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EDITED BY

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Universidad de las Américas, Chile
Dulcilei C. Lima,
University of São Paulo, Brazil

*CORRESPONDENCE

Patrick Dunleavy
✉ p.dunleavy@lse.ac.uk

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'Digital citizen vigilance' makes republican theory real

Patrick Dunleavy^{1*} and Helen Margetts²

¹London School of Economics and Political Science, London, United Kingdom, ²Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

In the modern digital era public services and public administrators are increasingly accountable (often in real time) to citizens querying or critiquing policy mistakes or decisions or actions, or voicing complaints and demanding redress, directly in the sphere of public debate, using social media and networks. Citizens' posts often relay compelling evidence to back up their messages, using photographs, videos, sound recordings, digital scanning of documents and materials. They can now also employ AI-synthesized data-collation and analysis of government messages and documents in ways that are hard to brush off or ignore. Critical messages often go viral or trigger 'pile-ons' of many others endorsing them, creating strong incentives for public administrators and politicians to resolve or counter them in real-time. These direct action capabilities of citizens have made a reality of a whole range of 'republican virtues' previously recommended by influential philosophical positions, but yet problematic because they were very high cost to enforce and very rarely effective. Because actions such as re-posting or 'liking' social media messages are low cost, political scientists have tended to underrate them as purely symbolic or non-serious. Yet since they are practicable for diverse interests and are unmediated, continuously operative, cumulative *en masse* and in real time, and are easily metricized, they have become far more visible and effective than the high-cost 'legacy' forms of participation celebrated by democratic theory. They can force even the most rash or ill-intentioned governments and administrations to admit truths, recognize misbehaviours and mistakes, and change course—as with the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 and multiple online reactions against ICE killings of US citizens in Minneapolis in early 2026. Digital citizen vigilance can thus substantially improve policy delivery, social welfare and democratic responsiveness. Instead of only deploring the serious downsides of digital changes caused by disinformation and populism (greatly magnified wherever democratic 'micro-institutions' have been weakened), public administration scholars and practitioners alike need to recognize and positively embrace the enhanced capabilities for ordinary (well-intentioned) citizens to vigilantly hold public governance actors to account.

KEYWORDS

digital government, public administration, public management and governance, republican theory, social media, citizen participation, citizen redress, democracy

1 Introduction

In western political theory a substantial and enduring body of republican theory has argued for a complex mix of values in which liberty plays a central role, defined as a political system where (i) citizens' security of life does not depend on the agreement or good will of others, and (ii) power-holders cannot dominate citizens' life-worlds. Like democratic theory

itself, this rich tradition has its own record of excesses and crises, as with the collapse of the Roman Republic from an oligarchy with a complex set of checks and powers first into corruption and then imperial rule; or the spiralling down of French Revolution republicanism first into authoritarianism enforced by terror and later into the Napoleonic dictatorship. This troubled background contributed to the eclipse of republicanism's apparently limited ambitions for good government, pushed to the margins in post-war liberal philosophy by (perfectionist) aspirations for full liberal democracy and social equality.

However, since 2000 a modern (democratized) forms of republican thought has assumed a new prominence in more difficult times, as serious democratic backsliding has spread even to long-established states like the USA (Nord et al., 2026, pp. 33–40), and authoritarian regimes once again pose significant challenges to the legitimacy, effectiveness and sustainability of liberal democracies. The new founding texts, notably Pettit's (1999) book *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government*, discard the Rousseau 'collective will' aspects of earlier radical republican thought, in favour of a full reconciliation of a list of republican virtues and arrangements with majority rule and the protection of human rights (Gädeke, 2020).

The modern public administration literature is awash with quasi-utopian arguments for 'new public governance' (Torfing et al., 2021, Ch.8) and prescriptions for co-producing public services more with citizens and civil society organizations. But relatively little evidence has been offered of the large-scale implementation of such ideals (however desirable), especially not in relation to the quite differently motivated and rapidly unfolding governance transformations in the current third era digital era government (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2023; Margetts and Dunleavy, 2024).

The main way in which public administration studies have so far addressed an aspect of this shift concerns how 'street level bureaucracies' have changed as administrative systems move online and public service workers increasingly no longer interact with citizens face-to-face but digitally (Hupe, 2019; Bovens and Mouridi's, 2002; Lindgren et al., 2019; Madsen et al., 2022). The rather pessimistic conclusion of current studies has pointed to strengthened managerial surveillance using digital tools leading to a withdrawal of the personal discretion or latitude that previously public service workers might have been able to use to 'humanize' how public administration edicts and rules impacted on citizens (Buffat, 2015; Nielsen, 2015). And some literature suggests that when citizens begin using digital tech themselves in governance interactions—e.g. to record conversations with case workers or professional staffs—public employees retreat even further into de-personalized and rule-bound behaviour, for fear of creating evidence that might later be used against them in any audits resulting from a complaint (Lillis et al., 2017; Burton and van den Broek, 2009; Harrits, 2019; Høybye-Mortensen, 2019; Munro, 2004). And about the operations of 'legacy' systems for securing citizen redress (Dunleavy et al., 2010) we still have almost no empirical analysis of how digital complaints and postings have radically altered the past dynamics between public managers and service users or recipients - as e.g. in the Australian Robodebt scandal (Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme, 2023). Since the rise of large language models (LLMs) citizens are also now armed with powerful digital social media for networking and new analytic synthesis capabilities that can effectively counteract the previous administrative monopolies of information and expertise.

