Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
The Tech We Need for 21st Century Democracy with Divya Siddarth

Speaker 1: ... All those in favor say aye.

Aye.

Tristan Harris: This is what democracy in action sounds like right now.

Speaker 1: All those opposed say no.

No.

Tristan Harris: And pretty much what it sounded like for generations. Outside of Congress constituents go to a building once a year or so and put little black dots on a piece of paper where we vote for people who more often than not, don't even represent some of the things that we actually want. While our technology gets more sophisticated, our forms of democracy have stayed much the same. And so, what would an upgrade look like? And I'm not just talking about voting booths and the floors of Congress, I'm talking about all the different places, the democratic decision making actually happens, in ways that affect us, on school boards and within companies, on city councils, and even governance of the online platforms many of us use every day. Today on Your Undivided Attention, we're going to give listeners a bit of a tour of some of the new tools that are emerging that could rapidly help us upgrade democratic decision making with collective intelligence.

I'm joined by political economist and social technologist, Divya Siddarth, founder of the Collective Intelligence Project and one of the world's leading experts in this area. And together we're going to explore how new kinds of governance or collective decision making can be supported through better technology and how that's the key to unlocking everything, from more effective elections to globally better ways of responding to problems like the climate crisis. And for those who listen to our episode with Digital Minister Audrey Tang of Taiwan, this is a continuity of the conversation on how we upgrade democracy for the 21st century.

Welcome to Your Undivided Attention. I am very excited to have here as our guest Divya Siddarth, who is co-founder of the Collective Intelligence Project, which is advancing collective intelligence capabilities for transformative technology governance. She's also a research associate at the Ethics and AI Institute at Oxford. Divya. How would you actually define collective intelligence, self-determination and agency?

Divya Siddarth: Collective intelligence is a pretty umbrella term, because it includes both the way that we aggregate decisions and the way that we might make these decisions. So I think we think about collective intelligence as technologies, processes, and institutions through which we basically make and execute on collective decisions. Then the major examples of these processes can include
democracies, markets, different forms of institution. And if you look at the field of collective intelligence, it's extremely wide-ranging.

We've created all of these different ways to be more collectively intelligent as a group. We've created ways to come together and build cities. We've created ways to come together and build corporations, to build bridges, to enable education and schools. And these are all ways to upgrade our collective intelligence that we're trying to build. And trying to take some of those to the next level, in particular with regards to our governance of technology is sort of what this whole project is based on.

And the way democracy fits into that to me is how do we A, have agency and input over that and B, gather all the information that people have to make decisions that are good for them. And while it can feel like democracy is often relegated to just voting, you are actually participating in our collective systems of intelligence, by riding the subway, you're participating in a system of collective intelligence.

By buying certain products, you're participating in that. By working at a certain place, you're participating in the collective intelligence of that organization. And so, upgrading our collective intelligence looks like changing many of those things for the better. Because, you're not just saying, "Let's look at it from the lens of the individual and trying to aggregate preferences." You're saying, "By being in a society, I do have a stake in what's happening with my neighbor. I have a stake in what's happening with the road." And that collective kind of piece of it, is I think a really crucial part of what we are aiming for. And then we have a huge suite of tools that we can get there with.

Tristan Harris: Yeah, I mean, I think that links with words that we use just for listeners to draw the link on our podcast and we talk about the quality of our sense making, informing the quality of our choice making, and that our collective ability to make sense of the world is an input into then the quality and the intelligence of our decision making. And how much do our decisions cause outcomes that are not just good, but incorporating what externalities did they cause.

So fossil fuels are actually really good from the perspective of creating the most efficient way to move energy around in human history. And we are living through the most abundant age of energy that we've ever lived in. And they're really good from the perspective of being cheap, transportable and all that. But they create externalities. And so, how do we have a more broad definition of good choices that actually minimize externalities to all the stakeholders, including nature?

