

Democracy in Danger S4 E2 Disconnected

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:05] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab, this is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:12] Will, just a few months ago, we thought we were through the storm of COVID 19. We thought we were done with all of those months of wondering how students of all ages were going to connect with their lessons and with their teachers. Everything was back on its way to normal.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:26] Yeah, well, not, not yet. The new Omicron variant makes it much easier to contract the illness. It seems that the symptoms may be relatively mild for those who are vaccinated, but many more people are getting sick – they're missing work or school for a week or more. And this is disrupting many areas of life, so probably we should just be prepared for the long term. Variants will sweep through perhaps every year, giving us a reason each time to work or learn remotely.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:56] Right. And you know, we realized over the past two years that we have a problem. Millions of Americans, billions of people around the world lack the level of data connectivity they would otherwise need to be fully effective workers, citizens, teachers and students. I mean, why haven't we fix that problem yet?

Will Hitchcock [00:01:14] That's a great question and an agonizing one, Siva. Expanding broadband access can be a real political hot potato in statehouses across the United States.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:26] Well, our guest today has thought, taught and written a lot about this. We have Christopher Ali in the studio with us. He's our colleague here at the UVA Media Studies department and one of the foremost voices supporting public policies that would better connect Americans online. He's been studying and advocating for state funded expansion of high-speed internet access for those who can't get it, either because they live in rural areas that lack broadband or because they can't afford it. Chris, welcome to Democracy in Danger.

Christopher Ali [00:01:57] Thank you so much for having me.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:01:59] So, Chris, one hundred and twenty million Americans lack access to the internet at speeds that we would define as broadband. Now, certainly, this demonstrates some stark digital inequality, and we can layer that on top of all of the other inequality in America. But is this just a matter of economic opportunity and development, or is it also a factor in the health of our democracy?

Christopher Ali [00:02:25] It is absolutely a factor in the health of our democracy. I mean, economic development is a component of that. And of course, economic development is part of a democracy as well. But if you also think about broadband access in terms of students, right, we know from great research that a student without broadband will probably have half a letter grade different than a student with broadband access at home.

Right. We can think about new and different abilities to vote. The military, for instance, have been experimenting with online voting, and we have some experiments here as well. I mean, all of this requires a high speed, affordable broadband connection. And this is one of the things that gets, I think, missed when we think about broadband purely as a consumer good or a market good. I mean, broadband is so much more than just a toaster, and I like my toaster fine. But if I was going to sacrifice a toaster for an internet connection, it's going to be access to the internet.

Will Hitchcock [00:03:17] So like a lot of teachers, I spent a lot of 2020 and 2021 teaching online. And you know, here in Charlottesville, where there is a major university and a number of major hospitals and reasonable urban density, you know, I didn't find it too difficult to jump online and teach on Zoom. Most of our students, not all, but most of our students found that they could connect. But if you just go a few miles outside of Charlottesville, you'll find a very different picture. And in fact, the picture of the state of Virginia is probably not so dissimilar to other states around the country. Around Washington, D.C. and around Richmond, there's high connectivity. But in rural areas just outside of those big urban spaces, connectivity dwindles. Just talk a little bit about the nature of that gap. It's social connotations how it came to be. What is it doing to us as a culture, as a polity?

Christopher Ali [00:04:10] Absolutely, happy to. Though, if I could be so bold as to push back on two things you said. We don't know the connectivity levels at the University of Virginia. We've never studied it. We have no concept of the digital divide. And I'll give you an example. I ran a survey of media studies majors – where a huge major right in the humanities. Fifty percent of students who responded expressed concerns with their internet connection when they went home during the pandemic. Fifty percent of one of the largest majors in the humanities. So I mean, that's more anecdotal than it is statistically significant. But it begs the question what is UVA's responsibility? What is all higher education institutions responsibility to its own and under connected students?

Will Hitchcock [00:04:49] Especially a public university.

