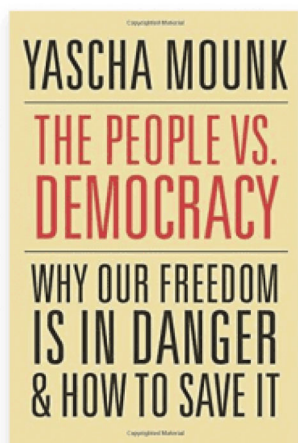**citizenlab**

BOOKS

10 Must-Read Books about Digital Democracy

As winter's coming, you might find some
more time to grab a book and learn about
our democracies in the digital age. We have

curated our favourite list of recently released books exploring how the Internet will (not) save democracy.

Take a sip from your coffee and enjoy your reading time with these books!

10. The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom Is in Danger and How to Save It

Two core components of liberal democracy—individual rights and the popular will—are increasingly at war with each other. As the role of money in politics soared and important issues were taken out of public contestation, a system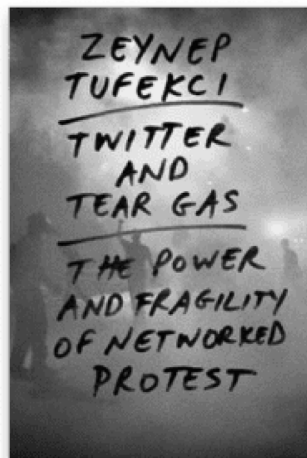 of "rights without democracy" took hold. Populists who rail against this say they want to return power to the people. But in practice they create something just as bad: a system of "democracy without rights." The consequence, as Yascha Mounk shows in this brilliant and timely book, is that trust in politics is dwindling. Citizens are falling out of love with their political system. Democracy is wilting away.

Drawing on vivid stories and original research, Mounk identifies three key drivers of voters' discontent: stagnating

living standards, fear of multiethnic democracy, and the rise

of social media. To reverse the trend, politicians need to enact radical reforms that benefit the many, not the few.

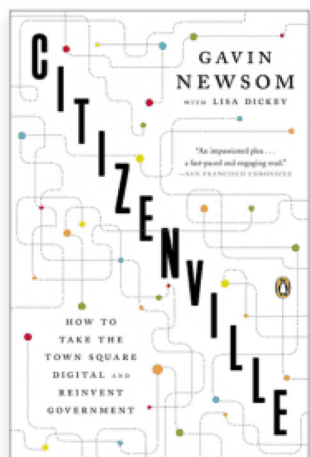## 9. Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest

A firsthand account and incisive analysis of modern protest, revealing internet-fueled social movements' greatest strengths and frequent challenges.

Tufekci describes how the internet helped the Zapatista uprisings in Mexico, the necessity of remote Twitter users to organize medical supplies during Arab Spring, the refusal to use bullhorns in the Occupy Movement that started in New York, and the empowering effect of tear gas in Istanbul's Gezi Park. These details from life inside social movements complete a moving investigation of authority, technology, and culture—and offer essential insights into the future of governance.

8. Citizenville: How to Take the Town Square Digital and Reinvent Government
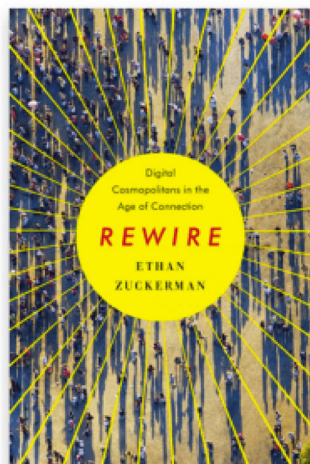
Citizenville is the story of how ordinary citizens can use new digital tools to dissolve political gridlock and transform democracy. As social networking and smart phones have changed the way we communicate with one another, these technologies are also changing our relationship with government.

In a world where people can do anything at the touch of a button—shop, communicate, do research, publish a blog, transfer money—government cannot keep functioning in a twentieth-century mind-set. Lieutenant Governor Gavin Newsom explores the many ways in which technology can transform government and empower citizens: Opening up vast troves of government data, then letting people create apps to use them wisely. Harnessing the popularity of online games to establish a kind of "Angry Birds for Democracy." Inventing new feedback loops so people can take active part in every facet of governing.

7. Rewire: Digital Cosmopolitans in the Age of Connection

A rousing call to action for those who would be citizens of the world—online and off. We live in an age of connection, one that is accelerated by the Internet. This
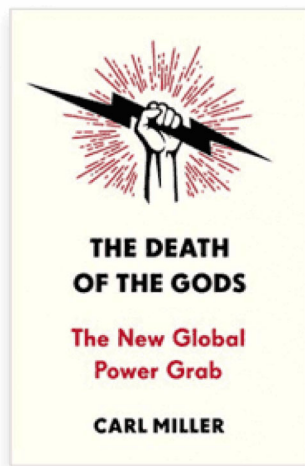
increasingly ubiquitous, immensely powerful technology often leads us to assume that as the number of people online grows, it inevitably leads to a smaller, more cosmopolitan world. We'll understand more, we think. We'll know more. We'll engage more and share more with people from other cultures. In reality, it is easier to ship bottles of water from Fiji to Atlanta than it is to get news from Tokyo to New York.

