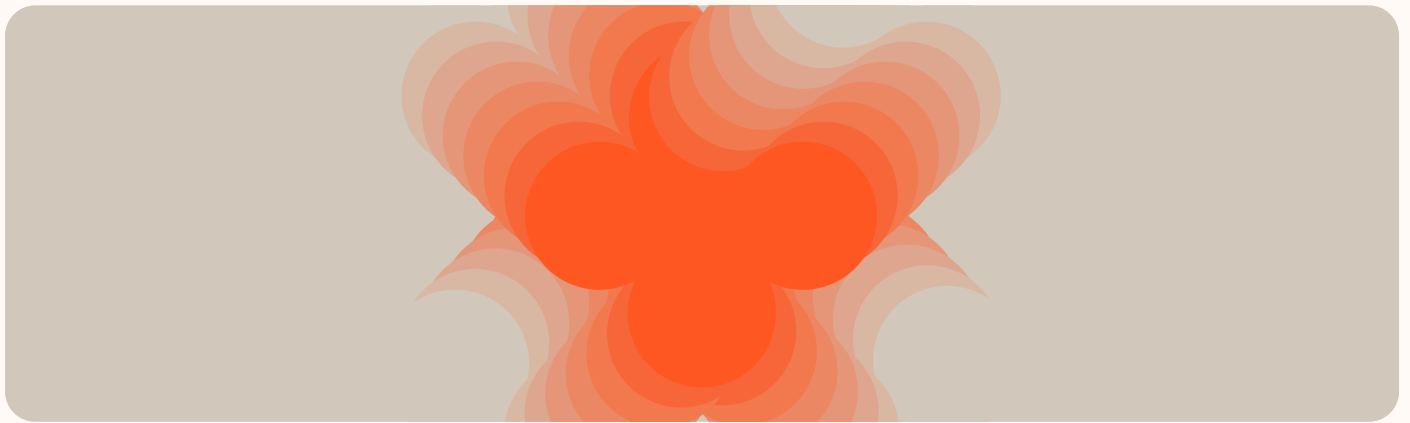


# Digital Information Ecosystems: The Progressive Playbook



## Introduction

Like all news junkies I rarely spend too long away from Twitter. In early autumn 2016 I sat at my desk by the River Thames with Tweetdeck open, monitoring for any mention of my boss, Tony Blair. This wasn't always a happy task. I was resigned to a slow but steady stream of swears where little of interest was ever shared. Which is why what happened caught my eye.

The column monitoring Tony Blair had started to spin like the reel of a fruit machine. A few minutes later, when it had slowed down, I took a look through to see what had happened. Thousands of tweets and retweets had been shared in a matter of minutes, all of them saying the same thing and containing the now notorious #MAGA (*Make America Great Again*) hashtag. Most of the profiles involved were covered in the bright red of Donald Trump's Presidential campaign. The tweet appeared to originate from multiple accounts, and many of those sharing the tweet were newly created accounts or only had a small number of followers. Something wasn't right.

In retrospect, this was a small trans-Atlantic glimpse into the murky waters of what took place on social media during the 2016 US election.

My curiosity was piqued and I started my podcast *Government Vs The Robots* to explore how technology will affect politics in the future. Back then, this was a niche subject, but these days it's barely out of the news. Now, most observers understand that social media has changed the nature of successful communication and that populist politicians are doing rather well out of it. What fewer people are able to explain, is what can be done about this.

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## The problem

The last decade has been a difficult one for the progressive cause. The repeated successes of populist politicians like Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi, Orbán, Erdogan, Salvini, Farage and Duterte have created challenging circumstances for campaigners seeking to secure social justice, tackle climate change and address growing inequalities.

One contributory factor in the rise to power of these populists has been the explosion in mass use of digital technology as billions of people have begun to use the internet and social media as their go-to platforms for the consumption, exchange and creation of information. Progressives have not been as quick to capitalise on the potential of digital technology to improve their ability to influence the world around them.

Technology has driven the emergence of new digital information ecosystems. These are more complex and less regulated environments than those shaped by mass print and broadcast media throughout the second half of the 20th Century. And they are now heavily impacting events that have consequences well beyond what happens on the internet. In recent years, terrorist attacks, financial phenomena and social movements have all begun below the radar online, before creating major high-profile consequences offline.