Christopher Ali [00:04:51] Especially a public university, right? And we've seen there's been some great experiments throughout the country with universities, for instance, subsidizing broadband access or providing hotspots. We haven't done that, but that's it may be a different story. The other question is the rural-urban divide, I mean, certainly what we're seeing in rural America is a lack of infrastructure, but in urban America, we also have to understand that there's a, there's a connectivity issue, both in terms of affordability, and that certainly exists in rural America as well, but also in terms of under connection, right? One of the major issues we're seeing with urban centers is that they've been built out with subpar technologies. And so people who thought they were paying, you know, \$100 a month for what they thought was high speed broadband access suddenly conked out when the whole neighborhood went on Zoom. That's often an urban problem because the networks haven't been upgraded. So we're, we're kind of flailing in a number of different areas. There's the infrastructure getting connections in the ground or in the air, which is oftentimes a rural issue. Then there's upgrading under connected areas. And then of course, there is the problem with affordability. On average, the monthly subscription for broadband in United States is \$84 a month. I mean, that is ridiculous. And we're seeing this factor into so many different things. I mean, one of the awful realizations during the pandemic was the stark digital divide, and if there's any bright spot that came out of it. What I'm hoping is that our elected officials have finally all gotten together and realized that broadband is not a luxury. It is a necessity. Some have gone so far as to call it a utility,

which has some interesting legal connotations, but also a right. The major question, though, and this is the question that's being battled on Capitol Hill right now is what exactly is broadband?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:06:27] Right.

Christopher Ali [00:06:28] That, you know, and here in the United States, we define broadband by speed. It's currently defined as 25 megabits per second, down three megabits per second upload. That's maybe fine if you can get it for one person living in an apartment. But if you're a family, if you're a high intensity user, if you're, if you live in a neighborhood in which a lot of people are jumping on Zoom, 25-3 is not good enough. And so far, our policies about getting broadband out into the hinterlands, so to speak, have been about just getting something that's good enough when really we need to be thinking, what are our broadband needs, not two years ago, but what will our broadband needs be 10 years from now? Broadband is expensive. Broadband requires public funding because it is, you know, what economists might call a market failure. I mean, there is not enough people living in rural communities to merit a private company going out there, and we've ceded broadband to the private market. And you know what, if the private market was going to solve this problem, it would have already done it. It needs public intervention. And then there the infrastructure package. \$65 billion coming down the pipelines. \$42 billion of which will go specifically to broadband deployment – that's getting wires in the ground, getting them on telephone poles, using fixed wireless. And then \$14 billion for an affordability program, which will subsidize broadband for low-income households at \$30 a month.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:07:46] Gotcha.

Will Hitchcock [00:07:47] Let me follow up with you on that, because while it sounds good that we get a number coming out of Washington, it doesn't always mean that that money hits the ground. What does that tell us about how complicated rural broadband has become as it's implemented through our federal system with a lot of corporations involved?

Christopher Ali [00:08:05] That's a great question. And just to give a little bit of context. Between 2009 and 2017, the federal government allocated and distributed \$47 billion for broadband, which would suggest that we should be pretty close to solving the digital divide. And of course, we know the digital divide is actually growing, it's not shrinking. So, what is getting in the way of this massive federal commitment and then getting future proofed connectivity on the ground? The major problem here has been that we've had a policy apparatus at the federal level that has privileged the largest telecommunications providers at the expense of much of our local regional, much more nimble players. And here's an example In 2015, the Federal Communications Commission had at its disposal the Universal Service Fund of \$5 billion a year to support broadband in rural areas. \$5 billion a year, that's a huge amount of money. Instead of, you know, having an open call for bidders instead of, you know, making it kind of a more equitable process, it's selected the 10 largest telecommunications companies, gave them a dump truck full of money and said, we trust you to connect the country. What did they do? They connected the country to the lowest legal parameters that they could. So, for instance, the speed they had to connect the country or their areas was a 10-1, 10 megabits per second download, one megabits per second upload. At that speed, they didn't have to be deploying fiber. They could just be using telephone wires. So what did they do? They deploy telephone wires and pocketed the rest of the money as profit. A company like CenturyLink, for instance, gets five hundred and five million dollars a year in federal subsidy, and some other companies

actually haven't even made their commitments, but they're still eligible for federal support. So one of the major, I think, findings of my work has been really the best broadband is local broadband. By that, I mean, local providers, regional providers, telephone cooperatives, electric cooperatives, they're the ones who are seeing broadband as an investment in their communities rather than a quarterly return on investment.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:10:03] Chris, is there is there a state in the United States that's doing it right, that's a model state?