And this is kind of breaking people's sense of self-determination. I think one of the sort of overall things is that as we're hitting multiple crisis points, environmental crisis, inequality crisis, social justice level crises, runaway
Center for Humane Technology | Your Undivided Attention Podcast
The Tech We Need for 21st Century Democracy with Divya Siddarth

technology crises, and people don't feel that even when there actually is agreement and legitimacy that anything is getting done, it feels like the gears of democracy have kind of broken down. Because, even when we can aggregate our preferences, people don't feel that self-determination.

They don't feel that agency, they don't feel like their decisions have a voice. And there's different ways that that's manifesting today, whether it's the MAGA movement, Make America Great Again on the right or the Bernie Sanders movement or populism around the world, which is in a way kind of reflecting just the fact that these systems of governance are not aggregating the preferences and then making decisions based on those preferences of people. And so, maybe if we just continue diagnosing a little bit, why this is happening, why is it struggling? Because, I think we need to get a more complete picture before we get on into solutions.

Divya Siddarth:
I mean, I think there are multiple reasons why this is happening. One, is that we've built institutions that aren't very good at surfacing that information and acting on it. The second important problem to discuss is we've built institutions that don't have incentives to act on what people want, because there is quite a significant incentive to act on various much more self-interested sort of directions. Politicians at least have short-term incentives to act on things that will get them reelected and likely seems evident by many of the campaign funding law issues that we're having.

If you look at the stock purchases of different Congress people, at least in the US, massive corruption in democracies across the world. And I think that is an issue when we talk about any of these things as separate from the economic systems that allow all of this to happen. And part of that is on, if we are building a system where economic power translates into political power, which is the system that we currently have in many different ways, then we will end up with these kinds of issues. And that is a really important tie to break. And I think there are many different ways that you can go about breaking that tie. And some of them are through enabling access to technology. Some of them are through changing those economic systems from the ground up. Some of them are through regulation and a bunch of financing laws, but you have to break that link.

Tristan Harris:
And pointing to the economic conditions here, the more runaway power that corporations have, the more money that they can spend on regulatory capture, persuading politicians helping them with their next election. And so, part of what we're diagnosing here is the interlocking, both incentives and the lock-in of what has power and when that power is economic, this is where the conversations around campaign finance reform and things like that become relevant.
Divya Siddarth: I think this is also just the uneasy relationship in many ways between capitalism and democracy, where you want one space in which everyone has equal power in an ideal sense, and you want another space where everyone cannot have equal power. A lot of how we have tried to structure a society is various ways to try to keep them separate, campaign finance being one of them, but also this just uneasy medium between these two different systems that are built with fundamentally underlying different precepts.

And they also do share some precepts. I mean, there's some sense of the self-determination that is core to both of them, but there is these real significant tensions and I think that's something to contend with. And if we think of both capitalism and democracy as forms of collective intelligence, which I do, then I think it gives you a sense of how you can upgrade both into a system that actually does not have to have all of those tensions.

Although then you must ask yourself, "Do you have the power to do that upgrade?" Which is a separate question. But I think this is one of the ways in which that collective intelligence frame helps is that we try to see, okay, capitalism is this resource allocation decision making mechanism, and in some ways, so is democracy and they are at odds with each other. So when is each making a good decision and when are each making bad decisions? And how do we then think about how to make good decisions for the short and long term in a collectively intelligent way?

Tristan Harris: Seems like what one would do is outline the failure modes of market-based decision making processes. Markets can't see externalities, don't account for the long term, don't deal with market failures. And so, they're really good at aggregating certain information and driving, say the mass production of masks in a pandemic, because suddenly people can see there's a market signal where an alcohol companies get pivoted to producing more hand sanitizer and that's great, but then they don't do long-term planning.

And then there's the failure modes of democratic decision making that maybe you don't have an informed population or maybe people are just tribalized and they have confirmation bias and disconfirmation bias. Maybe just to ground this for listeners, I mean, I recently had to vote in my local elections here in California, and for a person who is on this podcast talking about why we need to upgrade democracy and upgrade technology, it was kind of embarrassing that I got this ballot in the mail and I had all these people to vote on, supervisors and education boards and local propositions in the city that I live.

