

## Jamie Susskind

### In conversation with Andrew Kelly

**Andrew Kelly:** Hello and welcome to Bristol Ideas. I'm Andrew Kelly. I'm joined today by barrister and writer Jamie Susskind. We debated Jamie's first book, *Future Politics: Living Together in a World Transformed by Tech*, in our [Festival of Ideas in November 2018](#). We're talking today about his new book, *The Digital Republic: on Freedom and Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, which is out from Bloomsbury. This event is part of our series on the future of democracy. Jamie, thank you for joining us.

**Jamie Susskind:** Thank you for having me back, Andrew. It's great to be back at the Bristol Festival of Ideas.

**Andrew:** Jamie, controlling the tech giants, overcoming the downsides of tech and protecting and extending democracy are key questions for our time, and ones we have debated for some years now. We're obviously all personally involved, indeed implicated, with tech, given the use that we make of it in our lives, and this use will only grow into more parts of everyday life and politics in the future. We're aware too of the many problems this has created. We're searching for ideas for solving some of these problems. And your book provides many for debate. Can we start though with some bigger questions about democracy? How much is democracy under threat, Jamie?

**Jamie:** Scholars differ in answer to those questions. I think two or three years ago, there was a sense that authoritarian or quasi-authoritarian leaders around the world were on the ascent, whether it was Trump or Bolsonaro or Orbán. The first two of those three are now... well, Trump's gone, Bolsonaro is in trouble, Orbán isn't. The broad trends over the last couple of decades point to a slight democratic decline across the world. I wouldn't be sounding the alarm bells yet, but I do think it's a good time for us to be asking ourselves whether the democratic systems and institutions that we have in place are the best possible ones.

**Andrew:** We had an interesting example in Bristol recently. We had a referendum on whether to keep our directly elected mayor or go back to a committee system of governance. And the people of the city decided to finish with the mayoral experiment and go back to the committee system. There was little public education and debate, despite our best efforts, and the turnout was under 29 per cent. And these are the kinds of things that worry me about democracy – not just the big authoritarian, strongmen leaders, but the diminishing of turnout and involvement in civic matters.

**Jamie:** Yes. One of the things that I'm concerned with in the new book is a sort of anaemic conception of democracy that basically just sees it as voting every so often. And obviously even on that anaemic conception, we don't always do very well, because turnout rates are lower than we'd like. But there's actually a broader and richer vision of democracy. One which involves deliberation by the citizenry, real constructive engagement, people being prepared to listen and change their minds. Obviously, it's never going to be the ideal that we see in philosophy textbooks. But to me, an integral part of democracy is participation not just in the voting process but in the arguments and the debates and the discussions that precede it.

**Andrew:** Now, your book looks at the role of tech in part in creating problems for democracy, creating problems for other aspects of our life. But without tech, we can't live the full and rounded life, as you say. But the impact is huge, isn't it?

**Jamie:** That's right. So mine isn't a book that sees technology as inherently positive or negative. It does see it as a form of power in society. I think that those who own and control particular powerful technologies have a great deal of control over the rest of society. And this is a new phenomenon, right? Our political science and political theory textbooks from 30 or 40 years ago, indeed some from ten or 20 years ago, simply don't account for this change.

Now, it just so happens that more and more of our actions, our interactions, our transactions, are conducted through digital technologies. And every technology that we interact with has a set of rules coded into it about what may or may not be done with it. And increasingly, those who write the rules are writing society's rules. So if debate takes place on a particular social media platform, the rules on that platform – what may be said, who may say it, what may not be said, how many things be said in what form – these are very important social rules, because they affect the very fabric of our deliberative infrastructure.

My own view is that those who design these systems, software engineers, are becoming social engineers as well, whether they know it or like it or not. And so in the past, in the last couple of hundred years, we've tended to analyse politics in terms of great social forces, like, for instance, the invisible hand of the market, or the great clunking fist of the state, or the oppressive effects of tradition. Social scientists and political scientists love to think about these. I think that computer code, and the norms and values that are coded into it, will be one of the other great political forces of this century. And so we need theories about it, we need understanding.

