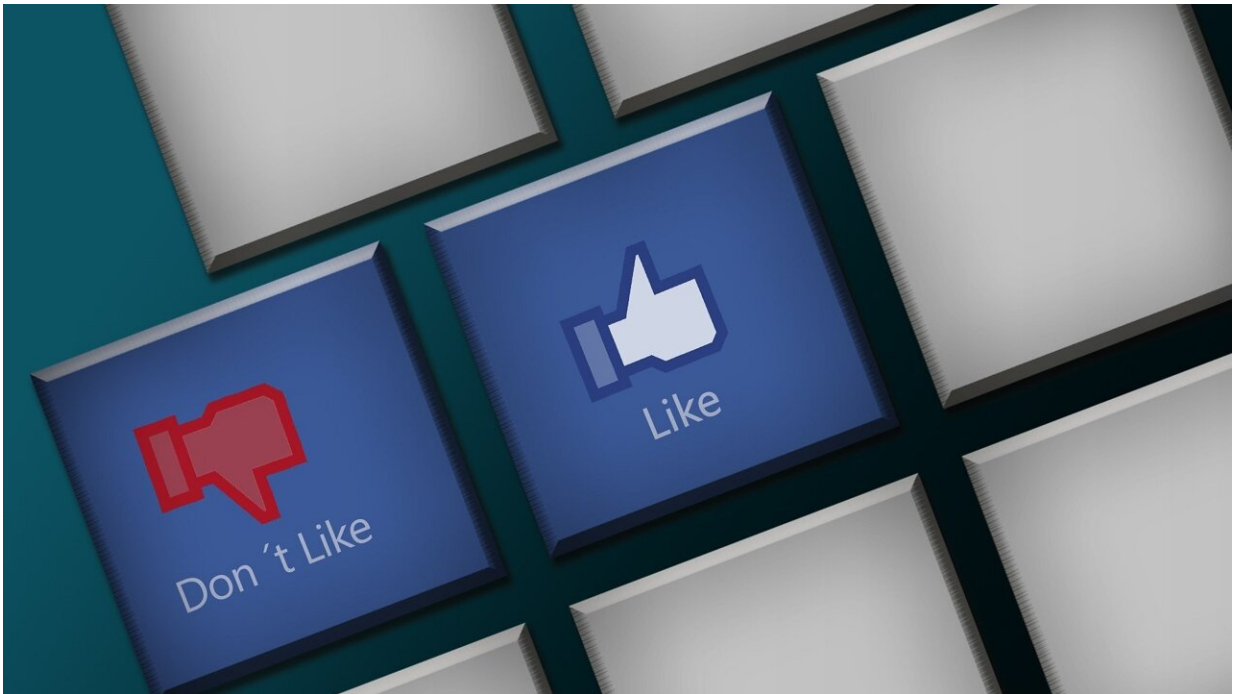


A social media platform that is actually good for democracy?

September 26 2024, by Phoebe Quinn



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Technology is often seen as a threat to democracy, with the surge in [AI capabilities the latest big concern](#).

This historic year of elections has put the complex relationship between technology and democracy on full display.

All eyes are currently on the upcoming elections in the U.S., with recent assassination attempts highlighting the deep divisions in the world's most powerful democracy.

Many have [blamed social media for supercharging this polarization](#), with AI increasingly used to spread disinformation on these platforms.

But, instead of dividing, could "pro-democratic" social technologies help communities work through difficult issues like climate change?

I'm exploring how [digital tools](#) can support democracy by helping crowdsource ideas, understand lines of division, and find points of consensus that bridge them.

These trials are inspired by innovations in digital democracy in Taiwan, another democratic society under threat.

Lessons from Taiwan

Back in January, [many held grave concerns](#) about technology being weaponized to spread disinformation and influence the [general election](#) in Taiwan.

But these threats were [fended off with overwhelming success](#), largely thanks to thoughtful and socially-oriented uses of digital technology.