And I really had no information that I would not want to trust my votes on those topics, because I spent all my time thinking about these big global issues of how to fix technology and deal with existential crises. And it was actually kind of this big moment of reckoning. Here we are sort of promoting that this is the method of governance that we want, and here I am with this ballot right in front of me,
which embodies the thing that supposedly I'm advocating for and I have to reckon with how little I really feel informed about those issues. And I'm curious, just when you think about your own felt sense of this and what got you into these topics, do you have a moment of reckoning like that too, where you sort of ask yourself, is this system working the way that I sort of speak about it in idealized ways?

Divya Siddarth: Yeah. One experience that this reminds me of, it's not quite the same, but kind of seeing policymaking in some sense from the top and realizing that those democratic accountability structures aren't in place. I worked on COVID policy for several months and would talk to these organizations, would talk to governor's offices and state offices about in particular testing and tracing allocation, but also how much they were procuring masks and how much they were providing support for people who had to isolate.

And it just felt so clear in that process to me in a lot of cases, and not all cases, but in a lot of cases that they were not worried about or thinking about A, what people might want. B, there was no reaching out for participation. C, there was no desire to build trust with communities. A bunch of our work was trying to say, okay, it's great that we've spent a lot of money on vaccines, but people aren't going to take them if they don't have trust in that process, which ended up being true. Can we work with community health workers? Can we work with other trusted organizations that people already go to for trusted advice and try to get them sort of bringing this into communities, all of those different kinds of things.

And it just seemed like it was this process that was completely from the top down. Not only was it inefficient and problematic in a lot of different ways that we've seen, it just didn't have that democratic component of we're making decisions that affect millions of people's lives and we'd like to do that in those people's interests. I think that just wasn't the prevailing kind of sense that I got. And that's not to say that I didn't meet a bunch of really incredible public servants. I absolutely did and there were people who embodied this, but it wasn't the major feeling that I got from that experience.

Tristan Harris: So in a sense, these are institutions that are supposed to be acting in the public interest but I mean, was it that they didn't have a mechanism to go after the opinions of what the public also thought, because they were sort of in a rapid fire decision making mode, people are just on phone calls at the beginning of COVID and it's an urgent crisis, or there wasn't the technologies available to do that or the time? Just interesting to keep diagnosing what was going on there.

Divya Siddarth: I think it's an information and incentives problem again, where they did not in some sense have that information, they didn't have a good sense. If you look at Taiwan's COVID response, a lot of it is about gathering information. It's about understanding where people are at. But it's also about that do people trust you enough to get that information and do you care enough to get that information.
And I think both of those were lacking at different points, and in some cases it was more one, and in some cases it was more the other, and then the incentives to act on what people may want. And so for example, there were decisions being made about supply chains or should we stop the production of X to increase the production of Y?

And people may have preferred us to overproduce PPE and under produce the various other things that were happening in factories, but that's just not the decision that the government took at that time. And we could have done that. And I think there's also, then this comes into many of the questions about polarization and misinformation that are discussed here, because obviously this is related to vaccine misinformation eventually, a lot of anger about masks, anger about lockdowns. And so, it wasn't always the case that say you had had a directly democratic sort of mandate over COVID that everyone would've said people would've pulled in the same direction necessarily. But I do think that acting in the public interest would have looked different, both from an information gathering and sort of an incentive standpoint of these institutions.

Tristan Harris: You're making me think back to those days of COVID when for a brief moment in time, everybody thought we just needed ventilators and we just needed to give more ventilators to more and more hospitals. And then later it was like that wasn't really the thing, but that was what sort of surged on social media. And so I think Elon Musk was like, well, I'll make some ventilators for the US and repurpose some of his factories or something like that.