Christopher Ali [00:10:08] Absolutely. And that state of Minnesota. Minnesota needs to be the national model for how to roll out broadband. And here's why. Over a decade ago, they established a office of broadband, right? So and that office acts as not only they had to have money to do grants, but also it's kind of an information clearinghouse and best practices because one thing we know about the digital divide, it is not a cookie cutter solution. It's not going to be just AT&T solving. It is not going to be just a county solving. It's not going to be a cooperative. It's not going to be just fiber. It's not just wireless. This whole kind of all hands-on deck approach needs to happen. And Minnesota really appreciated that. And so I spent a bunch of time in Minnesota for my book, and one place I spent a bunch of time in is Rock County, Minnesota, which is the Nutcracker capital of the Midwest, population of 10,000 people in the southwest pocket of the state. So bordering South Dakota and Iowa, Rock County got a \$5 million grant from from the state of Minnesota. They bonded themselves because in Minnesota, counties are allowed to do that for infrastructure needs. And then they found a telephone cooperative in South Dakota to lay the network. Rock County, Minnesota, population 10,000, has 99.3 Percent fiber-to-the home passed by. That is amazing, and they did that because of local digital champions and a state that had the foresight to be able to support connectivity like that in projects like that. Every state in this country, especially when states are going to become more and more vital to processing that infrastructure money, every state in this country needs to look at Minnesota and what they're doing. Some have even called it the Minnesota model, and I am in full endorsement of that.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:11:47] So Chris, if Minnesota is doing really well in Virginia, is not doing so well and Ohio's not doing so well. You know, why doesn't the federal government set basic standards and use the Minnesota model or something close to it and say, if you're going to get our money, you have to do it this way? I mean, why isn't that on the table?

Christopher Ali [00:12:04] There's lobbying, but the more serious answer is we had that. In 2010, we had something called the National Broadband Plan, which was promising, which set a goal of within 10 years to have 100 million people connected at 100 megabits per second. We blew through that. We did not hit any of the benchmarks set by the National Broadband Plan because it's not legally binding. It's a policy recommendation.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:12:27] But it was a set of standards based on numbers, speed and whatnot, right? But not a model for how to deploy right? Which is what Minnesota has figured out.

Christopher Ali [00:12:37] Right. One of the other problems is we actually don't know how many people are un- and under-connected. And here's why. The Federal Communications Commission is responsible for mapping broadband. And they do that through something called Form 477, which if anyone is familiar with broadband policy, it's this is quite infamous.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:12:55] And nobody is, go ahead.

Christopher Ali [00:12:56] But, internet service providers have to report on Form 77 twice a year who they are connecting. The problem is they don't have to report this at the address level. They report this at the census block level. Now, a census block in Manhattan might be a couple of streets here in, in Charlottesville, it's a neighborhood or two neighborhoods of three neighborhoods, right? In rural communities, it can be, you know, in Alaska, there's a census block that's eight thousand square miles, right? Because depending on population. According to the Federal Communications Commission, so long as one building in a census block has broadband or can have broadband within 10 business days, the entire census block is considered 100 percent served with broadband. What are the implications here? That census block is then ineligible for any future federal support. So you can be served on the map but not actually served in practice. It absolutely benefits the large national providers who can have that beautiful blue map that that AT&T has or the pink map, and they can say, look, we serve everybody because they might serve one building in one census block and that census block therefore gets a checkmark. How can we make sure everybody has broadband until we actually know who doesn't have broadband? And that's one of the major political fights going on right now. The Federal Communications Commission has been ordered to change their methodology. To the credit of now Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel, they're moving as quickly as they can. But you're asking big telecommunications companies to volunteer more information than they have ever done so before. So it is it is a political fight and we can't do anything unless we have accurate maps.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:14:30] So why are we obsessed with the wire coming out of a wall and fiber optic cable being dug into the ground right now? I mean, shouldn't we be thinking that the rollout of 5G, which is a global project, it seems, offers us a much more efficient way to skip over the infrastructure problem? Right? We're just building towers rather than digging in the ground. We're taking advantage of mobile connectivity, which is ubiquitous, if not universal. You know, it seems to me like that would be a better plan. Maybe doesn't solve the kids on Zoom problem in 2022, but it might be a more anticipatory way of imagining our information infrastructure five or 10 years from now, right? It seems to me to be a better way to address the challenges of India or Egypt, even if Canada gets left out because they still have pine trees, although maybe not for long with climate change.

