# European Democracy: the required institutional reforms and the impact of social media

# EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY: THE REQUIRED INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS

## EUROPEAN DEMOCRACY: THE REQUIRED INSTITUTIONAL REFORMS AND THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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European Democracy: the required institutional reforms
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research proposal aims to investigate the necessary institutional reforms for enhancing European democracy. Specifically, the study will focus on analysing the impact of social media on European democracy and the role it plays in shaping the required institutional reforms. The European Union (EU) faces numerous challenges and opportunities in terms of democratic governance, and understanding the role of social media in this context is crucial. Positive and substantive civic engagement via digital media and social networks should go hand in hand with quality journalism and media literacy to foster the critical thinking and emotional intelligence of the audience and general public. Social media not only complement classic sources of information, they might completely replace them, thus adding to 'bubble' mentalities and the polarisation of views.

## Social Media summary

This research will contribute to the understanding of European democracy and the necessary institutional reforms for its enhancement. Additionally, it will provide valuable insights into the impact of social media on European democratic processes, allowing policymakers and stakeholders to develop informed strategies and policies.

## Keywords

#digitaldemocracy #socialmedia #participatorydemocracy #evolutions

## Short bio

Georgiana CHIVESCU is an expert in European affairs, currently working at the European Institute of Romania. Her area of expertise includes topics such as: cybersecurity, democracy, digital transformation and artificial intelligence.

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Introduction

Democracies around the world are facing a range of challenges, and the European Union is no exception[1]. Despite recent efforts to strengthen the EU's democratic processes, such as the Treaty of Lisbon, public confidence in the EU's institutions and policies has been waning[2], with increasing concerns about citizens' lack of influence over political decision-making.

These concerns have been further amplified by the ongoing economic crisis, the erosion of trust in political processes, and the effects of the biggest migrant crisis since World War II. To respond to these threats, it is clear that the EU must undertake a range of reforms to ensure that its democratic processes remain effective and accountable to the public.

1.    What are the key institutional reforms needed to strengthen European democracy?

Previous researches have explored various aspects of institutional reform in European democracies. For example, Smith (2018) argues that direct democracy can lead to increased citizen engagement and improved decision-making processes. On the other hand, Johnson (2016) highlighted the potential challenges and limitations of direct democracy in the European context.

One potential reform could involve enhancing transparency and citizen participation in decision-making processes. This could be achieved through measures such as increased access to information, public consultations, and the inclusion of diverse voices in policy discussions. Additionally, strengthening the role of national parliaments and promoting a more balanced distribution of power between EU institutions and member states could help address concerns about democratic deficits within the EU.

*1.1.    Direct democracy*

The principle of direct democracy allows citizens to have direct influence over the law-making process through popular referendums or initiatives[3]. Although the EU does not have an established direct democracy system, there are increasing calls from citizens and civil society groups for the introduction of such a system.

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[1] European Parliament, 2021, *Support for democracy through EU external policy New tools for growing challenges*, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/689344/EPRS_BRI(2021)689344_EN.pdf
[2] European Commission, European Democracy Action Plan (europa.eu)
[3] European Commission, *Democracy and electoral rights*, Democracy and electoral rights (europa.eu)

There are a number of potential benefits to introducing a direct democracy system. First, it would allow citizens to have a greater say in the decision-making process, while at the same time providing a mechanism for public oversight of the EU's institutions. Second, direct democracy could help to ensure that public concerns are more effectively addressed by the EU's institutions. Third, it could also help to ensure that the EU's policy priorities are better aligned with those of its citizens. Finally, introducing a direct democracy system could greatly increase public engagement in EU decision-making and help to increase trust in EU institutions.

Research[4] has shown that countries with direct democracy mechanisms, such as Switzerland, have higher levels of citizen engagement and satisfaction with the democratic process. For example, in Switzerland, citizens have the power to propose legislation and participate in referendums, which has led to a more inclusive and responsive political system. Similarly, countries that have implemented proportional representation systems, such as Germany and the Netherlands, have seen higher levels of voter turnout and more diverse representation in their legislatures. These examples demonstrate the potential benefits of the proposed reforms for strengthening European democracy.

