

*Democracy, Freedom of Speech, Polarization, and Technology Policy: An Exploratory Study of the Perspectives of Academics on Advancing Community Building, Diversity, and Inclusion on the Internet and on College Campuses*

Tiffany Taylor, MPH, MS

Valuing Open and Inclusive Conversations and Engagement Grant

UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement

Final Report

After years of studying and researching democracy/freedom of speech and science and technology topics, I took a computer science course that intrigued my interest in technology policy. It inspired me to critically examine and study how we can leverage technology to advance democracy and the open internet. From these interests, my passion for conducting research on the topics of democracy, open dialogue, and technology via an anthropological lens emerged. This project examined the perspectives and opinions of academics on a broad range of issues relevant to democracy and technological innovation, affective polarization, freedom of speech, community building, censorship, and diversity and inclusion initiatives.

Via ethnography and in-depth interviews, I gained a more nuanced and holistic understanding of current debates, discourses, and discussions regarding how academics feel about recent initiatives and the creation of novel technologies to advance democracy and the open internet while mitigating and reducing hate speech, polarization, and disconnection. Some discussions catered to best practices for creating,

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adopting, implementing, and promoting novel technological advances for creating more inclusive and diverse communities both online and on college campuses while reducing the harmful effects of racist algorithms, affective polarization, and hostility in online environments. My work for this study included interviews with academic staff in various fields relevant to democracy, affective polarization, freedom of speech, technology policy, community building, censorship, algorithmic bias, and social justice. I spoke with persons from various academic fields, including computer science, public policy, anthropology, political science, engineering, science and technology studies, history, and communities. The implications of this study are vast, and I intend to use the results from this preliminary and exploratory study to conduct more studies, including a survey. This study resulted in a policy memo emphasizing the importance of creating, adopting, promoting, and implementing effective technologies that can advance democracy and the open internet while reducing hate speech, algorithmic bias, and polarization.

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Another focus of this project was to examine the connections between censorship among campus community members and cultural inclusivity. For this portion of the project, I used ethnography and in-depth interviews to gain a holistic understanding of current initiatives to promote diversity and cultural inclusivity, and free speech on college campuses. This project provided a foundation for future research regarding democracy and freedom of speech within the academic community. In addition, this multifaceted study provided the foundation for future studies relevant to inclusive conversations, community building, and the open internet.

Finally, I thank the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement for funding, support, training, mentoring, and guidance throughout this project! This organization has a fantastic mission, and it's very timely and necessary to ensure that all persons feel included in the dialogue advancing freedom of speech and democracy. In addition, the center continues to do a fantastic job of advancing the research efforts of researchers and providing the opportunity and funds to pursue diverse critical topics.