Public administration studies have generally shunned the more perhaps conflictual or even confrontational options for citizens to

mobilize and hold public service providers to account for their actions via communicative actions using digital technologies and media. Often these possibilities or phenomena are only peripherally noticed by conventional public administration scholars and officials in order to deplore and regret them, to write them off as unwelcome populist or aberrant developments, capable of widespread abuse thanks to the lax regulation of online social media that global platform companies (backed by US government actions) have forced on (most) liberal democratic states (Gorwa, 2024).

By contrast, we argue in this paper that digital changes have given modernized republicanism a new and potent relevance for democratic politics and public administration, because modern social media and other digital tech developments have transformed the ability of citizens at large to police a hugely expanded range of state actions. People can now find, analyse and communicate compelling information about public policies and services cheaply, in real time, and at all scales from macro-level policies to meso-level administrative regimes and micro-level implementation cases. They can monitor how many other citizens share their view, assemble critical masses of citizen opinion around salient issues, and then mobilize the expression of collective citizens' viewpoints in powerful and effective ways within political and administrative systems.

We begin by setting out in synoptic way the aspects of modernized republican thought that have the strongest contemporary relevance for public administration and public governance (section 1). We next show that the digital transformation of political and communication arenas for the first time in history has created mechanisms available to ordinary citizens at low cost and appropriately scaled in their potential to match, illuminate and critique a diverse range of almost any form of policy change, administrative malfunction or governance infraction, and thus to powerfully hold political and administrative elites to account.

2 The theory of republicanism virtues and past problems in their enforcement

To illuminate the close and potent interconnections between digital era changes and modernized republican theory, the first column in Table 1 provides a complete list of the republican virtues enumerated in Pettit (1999, 2012) and other key works, including salient critiques of republican thought like Goodin (2003). The first republican emphasis (shown in rows 1, 2 and 3) is on citizens acting as morally upright individuals, with strong ethical integrity and self-respect, and a developed moral code of how to behave honourably within civic life and the polity. Thus equipped, citizens themselves provide the primary guarantee of sustaining a limited and accountable political and constitutional system by exercising never-ceasing vigilance over the behaviour of their elected or appointed politicians, administrative elites and lower ranks of officials—calling out any lapses from democratic standards and legal/ ethical standards of behaviour (row 4 in Table 1). The capacity for this critical and reflexive self-guardianship by citizens at large has massively increased in the digital era (Table 1, rows 1–6), and this enhanced capacity strengthens the ultimate rebuttal of perverse right-wing arguments that the only

TABLE 1 How digital era changes enhance the feasibility of 11 republican virtues, plus some downside effects.

Republican virtues	How digital era changes boost the feasibility of actualizing 'virtues' [ceteris paribus]	Potential downsides or counter-arguments from digitalization
1. Self-rule	Radically reduces the costs of moral individuals participating in public life.	Ill-informed, badly-intentioned or 'vicious' individuals are similarly enabled.
2. Moral integrity	Social media (SM) contributions (or silence) reveal their author's moral code in detail, across diverse issues. Citizens and influencers with large audiences especially have incentives to optimize their ethical behaviours or risk reputational damage.	Skilled SM influencers may be able to dissimulate about their moral code while still distributing hundreds or thousands of malign messages and achieving welfare-reducing viral effects amongst non-alert, gullible or poorly informed citizens—a notable case in point being Trump-style 'weave' ramblings, flitting topics incoherently to camouflage outright lies, disguised by incessant repetitions and digressions (Barrow, 2024).
3. Strong codes of honour	Collective SM reactions by peers reinforce individual citizen's honour codes, calling out abuses and disinformation. DSAI (data science and AI) advances enable easier identification of hate speech, and the easy collation of all materials and messages generated by politically influential notables at all stages of their careers (Bastos, 2019).	'Community correction' mechanisms are relatively weak. Influenced by 'free speech' political mobilizing global platform corporations have radically cut paid moderation staff, encouraging an 'anything goes' regime in poorly regulated or 'flawed' liberal democracies such as the contemporary USA.
4. Constant vigilance over office-holders	Social media (SM) surveillances and digital developments (e.g. 'big data' (Dunleavy, 2016), open data, open government) enable unprecedented improvements in how citizens can uncover and critique official misdeeds and malversation in cheap 'fire alarm' mode. Complaints and protests are much more immediate, granular, low cost and widely shareable than ever before. Civic surveillance also strengthens recognition of good practice and achievements.	Incessant extreme or unfounded criticisms of politicians and officials may reduce public trust in government, breeding cynicism and fuelling populism without improving policy responsiveness. Alternatively, the creation of a 'shame society' may weaken the attractiveness of public office and public service careers. A wall of constant criticisms may produce timidity in government about making any difficult decisions that impose new costs on a particular group.
5. Strong institutional checks and balances	Civil society vigilance in DEG3 (the third wave of digital era governance) hugely reinforces the efficacy of institutional check systems within liberal democracies. It is fully compatible with maintaining high levels of political trust and of civility in public life and public debate. For instance, online social media complaints can modernize all 'legacy' citizen redress processes (Dunleavy et al., 2010), often securing myriads of needed changes in 'real time' instead of hugely delayed ineffective and costly tribunals and court actions.	Democratic backsliding by states and governing elites always undermines and may seem to vitiate micro-level digital civil vigilance. However, such trends adversely affect any and all democratic institutions, and can just as rapidly undermine concentrated institutional macro-protections—e.g. see Trump's remarkable aggrandizement and misuse of executive and emergency powers in the opening years of his second presidency (2025–6).
6. Rule of law	Digital civil society vigilance strongly underpins and strengthens the rule of law, extending and reinforcing it in great detail and immediately (cutting across long legal time lags)	Most civil society digital vigilance operates long before legal actions and consideration can even get started, and thus necessarily rely on selectively known 'facts'. Without adequate regulation, malign influencers (including populist politicians) can perhaps weaponize legal and administrative delays to undermine due process by demanding immediate action and sapping public confidence in lawyers, courts and judges.
7. Non-dependence	<i>In an appropriately regulated (i.e., non-backsliding) liberal democracy</i> Citizens can acquire and share knowledge directly, and pool their expertise/experiences, without relying on 'mainstream' media, journalists, politicians or SM network as intermediaries. Where things have gone wrong, citizens can immediately, cheaply and directly complain to providers, and share experiences of problems with others—without being dependent on official 'police-patrol' ways of uncovering problems, or 'suffering in silence' alone and unaware of other people with the same or similar problems.	Using any form of social media immediately creates individual dependence on the SM provider and internet corporations for access, which accentuates as users acquire followers, reputation and an archive of content. All SM firms continuously and systematically seek to enhance the strong addictive features of their products—achieving lock-in for the great mass of users (Hendrikse et al., 2021; Verdegem, 2022). Unless closely regulated by democratic governments, SM firms owned by oligarchs may then use their discretionary powers of algorithm design to promote congruent views, exclude or downrate opinions they dislike, and in particular insulate their own positions against criticism.

