent a linear equivalence between technological innovation and democratic deepening. From a theoretical standpoint, Fuchs (2023) contributes the vision of a public service Internet that counters the commodification of the digital sphere through auditable algorithms, universal access, and pluralistic deliberation. Complementarily, Hoff and Scheele's (2014) Contextual New Medium Theory (CNeMT) emphasizes that democratic effects depend on the situated interaction among actors, discourses, and

technological affordances. This contextual reading is reflected in the comparison between the Global North and Global South: while Korea and Denmark deploy digital democracies within more stable institutional frameworks, countries such as Nigeria and Brazil face challenges linked to socioeconomic inequality, regulatory gaps, and digital repression. The combination of both perspectives—structural and contextual—suggests that strengthening digital democracy requires ethical regulation of algorithms, technological sovereignty, and local adaptation strategies, especially in regions of the Global South where power asymmetries and informational dependency reinforce new forms of data colonialism (Couldry & Mejías, 2019; Zuboff, 2019).

The study's projections point to three priority lines for future research and action. First, the design of empirical indicators to assess the real impact of digital platforms on citizen participation, public deliberation, and digital accountability. These indicators should integrate dimensions of interaction, autonomy, algorithmic surveillance, and institutional traceability, articulating quantitative and qualitative approaches. Second, the development of longitudinal studies on civic formation in digital environments, particularly those examining how media and technological education influence the acquisition of democratic competencies. The research by Ojo, Edwards, and Oyewole (2025) in Nigeria constitutes a valuable starting point for observing the evolution of youth engagement and its potential transfer to the political sphere. Third, the expansion of analysis toward emerging platforms such as TikTok, Threads, and Telegram, where new dynamics of influence, mobilization, and counter-hegemonic discourse are taking shape. These platforms—with their logics of virality and opaque algorithms—represent critical laboratories for studying the relationship between visibility, emotion, and political power.

In sum, rethinking digital democracy requires articulating inclusive frameworks, clear regulations, and a critical citizenry. Social media have opened a new foundation for connected citizenship, but the democratic ceiling will depend on the consolidation of robust institutions, digital public ecosystems, and innovative social movements capable of transforming visibility into effective political action.

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