

AI's Impact on Access to Information in Democracies

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Julian NEYLAN

DISARM Foundation, United Kingdom

julian.neylan@disarm.foundation

Abstract

One of the most urgent challenges facing democracies is a widening digital divide: wealthier groups will increasingly access expert verified information while lower income communities will not be given tools to navigate an online environment increasingly filled with convincing AI generated content. To safeguard democratic participation, we must democratize AI literacy and detection tools, and integrate civic education. Only by reinforcing these initiatives can democracy remain resilient in the age of AI.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy; Misinformation; Large Language Models; Information Inequality

Artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming increasingly embedded in online life. Generative AI produces convincing texts, images, and deepfake videos at negligible cost, flooding the information environment with low quality content (Miklian and Hoelscher 2025). The most urgent challenge this poses to democracy is not merely the presence of false content or information overload but the deepening of information inequality: a widening divide in which wealthier actors can buy access to verified information and authentication tools while resource-constrained citizens are left to navigate an online sphere saturated with fabricated misinformation. The digital divide refers to disparities in information and communications technology access, usage, and outcomes (Lythreitis et al. 2022). Understanding how AI will shape the digital divide requires considering the resources needed for individuals to determine whether information is accurate. AI-generated content produces additional barriers: users need to assess whether a website is an imposter and whether the source is in fact an autonomous AI system rather than a human—each adding time or resource costs to online searches. These barriers are less burdensome for well-resourced actors, who can afford verification tools or hire researchers to vet information. While socioeconomic disparities have long influenced access to information, the concern is that AI technologies will further widen this gap, undermining democratic participation. As Marciel (2025) argues, citizens have a “right to information” that entails not just the right to free speech but also the right to information quality standards. Because democracy depends on an informed public, it is essential to ensure that all citizens have access to the tools and knowledge needed to distinguish between synthetic and authentic media.

The internet is increasingly flooded with low-quality information, much of which is AI-generated slop driven by advertising incentives (Miklian and Hoelscher 2025). Generative AI amplifies both the volume and sophistication of inaccurate content. Recent research shows that manipulated images already constituted about 20% of visual misinformation about political figures online (Yunkung 2023). AI-generated propaganda can be more persuasive than human-crafted messages (Capraro et al. 2024). Both small and large actors can now conduct fully automated influence operations, generating persuasive articles and visuals at scale (Olejnik 2025; Schroeder et al. 2025). Humans struggle to distinguish polished AI outputs from authentic reporting (Frank et al. 2024). In one study, participants correctly identified audio deepfakes as synthetic only 60% of the time (Barrington 2025). The sheer volume and convincing nature of low-quality content mean that individuals conducting legitimate research online must now invest additional time and resources to scrutinize information more carefully. This dynamic further deepens the digital divide between well-resourced and less-resourced individuals.

The epistemic shock brought on by AI-generated slop is not evenly distributed. Those with higher incomes and education can subscribe to paywalled, vetted journalism, use premium AI systems to get better-researched results, and deploy proprietary verification tools. In contrast, lower-income populations face barriers such as less broadband access and less access to advanced content-verification tools behind paywalls (Shirmir et al. 2025). AI illiteracy itself, compounded by uneven education, may become a new fault line, as people not given the tools to detect fabricated content will be less able to discern when AI generated material is in use (Bassi and Pagallo 2025). This will exacerbate existing divides, as wealthier individuals not only have the means to shape media agendas (Kantola and Vesa 2023) but also possess the resources to more effectively distinguish high-quality, human-generated content from AI-generated material. The consequence is an emerging information class divide between those equipped to verify the authenticity of content and those lacking the necessary tools for AI content detection.

One of the most urgent challenges AI poses to democracy is the widening digital divide. Left unchecked, it hardens class-based inequalities in information access. Democracies should respond by investing in civic and AI literacy, funding non-partisan public-interest media, and building open verification tools, while requiring platforms to verify provenance where feasible. These practices, taken together, strengthen the democratic capacity for shared reality without stifling innovation.

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