

Where is digital democracy?

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Has the democratic cycle, now two centuries old, reached the end of its life with the new age of digital democracy? Is digital democracy a source of hope with new forms of citizen participation, or on the contrary, a source of danger, because it polarises the public space and destabilises our institutions with fake news?

From Brexit to the victory of Donald Trump, the presence of Marine Le Pen in the second round of the presidential election and the victory of the Five Star movement and the League in Italy, the rise of populist parties has revealed a profound questioning of democratic institutions. The great paradox of our times is that digital technology, which encouraged great expectations in terms of new forms of participatory and citizen democracy, seems to be contributing to this rise in populism by polarising public spaces, as seen in the circulation of fake news. Digital democracy is balanced on a fine line between hopes and storms.

The hopes: digital democracy would make it possible to directly engage citizens and civil society and ensure greater transparency in institutions. Civic technology or "open government" initiatives illustrate this furthering of our democracies. Digital technology could lead to a "flattening" of the world, a horizontality that could re-establish citizens' trust in their institutions, and reconcile citizens and experts in a world of increasing populism and a worsening crisis in traditional democratic representation. Democratic innovation could also be an essential source of well-being: the same policy has very different effects on citizens' satisfaction, depending on their participation in its conception and implementation.

More generally, the advent of digital technology brings the possibility of renewal in public action and the role of governments, which was illustrated well by Tim O'Reilly in a seminal article, "Beyond Transparency". The regulation of public action by algorithms would enable more agile, reactive, efficient and personalised governmental methods. Numerous transformations are already at work in different countries, following the pivotal initiatives of Michael Flowers and his predictive analytics programme in New York City.

Digital democracy also raises the hope of a new conception of the State, involving a 3.0 public action co-constructed with citizens and public services on platforms – hence the term "platform State". The digital revolution is not only a technological and economic revolution; it is a revolution in terms of politics and citizenship.

The storms: while digital technology represents numerous possibilities for our democracies, the challenges and risks are also formidable. Firstly, digital technology contributes to a strongly polarised public space, as demonstrated by Yochai Benkler, Professor at the Harvard Berkman Centre. Social medias strengthen the filter bubble, to echo the title of Eli Pariser's bestseller. The personalisation of news streams and search results can harm political debate by guiding people towards information that reflects their personal preconceptions. We only search for, like and retweet ideas we already agree with, and the algorithms only propose content of this type to us, shielding us from everything that might disturb our vision of the world.

Social medias also boost the transmission of rumours and false information, fake news, which can destabilise our democracies. We all tend to prefer heuristic, rapid reasoning over longer, more reasoned arguments, as stressed by the works of the American-Israeli psychologist and

economist, Daniel Kahneman. These cognitive biases make us vulnerable to an initial exposure to fake news. This is all the truer because, as revealed by a recent study published in the *Science* review, fake news travels faster than real news. The electoral triumphs of Brexit, Donald Trump and the populist parties were partly attributable to fake news.

An additional threat looms with the advent of artificial intelligence: the governing of our societies by algorithms. The most pessimistic, like Evgeny Morozov in his evocatively-titled book, "To Save Everything, Click Here", see the end of politics and democracy. The first challenge raised by the emergence of artificial intelligence is ethical. The example of the driverless car is a case in point. What happens in the event of an accident involving a car and a passer-by? Should the algorithm save the driver or the passer-by as a priority? Who is responsible – the algorithm, the designer of the algorithm or the user? And how should the laws be changed in such a context? The second major question is that of democratic control over algorithms: when citizens are affected by an algorithm, they should be informed. The most famous example is the APB (French higher-learning admissions) programme, which implicitly uses random draws in allocating students to universities, in order to manage the constraints of establishments' admission capacity, without the students – or their parents – being informed. It is crucial to regain democratic control over algorithms in public action to guarantee transparency and fairness. The third challenge consists of returning citizens' control over their data, known as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and promoting common digital property. Many data are of general interest, for example to further our knowledge in medical research. How can we ensure that these data are not privatised by groups, and how can the State coordinate their sharing to improve research and innovation, while ensuring their protection? Lastly, how can we protect ourselves against the circulation of fake news that can destabilise our democracies? What is the role of laws and regulations, and how effective are they?

To answer these questions, a technological approach is insufficient. The digital revolution is first and foremost a political and ethical one.