And as you said, it goes back to the issues of social media and information, because whether it's the top of the institutions or it's what people think about those, what the right answer is that's going to be mediated by social media and especially during a crisis like the pandemic where people are trying to get the news as fast as possible and really care on the kind of minute to minute by basis what's going on, more people sort of rely on social media to figure out what's true. And when those algorithms were rewarding the most divisive and outrageous memes, it meant that people saw both sides of masks absolutely work, and we need to get way more masks to way more people. And then I was following people on both sides of the pandemic, and I remember so many people posting these graphs of Florida, which didn't have masks and was totally outside and how well they performed.

Divya Siddarth: I do think there's a really interesting collective intelligence example of this information ecosystem during the pandemic, which is that researchers have studied what the Wikipedia page for COVID-19, what the edits to that looked like over time. Because, Wikipedia isn't set up to be a news organization, but because it is a trusted source for a lot of people, people would be checking that Wikipedia article instead of reading the news. And they have these long and really interesting collective processes for determining when an edit is real,
especially if it's a controversial one, people have to sign off on it. There's a bunch of ways to determine what is "fact."

And it's fascinating, first of all, that those really sensitive questions, I mean if you look at some of the more complicated issues of our time, how do those Wikipedia articles get written on the Israel-Palestine conflict or how does the Wikipedia article get written on the 2020 election or whatever it is. But COVID was a particularly interesting case, because it was being updated day by day, hour by hour, if you look at the edit history. And I think it is really incredible that, that system of collective editing of people, if not perfectly representative of all around the world, who were all around the world, did arrive at a collective process of adjudicating truth that created information for millions. Those are the kinds of examples that make me think, okay, collective intelligence of that form, it is possible to solve those really thorny questions in an imperfect but deeply valuable way.

Tristan Harris: How would we have done something more like what Wikipedia was doing than to replace the elite policymaking process that you were a part of?

Divya Siddarth: I mean, I think the Taiwan example is instructive here where they did have a bunch of volunteer fact-checkers sort of go out, created a network of volunteers enabled by different forms of actually social networks that put out corrections to misinformation as they came up within a few hours. And so I think that's one way, but that's not the only way. You can imagine different ways in which you could work with "editors" like in Wikipedia to make sure that the information going out from governments was from fellow citizens. And maybe that would help how people would feel about that, which some studies have shown it's better to get information from fellow citizens. You could take more of a sortition or deliberative democracy approach. So sortition is when people are chosen randomly from a group to represent that group. It's a different way of doing representation than elections.

And it's been shown that many people have more trust in sortition than in representation, because they feel that they're actually being more represented by someone like them than by someone they've elected. And information is one avenue for this. But if we look at the incentive side, you could imagine people being able to have more of an input on where their tax Dollars were going to combat COVID. You could imagine something more on the participatory budgeting side or a lot more expanded notions of collective financing, because a lot of the COVID questions were about resource allocation. Should we get tests or should we not get tests? And there are ways to weigh in on that. And if you did weigh in, perhaps you would feel a lot more interested in going to get those tests yourself. And another big part of COVID was contact tracing.

And I think that's one thing in which the US massively failed. And by the time we wanted to do it was a bit too late, because there's no point doing contact tracing
Tristan Harris:

I want to step away from my conversation with Divya for just one moment to talk about a great book by Jason Brennan called Against Democracy. In which he makes a strong case that all these ideals that we hold up about voters being interested citizens who read up on all the issues, and then they develop independent opinions about what they prefer about those different policy positions. And they definitely know about each of the policies across every single domain, whether it’s environment or taxes or inflation or roads or schools or who should be on different supervisory boards. What he says is that the research shows that people are really not informed. In fact, they’re worse than informed. They’re systematically misinformed. People hate to say, “I don’t know.” And so they’ll say one opinion, but if you ask them two weeks later, they’ll give a completely different response and not be aware that they gave a different response.