**Andrew:** I was very taken particularly with the role of the coder in all of this, as you say, the social engineering role that can take place and we'll come on to what we might do about this later on. But you position this book as being about democracy and about new models of governance, bringing together the historical foundations, philosophical views and potential new infrastructure of laws and institutions. Could you contrast now the two points you make to situate this debate, market individualism versus digital republicanism. Perhaps we could start with market individualism, which you say is the defining political philosophy of the modern age, but has also shaped the modern tech industry.

**Jamie:** Yes. So what I'm trying to argue against is this slight knee-jerk approach to policy where something goes wrong in the tech industry and

people think overnight, oh, we need to introduce a law to fix that. To my mind, the political and philosophical challenges raised by technology are too big for that kind of way of conducting ourselves. What we need is to create systems of ideas, like we did in the last century and the century before it, that can help us to understand and make sense of what's happening to us. So I imagine a future dominated by different ideologies of which people won't even really have heard or thought about today – digital nationalists, who see technology as a means to national greatness; digital liberals, who focus on personal rights and accountability; digital libertarians, who view the end of policy as being the removal of government from any form of interference. Whatever it is, there are new political philosophies out there to be discovered and argued, and I wanted to contribute to or rather help to kickstart that debate.

When it comes to the existing system, what I tried to diagnose is why we have got to a place where people are justifiably anxious and insecure about the way that technology works. And what I say is that we do already have a governing philosophy, it's just that it's not always expressly articulated, and that's the philosophy of market individualism. What do I mean by that? I mean that digital technology is developed and regulated within a paradigm which has certain philosophical preoccupations or commitments. One is the supremacy of the individual – the belief that society is best ordered by individuals going about their business and seeking their own self-interest. So a good example of that, for instance, is the fact that we are, as individuals, invited to consent yes or no to certain ways that our data is used. That's, I think, a ridiculous paradigm. I think it's in a sense a meaningless exercise. But it reflects the philosophical belief that the first and last line of defence should be the individual. It reflects a set of beliefs that the state should not intervene beyond creating favourable conditions for property rights and contracts and the like.

But any other forms of regulation are in a sense counter-productive, counter innovation. That's a very market individualist's idea. The idea that countries

should compete for a race to the bottom, whether it's regulatory burden being lowered or tax burden being lowered. The idea that social media companies, for instance, should operate as kinds of markets, where they compete against each other in the market for people's attention, ideas compete against each other like products in the capitalist economy, and those that are popular achieve viral fame and those that are unpopular, even if they're true, don't. So what I see is the sort of market thinking permeating the digital world, and often that's uncontroversial, often it's fine. But when particular technologies assume an important democratic function, we shouldn't be surprised that market thinking leads to selfish, individualised divisive outcomes, when sometimes what we might want is the pursuit of the common good or compromise between different social groups.

**Andrew:** You contrast this with your argument for a digital republicanism. And in the book, you take us back to Roman times, and then through Europe to the American founding fathers and the Federalist Papers and so on. Huge lessons to learn there. What would make an ideal digital republican?

**Jamie:** Well, it's first of all worth saying what do I mean by the word republican? So people tend to associate the word republican with the Republican Party in the United States just now. That's not at all what that book is about. There's also a republican tradition of getting rid of kings and queens, which in this month above all I should say is not the point of the book.

Republicanism, small 'r' republicanism, is a political theory that stretches back to the Roman times, and it basically has one key precept. It says that the key purpose of law and governance is to reduce unaccountable power, so to stop one group in society from dominating another group. Now, that might be a king dominating their subjects. It might be a conqueror or an occupier dominating the place that they've occupied. It might be men dominating women, it might be bosses dominating workers, it might be slave owners dominating slaves, it might be adults dominating the children under their

control. Wherever it is, republicanism seeks to identify imbalances in power – particularly unaccountable imbalances and power, so where essentially the stronger party can do as it wishes – and it seeks to reduce them. That's the basis of the republican philosophy. And so I say that it's been very useful in all of these other contexts in the past, which is why we've seen it in revolutions, why we've seen a republican philosophy in constitutions, declarations of independence. But it can also teach us a lot about the moment that we're currently living in vis-à-vis tech firms.