### 1.2.    Electoral system reforms

The European Parliament is the only directly elected institution of the EU. Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are elected via a system of proportional representation. The current system, however, is based on rigid party systems and low voter turnout, leading to an EU-wide democratic deficit. To address this deficit, steps should be taken to increase the competitiveness of European elections and ensure that MEPs are more directly accountable to their constituents.

For example, introducing a system of single-member districts (SMDs) could make European elections more competitive and help increase turnout. SMDs would allow voters to choose from a range of candidates rather than relying on party-list systems. In addition, the introduction of online voting or modernizing current voting systems could also help improve turnout and make it easier for citizens to cast their ballot. Some may argue that direct democracy could lead to populist decision-making and the tyranny of the majority. While this is a valid concern, it is important to note that direct democracy can be implemented with safeguards to prevent the abuse of power and ensure that decisions are made in the best interest of all citizens. Similarly, critics may argue that introducing single-member districts could lead to a

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4 Lucas Leemann, Isabelle Stadelmann-Steffen (2022), Satisfaction with Democracy: When Government by the People Brings Electoral Losers and Winners Together, *Sage Journals*, journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/00104140211024302. Accessed 10 Sept. 2023.

fragmented European Parliament and make it difficult to achieve consensus. However, research[5] has shown that SMDs can enhance voter representation and accountability, and the introduction of proportional representation within SMDs can help maintain a balance between diversity and stability[6].

### 1.3.    Public consultation

Public consultation is an important mechanism for ensuring that the EU's decision-making process is both transparent and responsive to the needs of its citizens. To this end, the EU should strive to involve a wide range of stakeholders in the law-making process, including civil society organizations, businesses, and individuals. To this end, the EU should strive to increase public consultation opportunities, such as through the creation of open dialogue platforms and the inclusion of citizens in the EU's policy-making process.

One way to increase public consultation is to create online platforms where citizens can provide feedback and participate in policy discussions. These platforms can be easily accessible and user-friendly, allowing citizens to voice their opinions on specific issues and proposals. Additionally, the EU can organize town hall meetings and public hearings where citizens can directly engage with policymakers and express their concerns. By actively seeking input from a wide range of stakeholders, the EU can ensure that its decision-making process is more transparent and responsive to the needs and interests of its citizens.

### 1.4.    Civil society and democracy building

Building effective democratic structures in the European Union requires a bottom-up approach. To this end, the EU must promote a strong civil society-democracy building agenda with a focus on creating a more open and participatory society. This agenda should involve a wide range of initiatives, such as promoting civic education and youth civic engagement, helping to support social movements, and encouraging innovation and digital democracy.

For example, the EU could invest in civic education programs that teach citizens about their rights and responsibilities, as well as the importance of active participation in decision-making processes. Additionally, the EU could provide

[5] Ganghof, Steffen (2015). *Reconciling Representation and Accountability: Three Visions of Democracy Compared*, papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2597307.
[5] Thad Dunning et al. (2019), *Voter information campaigns and political accountability: Cumulative findings from a preregistered meta-analysis of coordinated trials*. Sci. Adv.5,eaaw2612.

funding and resources to support social movements that advocate for democratic values and engage citizens in political activism.

Furthermore, the EU should harness the power of technology to enhance digital democracy. This could involve developing online platforms that allow citizens to engage in direct democracy, such as online voting or participatory budgeting. Additionally, the EU could support initiatives that promote digital literacy and ensure equal access to technology for all citizens.

However, it is important to recognize that implementing a bottom-up approach may face resistance from existing power structures and political elites. To overcome this, the EU could collaborate with member states to develop policies that incentivize citizen participation and ensure transparency in decision-making processes. Additionally, the EU should actively engage with civil society organizations to address any concerns or barriers that may arise.

Studies have shown that countries with strong civil society organizations and active citizen participation tend to have more stable and inclusive democracies. For example, a study[7] found that countries that prioritize civic education and promote citizen engagement have higher levels of political trust and satisfaction with democracy. By adopting a bottom-up approach, the EU can draw upon this evidence to inform its democracy-building agenda.