And Jason Brennan says it’s about 50% of the population are basically answering kind of at random. He says that if you look at, I think it's American National Election Studies, and they ask a battery of basic questions like, "Who's the president? Who's the vice president? Who controls Congress? Can you identify the unemployment rate?" That you typically find that roughly the top 25% of voters get an A minus on the test and then the next 50% or so do equivalent to chance, and the bottom 25% do worse than chance. So it means that they're actually doing worse than just randomly guessing, they're systematically mistaken.

And so, when you consider how uninformed voters are about most things, most of the time, how much is this ideal of citizens developing opinions and researching that and even catching up. So we’re becoming simultaneously less informed while the world’s issues are getting more complex. We've called this the complexity gap. We also have this problem though there’s no skin in the game. So people vote on things where they actually don't have any real accountability of whether they were right or whether that decision will affect them. And so, people have lots of opinions on things where they don’t actually actually have something at stake.
Okay, back to my conversation with Divya Siddarth.

Now we want to pivot to the conversation of what kind of new collective intelligence system would deal with those problems. We've talked about some of the generator functions for why people don't trust these systems and institutions that are making decisions. We also talked about some of the ideals that we want decisions to have some amount of legitimacy. We'd like the decisions that we're collectively coming to be legitimate. We'd also like the decisions to be good, which means minimizing externalities that when you make a choice, it's not causing harm on some invisible balance sheet that we'll discover later. So your whole work at the Collective Intelligence Project is about articulating new mechanisms, new technologies, and new systems that we can use to upgrade democracy. So let's explore a couple tools of collective intelligence that people may not be familiar with. And let's start maybe simple. Do you want to talk about ranked choice voting?

Divya Siddarth: Yeah, absolutely. So first-past-the-post voting basically means that whoever has the most votes at the end, direct majority voting will win an election. Whereas ranked choice voting allows for more granular expression of preferences by basically taking into account second and third choices. So even if my preferred candidate doesn't win, it still matters that I ranked someone second as opposed to the fact that if my preferred candidate doesn't win, my vote doesn't matter at all. So that's a slightly more granular way of expressing my preferences that actually can meaningfully change who ends up winning an election and in some sense can mediate against extreme candidates sometimes because of trying to get this more median sort of vote input.

One of the major issues with voting, is that it's a very binary choice. I mean, we've talked about how much complexity there is in the world and there's very little of that you can express on the ballot. Even if you do have a sense of it, you can't directly express what is bothering you or what problems you see in the world directly. You can basically just vote for a candidate who has a bundle of preferences that you may or may not agree with. And in the US at least, it's probably the case that you're voting against the other candidate rather than for your candidate based on where people's approval ratings are. So rank choice voting allows for different candidates to come up and sort of a just broader field of options for people.

Tristan Harris: And has people feel more legitimacy because they can feel like their views actually were captured by the system rather than I don't want to participate at all, because they don't like either or I only left with the bad guy choice.

Divya Siddarth: Yeah, exactly. I mean it's hard to feel very good about democracy when you're basically just voting against candidates.
Tristan Harris: So we have ranked choice voting. What are some other sort of upgrades to democracy we would add to the tool set?

Divya Siddarth: I mean I think there are a bunch of really interesting, what I think of as democracy primitives almost that we could bring to this. So you can think about sortition or mini-publics where you select a random group of citizens from some other broader group and have them as representative, there's a lot of interesting evidence. For example, if you look at the climate assemblies that people really do after a week or so of discussion and deliberation with experts have pretty strong opinions that can come to consensus. And often that consensus actually does match in a lot of senses what experts have put forward as well.

There are systems of liquid democracy, which basically means delegating your vote to someone, some person or institution that you think knows more about the problem than you do. And liquid democracy is basically a more liquid form of representative democracy, where you do this every four years already to a representative, but you don't have a huge amount of choice over who that representative is. They're probably put forward by your party and you can't change that. So liquid democracy allows for a lot more choice there, but you don't have to exercise that choice. So that gets in this question of is democracy going to be a huge amount of work, which I think a lot of people have. So these systems are flexible to figure out how much input people are going to give.