In democratic environments, it was perhaps inevitable that well-resourced and well-organised regressive political actors would be first to benefit from the shift to digital information ecosystems. Cambridge Analytica used personal data acquired unethically to micro-target voters with dubious content aimed at influencing their vote. Alternative news networks like Breitbart or One America have presented themselves as independent news sources, leveraging a more fragmented media ecosystem to appear authentic. Donald Trump whipped up a mob through Twitter and Parler. Each of these examples shows the power of adopting new tools and tactics to achieve influence through digital information ecosystems.

These examples also reveal the damage that unethical approaches to influencing digital information ecosystems can cause. In the years ahead, regulation should limit their potential to inflict damage by distorting democratic discourse - but this could take decades, especially given the power and influence of big tech. Right now, ethical alternatives are urgent.

This report explores the skills and knowledge that progressives will need to successfully shape debates within these digital information ecosystems. A new, ethical model of digital influence is possible. However, for it to succeed, we need to equip organisations to monitor and navigate these evolving environments and realise the potential of data-driven digital tools and tactics.

An essential first step is to understand how digital information ecosystems are likely to evolve, and the impact this will have on best practice in communications and policy influencing work.



### LISTEN

Every episode of *Government Vs the Robots* featuring over 50 expert voices from across the world can be found [here](#).

## The future of digital information ecosystems

There are five trends powered by digital technology that are shaping the future of digital information ecosystems. By understanding these trends and their implications, organisations can begin to equip themselves to operate successfully within these environments.

### 1. The rise and rise of data

From smartphones and smart speakers to internet browsers and cloud-based storage, digital technologies are designed to capture insights into the behaviour of their users. With over half of the world's population now able to access the internet and over five billion mobile phone users, the scale of data generated is mind boggling. From only mobile devices currently in use alone, vast quantities of data are created reaching into hundreds of exabytes a year. To put this into context, not only does an exabyte require 15 zeros when written down, but if you had started to record a video call a quarter of a million years ago, you would only just have amassed your first exabyte of data. Factor in advances in artificial intelligence which render audio and video instantly searchable data sources, and the scope of potential insights into multimedia content is enormous.

The insights available from growing quantities of data make it possible to create better informed and better targeted strategies, especially for communications and influencing purposes. Many of the tools and tactics needed to monitor and navigate digital information ecosystems are already data-driven, allowing users to map complex online networks or visualise huge volumes of statistical information.

### 2. Contested realities

Mis and disinformation are not new phenomena, but digital information ecosystems offer a fresh context for them to spread. Technology continues to provide new tactics, including the use of online bots, deepfakes and geo-propaganda. These supplement tried and tested techniques for spreading alternative narratives such as creating fake public personas, front organisations and the hijacking of political events and movements. The net effect of this has been to render facts - and increasingly even the notion of reality - open to debate. All of this makes it harder for citizens to know who to trust, and places a premium on an organisation's ability to trace the origins of mis/disinformation and to communicate with the authenticity needed to build legitimacy.

### 3. Hyper-fragmentation

Each of us has an increasingly individual experience of the internet. As apps and browsers use algorithms to offer us content based on our previous habits, we are all surrounded by personalised information ecosystems. At the same time, the effectively unlimited size of the internet, growing variety of social media platforms and readily available smartphones and digital software mean almost anybody can create content and promote it online. The net effect of this is fragmentation in how and where each of us consumes information. This is marked by the product diversification of existing print or broadcast media into podcasts and video streaming, alongside the emergence of new online-only channels and podcasts. Organisations wanting to influence political outcomes will need the skills and capacity to effectively map and reach these highly fragmented audiences.

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#### 4. Disintermediation

A close cousin of hyper-fragmentation, the trend towards disintermediation recognises the way in which digital tools and technologies enable organisations and individuals to build and interact directly with their own online audiences, bypassing traditional media entirely. In digital information ecosystems, less of the information that citizens consume passes through ethical and regulatory filters. Instead, it is often ranked or prioritised by opaque social media algorithms, and is harder to monitor. This has changed norms in the tone and style of content likely to succeed. As a result, organisations wanting to influence political outcomes will need to consider the tactics they deploy when trying to reach and build their own audiences.

#### 5. Moving beyond text

Memes, gifs and emojis are now well-established methods of communication in popular culture. Audiovisual content is rapidly evolving to challenge the supremacy of text. Over the last decade, consumption of podcasts and audiobooks has exploded and the content found on most social media platforms has drifted steadily towards video, including that created by legacy media. And this shift will deepen as voice activated technology and augmented reality continue to develop. The ability to communicate effectively without using text will be critical to influencing progressive outcomes in the decades ahead, and organisations wanting to succeed in digital information ecosystems will need to understand how to capture attention in invisible spaces where algorithms play an even greater role in dictating the information citizens receive.