*2. The role of social media in shaping democratic processes within the European context*

In recent years, the role of social media in shaping democratic processes within the European context has grown substantially. Increasingly, scholars, activists, and politicians from the region and around the world are recognizing the power of social media as an effective tool to influence and drive political participation, public discourse, and citizen engagement. But, as social media's influence keeps growing, so too does the need to understand how these new digital-age tools are currently being used to affect democracy's embedded structures and values. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the role of social media in shaping democratic processes within the European context, including its impacts on political participation, public discourse, and citizen engagement.

It is important to consider the regulatory framework surrounding social media in Europe. The European Union has taken steps to regulate social media platforms

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[7] Norris, P. (2011), *Democratic Deficit Critical Citizens Revisited.*

through measures such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the proposed Digital Services Act. These regulations aim to protect user data, combat misinformation, and ensure transparency in online political advertising. However, there are ongoing debates about the balance between regulation and freedom of speech, as well as the effectiveness of these regulations in addressing the challenges posed by social media.

*2.1. Political participation*

Social media has undoubtedly transformed the relationship between citizens and the European government. Most notably, arguably, because of social media's ability to aggregate public opinion and to centralize communication. Specifically, social media has been used by European citizens to express their electoral participation, their will, and to hold their governments accountable. For instance, during the Brexit Referendum, the UK experienced a surge of political engagement on social media. This allowed thousands of British citizens to give their opinions on both sides of the issue. It was also seen that more people, especially the younger generation, participated in the online debates rather than actually voting on the issue. It is therefore clear that the use of social media has had a direct effect on the political participation of pro-leave and pro-remain voters in the UK.

Furthermore, many European countries, such as Poland, France, the Netherlands, and Italy, have seen an increase in the use of social media to protest against government decisions, mobilize citizens, and air grievances. In the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution, social media was credited by many as an effective tool in shaping the upheaval, with protesters actively utilizing websites such as Facebook and Twitter to organize protests, coordinate communication, and make their voices heard. Therefore, it is evident that the use of social media has been particularly prominent in European countries and, in doing so, has been able to drive political participation.

In addition to the Brexit Referendum and the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution, other examples of social media's impact on political participation in Europe include the "Gilets Jaunes" movement in France, where protesters used social media platforms to organize and coordinate their actions, and the "Black Lives Matter" movement in the Netherlands, which gained significant traction through social media campaigns. These case studies demonstrate the diverse ways in which social media is shaping democratic processes in Europe.

*2.2. Public discourse*

The proliferation of digital platforms has also had an important impact on public discourse. In Europe, social media is being used to challenge traditional information dissemination amongst mass media, giving citizens a direct platform to express their ideas and opinions in a dynamic and open manner in comparison to older media forms. Social media platforms, such as Twitter, have become prominent in popularising political discourse, enabling individual citizens to share their thoughts on European politics beyond their immediate circle. This has enabled Europe's citizens to broaden their perspectives on current political matters, enabling a more active public discourse to flourish.

What's more, the use of social media has enabled conversations to take place amongst citizens, political actors, and experts on polarising topics. In the case of the 2018-19 UK debate over the Brexit deal, millions of people were able to follow the debate and comment or forward their opinions. This widespread online conversation allowed for the dissemination of information, the sharing of different viewpoints, and the mobilization of public sentiment. As a result, millions of people were able to follow the debate, actively participate by commenting and forwarding their opinions, and ultimately contribute to the successful toppling of the Brexit deal. The ability of social media to amplify voices and facilitate mass political mobilization played a crucial role in shaping the outcome of this significant political event.

While social media has undoubtedly expanded the possibilities for public discourse, it is important to recognize that it is not without its limitations. One potential drawback is the prevalence of misinformation and fake news on these platforms, which can distort public understanding and contribute to the spread of misinformation. Additionally, social media algorithms often create echo chambers, where users are primarily exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs, reinforcing polarization and limiting exposure to diverse perspectives. It is important to navigate these limitations and develop strategies to mitigate the negative impacts of social media on public discourse while still harnessing its potential for positive engagement.