Tristan Harris: So let's just pause on liquid democracy for a moment. So this point about liquid democracy is really important. We just talked about the complexity of the world's issues. People don't want to research the complexity of everything, but if they sort of have listened to say, you or me or talk about social media issues for a long time, you could say, "Well, actually I would really value whatever Tristan or Divya thinks should happen on how to fix social media." And if a lot of people suddenly said, those two really know how to fix that, then suddenly we would be these sort of mini representatives. So instead of a California state senator, you have people that you trust that you listen to for a while and that deals with that problem. So now when I got my little sort of city ballot and I don't really think about who should be on the school board, but I know that someone in my community has really been paying attention to who should be in that school board, I can now outsource my vote rather than not vote at all.

Divya Siddarth: Yeah, exactly. And it's pretty interesting to think about liquid democracy in the context of not just these national elections, but even in the governance of say some of the social media platforms where what would it look like to have content moderation, for example, which is a really confusing issue, but you may not trust the moderation policies of the platform itself, or you may want something a little bit different. Could you delegate any of that to someone you trust or to some organization that you trust?
Tristan Harris: Yeah, so we're not just talking about there you are in the Philippines and you get a paper ballot and you're voting four years, but we could actually be sort of saying if we want to improve Twitter, everyone's got an opinion about Elon Musk and Twitter right now, but there is actually a way to have organizations effectively have input in changing the overall dynamics of Twitter. So that let's say we changed the ranking system so that it didn't just rank for engagement but ranked for unlikely consensus, then the more unlikely the positive sentiment was from two different political tribes that agreeing with a kind of political tweet that would be the basis of what we would reward and we could actually have some governance into that rather than being up to Elon Musk and the guys that are up till one in the morning coding the changes on the algorithm.

Divya Siddarth: Are there any large states or cities or municipalities that are actually deploying liquid democracy for something other than... When I was at a RadicalxChange conference once, I think they used it to order pizzas and figure out which pizzas to order. And I was like, "Well, let's talk about something more complex."

There was an example in Argentina that allowed users to propose and vote on different topics using deliberative democracy. There was an example in Stockholm in a smaller town where people tried to use liquid democracy for this. The pirate parties, which I'm not sure that's sort of a topic that's been covered here yet, but they were parties in Europe, I think Germany and Italy and Austria that really tried to embody the ethos of open source in elections there. And they used a lot of liquid democracy for internal feedback structures. I also think liquid democracy, I mean it sounds kind of cutting edge and it is, and we should incorporate it in more forward-thinking ways. There's also something quite deeply human about liquid democracy. I mean, in a sense where we get our information from is already a form of liquid democracy. Me asking my mom what she thinks about something as a child, I am delegating in some sense my decision making to other people all the time. I'm asking people in my social group, I'm asking people in my workplace.

And so, a lot of these procedures work because they take something that is instinctive to us and then they think about how we can use it now that we have scaled problems. I mean, when you think about sortition, the idea is from Ancient Greece. When you think about choosing a representative group, it intuitively makes a lot of sense. When you think about these bridging based ranking things that we have talked about. It's basically just saying, Hey, if two really different people agree on something, that idea's probably pretty compelling. That's not very complicated for people to think about. Even if you think about some of the use cases that we're excited about AI governance or data governance, it's just saying, look, we're having a really important technological change. How do we allow people to understand that enough to comment on it, because it's going to affect them.
And so I think, we talked earlier about does democracy need to be upgraded? And I think it does, obviously, but I also think those democratic impulses are actually really deep within people. These are all senses in which we're pushing towards better collective intelligence all the time, but sometimes it's not fast enough with a bunch of the changes that are happening. And sometimes the incentives and information aren't aligned for people to actually get what they are asking for and what they need out of systems. And so yes, there's work to do, but what I love is that work is built on so much human instinct and ingenuity.