(Continued)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Republican virtues	How digital era changes boost the feasibility of actualizing 'virtues' <i>[ceteris paribus]</i>	Potential downsides or counter-arguments from digitalization
8. Non-domination	<i>Within legitimate 'public interest' limits set in a liberal democracy, and assuming no partisan or directed censorship or algorithm manipulation by the SM network's owner(s) citizens can post on SM what they wish so long as it does not actively cause harm to others (Newell, 2014). This capability provides a strong counterpoint to the increase in government nodality that has also occurred (Castelnuovo and Sorrentino, 2021; Hansen et al., 2018) and highlights that 'all tools [of governance] are digital now' (John, 2013; Kuehnhanss, 2018).</i>	SM terms of service are privately enforced by platform corporations themselves and have been only weakly regulated in most liberal democracies. These private rules have far-reaching effects on what any civil society actors or government/public service officials can do or say online (Rozgonyi, 2023). This power is always exercised to protect the corporations' own political and economic positions. If major oligarchic and political notables directly own and run giant SM networks (e.g., Trump and Truth Social or Elon Musk and X) their interests can dominate over users' interests. ¹ In addition, they may intimidate all other political and media actors, and sustain huge corruption and malversation. Yet without citizen vigilance and social media involvement these problems are only increased.
9. Public deliberation	<i>Subject to appropriate and facilitative regulation in a non-flawed, non-back-sliding liberal democracy:</i> The addition of hundreds/thousands /millions of new sources of information and comment to online debates and commentary (dependent on the size and focus of the issues involved) provides a radical boost for the cognitive accuracy of public debates.	<i>Without appropriate regulation in a liberal democracy ...</i> digitalization may asymmetrically increase the potential for malign actors to spread disinformation and foster hate speech
10. Fostering the common good	With active, mass public agreement and in some limited areas of public debate (such as STEM scientific issues), cognitive 'epistocracy' (rule by the knowledgeable) is boosted and clearly enhances the chances of optimizing social welfare. The problems in the right-hand column here have always been with us, and no hard evidence shows that they have increased, only become more evident. Cultural theory has long recognized that achieving the cognitive accuracy of public debate is feasible (Douglas, 1986), despite many people in society holding irrational beliefs.	Chronic disinformation (Matasick et al., 2020) plus conspiracy theories and various forms of mental unwellness mean that even on the most clear-cut and resolvable issues a significant minority of people will hold irrational views. A minority (potentially a large one) will not agree with any well-informed cognitive consensus—e.g. to this day millions of Americans tell pollsters they believe that the earth is flat. Digitization has made people with irrational beliefs more publicly evident, and visible to each other, strengthening their ability to organize collectively, and perhaps engage in 'debate'.
11. Social protections	SM and digital knowledge allow the situations and perceptions of minorities to be far more easily perceived and shared than in pre-digital times—by minorities themselves, sympathetic or altruistic actors, philanthropic donors, and mainstream media/journalists. Digital changes and DSAI advances make it far easier and cheaper for government staff to reach out to digitally non-included groups in pro-active ways.	'Digital divide' issues constantly renew (and perhaps may deepen) with each successive wave of digital era changes. While almost everyone can now go online and most people use social media and a wide range of apps, an irreducible minimum group cannot for lack of finance, knowledge or skill reasons. As digital era governance (DEG) changes move on, new inequalities will constantly open up and require new mitigations—e.g. access to always-on health monitoring, ability to use online chatbots or LLMs (large language models), abilities to interact or work with drones, robots, etc. (Dunleavy and Margetts, 2023).