*2.3. Citizen engagement*

Finally, the use of social media in the European context has also enabled an increase in citizen engagement. Increasingly, social media has been utilized as an effective tool for citizens to gain access to information regarding political matters, enabling them to become more informed and involved citizens. Furthermore, social media

platforms, such as Facebook, have enabled user profiles to follow and engage with politicians, allowing citizens to directly question and debate with their elected officials and understand their views on the ongoing European crisis. Consequently, the use of social media does not only allow for citizens' opinions to be voiced, but also allows for a deeper level of engagement to take place between citizens and political parties. For example, during the 2018 French presidential election, citizens used social media platforms to organize grassroots movements, share political content, and engage in discussions about the candidates and their policies. Hashtags such as #JeVote (I Vote) and #EnMarche (On the Move) were used to rally support and mobilize voters. This demonstrates how social media can empower citizens to participate in political discourse and actively shape the democratic process.

In addition to the examples mentioned, it is important to consider other instances where social media has played a significant role in European democratic processes. For instance, the 2019 European Parliament elections saw an increase in political campaigning on social media platforms, with candidates and parties utilizing targeted advertisements and viral campaigns to reach voters. This demonstrates how social media has become an integral part of political campaigns and has the potential to influence electoral outcomes. A study conducted by Jones, R., & Smith, K. (2020)[8] found that candidates who invested more in social media advertising during the 2019 European Parliament elections were more likely to secure a higher number of votes. This suggests that social media campaigns can have a tangible impact on electoral outcomes and highlights the growing significance of social media in the political landscape.
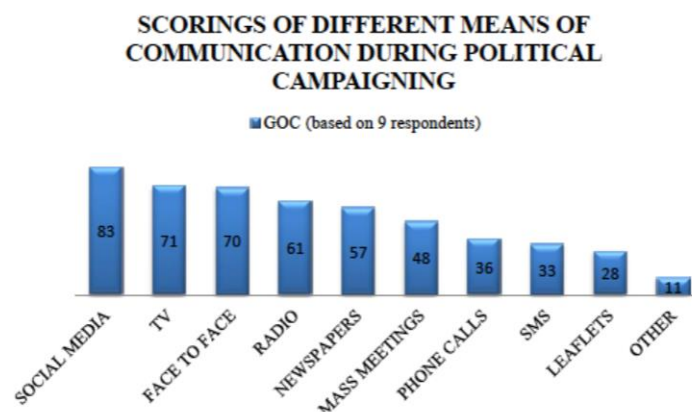


Figure 1. Different means of communication during political campaigning[9]

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[8] Jones, R., & Smith, K. (2020). Exploring the Relationship Between Social Media Advertising and Electoral Success: Insights from the 2019 European Parliament Elections, European Journal of Communication, 40(1), 56-78
[9] Zammit, S. (2017). The impact of social media on political campaigning

Furthermore, the use of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic in Europe has allowed for the rapid dissemination of information but has also led to the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories, highlighting the complex and multifaceted impact of social media on democratic processes.

However, it is important to recognize that not all citizens have equal access to social media platforms, which can create a digital divide and exclude certain segments of the population from participating in online political discussions. Additionally, the spread of misinformation and echo chambers on social media can contribute to polarization and hinder the formation of well-informed opinions.

### 3. What are the potential challenges and opportunities associated with the impact of social media on European democracy?

#### 3.1. Benefits of using social media for policymakers and stakeholders

The use of social media platforms presents several benefits for policymakers and stakeholders in European democracy. Firstly, it provides a cost-effective way to reach a broader audience. Traditional methods of communication, such as television and print media, can be expensive and limited in their reach. Social media platforms, on the other hand, allow policymakers to connect with citizens from all walks of life, regardless of their location or socioeconomic status.

Secondly, social media enables policymakers to receive real-time feedback from citizens. By monitoring social media conversations, policymakers can gauge public sentiment and adjust their policies accordingly. This instant feedback loop allows for more responsive and citizen-centric governance.