In *Rewire*, media scholar and activist Ethan Zuckerman explains why the technological ability to communicate with someone does not inevitably lead to increased human connection. At the most basic level, our human tendency to "flock together" means that most of our interactions, online or off, are with a small set of people with whom we have much in common. In examining this fundamental tendency, Zuckerman draws on his own work as well as the latest research in psychology and sociology to consider technology's role in disconnecting ourselves from the rest of the world.

6. The Death of the Gods: The New Global Power Grab

The old gods are dying. Giant corporations collapse overnight. Newspapers are being swallowed. Stock prices
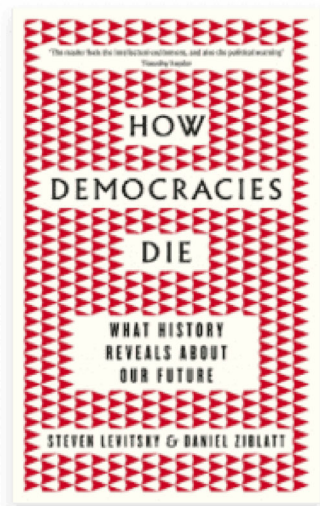
plummet with a tweet.

Governments are losing control. The old familiarities are tumbling down and a strange new social order is rising in their place. More crime now happens online than offline. Facebook has grown bigger than any state, bots battle elections, technologists have reinvented democracy and information wars are breaking out around us. New mines produce crypto-currencies, coders write policy, and algorithms shape our lives in more ways than we can imagine. What is going on?

For centuries, writers and thinkers have used power as a prism through which to view and understand the world at moments of seismic change. *The Death of the Gods* is an exploration of power in the digital age, and a journey in search of the new centres of control today. From a cyber-crime raid in suburbia to the engine rooms of Silicon Valley, and from the digital soldiers of Berkshire to the hackers of Las Vegas, pioneering technology researcher Carl Miller traces how power – the most important currency of all – is being transformed, fought over, won and lost. As power escapes from its old bonds, he shows us where it has gone, the shape it now takes and how it touches each of our lives.

5. How Democracies Die: What History Reveals About Our Future

A bracing, revelatory look at

the demise of liberal democracies around the world–and a road map for rescuing our own.

Donald Trump's presidency has raised a question that many of us never thought we'd be asking: Is our democracy in danger? Harvard professors Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt have spent more than twenty years studying the breakdown of democracies in Europe and Latin America, and they believe the answer is yes. Democracy no longer ends with a bang–in a revolution or military coup–but with a whimper: the slow, steady weakening of critical institutions, such as the judiciary and the press, and the gradual erosion of long-standing political norms. The good news is that there are several exit ramps on the road to authoritarianism. The bad news is that, by electing Trump, we have already passed the first one.

Drawing on decades of research and a wide range of historical and global examples, from 1930s Europe to contemporary Hungary, Turkey, and Venezuela, to the American South during Jim Crow, Levitsky and Ziblatt show how democracies die–and how ours can be saved.

4. The People Vs Tech: How the internet is killing democracy (and how we save it)
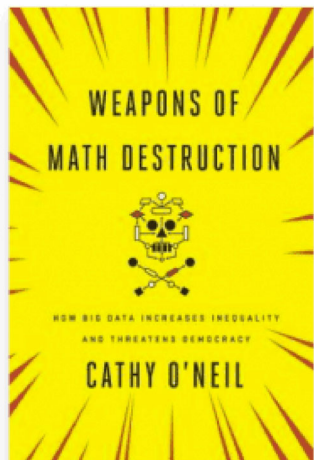
The internet was meant to set us

free.

Tech has radically changed the way we live our lives. But have we unwittingly handed too much away to shadowy powers behind a wall of code, all manipulated by a handful of Silicon Valley utopians, ad men, and venture capitalists? And, in light of recent data breach scandals around companies like Facebook and Cambridge Analytica, what does that mean for democracy, our delicately balanced system of government that was created long before big data, total information and artificial intelligence? In this urgent polemic, Jamie Bartlett argues that through our unquestioning embrace of big tech, the building blocks of democracy are slowly being removed. The middle class is being eroded, sovereign authority and civil society is weakened, and we citizens are losing our critical faculties, maybe even our free will.