Digital tools—created and used collaboratively by citizens, civil society and government—were also a pillar of Taiwan's response to the COVID-19 crisis, which was celebrated for [achieving among the lowest mortality rates in the world without imposing lockdowns](#).

Examples include the use of [social media](#) to ["inoculate" misinformation through funny memes](#), and an [app created by civic hackers to show live](#)

[mask availability](#) in pharmacies.

This resilience to threats shows the power of the digital democracy ecosystem that has flourished in Taiwan over the past decade, according to a new book, "[Plurality](#)," showcasing the island as a model for the future of collaborative technology and democracy.

Speaking at the National Press Club during a recent visit to Australia, one of the authors, Audrey Tang—civic hacker turned Taiwan's first digital minister—explained the ethos underpinning these efforts: that the best way to protect democracy is to keep improving it.

Polis—a 'pro-social' platform

Tang says we shouldn't be surprised when people start "screaming at each other" in political discussions on platforms like Facebook or X/Twitter because they are the digital equivalent of having a town hall discussion in a nightclub.

[Polis](#) is something different—an [open-source digital democracy](#) tool that Tang calls [a "pro-social social media" platform](#).

To protect against trolling, there is no "reply" button—when you see a comment, you just vote (agree, disagree or pass) and can submit your own comment(s) separately if you want to.

In Taiwan, Polis has been used to find a "rough consensus" on [issues like Uber regulation and AI development](#), inspiring many to wonder if these approaches could be used and built upon in other contexts around the world.

When I first heard these stories about five years ago, I was working with colleagues to support community well-being in the face of climate

change and disasters. And we began to wonder:

- Could tools like Polis be useful in breaking the deadlock in [Australia's seemingly never-ending "climate wars"?](#)
- Could they smooth the path for [community members to be heard after disasters like bushfires](#), so that crucial issues and great ideas can make their way into the spotlight, and into action?

Given the many urgent, complex issues facing communities across Australia due to climate change, these are compelling possibilities. This has been the motivation for my doctoral research.

Lessons from climate change pilots in Australia

In our first pilot using Polis in Australia in 2022, we ran a consultation at the University of Melbourne about the climate impacts of staff flying—a thorny issue especially in countries like Australia that are far away from conference hubs in the U.S. and Europe.

We posed a single question: What should we do about staff air travel emissions?

Through the Polis consultation, 173 participants made more than 300 suggestions in their own words and voted over 22,000 times on each others' comments.

In this way, we crowdsourced a detailed picture of collective opinion. The Polis automated analysis tools displayed patterns of opinion to participants in real-time and then we did extra analysis for deeper understanding.

It was a contentious issue. About half the participants were eager for a wide range of measures to dramatically reduce staff flying, while for

others the negative impacts of restricting flights were front of mind.

But through the Polis consultation, we found key points of consensus that were very popular across the board. One of these 'bridging' ideas was the principle that any policies on this issue should not exacerbate inequities.

Next, we partnered with a council in Melbourne's southeast to run a [consultation on the issue of extreme heat](#).

This surfaced many ideas from community members—like reducing or banning artificial grass—that were broadly supported by participants. Views were mixed on many other comments, like a suggestion that new builds on private properties "should be required to keep all existing trees."

Interestingly, the issue of heat was also discussed in parallel on Facebook, where the council had shared a notice about the consultation.

Comments on the Facebook post often had a combative tone or rejected extreme heat as an issue worth discussing—much more so than in the Polis consultation itself.

There is plenty to unpack here, but this general lesson is clear: different online platforms can foster very different [political discussions](#).

The Polis platform is far from perfect and our research explores the limitations and drawbacks in these case studies, as well as learning from what went well.

There is no silver bullet that can solve these huge societal challenges around democracy and [climate change](#).

Instead, these initiatives add to a growing ecosystem of democratic innovations—from [using new digital AI tools](#) to in-person deliberative democracy through [climate assemblies](#)—which are being thoughtfully explored and combined around the world.

In this way, we can expand our collective capacity to navigate difficult issues and collaborate across diversity.

Provided by University of Melbourne

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