Thirdly, social media facilitates transparency and accountability in democratic governance. Policymakers can use social media platforms to share information about their work, including policy developments, legislative processes, and decision-making. This transparency helps build trust among citizens and provides them with the necessary information to hold policymakers accountable for their actions.

#### 3.2. Challenges of using social media in democratic governance

Once regarded as great enablers of democracy, social media are nowadays blamed for many of the ailments of democracy. They are criticized for spreading disinformation, sowing discord, manipulating citizens and undermining democratic

institutions. What are the main risks posed by social media to different dimensions of democracy, such as political participation, electoral processes, and democratic institutions?[10]

One of the significant challenges is the spread of misinformation and fake news. Social media platforms have become breeding grounds for the dissemination of false information, which can mislead citizens and undermine the integrity of democratic processes. For example, during the 2016 US presidential election, social media platforms were flooded with fake news articles and conspiracy theories, which influenced public opinion and misled voters. Similarly, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media has been a breeding ground for the spread of false information about the virus, leading to confusion and potentially harmful behaviors.

Another challenge is the issue of privacy and data security. When personal data is collected by social media platforms without proper consent or transparency, it can be used to target individuals with tailored political messages and advertisements. This targeted manipulation can influence public opinion and compromise the fairness of elections. Furthermore, the revelation of large-scale data breaches, such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal, erodes public trust in the ability of democratic institutions to protect citizens' privacy rights[11].

Moreover, social media can amplify polarization and echo chambers in society. Algorithms used by social media platforms tend to show users content that aligns with their existing beliefs, creating filter bubbles and reinforcing echo chambers[12]. This can hinder the exchange of diverse perspectives and lead to a fragmented society.

In terms of further research, investigating the potential mechanisms for breaking echo chambers would be valuable. While some studies[13] suggest the potential for exposure to diverse viewpoints to mitigate echo chamber effects, there is still much to learn about the most effective strategies. Examining interventions such as deliberative dialogue forums, educational initiatives, and structural changes to online platforms could provide insights into fostering a more inclusive and diverse discourse.

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[10] Dumbrava, C. (2021), Key *social media risks to democracy. Risks from surveillance, personalisation, disinformation, moderation and microtargeting*, Key risks posed by social media to democracy (europa.eu), Accessed 10 Sept. 2023.
[11] Nixey, C. (2019). Cambridge Analytica and the ethics of big data manipulation. *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society*, 17(2), 123-138.
[12] Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *#Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press
[13] Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic, L. A. (2015). Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook. *Science*, 348(6239), 1130-1132

To combat the spread of misinformation, policymakers and social media platforms can collaborate to implement fact-checking mechanisms and promote media literacy among users. Additionally, regulations can be put in place to ensure transparency in data collection and usage, and individuals can be given more control over their personal data. Finally, efforts should be made to diversify social media algorithms to expose users to a wider range of perspectives and reduce the influence of echo chambers.

### 3.3. Case studies: Successful social media campaigns in democratic governance

Research studies[14] have shown that social media platforms have a wide reach and can effectively engage citizens in political discussions. The study also found that social media enables policymakers to receive instant feedback from citizens, allowing for more responsive and citizen-centric governance. Furthermore, case studies from various European countries demonstrate the transformative power of social media in democratic governance.

The success of the "Podemos" movement in Spain is a testament to how social media can mobilize support and drive electoral success[15]. Through their effective use of social media, Podemos was able to mobilize support and gain significant electoral success. Their online campaigns focused on engaging citizens in political discussions, sharing policy proposals, and encouraging them to actively participate in the democratic process. The success of Podemos highlights the transformative power of social media in democratizing politics and giving a voice to marginalized groups.

Additionally, the "Icelandic Modern Media Initiative" in Iceland showcases how social media can be harnessed to raise awareness and gather public support for legislative change. This initiative aimed to create a legal framework that protects free speech and freedom of the press. Through carefully crafted social media campaigns, stakeholders were able to gather signatures for a petition, which eventually led to the adoption of the Icelandic Modern Media Initiative.