The People Vs Tech is an enthralling account of how our fragile political system is being threatened by the digital revolution. Bartlett explains that by upholding six key pillars of democracy, we can save it before it is too late. We need to become active citizens; uphold a shared democratic culture; protect free elections; promote equality; safeguard competitive and civic freedoms; and trust in a sovereign authority. This essential book shows that the stakes couldn't be higher and that, unless we radically alter our course, democracy will join feudalism, supreme monarchies and communism as just another political experiment that quietly disappeared.

3. Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy

We live in the age of the algorithm. Increasingly, the decisions that affect our lives—where we go to school, whether we get a car loan, how much we pay for health insurance—are being made not by humans, but by mathematical models. In theory, this should lead to greater fairness: Everyone is judged according to the same rules, and bias is eliminated. But as Cathy O'Neil reveals in this shocking book, the opposite is true. The models being used today are opaque, unregulated, and uncontestable, even when they're wrong. Most troubling, they reinforce discrimination: If a poor student can't get a loan because a lending model deems him too risky (by virtue of his race or neighborhood), he's then cut off from the kind of education that could pull him out of poverty, and a vicious spiral ensues. Models are propping up the lucky and punishing the downtrodden, creating a "toxic cocktail for democracy." Welcome to the dark side of Big Data.

Tracing the arc of a person's life, from college to retirement, O'Neil exposes the black box models that shape our future, both as individuals and as a society. Models that score teachers and students, sort resumes, grant (or deny) loans, evaluate workers, target voters, set parole, and monitor our

health—all have pernicious feedback loops. They don't simply *describe* reality, as proponents claim, they *change* reality, by expanding or limiting the opportunities people have. O'Neil calls on modelers to take more responsibility for how their algorithms are being used. But in the end, it's up to us to become more savvy about the models that govern our lives. This important book empowers us to ask the tough questions, uncover the truth, and demand change.

2. Disco Sour

The only fiction book that made it to this list! Disco Sour questions where our democracy is going in an era of ubiquitous data. Read the interview we did recently with the Giuseppe Porcaro, the author of Disco Sour, about Internet democracy.

In the aftermath of a continental civil-war, nation-states have collapsed, the European Union™ holds on, preventing anarchy.
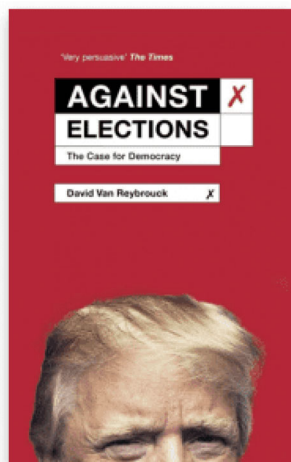
Bastian Balthazar Bux is a leading member of The Federation®, the European network of civil society and local governments. Bastian has just been unexpectedly dumped through an app, the BreakupShop™ service. Heavy hearted, he just wants to drink, get on with work and forget his romantic woes.

However, he discovers that Nathan Ziggy Zukowsky is

planning to sell Plebiscitum®, a dating-style app that is meant

to replace elections with a simple swipe, at the same
conference he is invited to attend in Chile. Haunted by the
ghosts of his recent relationship, he finds himself without his
all-important Morph® phone, just a few hours before
embarking on his trip to try to save democracy.

Will he make it to his conference on the other side of the
world? Will he stop Zukowsky from selling his app? And will he
ever find a way to deal with his breakup?

1. Against Elections: The Case for Democracy

Democracy is in bad health. The
symptoms are familiar: the rise of
fear-mongering populists,
widespread distrust in the
establishment, personality
contests and point-scoring in
place of reasoned debate, slogans
instead of expertise. *Against*
Elections offers a new diagnosis –
and an ancient remedy.

In this ingenious book, David Van Reybrouck reminds us that
the original purpose of elections was to exclude the people
from power by appointing an elite to govern over them. He
demonstrates how over time their effect has been to reduce
the people's participation in government to an absolute
minimum, ensure power remains in the hands of those who
already wield it, and force politicians to judge policies not on
their merits but on their likelihood to win or lose votes. And
that's when elections go well.

Yet for most of democracy's 3000-year history governments were not chosen by election at all: they were appointed, much like the jury system, through a combination of volunteering and lottery. Drawing on vast learning, an international array of evidence and a growing number of successful trials, *Against Elections* demonstrates how a sophisticated and practical version of this ancient system would work today and thus eliminate the underlying cause of democracy's sickness.

Urgent, heretical and completely convincing, *Against Elections* leaves only one question to be answered: what are we waiting for?

P.S. Do you have any other book tips for us to include in this list? Let us know by tweeting us *@citizenlabco*!

P.S.S. Would you rather read about urbanism and the future of our cities? We curated a list on our best reads in this field too.

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AUTHOR

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Founder of CitizenLab. On a mission to shape local democracies for the digital age. Proud Forbes 30 Under 30 Europe & YTILI Fellow. Talk

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