If you accept the view that those who own and control and design particular digital technologies have a kind of power, then the republican question is how can we hold that power accountable? If you look at something like the Elon Musk takeover of Twitter, the question that a lot of people are asking is will Elon Musk do a good job? Does he understand free speech? What does he want to do with the platform? The republican says the problem isn't Elon Musk, the problem is the idea of Elon Musk. The problem is the idea that we will rely on the wisdom and goodwill of one private individual for the future health of the democratic deliberative process. And so what the republican seeks to do is put in place systems and structures that prevent the Elon Musks of the world, the Musks of today and the Musks of tomorrow, from dominating the rest of us.

So what the book talks about, having laid out that philosophy, is what it would look like in practice. And the way that republicans hold power accountable differs according to the context. So sometimes it's about making processes more transparent, exposing them to scrutiny. Sometimes it's about introducing ways of contesting power, so introducing processes of appeal and oversight. Sometimes it's about imposing responsibilities on those in power, systems of certification, professionalising individuals – why should someone who runs a social media platform have fewer duties than someone who runs a pharmacy, even though the social media platform might have systemic effects on the future of democracy? And indeed sometimes republicans say that the best way to sort out unaccountable power is to

break it up, to disperse it. And so the book looks at these solutions, applies them to all different kinds of technologies, whether it's big data and algorithms, robotics and artificial intelligence, social media platforms, blockchain technology, whatever it is. We look for unaccountable power, and we find sensible ways of reducing it.

**Andrew:** And just to pursue this a little more about the way republicans think differently about the nature of democracy. I was very taken – and this is a debate we've been having about other books as well – about the role of people being citizens and not consumers, and believing in the common good as well as private desire, and, as you mentioned, allowing politics to be shaped through debate. But it's citizens, not consumers, I think, which is critical here.

**Jamie:** Yeah. The funny thing about a lot of tech companies is that we conceive of them as being kind of purely commercial and economic entities, and that our relation to them is one of consumers. In reality, a lot of them have assumed political significance as well. But we haven't shifted our mindset in order to treat them and ourselves as citizens in that process, too. So for instance, if you look at social media platforms, it's clear to me that they are no longer just ordinary companies, ordinary appliances. They have assumed systemic political significance within our system. And yet the dominant market individualist paradigm says we should just treat them as businesses like any other. That can't be right, in my view.

And if you subscribe to the republican philosophy, which involves a conception of democracy which is thicker than merely turning up to vote once every so often – about participating in deliberation, doing so in terms of equality and a degree at least of cordiality, a commitment to the pursuit of truth, rather than just the pursuit of popularity – if these are values that you hold as a citizen, well then you shouldn't just jettison them and call yourself a consumer in your interactions with social media. And so I don't place the responsibility for this on individuals. I think that these are social problems

which can only be met through legislation and regulation and the like. But it seems to me that once you get it into your head that the problems thrown up by technology are political and not merely commercial, then you start to look at them as a citizen rather than a consumer.

Another good example, for instance, is the fact that loads of data has been gathered about us. For the last ten years, a lot of people have argued, well, the real problem with that is that you're not paid anything for your data. Companies are making huge amounts of money out of analysing your data, but you don't get any of it. I think that's completely the wrong diagnosis. The problem with data usage is not an economic problem. In reality, we give something up that is likely to be of limited financial value to us, a bit of personal data about ourselves, and we get in return awesome stuff like, you know, Google, Facebook, and we get them for free, you don't have to pay for these things.

