

Digital Media and Democracy: A Systematic Review of Causal and Correlational Evidence Worldwide | SocArXiv

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One of today's most controversial and consequential questions is whether the rapid, worldwide uptake of digital media is causally related to a decline in democracy. We conducted a systematic review of causal and correlational evidence (N=498 articles) on the link between digital media and different political variables, such as trust, polarization or news consumption. We further focused on the subset of articles that employed causal inference methods. Across methods, the articles report associations between digital media use and most political variables. Some associations, such as increases in political participation and information consumption, are likely to be beneficial for democracy and were often observed in the Global South and emerging democracies. Other consistently reported associations, such as declining political trust, advantages for populists, and growing polarization, are likely to be detrimental to democracy and were more pronounced in established democracies. We conclude that while the impact of digital media on democracy depends on the specific political variable and the political system in question, several variables show clear directions of associations. We believe that the evidence calls for further research efforts and vigilance by governments and civil societies to better understand and actively design the intimate interplay of digital media and democracy.

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