Christopher Ali [00:15:30] You know, it's a great question, and certainly the growth of 5G is interesting. The problem, though, is that not all 5G is created equal. And one of the great lines, and this is from Deb Socia, who used to head Next Century Cities, as is now, is Tennessee. And she told me that wireless is just one wire less. 5G still requires a fiber optic backhaul. Right. You still need wires in the ground to connect to that tower? The other problem with 5G is that 5G operates on three different bands of frequencies. There's low-band, mid-band and high-band. Only high-band 5G is able to compare to the connectivity we would get with a fiber optic cable. The problem with high-band 5G is that you need a repeater every 800 feet because the signal is so weak it can't pass through a human body, it can't turn a corner, it can't go through a wall. So it might work in Manhattan, where, yeah, you've got a light post every 800 feet and you could slap on what's called a small cell. It is not going to work in Charlottesville. It's to spread out. Low-band 5G, which is what, for instance, T-Mobile is rolling out right when you see that bright pink map and 5G is everywhere. Low-band 5G, the user experience with low-band 5G will be no different than 4G. It really isn't any different. So, you know there is going to be a

wireless solution. The solution to the digital divide is not always going to be about fiber. It just, it just can't be, right? But 5G will not be the answer in this country. You could say the exact same thing about Starlink. Starlink is Space X's satellite broadband company. Space X, of course, is famous because it's founded by Elon Musk, right? And what Starlink is, they are operating what's called a low earth orbital satellite network. LEO satellites. And that's different. If any of your listeners here have conventional satellite internet provided by, let's say, Viasat or HughesNet, you know, dollars to donuts, they're pretty frustrated with their service. It's super expensive. It's super slow and laggy. You've got these data caps. It's just, it's internet, but it's not broadband. What Elon Musk promised, what Starlink promises that because the satellites are closer to the ground and because there's more of them, they can offer a fiber-like user experience. That's originally what was happening in 2018, that's what it was promised. And then we saw, well, some satellites got launched and then it wasn't going to be fiber broadband for everybody. Then it became good broadband for some. Now it's good enough broadband for fewer, right? So again, we got to, I think, dial down the hype with Starlink. Starlink will play a role there doing some good work in connecting really, really hard to reach areas, but it's nothing like fiber. So right now, if you're with Starlink, first of all, it's a \$500 down payment and then at least \$100 a month. So it's quite expensive. And the user experience you're going to get is about 100 megabits per second download, 20 megabits per second upload, which is comparable to what Comcast offers. So it's good. It's really, it's good, but it's again, looking at the height from 2018 where Musk is saying, I'm going to connect the world. What he's saying in '22 is I'm going to connect hard to reach areas. Big difference.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:18:28] Wait, are you saying Elon Musk is...

Will Hitchcock [00:18:30] Failing to deliver on his promises?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:18:35] Yes, right! Is practicing hyperbole?

Christopher Ali [00:18:37] Only only only slightly. Only only only slightly. Yeah.

Will Hitchcock [00:18:40] Well, Chris, let me bring this topic back around to the question of democracy and participation in public life. You know, for this much of this conversation, we've been assuming that if you connect citizens to, you know, more powerful broadband access, that's good for democracy. But one could make the argument that at least over the last ten or 20 years, the opposite has happened. More people have access to information, but they are increasingly sharing the kinds of information which have served to undermine democratic practices and commitments and the extraordinary metastasizing of the internet as a source of disinformation of conspiracy theories, of a dark space that can be used to explain bad things everywhere. This has also served, we all agree, has served to weaken or to challenge our commitment not just to democracy, but really what we think about as truth and what we think about as science and information. What do you make of this? Is more broadband basically a good thing for our civic health? Or do we also have to continue to think about the ways it's exacerbated grievances and fears and anxieties of the modern age?