The problem is not therefore an economic or commercial one, it is actually a political one. When you give up loads of data, there are serious implications for privacy, for liberty, for democracy. And those problems maybe don't affect you as an individual as directly as, say, a commercial disbenefit might, but they are important at a societal level. And so what we have to do is stop people from characterising this as a purely economic debate, because as long as you characterise it as an economic debate, people will never recognise a problem with the way that the current system works, because economically it's kind of beneficial for everyone. Politically, though, the question is rather different.

**Andrew:** You talk about four principles: the preservation principle, which is the survival of the democratic state – this is all under the republican philosophy; the domination principle, which is reducing the unaccountable power of digital technology. We've talked about those two. The next two, the democracy principle, which is that the design and development of powerful technologies should, as far as possible, reflect moral and civic values of



people who live under their power. And the fourth one is the parsimony principle, restraint of others, the state shouldn't be too powerful in this.

**Jamie:** Yes, so just touching on the last two, starting with the last one – republicans worry about the power of private corporations, but they also worry about the power of the state. There's no doubt that digital technology has given even more power to the state than it already had, and the twentieth century was a good century for the state in terms of the amount of power it enjoyed. The last thing I would want is an effort to regulate or legislate for technology which only moved unaccountable power from the hands of corporations into the hands of governments. So republicans are just as anxious about restraining the power of the states as they are about other things.

The democracy principle, which you mentioned, I think is really important. Think of it this way. France and the United States are both kind of democratic systems with the rule of law, and they both have a commitment to freedom of expression. But it's not the same commitment. So in America, you have the First Amendment tradition, which is very, very permissive and basically prevents almost any government intervention in the speech world. In France, the rules are slightly different. There are rules against hate crimes, there are rules against, for instance, certain acts of speech, like Holocaust denial is unlawful in France. It's not unlawful in the United States. If you think about a social media platform, why should a person in France be governed not according to French speech norms, but according to American speech norms? Why should someone in America be governed by decisions of the European Court of Justice about what may or may not be said or done online? And to the republican the answer is they shouldn't. Like any other form of power, social media platforms should reflect the moral and civic values of the people that they affect, and that differs from country to country. This is an argument that makes me slightly unpopular among some people who would like to see global governance of digital technology. I'm not convinced that it's a practical likelihood. But I'm also not convinced of it

necessarily at a moral level. We do have very different norms in England, as they do in France, or Germany, or in the Netherlands, or in Scandinavia, or in the United States.

And, by the way, the book isn't about what we should do about digital technology in non-democratic countries, so, you know, the Chinas and Russias of the world – that is different. The arguments that I make really only apply to countries that are democratic and have the rule of law. But they differ, and their norms differ. And digital technology should not be allowed to destroy those norms or subvert them simply without challenge.

**Andrew:** It was a point I was going to raise with you actually later on, but I'll raise it now, about action at a global level and action at a national level, because often, as you say, a default option would be let's do global governance on this. But I was very much convinced by your argument, I have to say, to look at the national level, not at the global level.

**Jamie:** It seems to me that if we're going to have global governance it is more likely to arise as a patchwork of national efforts, rather than the nations of the world coming together to agree a global law. I just don't think that's going to happen, not least because there are reasonable disagreements between nations about what is and isn't appropriate. Even between democratic nations. A cynic would say that one of the reasons large technology companies argue for global governance is because they know in their hearts that it would never happen, or at least it's unlikely to happen soon.

Another reason they argue for it is that obviously it makes it easier to do business. If you're a multinational corporation, it is obviously easier for you if the rules are the same in the EU as they are in the United States. But in a sense, so what? Every business in every industry has to comply with the rules of the jurisdictions in which they operate. And that is already true of things like social media. So for instance, if you tweet a swastika in Germany you

won't see it, but you might see it in the United States. So the governments there already regulate companies differently, and the companies already respond differently. So I think we shouldn't be afraid of accepting that we still live in a kind of Westphalian world where nation states are often the first and last regulatory organs. Now, I know there is a risk of arbitrage or the sort of Delaware effect, which is if one country makes its rules slightly stricter, they risk seeing a capital outflow to countries where the rules are less strict. But to me, that's just an argument for places like the EU and the US, the kind of global regulatory superpowers, doing a better job, because if they set standards, the rest of the world is likely to follow them. When California set certain emission standards for cars, it didn't just affect California. Car companies in Germany who wanted to sell into California started changing their products too.