Sources: Authors' own. In addition to references included in the table, the left column items, and responses in the middle column, are derived from: Pettit (2002, 2012, 2017), Honohan and Jennings (2015), Lovett and Pettit (2009), Laborde (2013), Laborde and Maynor (2008), Patten (1996), Goodin (2003), Zavediuk (2016), Andronache (2009a,b). The middle column also draws on: (Margetts and John, 2024) (Newell, 2014; Gädeke, 2020). The right column draws on: Brennan and Lomasky (2006), Zuboff (2015, 2019), Sadowski (2019), Hoeksema (2023), Shearing and Wood, 2003), West (2019), platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017; Viljoen et al., 2021; Verdegem, 2022; Hendrikse et al., 2021).

¹There are two possible definitions here. Skinner (2010) defines domination as dependency, as an actor's freedom being subject to interference by another. Pettit (2002, p. 340) defines domination as: 'subjection to an arbitrary power of interference on the part of another—a *dominus* or master—even another who chooses not actually to exercise that power'. Global platform corporations claim their users are not 'dominated' on either criterion because they can shift to a competitor if denied service, or if they object to the terms of service on a platform. But established users have a lot of 'sunk capital' invested in their sites on a given medium, and confront very high transaction costs in shifting providers. Additionally, of course, individual users have no practical ways of shaping platforms' terms of service on their own—so in fact they are clearly dominated on both criteria.

good state is a small state (Somin, 2013; Brennan and Lomaski, 2006); or that with rational actors democracy is somehow ethically improved by minimizing the size of the state relative to the market (Brennan and Lomaski, 1993).

Citizens must constantly guard against twin deadly threats to every democratic republic—first, any elites in the state or wider society illegitimately accreting authoritarian power; and second, corruption or malversation (Rothstein and Varraich, 2017). Starting from utilitarian (rather than strictly republican) premisses, Jeremy

Bentham none the less crucially updated the requirements for how the essential foundation for all other republican arrangements must work in modern, large nation states (Bruno, 2017):

“Throughout his political writings, Bentham envisions citizens who are motivated to supervise the conduct of public authorities, and who do so frequently and faithfully (De Champs, 2015, 88–90). Their work proceeds through the “Public Opinion Tribunal [POT]” that imaginary “Committee of the whole”

composed of all citizens who take an interest in public affairs (Bentham, 2015, p. 28). The activity of this panel provides “the only remedy” for the constantly threatening disease of “misrule” (p. 28), defined elsewhere as official conduct producing anything less than the greatest happiness of the greatest number (Bentham, 1989, p.270). Only by its supervision and judgment can the responsibility of public officials be ensured’ (Bruno, 2017, p. 7).

Bentham’s tribunal concept clearly implied a detailed, forensic consideration of a huge mass of issues down to micro-levels. Yet since John Stuart Mill’s more conventional re-versioning of utilitarianism the whole POT notion has long been ignored and largely dismissed as a fanciful, utopian and unnecessary ‘dream’ element of early utilitarianism, since displaced in practical policy-making by the more far more credible and workable institutions of representative government backed by far looser and more sporadic ‘public opinion’ constraints, generated by politicians or the media, and covering at any one time no more than a handful of highly salient issues.

3 How digital citizens directly actualize republican virtues

In the pre-digital era the mechanisms for citizens to secure accountability were so scarce, problematic, or only contingently available via the media or other intermediaries that critics rightly attacked as utopian the reliance placed on them by conventional democratic theory. Yet now a huge range of digital era developments support the modernized republican virtues so that a potential for far more effective accountability has been realized in practice. In the middle column of Table 1 above we argue that a form of omniscient, multi-scaled yet highly detailed, cognitively well-informed and directly controlled citizen vigilance has been created. This capability closely approximates Bentham’s Public Opinion Tribunal (POT) concept—and furthermore we would argue that it generally works well in well-functioning liberal democracies. Millions of social media and app users now enunciate their own political philosophies and commentary online, some very episodically, and many more others by their choice of personal descriptions and their behaviours in re-messaging and endorsing content from other citizen influencers, mainstream media sources and commentators, political parties and actors, state agencies, enterprises, academics/intellectuals, and NGOs or civil society organizations. Once checked for accuracy citizen-originated communication also offers important insights for public administrators especially in crises and emergency management episodes, when ‘the public responds [*positively*] to transparency, especially when the information is actionable or relevant to immediate concerns’ (Wukich, 2025, p. 174).

As in all other parts of the ‘free’ economy online (Anderson, 2010), attracting large audiences via free reliable information content and interesting commentary have provided key avenues for mainstream media to move a large part of their audience onto paying online sites (e.g., for the Australian case see Dunleavy, 2024; Halupka, 2024). It has also stimulated many new ‘professional’ blogs, podcasts and videocasts run for payment by professional journalists, academics/intellectuals, former public servants and other ‘serious’ commentators. These new activities are so extensive that they arguably more than compensate for the much-lamented decline of legacy mainstream

media. Large language model estimates of the number of blogs live online in August 2025 were approximately 600 million worldwide (accounting for around a third of all websites). Estimates of the number of blogs professionally run by universities, academics, authors, civil society organizations, media, corporations and other enterprises with strong incentives to provide well-founded content range from 100 to 150 million, and an estimated 60 million of these have some form of paywall. Within the professional and paywall blogs universe an appreciable number cover political and social developments.

