

Book Review

Democracy Hacked: Political Turmoil and Information Warfare in the Digital Age



By Martin Moore

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Introduction

The Chief of the Air Staff's reading list has contained several books about digital technology's influence over social systems and politics and for good reason - this phenomenon shouldn't remain the preserve of the specialist - it should concern us all as citizens with 'galumphing digital footprints' (p. 64). Martin Moore's *Democracy Hacked* joins books such as *Wired for War* (by P. W. Singer and Emerson T. Brooking) and *Sandworm* (by Andy Greenberg) in this important canon of work and, like these books, is aimed at a broad audience. Moore is intimately familiar with the subject area as director of the Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power and founding director of the Media Standards Trust; he makes a convincing case for the 'fragile state' of democracy (p. 253) and warns us about where this might lead in his very readable (if unsettling) book.

Moore explains how the cheerleaders of democracy hailed the social media revolutions of the Arab Spring, not realising technology's Shiva-like, but agnostic, power to both create and destroy democracies. *Democracy Hacked* explores how we got to this point ('this point' being the 2018 publication date) from those hopeful days, while providing a chilling portent of the future – some of which *has* come to pass. I am writing this review on the anniversary of the

storming of Capitol Hill - a terrible realisation of Moore's hypotheses, as captured in Amanda Gorman's famous Presidential inauguration poem, which urges us to reflect on how we got to this point and how we could step off this path – a perfect allegory for Moore's book,

We've seen a force that would shatter our nation...

Moore's case is built thematically, with sections on *hackers*, *systems failure* and *alternative futures*. In the *hackers* section, Moore outlines and distinguishes between the methods and motives of three very different groups: 'freeextremists, plutocrats and states' and demonstrates, through a series of historical vignettes, how they have used these new technologies to further their particular ends, whether 'democratic, autocratic or anarchistic' (p. xi). He spans the heterogeneity of this space: with detailed case studies of internet trolls, 4Chan, the 'First Great Meme War', Brietbart, Bannon, Cambridge Analytica and the Russian state's efforts to 'perfect...activities in the information space' (p. 90), explaining how old concepts of dis/misinformation and propaganda have had new life breathed into them via this new ultra-efficient dissemination mechanism – creating a 'global propaganda arms race' (p. 103) against our weakened cognitive defences. Although this 'vandalized the democratic process' (p. 25), it provided a model to mimic.

*because we know our inaction and inertia
will be the inheritance of the next generation*

In the *systems failure* section, Moore examines the rise of social media, with chapters devoted to Facebook, Google and Twitter. Moore lucidly explains how these companies monetised advertising to increase profits; building systems to 'minimise human involvement and maximise the latent power of algorithms and the market' (p. xiv). The trouble for democracy, Moore argues, is that the companies had unthinkingly created an extremely sophisticated machine for targeting political propaganda; those enabling algorithms are unable to distinguish between an ad selling face cream or one selling fascism (p. xiv). Were that not problematic enough, this 'ad tech' also prioritises ads which generate more 'engagement', which innately favours more extreme political content. Moore observes that these 'creations have grown beyond their understanding or control' (p. 271), describing ad tech as 'the poison at the heart of our digital democracy' (p. 139). He also highlights an important counterpoint: as social media's reach grew, the 'scarecrow function' of the press diminished, with a resultant weakening of political accountability (p. 252).

*We will not march back to what was
but move to what shall be*

The final, *alternative futures* section focuses on what this means for democracies. Moore posits that democracies will splinter in three directions: *platform democracies*, *surveillance democracies* and the third optimistic alternative – *democracy re-hacked*. The first splinter appears to be

the path many democracies are currently moving on: where digital platforms become more powerful, and citizens become more bound to them, becoming gateways to more and more services, such as healthcare and educational provision. Following this, Moore outlines the Orwellian dystopia of surveillance democracies – citizens are forced on to state platforms as an alternative to the omnipresence of the tech giants. Moore describes 'social credit' systems already in existence, with increasing access to citizens' data and behaviours, thus squeezing out dissent by stealth. Indeed, with this curtailment of freedoms it would be a misnomer to call it a democracy at all.

where can we find light in this never-ending shade?

The final section, *democracy re-hacked*, provides several ideas for how we could 'reinvent democracy for the digital era' (p. 266). Moore provides a tantalising smorgasbord of innovative examples of adaptation, such as direct mass consultations, 'participatory budgeting' (p. 260) and the digital lead taken by Estonia and Taiwan, should politicians and governments be bold and brave enough to take them on. However, if you are drawn to this book to seek a holistic panacea, you will not find it. Moore argues that democracy re-hacked is a major undertaking requiring: a fundamental examination of what democracy is; radical reform; and redistribution of power – i.e. a break in the status quo. To do this, Moore argues, we will need political leaders who have 'foresight, bravery and acumen' (p. xvi).

*For there is always light
if only we're brave enough to see it*

Democracy Hacked makes a compelling case that we are at an 'inflection point, an existential crisis' (p. 250). Moore convincingly argues that 'democratic governments were ignoring mounting evidence' that democratic systems were failing to function in this new digital age (p. 248) while others took advantage of the platforms' new freedoms. Moore notes, 'if we are to have any chance of determining the type of political system that will emerge from this maelstrom, then we need to start trying to understand it (p. xi)'. Moore does an excellent job of this - pulling back the Wizard of Oz's curtain to reveal...the Rube Goldberg machine behind it. He encourages us to walk a different path, to a place where democracy benefits from, but is not directed by, digital technology. Although *Democracy Hacked* concludes that 'for the moment at least, the future is up for grabs' (p. 265), Moore nevertheless urges us not to put our heads in the sand and to renew our faith in democratic political systems with 'the citizen at its centre' (p. 272).

...while democracy can be periodically delayed
It can never be permanently deleted
...In this faith we trust

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