**Andrew:** Tech throws down many challenges to democracy and freedom. We've been discussing some of them. I want to go through some of the areas you discussed in the book about how change might happen, but we can also talk about some of the problems that tech causes in that. And the first one is about self-regulation, which we tend to let the companies do, get away with. This is a nonstarter, isn't it, really?

**Jamie:** Yes. So one of the arguments in the tech industry is that companies and individuals in the industry should be left to regulate themselves, they can effectively be trusted to. And then there is an additional step where they say lawyers are self-regulating, doctors are self-regulating. But that is a slightly misleading argument, because individual lawyers are not at all self-regulating. I'm a barrister, I'm regulated by my professional regulator. If I am unethical or breach my code of conduct, I can be sanctioned for that. I can be fined, I can be struck off. That is not self-regulation, that is a real system which contains systems of enforcement. It's the same with doctors. They're self-regulating in the sense that my regulator is itself largely comprised of lawyers from my profession, but even then there is some oversight and input from the government as well.

So if what the tech industry was saying I was we want to move to a system of self-regulation like doctors and lawyers, I'd be saying great. If you want to design algorithms, for instance, that decide whether people get a job or a mortgage or insurance, really important stuff, I wouldn't mind you being under some kind of professional duty not to behave unethically, or a professional duty to act with integrity. I think that would be a good thing. Likewise, if you run a massive social media platform that might have systemic effects on the health of the democratic system. So where self-regulation basically means trust us and let us get on with it, it's a nonstarter. It's a nonstarter in every other industry, basically. And I don't see why tech would be any different.

**Andrew:** And you give the example in the book of Facebook and its attempts to moderate its political problems. But you say, rightly, that we shouldn't leave these issues to be dealt with by Mark Zuckerberg or Nick Clegg. These are issues that should be dealt with by others.

**Jamie:** Yeah. We want a world in which the Facebooks of the world have in place adequate systems to meet certain goals, whether it's the removal of disinformation, the prevention of things like revenge porn or harassment. We want them to put in place systems. We don't want them to do this as a matter of goodwill, because where things become kind of optional and charity, in a competitive marketplace they almost always end up being subordinated to other commercial interests. Or rather, as little is done as possible as is needed to meet the kind of commercial aims of the company rather than some kind of higher moral aim.

Facebook has introduced this thing called the Oversight Board, which is quite interesting. It's a kind of quasi-independent body which can review the company's own decisions and has sometimes sort of overturned them. In one way, that's a positive step. But again, the republican would say, well, we shouldn't have to rely on the goodwill of Mark Zuckerberg and Nick Clegg for

that Oversight Board to exist. And there's a reason why no such thing exists in other companies, because they've chosen not to do it. We shouldn't have to rely on companies from time to time doing the right thing for the health of something as important as our deliberative system of democracy. So it's about changing good behaviour in the tech industry from being a matter of charity and goodwill to one of law and compliance.

**Andrew:** And Google's Ethics Advisory Council only lasted a few days, didn't it?

**Jamie:** Yeah. Google's had a bit of difficulty. A lot of these companies, they sort of set up things like ethics advisory panels and the like. Quite a few of them have unravelled when they've turned out to be essentially toothless, filled with allies from the industry. But none of this is surprising. If you let people mark their own homework, they're unlikely to be particularly harsh about it. I don't even criticise Google for that, because they're operating in an industry where, unlike in other industries of systemic social importance, there aren't that many external rules telling them what they can and can't do. And in those circumstances, they have a duty to shareholders, they're a commercial enterprise, they're going to try and make money, and they're not going to let intervening democratic and civic values make an enormous dent in that pursuit of profit.

**Andrew:** And that brings me on to what you talk about in the book about introducing new standards into this. Can you talk us through that?