For most blog-providers and for the huge majority of people (i.e., apart from an inescapable minority of individuals and organizations who may be ‘vicious’ (Olin and Doris, 2014) or malignly-motivated) (present in every human society), the permanent digital scrutiny of online citizens’ public behaviours by each other (and conventional media) provides a strong guarantee of most SM authors’ and participants’ own moral character. Influential voices have very strong incentives to constantly manage their public reputation in ways that build their reputations, attracting followers, acceptance and agreement from other citizens and organizations (middle column, rows 1–4). And there are strong incentives to avoid triggering ‘pile on’ critiques of their messaging by other morally reputable social media users.

In turn that creates the critical foundation for a distributed concept of extensive citizen vigilance covering all ranges of public policy and political decision-making, from macro-politics, through a wide range of meso-issues, down to micro-policy, delivery, implementation and monitoring of officials’ behaviours. The gamut of contemporary citizen vigilance extends from state international relations and summits through critical national and state/regional/local policies all the way down to ‘street-level bureaucracy’ issues (Hupe, 2019). Nor is the always-on surveillance provided by this contemporary omni-tribunal confined to the formal political realm. Instead (like mainstream media coverage and political party policy-making before it) its gaze extends to the monitoring and regulation of *all* other social institutions—whether firms and corporations, pressure and interest groups, elected representatives and civil service officials, NGOs, charities and cultural, religious and ethnic group organizations. The previous era of trusting and untested public faith in ‘elite’ institutions of all kinds has passed in modern liberal democracies (Butler et al., 2026).

In Bentham’s thought the POT was not a marginal or desirable addition to representative government, but instead something central and essential for any permanent accountability:

“The propriety and efficacy of any endeavor of government depends “upon the spirit, the intelligence, the vigilance, the alertness, the intrepidity, the energy, the perseverance, of those of whose opinions Public Opinion is composed” (Bentham, 2015, p. 139; wider quotation from Bruno, 2017, p.8).

This is a critical point for republicanism’s emphasis on the need for limited government with strong institutional checks and balances and the importance of maintaining the rule of law (rows 5 and 6 in Table 1). Bentham stressed repeatedly that without intense public opinion accountability via his POT these other distinctively republican macro-virtues (and essential pillars of democracy) would come to nothing:

“Those who desire to see any check whatsoever to the power of the government under which they live... must look for such

check and limit to the power of the Public Opinion Tribunal,” and to this body the people “must on every occasion give what contribution it is in their power to give” (Bentham, 1990, 125). The impetus of every such contribution is [a form of civic] distrust. “Jealousy,” writes Bentham, “is the life and soul of government” (Bentham, 1843a, vol 4, p. 130). The public cannot simply rest on its laurels once a system of safeguards against official misconduct is established (Bruno, 2017, pp. 7–8).

For both democracy and republicanism to work, extended and pervasive vigilance by citizens is indispensable, unavoidable, and cannot be substituted for. Bentham emphasized that citizen surveillance and accountability must be pervasive and real in probability terms:

‘the persons to be inspected should always feel themselves as if under inspection, at least as standing a great chance of being so, yet it is not by any means the only one. What is also of importance is, that for the greatest proportion of time possible, each man should actually be under inspection. This is material in all cases, that the inspector may have the satisfaction of knowing, that the discipline actually has the effect which it is designed to have.’ (Bentham, 1843a, volume 4, p. 44).

And in a rare breakthrough to realism for a political philosopher, Pettit (1999, p. 1) acknowledged what many previous advocates and critics of republicanism have ignored, that any modern state polity has a strictly limited capacity to process issues in an institutional way:

‘A [key] reason why widespread civility [citizen activism in public life] is needed is that the public authorities cannot hope to identify and sanction all offences against republican laws and norms; ordinary people also have to be committed enough to perform in that role or to support the efforts of the authorities. Ordinary people have to maintain the eternal vigilance that constitutes the price of republican liberty [his emphasis].’

Yet it is only now, in the digital era, that a practicable technology for actualizing omni-vigilance has been created and operationalized in low-cost and commensurate ways, for every issue and at multiple spatial scales, so as to monitor all tiers of governments in modern liberal democratic states. We make the case for this change in the middle column of Table 1. Previous arguments that citizen vigilance can be extended by distributed institutional and mainstream media coverage, achieved within a given polity by sub-national and local government systems (even with maximum decentralization and ‘subsidiarity’), actually secured only very modest extensions of political accountability compared with the vast scope and immediacy of the direct vigilance now conducted using digital era mechanisms. Similarly, even in the past age of mass political parties, party memberships and decision-making always covered at best tiny fractions of issues. And in advanced societies parties now only involve vanishingly small (and demographically unrepresentative) sub-sets of atypical people (many just pursuing political careers). In his critique of republicanism’s revival, and backed up by a reference from 1973 (!), Goodin (2003, p. 72) commented that.

‘although public-spirited attitudes might be more easily evoked within those smaller groups, the public to which those attitudes

attach is smaller as well. This is no solution to the problem of size, understood as the problem of how to get people to internalize the common good of the whole community rather than just their own particular parts of it.’

But that was then and this is now. By contrast to any predecessor systems, digital citizen vigilance guarantees always-on attention across all public policies and public services, and across all non-state major institutions as well—thanks entirely to the tireless free labour, knowledge and attention contributed by millions of citizens, groups and organizations.

