

How democracies can claim back power in the digital world | MIT Technology Review

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Since technologies evolve faster than laws, discrepancies between private agency and public oversight are growing. Take, for example, “smart city” companies, which promise that local governments will be able to ease congestion by monitoring cars in real time and adjusting the timing of traffic lights. Unlike, say, a road built by a construction company, this digital infrastructure is not necessarily in the public domain. The companies that build it acquire insights and value that may not flow back to the public.

This disparity between the public and private sectors is spiraling out of control. There’s an information gap, a talent gap, and a compute gap. Together, these add up to a power and accountability gap. An entire layer of control of our daily lives thus exists without democratic legitimacy and with little oversight.

Why should we care? Because decisions that companies make about digital systems may not adhere to essential democratic principles such as freedom of choice, fair competition, nondiscrimination, justice, and accountability. Unintended consequences of technological processes, wrong decisions, or business-driven designs could create serious risks for public safety and national security. And power that is not subject to systematic checks and balances is at odds with the founding principles of most democracies.

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