Christopher Ali [00:19:49] I mean, that's a great question. And my kind of first glib response is that none of this is broadband's fault. Broadband is an infrastructure. It's like blaming a highway for a car accident. Right? Broadband is a net positive, right? There is nothing moral or amoral about a wire in the ground, I mean. So, you know, do we have problems with the way in which information, false information, misinformation, disinformation, malinformation is being spread? Yes, we do. Is that a reason to slow down

broadband deployment? Absolutely not. It is doing way more good, in my opinion, than it is undermining democracy. Again, just look at what's happened in the last two years. None of us could do our jobs, which means that none of us would be able to participate in the conversations that we enjoy participating in. So I don't think concerns over the spread of misinformation should factor in, to be perfectly honest, into the conversation about whether or not we need to get broadband in the ground because communities are worse off without a broadband connection. So the wires in the ground, wires in the air isn't doing anything in and of themselves, but the lack of them is certainly hurting, particularly rural areas, particularly tribal areas.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:21:06] So wait, Chris, I mean, you said that, you know, highways aren't the problem with traffic accidents, but in fact they are. I mean, we had many millions more deaths because we built high speed highways where people could drive 65, 75, 85 miles an hour, right? Before we had highways, we had very few automobile deaths. If you're driving 10, 20 miles an hour, you're just not killing that many people. Now that said, look, when we look at what we've done over the past 20, 25 years, building out more and more speed, layering on audio and video to everything we do. I actually have an argument and I've written about it at some length that this has been very bad for human minds, very bad for democracy, very bad for community, and that we were all better off when our connectivity was limited to the speed at which sharing text was about the best we could do, and we didn't have these algorithmically driven engines that put things in front of us. Now we're never going to go back to that, right? But I'm not convinced that broadband in general is good for human beings, good for learning, good for democracy. But what are we stuck with? I mean, how should we be looking at this problem?

Christopher Ali [00:22:16] We have to be looking at this problem through the lens of equity. Absolutely. Right now, we've got a patchwork of connectivity. We've got rural folks who are paying upwards of 37 percent more and then for worse connections than urban peers, right? We've got folks who are paying hundreds of dollars a month for subpar technology. We need to ensure that our students, that our workforce is well equipped. That means broadband. A study found that those with a high-speed internet connection at home are more likely to social distance than those without. Think about it, it means that you could, you could use Instacart to get your groceries right versus going to the grocery store. You know, Reverend Al Sharpton and FCC Commissioner Jeffrey Starke wrote a piece saying that broadband access was a civil right. You know, you've got the European Union, you've got the United Nations calling it a human right, right? This is not for naught. This is not they're not being disingenuous, and I don't think they're speaking in hyperbole here. So, yes, do we have a problem with algorithms? We do. Do we have a problem with, with wealth infiltrating our telecommunication system where the wealthy are getting, you know, millimeter wave 5G and fiber optics because they can afford \$20,000 a mile and pay for it privately? Yes, we do. That is that is a massive political economic problem. So we need to ensure that history doesn't repeat itself when we're about to spend \$65 billion. We need to ensure that there are rules of the road, so to speak, to use that highway analogy, that are put into place to make sure that the folks who need high speed broadband, who want high speed broadband have access to it and can afford it.

Will Hitchcock [00:23:48] But let me put it another way, which is the same concern. On highways, you have to have a driver's license to use them. I mean...

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:23:57] But we can't do that with this because it's the First Amendment. The First Amendment prevents any reasonable regulation of these spaces.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:04] Right.

Christopher Ali [00:24:04] And I mean, I can talk about we need to reinterpret the First Amendment, but I'm not an expert in this area that's getting into me pontificating and wishing we were more like Canada with responsible speech.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:24:13] Canadians are always telling Americans how to live.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:16] Canadians are always invading us.

Christopher Ali [00:24:17] We don't have free speech in Canada, right?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:24:19] Canadian cultural imperialism.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:23] So, so this is not a technology problem. This is a policy problem.

Christopher Ali [00:24:27] Absolutely. Broadband actually is not about technology or markets. Broadband, it's about people, right? It is a question of policy and a question of politics, and that's where things get tricky.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:37] Well, Christopher Ali, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Christopher Ali [00:24:42] Thank you so much for having me. This was a lot of fun.

Will Hitchcock [00:24:54] Christopher Ali is an associate professor of media studies at the University of Virginia. He's the author of *Media Localism*, *The Policies of Place*, and the new book *Farm Fresh Broadband: The Politics of Rural Connectivity*.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:25:08] *Democracy in Danger* is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit DemocracyGroup.org to find all of our sister shows. We'll be right back after this message from our friends.