Its collective achievement is a vastly richer, more articulated and far faster (near ‘real time’) scrutiny of the actions of political, administrative and social elites at a scale matching any representative government, something that has never existed before in human history. DEG3 arrangements have an enormous potential to create good effects by (i) extending how many citizens participate in public life and debates; and (ii) enhancing the epistemic capacity of citizen vigilance, enabling participants with enhanced and well-grounded knowledge about detailed issues and processes to make evident expertise (i.e., well-checked knowledge, often perhaps professionally certified) available to everyone else participating. By bringing into consideration huge rafts of ‘ordinary knowledge’ that is none the less well-founded (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979), digital citizen vigilance creates a kind of ‘technocracy by agreement’ of active citizens accepting the greater credentials of appropriately placed others.

Of course, every potential beneficial mechanisms of enhanced vigilance also has potential downsides that the erratic oligarchic politics of the Roman Republic and the Greek city states before that constantly demonstrated. Bentham was fully aware that republican scrutiny is nothing like a macro-deliberative forum, but just a stripped-down accountability mechanism potentially driven by many base motives:

‘The tribunal of public opinion possess more liberty and power [than any institutional scrutiny mechanisms]; it is liable to be unjust in its decisions, but they are never delayed on that account; they can be reversed at pleasure. Trial and execution proceed with equal steps, without delay or necessity for pursuit. There are everywhere persons ready to judge, and to execute the judgement. This tribunal always inclines to the side of severity... thus although the punishments of the moral sanction are indeterminate, and for the most part, when estimated separately, of little weight, yet by the certainty of their operation, their frequent recurrence and their accumulation, from the number of those who have authority to inflict them, these possess a degree of force which cannot be despised by any individual, whatever may be his character, his condition or his power’ (Bentham, 1843b, Book III, Part II, Ch.2, p. 458). [Our italics].

Bentham noted a pervasive human tendency to want to bring down others’ reputation as a way of buttressing your own standing or self-esteem. And of course in the social media era many people have fallen prey to the temptation of digitally belittling others from a concern to uphold what they regard as standards or moral values different from others, but which can spill into malevolence. Thus Bentham was clear that the benefits of citizen vigilance come with an unavoidable

price. Yet he believed in its cumulatively (and eventually) progressive nature—*so long as* freedom of the press and opinion was strongly maintained by law and any abridging of these rights was strongly resisted (Cutler, 1999).

In contemporary liberal democracies we all of us depend on constant and close regulatory supervision by well-intentioned (welfare-regarding, non-sectarian) governments to ensure that social media networks and internet mechanisms operate in supportive and not in a spiralling vortex of destructive ways—a regulation that some countries (especially the USA in the Trump2 period) have been either slow or loath to implement. If public trust in government is to be maintained the reflexive vigilance of well-intentioned citizens themselves is vitally important to ensure that both elite behaviours and other citizens' participation remain honest and constructive, that disinformation is called out continuously, and that key online mechanisms like social media debates themselves work effectively (Bradshaw and Howard, 2019). In non-backsliding democracies it is vital to maintain a critique of government media management (especially by top politicians and officials, and by social media influencers within government (Salomonsen et al., 2025; Zumofen et al., 2025).) Political or administrative elites themselves frequently originate misinformation and combatting this is an especially key aspect of this role (Pentney, 2022). Studies of citizen reactions to UK government's generally poor Covid 19 instructions and information (Page and Hansson, 2024), and of conscientious US civil servants coping with Trumpist policies in his first term (Kucinskas and Zylan, 2023) both show the complex incentives at work here.

Of course, rows 1–6 in the last column of Table 1 all emphasize in different ways that the benefits of vigilance are fragile and ephemeral, requiring continuous and reflexive citizen actions if they are to be preserved from the constant risks of capture by powerful oligarchs and oligopolies. Also, as in every other sphere of social life, digital public debate faces a constant struggle to avoid sinking below countervailing waves of disinformation or hate-content created by malign actors, especially by self-interested political, state and corporate elites. So the digital era dominance of modern social media and internet-based citizen vigilance has undeniable downsides without state regulation and citizen support. For instance, some costs or threats to institutional independence or to the rule of law will undoubtedly stem from or be accentuated by online and digital forms of citizen vigilance being abused by malign minorities of people (row 6). But these same threats will exist whether or not citizens actively combat them and maintain omni-accountability—because as we stressed above 'eternal', omni-directional scrutiny is indispensable for the efficacy of absolutely any form of democratic republic (so long as limited institutions and the operations of an effective rule of law are maintained).

Some theorists have criticized an alleged tension or contradiction between republicanism's recommendation of an active, ethical and tolerant civil culture (civility) sustaining honour and participation in public life on the one hand, and the centrality of constant vigilance (or the 'jealousy' of Bentham's POT tribunal) in guarding against malfeasance of all kinds on the other. Yet Pettit (2012, p. 251) argues at length that there is actually no tension here, pointing out that the precise way in which citizen vigilance can be achieved has been debated amongst major republican thinkers for centuries:

‘Traditional republicans almost all recognize the need for virtue in the sense of vigilance, [but] there is an interesting divergence between those who think that vigilance can be more or less

routinized and those who believe that it requires an active, ever restless citizenry. Montesquieu (1989) represents someone who holds that things can be organized so that without any tumult, without any hue and cry, we can ensure the smooth functioning of the republic: the smooth functioning of the moderate society, as he would put it, in which liberty and tranquillity is assured for all. Ferguson (1767), on the other hand, rails against this vision, arguing that there is no hope for liberty unless complacency is kept continually at bay and the ordinary people remain alert to the worst that the powerful can do. The rule of law that Montesquieu found and praised in Britain is fine, so Ferguson (1767: 167) says. “But it requires a fabric no less than the whole political constitution of Great Britain, a spirit no less than the refractory and turbulent zeal of this fortunate people, to secure it.”