**Jamie:** Standards are not a new idea. They've been around for hundreds of years. What I say is that there are two main legal pathways for holding companies accountable. One is to give individuals rights to sue companies or to sort of appeal decisions. But sometimes individual rights aren't satisfactory, because the harms that are created by digital technology are created and felt collectively. For instance, if you had a system of social media platforms which together were eroding the quality of democracy, what right

am I going to have in a court of law as an individual to pursue redress? The actual harm that's been caused to me as an individual may not even be quantifiable in monetary terms.

So what you need for problems that are systemic and society-wide are standards, where a set of generalised or specific rules apply to a particular industry, or a particular product, or a particular set of persons, and they lay down the quality of behaviour that is expected, or the quality of product that is expected. And if they're legally enforceable standards, there are consequences if companies fall below them. Now, there are standards everywhere in the rest of the world – standards for the food we eat, the buildings we walk in, the cars we drive, the roads we drive on. And there are standards in the tech industry, but in the book, I argue, not quite enough, and not quite the right ones yet.

**Andrew:** You point out how individuals in the companies, coders and others, are dealing with very sensitive functions in the work they do, the algorithms that are set and so on, and there will inevitably be ethical failures there. How can that be done within the company? Is that a question of the companies adopting new standards which are developed elsewhere, for example?

**Jamie:** One way that you might regulate companies, for instance, is by setting standards but not specifying the way that they have to be met. So for instance, you might say that a social media platform has to have in place adequate systems for the removal of misinformation about vaccines. Obviously, that's a reasonably vague legal test, but the law is filled with vague tests, and over time you hone what it means. But what you're not saying there is that a social media platform has to do certain things, or hire certain people, or implement certain protocols. You're just saying, you need to have in place adequate systems and you know best as to what those systems might look like. We, the regulator, whoever that is, will be the ultimate arbiter of whether those systems are adequate, but you need to put them in place. So that's one way. Another way is by professionalising or semi-

professionalising the tech industry, so placing duties on companies and the people who work within them to act according to certain standards, to certain norms and values like, for instance, a law firm is expected to or an accountancy or audit firm.

**Andrew:** You've got many other areas in the book which we haven't got time for today. I want to talk about a couple more. The first is specifically about social media and particularly about things like Twitter. Do you think removing anonymity would help?

**Jamie:** It would certainly help some things but it would also cause problems in other ways. Anonymity is an important part of the internet, because it allows for whistleblowers. It allows for people to resist power, whether that's state power or corporate power, with less fear of being caught or captured. At the same time, we know that when people are anonymous online, they're likely to behave in a much worse way than if it was their name and face that was on their avatar. So there's no kind of easy answer to that. And it also partly depends on the platforms. Some platforms, for instance, are much more suitable for removing anonymity. A good example might be one which is largely used by young people or children. Some platforms are not. And I wouldn't want to have a societal rule one way or the other about anonymity. But it might be that a platform that is engineered in a particular way, like, for example, Twitter, which allows for mass acts of harassment, that might be one where rules around anonymity could be fruitfully tightened. Because it's the combination of the anonymity and the engineering of the platform which leads to a kind of social problem of harassment and trolling which can make people's lives absolute misery. So it's a subtle question, I think. Despite what politicians say, there isn't a clear answer to that one.

**Andrew:** I think that's right. And then certainly, you can see on certain platforms how this can go terribly wrong, where people come under attack, but the anonymous function is a critical one in terms of whistleblowers, as

you've mentioned, plus in certain things like the Arab Spring it was used. It's a very difficult balance that one, I think.

The wider question I want to ask about in terms of this part of the book is about the renewal of democracy. You talk about referenda not being a suitable method for these for making decisions. And you talk about deliberative democracy, small group discussions, citizens' assemblies, and certainly in Bristol, these are being used. It's interesting that Bristol had its own citizens' assembly not so long ago, and that may continue. And the recent decision following a referendum, which was a choice between a mayoral system and a committee system, as I mentioned earlier on, has led to more work about deliberative democracy across the city as the new system begins to be debated and developed. How important are these kinds of things in renewing democracy?