Tristan Harris: So we have all these tools, ranked choice voting, liquid democracy, sortition, where you take a random representative sample of stakeholders and have them make deliberative decisions together. So if democracy was a sort of dusty tool that was not kind of fit to the task of 21st century complexity and we've just outlined a bunch of more fine-grained higher precision tools that do match collectively using them built to purpose for 21st century complexity, what's stopping us from utilizing these tools around the world right now?

Divya Siddarth: I think that's a great question. And at CIP, we try to work on pilots to sort of prove out that these tools do work and lead to better outcomes. Because, if we're grading ourselves on these questions of legitimacy and good outcomes, well we should be able to show that these tools allow us to create more legitimate decisions and have better outcomes. And you do have some of that. A lot of people who participate in deliberative processes will find them much more legitimate than other forms of governance. You'll have surveys of different kinds of voting structures than people will say, "Okay, I'm glad I was able to express those kinds of preferences." But we also need way more pilots of a lot of these things. We need a lot more examples of how this works. And I think that's kind of where governing technology comes in, or at least governing smaller skill institutions, governing cooperatives, governing neighborhood groups, governing corporations, because we need a plurality of pilots in a lot of different places.

And it’s pretty hard to convince the US government to switch all of its procedures, but it's a lot easier to do that in Colorado. And so, you can take something like sortition and there are a bunch of groups, particularly in Europe actually advocating for a sortition based decision making, DemocracyNext is one of them, Ostbelgian is another one. So you can participate in those assemblies. There are climate citizens assemblies that are running at a global level fairly consistently now, that you can participate in or you can advocate for those kinds of things to be tried out in your community. So there are a bunch of really interesting things like that. For example, it's really hard to convince a massive corporation to change what it's doing, but it's possible to get Twitter to try and implement something like bridging based ranking, which they are trying to do.

Or what if you're in some other digital kind of organization that could be run in this way. And so, I think you can think about a lot of the different parts of your life that could benefit from these tools and also some of the advocacy that can
be done to improve our democracy at all of the different stages that it exists in from the local to the workplace. It’s really hard to say, okay, we should run this entire state on deliberative democracy, but it’s possible, and CIP is piloting a deliberative democracy platform called Narwhal in partnership with the Emerson Collective and The Atlantic, because let's try out and see if we can answer some questions with that before we suggest that it replaces a lot of large scale decision making. So I think it's enabling those pilots, that is one big part of it.

And then the second part of it I would say is we are at an inflection point with some of the technologies we have available. It wasn't super easy to tabulate liquid democracy even 20 years ago. How are you going to have paper ballots combined with liquid democracy? It's hard to imagine. Sortition is something that's been possible for thousands of years, but it's very difficult to sort of create a quote-unquote representative sample from a large group in some statistically significant way until recently. And so, I think a lot of these are helped by technological advances. So that's one thing as well. So we have pilots and we have technologies, but there's also a big chunk of it that is you need to build power to change how power is distributed. And so, some of this is just how do you enable different distributions of power? How do you advocate for this? How do you build coalitions around it? All of these difficult ways that you have to work to change how power is distributed in a society.

Tristan Harris:

What I’m really hearing from you is that so much more funding needs to go into pilots. There should be, we have these experiments, we have some tools, we have tools like Polis, we have tools like Ethelo. Larry Lessig has a deliberation platform called Kazm that invites groups of citizens to debate on issues and then has an AI facilitator that kind of moves them along through the conversation. We have decentralized autonomous organizations on Ethereum that are actually implementing liquid democracy. But what we need is actually more pilots, more funding going to pilots and the completion of those pilots so that people have more faith that this is not just spewing hot air about an idea of what would make things better.

But actually that these are proven ways to get better results, higher legitimacy, more participation, less cognitive labor for those who don't want to be participating and better collective outcomes that actually represent more of the stakeholders. And that together really does paint a picture of, I think, a more optimistic future where we’re not just upgrading technology, but upgrading democracy to be commensurate with the kinds of challenges that we face in the 21st century.