Consequently, Pettit (2012, pp. 29–30) argued:

‘I see no tension between the republican belief in a dispensation of widespread civility and personal trust and the emphasis on maintaining eternal vigilance. For vigilance clearly involves only expressive distrust. The republican recommendation is that, whatever confidence people feel in the authorities, they will have all the more reason to feel such confidence—to enjoy such personal trust—if they always insist on the authorities going through the required hoops in order to prove themselves virtuous.... The republican emphasis on vigilance stems from a belief that those in authority must be subjected to quite demanding checks and constraints: that this may be the only way of guarding against arbitrary will and coping with corruptibility. But that emphasis is quite consistent with enjoying, and with displaying in other ways, an attitude of confident reliance on the authorities. There is no incoherence at the heart of republican tenets.’

Yet even if writing in the last decade some of the most hide-bound republic advocates (and their critics) still seem to be trapped into relying only on 'legacy' arrangements from the past. Philosophers and political theorists appear unable to recognize that key democratic changes have happened in the digital era. For instance, in the quote above, and elsewhere (Pettit, 2017), Pettit still seems clearly over-optimistic or almost utopian in believing that conventional representative institutions might operationalize the scale of effective scrutiny needed. Both Pettit and other philosophers in the recent revival of republicanism have also unfortunately showed almost-zero awareness in anticipating the rising importance of digital citizen vigilance for modern democracies, which goes little mentioned even in recent literature.

All pre-digital versions of republican thought (and modern digital-blind approaches also) lacked any effective and commensurately-scaled mechanisms needed for blending 'eternal vigilance' with a balanced and stable civic life. The form of digital republicanism set out in the middle column of Table 1 essentially fits squarely with the Montesquieu end of the debate Pettit sketched above. Rows 1–6 argue that a constant and pervasive self-discipline should act continuously on online citizens to behave ethically (or lose their online status). The continuous ecological ebb and flow of issues and the constant churn of reputations matters a great deal to citizens themselves, and still more to influencers, meso-level actors and political and administrative elites. Thus online debate has the necessary honest civility to sustain vigilance over the actions of politicians, officials and powerful

institutions across the full range of policymaking and service delivery issues, and social life—from the macro- to the most micro-levels. In particular, digital republicanism can be seen as an especially salient support of liberal democratic *micro-institutions* across the vast range of the administrative state, whose continued fair and decent operations in public services delivery are essential for the overall health of much larger and far more visible macro-institutions, like elections or legislatures (Evans et al., 2018; Dunleavy et al., 2018; Dunleavy, 2019).

Existing empirical research shows that however conspicuous or consequential a few online controversies fuelled by populism may be, the vast mass of the issues raised digitally have been (and always will be) highly detailed. Many complaints or criticisms can be and have been quickly addressed or resolved in near ‘real time’, with citizens’ greater knowledge and first-hand experience inputs leading directly and immediately to public managers seeking to rectify problems, especially those based on oversights, misconceptions, or errors. Many other individual interventions will seem at first sight to be ignored, but their cumulation via viral spread may then produce a lagged response not directly traceable to any one citizen’s inputs, but reflecting a strong collective impact. Even online contributions and activities that seem to have no immediate take-up or response from anyone else can none the less contribute strongly to collective impacts—e.g. encouraging people into participating in other more conventional political input activities. Just as reproduction in the natural world may often seem to create massively over-produced germs, seeds or fertilized embryos to achieve species reproduction, we need to have an ultra-realistic view of democratic political ecology in the digital era, where whole (potentially disruptive) waves of public critique may be needed to keep policies and implementation on efficient and morally acceptable lines.

‘Falling into silence’ may be the fate of vast numbers of social media and online messages and contributions, but so it probably is for most offline or in-person political activities of individual citizens. Often not having a directly traceable impact does not undermine the salience of digital vigilance for republicanism. Posting every message has some impact on the author themselves, on those who see it in their family, community, workplace or online network, amongst friends or other people they know, or who simply follow them, and (of course) on the enduring digital record itself. (For instance, long-forgotten mis-speech or hate-speech outbursts can return to haunt many influencers and elite members, months or years later).

High quality political science research on digital politics has only begun quite recently, but it seems to strikingly confirm this view, even in much more overtly ‘political’ areas of public life. One key recent study of ‘political turbulence’ looked at the experience of the UK government’s initiative for digital petitions, which can be started by anyone, registered with Parliament and promoted for online signatures from other (certified) citizens by the proposers, in a directly analogous way to analogue paper petitions. If a proposal reaches 100,000 signatures then it qualifies for a debate by Parliamentarians in Westminster Hall. The overwhelming majority of issues started under this process attract only relatively small amounts of signatures (Margetts et al., 2017). Only a tiny fraction of issues ever go viral enough to attract any attention at all on social media, let alone mainstream media, often requiring millions or hundreds of thousands of signatures first. These cases occur chiefly because their proponents got ‘lucky’ and struck a particularly responsive chord with other people. Very few online petitions go viral and achieve the traction needed to even be debated by legislators, and almost nothing follows from that even so. However, such breakthroughs do happen and huge numbers can register their views via this process on occasion.