**Jamie:** I think they are important. So the idea that I talk about in the book is deliberative mini publics. This is something that we don't use very often in this country, but it's a form of democratic art that reaches back to the Greeks. It's the idea that a bit like a jury, you impanel a group of citizens – might be five, might be 500 – for a certain period of time – might be a weekend, might be six months – to deal with a particular issue, as they did in Ireland relating to abortions, for instance.

I think in the tech industry there are loads of issues that would benefit from it. And what you do is you create ideal deliberative conditions for those citizens. You give them the opportunity to be their absolute best. You give them information, you create discussion rules and processes which allow everyone to have their say and encourage people to listen and encourage consensus. And then often what comes at the end of that is a really great outcome. The social science, the empirical evidence, suggests that when deliberative mini publics are used to resolve thorny social and political problems, they have a high degree of success.



The question that I'm asking in the book is, well, we want technology to be more democratised, might this be one way of involving citizens? And I think the answer is yes. So I think if there is a proposed merger, for instance, a company wants to buy another tech company, whether that is lawful or not will now just be determined by lawyers and policymakers cloistered away in some office somewhere. I don't see why for decisions like that, which involve systemic social questions, you might not impanel a citizens' jury to look at the facts as well. And the truth is - it asks more of us. It perhaps asks more of us than many of us think we're capable of. But either you're into democracy or you're not, and if you are, deliberative mini publics are the one way to make democracy work better and get people more involved. I'm not wild about referendums because they involve people talking across each other. And about just totting up the votes, 59-41. And deliberative mini publics are about something else. They're about encouraging us to be the best citizen versions of ourselves. I see a role for them in the development of digital technology policy, not replacing the legislature, not replacing politicians, but supplementing them.

**Andrew:** And I think the book is very clear on that. You have a number of areas for improvement and whether that is legislation or the kinds of democracy you've talked about, and each one can be adopted in different time periods for different reasons. It brings me to a wider question, which is about the need to make sure this isn't just a debate for lawyers or for technologists or for government, but really about bringing in the widest range of expertise and views. You talk at one point in the book about this being a question for philosophers, not just for lawyers, for example. And Future Politics [Susskind's previous book] is partly about bridging the gulf between arts and sciences, I felt. How important is this, that we bring in the widest range of disciplines just as we try and bring in the widest range of publics to this?

**Jamie:** Very important and you've put it really well. The problems thrown up by digital technology do not easily fall into the established categories of

thoughts that we as a civilisation have built up over time. I'm not seeking to criticise those systems, but the conversations we're having today – Are they history? A little bit. Are they political science? A little bit. Are they the study of law? A little bit. Are they the study of philosophy? A little bit. Are they the study of computer science and engineering? A little bit. Are they the study of architecture and planning? A little bit. There is no benefit, really, to pretending that it falls neatly into any of those categories. And to a hammer, everything looks like a nail. So often lawyers approach these issues in a very lawyerly way. Engineers approached them in a very engineering way. And there are deficiencies with both of those, as well as strengths.

So multidisciplinary is the name of the game here. And apart from a couple of fellowships at universities, I think I benefit as an author from not having to sort of publish in a very specific academic field in fear of straying beyond the permissible boundaries of it. I should say, by the way, there are lots of more interdisciplinary centres around now than they were five or ten years ago. But there are still nowhere near enough.

**Andrew:** It has changed, I agree. We work very closely with universities, for example, and the number of interdisciplinary centres over the past decade has improved a lot, whether it's on environmental issues, which bring in all sorts of disciplines, through to the recent Bristol History Commission, which is trying to work out what it would do, amongst other things, with the Colston statue problem, for example. We've always believed that the greater the network of people and disciplines involved, the greater the opportunities for creativity and innovation. I think this is critical in terms of the tech world.

One final question is about the ability and capabilities of us to keep up with this world. Tech moves very quickly. Innovation happens very quickly. Our institutions are slower to respond. Laws and regulations are even slower to respond. How can we be made more capable and able to deal with this fast-changing world?