Jane Frankel [00:25:22] Hi, I'm Jane Frankel, an intern on the show, we wanted to let you know about a cool new project from the Democracy Group. It's a set of podcast channels with shows from across the whole network organized by topic. You can look up episodes from *DinD* and all of our sister shows. They're organized around themes like voting rights, racial justice, misinformation, climate change and much, much more. Just go to DemocracyGroup.org and scroll down. You'll find links to each topic with audio from acclaimed guests like Ezra Klein, Madeleine Albright, Andrew Yang, Sergio Popovic and Elizabeth Warren. While you're at it, let us know about any other topics that you'd like the network to curate for its audience. Thanks for listening, and let's get back to the show.

Will Hitchcock [00:26:12] Well Siva it turns out *Democracy in Danger* had its own infrastructure week. What did we learn? I mean, is broadband good for democracy? It sounds like it is, but it also seems like there are many other issues that are involved. I mean, it's a fascinating way to understand the sort of tension points in our society right now.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:29] Right. I mean, as I've said, I actually think broadband is bad for democracy, but inequality is also bad for democracy. And Chris's argument, and I

think it's a strong one, is that as long as some of us are going to have access to the full range of opportunities in society, the full range of opportunity to communicate with our leaders, to make our opinions known, to connect with each other, to learn about the world, then by all means we all should have that opportunity, right? So in this case, equality trumps whatever weird media theory thing is informing my own grumpiness about broadband.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:05] Siva, let me ask you a question, since you've written a lot about this issue. In some institutions and in some countries, we're hearing people talk about connectivity as a human or civil right. Do you buy that? Do you think that's the right way to think about access to the internet?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:27:21] I mean, we've had earlier discussions of human rights in terms of culture and in terms of the freedom to connect with one's culture, the freedom to be a cultural citizen, the freedom to represent one's culture. And look fundamentally, to be cultural is to be connected. So, it is of a part with that longer human rights emphasis on culture. By the way, that whole idea is absent from American thoughts about rights, about policy and about human rights. It's the sort of conversation that happens in Australia or Canada or Ghana or South Africa, where cultural policy is much more explicit than it is in the United States. Now, you know, when you think about broadband as a policy issue in this country, we always make it about economic development, right? About entrepreneurship, right? But we could look at it as cultural policy. We could look at it in terms of an opportunity to help communities flourish fully to help communities hang together, identify themselves and represent themselves and explore their own histories, their own identities in a fuller way. You know, if we wanted to include things like communication policy, broadband policy, as cultural policy, we might have a much better set of decisions coming out of Washington DC.

Will Hitchcock [00:28:44] Yeah, maybe we could look at it through the lens of human development. And in that sense, consider it as necessary in the same way the public health rules and regulations are necessary, though to be honest, the United States doesn't have a particularly good record of doing that either.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:28:56] Not a model. No.

Will Hitchcock [00:28:57] But, but I think this is a new way of thinking about access to the internet, not simply, as can I get my download speed faster, but rather what am I going to do with this good once I have it? How is it going to affect me and my neighbors and my, my life and my family?

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:29:11] So look, as we construct a media system and a media policy for the rest of the 21st century, we should be putting democracy first, right? We shouldn't make democracy an afterthought in this. And I think that's our big error that we've already rushed one-fifth of the way through the 21st century, thinking of these things as purely commercial enterprises. As purely instruments of economic development and wealth distribution or wealth creation. We really have to put democracy first as we make big decisions about what our communication system should be like.

Will Hitchcock [00:29:54] That's all we have this week on Democracy in Danger. Next time, we'll dig deeper on some thorny political topics right here in the Old Dominion with another University of Virginia colleague and member of the House of Delegates, Sally Hudson.

Sally Hudson [00:30:07] People are right to be losing faith in government. I don't think that they're wrong to wonder whether their votes really matter, and that's what scares me most.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:17] There's a lot more coming your way this season as we hone in not just on threats to democracy, but on ways we might repair government for and by the people.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:28] Read up on our guests and find background material on all our shows at DinDanger.org. And stay in touch. Tag us on Twitter @dindpodcast. That's D-I-N-D podcast.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:30:39] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Sydney Halleman edits the show. Our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel, and Elie Bashkow.

Will Hitchcock [00:30:52] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. We are distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:31:07] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan. Until next time.