The scope of citizen vigilance has also increased appreciably in recent years with the spread of smartphones so that almost every citizen in every interaction with the state, companies or just other people may have ready access to still and video cameras and accurate audio recording, extending now into many wearables, digital assistants and note-takers for instant recording. For instance, millions of cyclists who now digitally record every bike journey with headcams and post up dangerous incidents have shamed online numerous car or truck drivers who have behaved in irresponsible or dangerous ways, and also generated evidence that has sustained multiple company, police or legal actions against offenders. Similarly citizens’ complaints against state officials misuse of powers and maladministration are increasingly backed by evidence from wearables or other devices, raising the bar for public service providers and staff. For instance, the global ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement was triggered largely by a single, chance ‘bystander video’ taken by a teenage girl of an arrest that resulted in an avoidable death, caused by a white Minneapolis policeman kneeling on the neck of a black man suspected of shoplifting for over 9 min, until he could no longer breathe at all (McGreal and Kenya, 2020; Izadi, 2021). This and similar incidents highlighted dramatically the extent of racial minorities’ lack of trust in US police, shared by many other citizens (Péloquin et al., 2022; Boudreau et al., 2022).

Since then, the recording of arrests and incidents has spiralled in many countries so that organized protests are systematically filmed by many citizens—the benefits of which were vividly demonstrated in early 2026 when Immigration and Customs Executive (ICE) personnel gratuitously shot dead two US citizens in Minneapolis, triggering a storm of protests nationwide (Garcia, 2026; Ray and Sanchez, 2026). At first their innocent victims were falsely denounced by Trump presidency spokespersons as ‘domestic terrorists’ and condemned by Vice President Vance as responsible for their own deaths. But citizen videos showed their complete innocence, compelled the release of confirming official bodyworn and dashcam videos, and led to a public backlash that first forced ICE agents out of Minnesota and quickly thereafter led to the marginalization of the ICE chief involved and ultimately the sacking of the Homeland Security Secretary.

Of course, for every such digitally-driven change there may be countervailing responses by public sector managers and staff. For instance, health or social welfare staff fearful of post-audit complaints may increasingly refuse to offer clients any positive advice going beyond setting out options and insisting that clients decide issues themselves unaided (Burton and van den Broek, 2009; Breit et al., 2021). And evidence has accumulated that the most optimistic estimates of how police bodycams and dashcams would curb the use of deadly force by US police have not been realized because of countervailing responses by police managers and personnel (such as delaying video releases and cultural adaptations by police to protect each other) (White and Malm, 2020). Some police counter responses to ‘bystander’ videos (such as blocking off their actions from view, or moving people on forcibly) have also limited the chances of scrutiny, hence the strong trend in many countries towards multiple people filming incidents and especially protests from many viewpoints. Still, significant behavioural changes and management policy changes have occurred, appreciable fractions of deaths and woundings in America have been avoided (Corley, 2021) and in many other cases more effective post-incident redress and significant disciplinary actions and rule-tightening have followed (Cubukcu et al., 2023). The positive benefit/costs ratio for just police body-worn cameras alone has been estimated at 5:1 in the USA (Williams Jr. et al., 2021).

As ever, the dynamics of social situations needs constant management, by regulation from elites and reflexive behaviour by citizens. Speeding up the pace of citizen vigilance innovations across social life and public debate via digital scrutiny will always be discomforting for some elite and government staff vested interests. And differing access to skills and technology useful in monitoring officials behaviour can create new digital divides amongst citizens. Yet it is important that public administration and management studies do not focus solely on the 'discomfort' factors of digital changes, or the potential for organizational cultures to absorb and adapt to citizen inputs in minimizing ways, without also recognizing that the gains involved here have been and will likely remain overwhelmingly positive.

4 Conclusion

In advanced industrial societies that have remained full liberal democracies (which may not now include the USA (Nord et al., 2026), the third wave of digital era governance plus the rapid development of social media and modern scrutiny information systems have made possible (for the first time) a pervasive and direct citizen vigilance over all units and levels of government. Digital citizen vigilance now supplements and in many ways transcends the acute informational limitations of representative government arrangements, especially tending to marginalize the limited legacy 'citizen redress' mechanisms in public administration. Of course, empowering people directly in these new ways inevitably and undeniably creates some potential for greater societal harms to also be caused by malicious or irrational actors. This is especially serious when liberal democracies begin 'back-sliding' away and are lax about updating state regulations and legal regimes to maintain effective regulation of platform corporations from democracy and the oligarchic mega-billionaires owning them, as in the contemporary USA. However, although empirical studies remain in their infancy, there are emergent indications that perhaps the great bulk of citizens' digital activity positively increases social welfare, strengthening the autonomous capabilities of citizens to hold their governments (and indeed each other) to account for wrong actions or failings. 'Always on' citizen digital vigilance is now a key support of the modern republican virtues vital for the continuing health of all democracies. In flawed democracies, the strengthening of citizen vigilance can have immense importance too in combatting oligarchy and corruption, and helping to rebuild the dozens of micro-institutions (Dunleavy, 2019) crucial for maintaining or improving democratic operations. Even in overtly non-democratic authoritarian regimes (like China), there may still be worthwhile positive welfare gains from using social media and digital vigilance (albeit only in state-managed ways) to enhance or maintain the efficiency and effectiveness of applied public services delivery (Li and Liu, 2025).

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Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

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