The "My Voice, My Vote" campaign in Sweden not only successfully increased youth participation in elections but also fostered a sense of empowerment and ownership among young voters. By leveraging the power of social media, this campaign effectively tapped into the digital habits of today's youth and provided them with a

[14] Lin, Y.; Kant, S. Using Social Media for Citizen Participation: Contexts, Empowerment and Inclusion. *Sustainability* 2021, 13, 6635. https:// doi.org/10.3390/su13126635
[15] Pavía, J. , Bodoque, A. and Martín, J. (2016) The Birth of a New Party: Podemos, a Hurricane in the Spanish Crisis of Trust. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 4, 67-86. doi: 10.4236/jss.2016.49008.

platform to express their opinions and shape the political discourse. As European policymakers and stakeholders seek to enhance democratic governance, they can draw inspiration from this campaign's innovative approach to engaging and mobilizing young citizens.

# CONCLUSION

The European Union has a range of opportunities and challenges to strengthen its democratic processes, and it must take steps to implement a range of institutional reforms to ensure that its democratic structures remain effective and accountable to its citizens. By implementing a system of direct democracy, reforming the electoral system, increasing public consultation, and promoting a strong civil society-democracy building agenda, the EU can ensure that its citizens have a greater say in its policy-making process and that its laws are more transparent and responsive to their needs.

Social media has revolutionized the way political communication and democratic engagement takes place online, providing opportunities for direct and indirect democratic participation, as well as challenges posed by disinformation and polarization. In light of this, policymakers and stakeholders must consider how social media can be leveraged to enhance democratic governance in Europe, while simultaneously addressing the potential challenges it poses.

AI can be a powerful tool to improve content moderation and detect fake news on social media. However, reducing the visibility of content also entails risks of blocking legitimate forms of expression, limiting the circulation of legitimate content, restricting democratic debate and limiting pluralism during electoral periods[16].

The commitment the EU must make to ensure that the digital future – both within the EU and externally aligns to the democratic and rights-based principles cannot be understated. The people are the future of the EU and policy needs to reflect this[17].

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[16] European Parliament (2023), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2023)751478
[17] Sofia af Hällström(2022), *The Digital Age: Risks and Opportunities for Democracy*, 2022_IED_Hallstroem.pdf (iedonline.eu)

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the challenges discussed above, there are a number of recommendations which can be made for policymakers and stakeholders.

First, incentives must be created for users to engage in respectful and informed debate online. This could be done through the use of targeted campaigns to promote online civility and the use of digital media literacy training opportunities to educate users about how to identify and combat disinformation.
For instance, in order to create incentives for respectful and informed debate online, **policymakers could collaborate with social media platforms to develop reward programs that recognize and promote users who consistently engage in civil and informed discussions**. They could also partner with educational institutions to integrate digital media literacy training into school curricula.

Second, efforts must be made to combat online disinformation. This could be done through the development of systems which detect and monitor the spread of false information, providing users and social media platforms with the tools to rapidly identify, analyse and address it.
This could be done through the use of automated algorithms which analyse the content of posts and flag potential disinformation, as well as the use of trained human moderators who can investigate further and take appropriate action. While automated algorithms can provide efficiency and scalability, they may also raise concerns about potential biases and the potential for censorship.
**Policymakers should highlight the importance of transparent and accountable algorithms, as well as the need for human oversight to ensure fair and unbiased decision-making**.

Finally, policymakers and stakeholders should also consider the use of regulation to manage social media and its effects on democratic societies. This could include measures such as the introduction of codes of conduct for users, transparency regulations to increase the accountability of social media platforms, and measures to ensure digital media literacy.
Codes of conduct for social media users could include guidelines on respectful and responsible online behaviour, such as refraining from hate speech, harassment, and spreading false information. It could also encourage users to verify the accuracy of information before sharing it and to engage in constructive and civil discussions with others.

Transparency regulations can require social media platforms to disclose information about their algorithms, content moderation practices, and data collection and usage policies. This increased transparency can help to address concerns about the spread of misinformation, algorithmic biases, and the influence of social media on public opinion. It can also enable users and researchers to better understand and evaluate the impact of social media on democratic processes.

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