So imagine over the next 10 years that we took everything we’ve been talking about and all these different tools, can you give us a little vision of what would we do over the next 10 years to move towards utilizing all these tools and
upgrading democracy? Do you have a rough idea of what a timeline could look like?

Divya Siddarth: Yeah, definitely. I mean, I have a dream certainly of what a timeline could look like. I think that we would start out with some of these smaller scale interventions, things that we've talked about, different voting processes, slightly more deliberative mechanisms, deliberation at slightly larger scales and all of that. And we'd build up the practice of democracy in our societies that we don't currently have. I think we're quite under practiced in participation in a lot of different ways. We would enable more organizations to run in a slightly more cooperative manner. And then we might move into, okay, let's think about where our infrastructure is coming from. Maybe we can have some voice on exactly how our taxes are being spent or participatory budgeting and a little bit more understanding of what we should be funding based on where our needs are. We could imagine building things like community currencies, which can allow for communities to build sort of internal wealth as well as exchange with other communities.

We can imagine more global mechanisms of deliberative democracy that can build in ways that people from different countries might make different kinds of decisions and try to triangulate those and build consensus on big global problems. We can imagine different forms of public funding for science or public funding for a bunch of the kind of foundational infrastructure that is required to build a 21st, 22nd century democracy. And we can imagine a lot more input on just basic local decisions. If we're going back to you looking at your ballot, what would it feel like to be empowered in that moment instead of feeling sort of confused or far away from the decisions that you're making? Well, maybe it would look like having a better sense of who you might want to delegate your vote to. Maybe it would look like having more sortition based mechanisms where you don't think about those things much of the year, but once in a while you are selected to do that.

And in those times, you care a lot about the questions. And so I think in a sense, it looks like combining that local and the global ways of participating through a bunch of these mechanisms that can bridge that gap. And a lot of them are about strengthening ties and interdependent decision making, where we're making decisions together, whether that's technology mediated or not, rather than in this very individual way. We're like, yeah, we're all confused about the world when we think about it individually. And that's where that collective piece comes from. And as technology allows us to do a little bit more of that bridging, we can really take advantage of that to exponentiate that process.

Tristan Harris: Awesome, Divya, thank you for coming on Your Undivided Attention. I really think that you've offered a tour of real solutions that we are not just upgrading technology, but we can upgrade democracy and meet the problems of the 21st century. Thank you so much for coming on.
Divya Siddarth: Thank you so much for having me.

Tristan Harris: Divya Siddarth is the co-founder of the Collective Intelligence Project, an organization that advances collective intelligence capabilities for transformative technology governance. She's also a research associate at the Ethics and AI Institute at Oxford. Divya and I spent a lot of time talking about places in which collective democracy is already happening online and in the world. And if you want to learn more, get involved, or maybe even bring some of these tools to your community, we’re going to have a lot of those links in the show notes.

Your Undivided Attention is produced by the Center for Humane Technology, a nonprofit organization working to catalyze a humane future. Our senior producer is Julia Scott. Kirsten McMurray and Sarah McCrea are our associate producers. Mia Lobel is our consulting producer. And Sasha Fegan is our managing editor. Mixing on this episode by Jeff Sudekin. Original music and sound design by Ryan and Hays Holladay. And a special thanks to the whole Center for Humane Technology team for making this podcast possible.

A very special thanks to our generous lead supporters, including the Omidyar Network, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and the Evolve Foundation among many others. You can find show notes, transcripts, and much more at humanetech.com. If you want to go deeper into the themes that we've been exploring in this episode and all the themes that we've been exploring on this podcast about how do we create more humane technology, I'd like to invite you to check out our free course Foundations of Humane Technology at humanetech.com/course. And if you made it all the way here, let me give one more thank you to you, for giving us your undivided attention.