**Jamie:** That is one of the biggest and most difficult questions when it comes to tech regulation. It's not the only one. There are others too, like, for instance, you know, the private sector is a lot better resourced than the public sector, and – particularly in the States, but also here – often outguns regulators inside and outside of court. Public sector bodies struggle to retain particularly good scientific talent these days because a lot the action is at the big companies, because they have more data and more processing power. There are the international issues we talked about. It's quite hard sometimes to regulate at the national level, when problems seem to span borders. All of this is really hard.

The answers aren't very simple either. One of the things I argue for in the book is that we have to move away from a vision of the state kind of playing catch up. So if something goes wrong, then the state steps in to fix it. What we should instead have is a system in which regulation forms part of the lifecycle of digital technology right from the start, which actually isn't so difficult given a lot of digital technologies rely heavily on state help in order to get off the ground, or at least on the kind of stable infrastructure and apparatus of Western and other democracies.

So I argue in the book for a more forward-looking state. I think there should be people in government whose job it is to anticipate problems with anticipatory governance and try to come up with ideas for fixing them before they've gone wrong. That's literally what I do in my work. I don't see why governments couldn't do it either. I would like to see the state more involved right from the start of the innovative process [as]...a fence at the top of the cliff rather than an ambulance at the bottom, to borrow a phrase. There are other ways as well. For instance, I think if you impose professional duties on people who work in the tech industry – duties to act with integrity, duties to be a fit and proper person – it's a bit like in finance and law, what you do is you create a regulatory system that is flexible enough to deal with new problems. So if I know, for instance, that I have to act with integrity, that applies just as much to a new technology that no one's heard of before as it

did to the one that I was working on before. So there are all kinds of ways of getting better.

Do I think will ever be perfect? Absolutely not. But that's not the test, the test is can we do something better than what we currently have?

**Andrew:** And on innovation, you do make the point that greater regulation laws, ethical standards, certificates, whatever, don't stop pharma, for example, innovating. Tech seems to be out of the loop on this one.

**Jamie:** Yes. And there's this fallacy that innovation and regulation are enemies, but often regulation generates innovation. For instance, if you set standards below which no company can fall, that encourages a degree of healthy competition to meet and beat those standards. So you might have a competition in the future for a more transparent algorithm, for a more socially beneficial social media platform. I don't think that's a bad thing.

You also give people faith. I would much rather eat in a restaurant that has a food hygiene certificate than one which doesn't. The same goes for technology products. I'd much rather step into a heavily regulated self-driving car than one that that wasn't. And they're unified standards. If you look at GDPR, for all its problems, what it's done is – and it's considered to be burdensome on the industry – but by creating harmonised rules about the use and abuse of data, it makes it quite easy for companies in different countries to speak to each other and to transact with each other, and that's business generating rather than business suppressing.

So don't buy the argument that all regulation is the enemy of innovation. Some is. Bad regulation is. And, sometimes, yes, just sometimes, putting the brakes on might be necessary before we design or unleash some earth-destroying technology. But by and large...I don't accept the arguments that we can only live with the benefits of digital technology if we have to live in the thrall of the unaccountable power of those who design and control it. I

don't think we accept that in other fields of life, and I don't think we should accept it technology either.

**Andrew:** Certainly GDPR made us look at our how we collect data and use data. It was applicable across the board. You do acknowledge that achieving meaningful change is going to be fiendishly hard, and you do say this is not a blueprint, but this book, I think, is a fine example of promoting learning and debate. It helps us move forward, at least helping us to decide what we might do in the future. And as you say, we need to solve these challenges because human and technological flourishing go hand in hand.

**Jamie:** Yes, or at least they should. That's what we should be working towards.

**Andrew:** *The Digital Republic* is out now from Bloomsbury and available in bookshops. Thank you, Jamie, for joining us today. Thank you.

**Jamie:** Andrew, thank you for having me.

*This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. The full version of the interview is in the recording.*