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#### Operating effectively in digital information ecosystems

All organisations seeking to influence political outcomes have the same basic set of needs. This includes securing access to the flow of political information and the ability to reach people with messages, the ability to change minds, and the capacity to collect data.

Within digital information ecosystems, the capacity of an organisation or individual to meet these needs and shape public discourse depends as much on their ability to *monitor* and *navigate* messy webs of digital platforms, communities and influencers as it does on having professional journalists on speed dial.

There are a range of emerging digital tools and innovative tactics with which organisations can equip themselves to monitor and navigate digital information ecosystems. Many of these draw on open source data and often represent best practice in forward-thinking commercial companies or specialist agencies concerned with mass consumer preferences and/or reputation management.

#### Monitoring digital information ecosystems: new tools

Tools for monitoring digital information ecosystems use data analysis, sometimes drawing on artificial intelligence, to identify patterns in content and behaviour as well as to visualise networks of accounts on various social media platforms. These tools are widely used by commercial brands to identify influential accounts to promote their products, as well as by mis/disinformation researchers to track the origins of malicious and damaging narratives. There is significant potential here for organisations working to influence political

outcomes to move beyond media monitoring, polling, market research and social listening to deepen their analysis and act accordingly.

### Navigating digital information ecosystems: new tactics

Tactics for effectively navigating digital information ecosystems should be informed by insights from these monitoring tools where possible. Organisations that have been effective to date have drawn on a range of new and adapted tactics to reach and influence audiences. These include highly targeted approaches to delivering content, regular use of data such as A/B testing to improve audience engagement, live-streaming of multimedia content, partnerships based on identified networks of influence and the creation of online communities among their audiences often using new platforms such as Telegram, TikTok, Clubhouse and Substack. Success has also often been marked by a willingness to adopt bold approaches that recognise the role of algorithms in driving what content is amplified across various social media platforms. Such tactics offer significant potential to enable organisations working to influence political outcomes to successfully influence digital information ecosystems.

### Conclusions

Organisations across the progressive spectrum that are too slow to adapt to these changes within digital information ecosystems will lose their ability to influence narratives that affect political outcomes. Not adapting quickly enough risks perpetuating the stranglehold currently enjoyed by populists and regressive actors - regardless of any regulatory reforms.

But it's not too late. As this report sets out, it is possible to understand how our digital information ecosystems will evolve in the medium term. And, as digital discourse increasingly influences real-world outcomes, this understanding will be increasingly important. The tools and tactics referenced in this report are just some of the ways organisations can seek to adapt their approach to influencing political outcomes. They will need to evolve to keep pace with technology - but they represent a critical shift.

Digital information ecosystems bring challenges for communications professionals, operational considerations for civil society and multilateral organisations, and significant potential for philanthropy to generate impact on issues that cut across a range of policy agendas. Investment in identifying and sharing the skills and knowledge required to effectively monitor and navigate these evolving ecosystems could act as a force multiplier across a range of progressive communities.

In debates about technology and politics, we often fall into a binary discussion where the future is either utopian or dystopian depending on how well, or how badly, we handle the changing relationship between technology and humanity. This is unhelpful. Just like the past and the present, the future will be a mixture of good and bad. A world of digital technology, artificial intelligence and ubiquitous data is inevitable no matter how well we address the policy and regulatory challenges brought with it. But this does not have to mean authoritarian government or a loss of human agency. It can also offer opportunities to improve and refine our efforts to make the world a better place. The use of data and digital tools to help organisations influence digital information ecosystems is just one example. We should seize this chance.

This is a summary of *Digital Information Ecosystems: The progressive playbook* by Jonathan Tanner

Jonathan is a consultant who helps organisations influence digital information ecosystems. He has over fifteen years of experience in global communications roles and has worked with senior politicians, CEOs and leading public thinkers. You can find out more about Jonathan's work via his [website](#)<sup>7</sup>. His podcast [Government Vs The Robots](#)<sup>7</sup> explores how technology will affect politics in the future and has listeners in over 100 countries.

If you would like a copy of the full report please get in touch at [jonathantanner@gmail.com](mailto:jonathantanner@gmail.com)