

Digital technology and the stake for representative democracy

Dear interlocutors,

For two and a half centuries, since the American revolution, the Western world has existed and evolved under the guidance of the values of liberal democracy. Our societies, in which we had the blessing to be born and raised, were the first in global history to be established upon the solid foundations of the “Institutions”.

The Parliament, the Judiciary, the Press, the Independent Authorities, the International Organizations, they all seem to be rather self-evident nowadays, though they are the outcome of a conscious and incessant effort to stabilize and modernize democracy. Our democracy is the state which created such conditions of prosperity that this day, in the era of post-modernity, we can talk about a progress of technology, which is beyond any imagination, the so-called digital or God like technology.

What really is digital technology, how do we perceive it today and in what way and to what extent will technology and democracy be able to move in parallel in the future, dear interlocutors?

The main trait of digital technology is velocity. In a matter of minutes or even seconds, millions of people have shared Russia's invasion in Ukraine this past year, the demonstration of oppressed women in Iran, the devastating fires in many regions of the world, and just a few days ago the devastating earthquake in neighboring Turkey. The most prominent event though, which asserts the above allegation, is that humanity two years ago has witnessed an exceptional achievement of synthetic biology, the mRNA vaccine against Covid-19. This vaccine was manufactured rapidly, saving millions of lives and giving back to the citizens around the world the freedom which we had been divested of for a prolonged time period due to the quarantine. The power of this velocity is unprecedented and makes us all participants at the same time in the same “event”. This participation includes “responsibility” in the “decision” but also “welfare” in the “outcome”, which are core components of a liberal democracy. How responsibly did we behave, dear colleagues, when we got vaccinated against Covid-19 and how happy we were seeing our beloved grandparents not getting ill and being around us? Thus, to what extent did the rapid coordination of the scientists around the world help us feel safe again and carry on with our lives without fear?

Digital technology is nonetheless also a common possession, almost of the entire global community, which makes it omnipotent. The vast majority of people globally own one at least mobile phone or tablet or some other “smart” electronic device. Therefore, we are all transmitters and receivers of millions or even billions of pieces of information. This information can be collected, recorded and analyzed on special platforms and establish the environment of the so-called artificial intelligence. Why is all this happening? The key purpose is to identify and delineate the difficulties of our daily life, to assess the risks and to make up possible scenarios. To date, human beings with their linear mode of thinking run behind the events. The objective, using the tool of the exponential technological progress, is to achieve a dynamic cognizance, a dynamic diagnosis and foresee the uncertainties in an exponentially shaped future by all means and to place ourselves, to the practicable extent, ahead of the events. Will we be able to predict in the future a massive earthquake like the one

hitting Turkey? Probably not. But we will be able to be more prepared by collecting and coupling information from geological, climatic changes or human interventions concerning construction activities, use of certain materials and tens to thousands of other data that may seem irrelevant on their own, but they can lead us to proper conclusions in case they are used properly. Only then will we be able to make the most appropriate decisions for a series of pain issues concerning safety, health, education, global environment.

Therefore, we are talking about a new society identified by data and algorithms. We are talking about a world that has changed. A hybrid world that now obeys to different rules. Perhaps we are talking about many individual worlds that each makes individually through his/her “smart” device. Will we just watch this new reality from afar or get off the couch? Because democracy signifies a sense of community, a common perception as to the truth, a common strive for life. It means action instead of inaction.

Nowadays, the conventional ties between citizens and politicians ebb away. Citizens fall victim to misinformation and politicians succumb to populism. Social Media shape “truth” through fake news, with no control whatsoever regarding the delivery of information. Digital democracy often turns into a perilous habitat which puts the constitutional boundaries of democracy into test. Do we enjoy being part of an online arena where we are all right and stand up for our own unique truth?

What is required is institutional strengthening and technological armoring and this can be achieved only within a democracy that respects itself and its citizens.

In the past year, the Declaration for the future of the Internet and the Code of Practice on disinformation were signed, aiming at the accuracy and validity of the news which are distributed on the internet but also at the accountability of the provision of information. A global effort is being made through Regulatory Authorities to ensure adequate supervision of Cyberspace and actions are taken regarding competition, data protection, technological design. Thus we will feel on the one hand more secure while on the other hand we will be able to have access to numerous valid information with the aim to participate in democratic procedures. Our representative democracy can and must become more direct. We are the citizens of the world, we are the ones to question, to react but also plan a better and certainly more democratic future. States which, alas, are not renown for their democratic modus operandi such as China, Russia, Brazil are the great absents from this effort. If we get better, they might as well get better.

Moreover, our democratic society should invest in digital humanism, that is to say, in those human traits that distinct us from the machines, these smart but impersonal devices that we hold in our hands and become one. Empathy, imagination, contact, touch with the person next to out or across us are our privileges, they are human privileges. We should be trained again, we must win them back. We used to call them soft skills but now they must become hard skills. It is the copyright of our human existence and of our democracy. Because democracy, dear interlocutors, is that state that brings about welfare which in turn creates an environment of euphoria. In this environment living conditions are not the same for everyone. Vulnerable social groups need us, they need our help. In this way, inequalities will be mitigated and social cohesion will be achieved. Thus, the specter of populism, which is embraced by irresponsible politicians and policies, artfully concealing their authoritarian mask, will be increasingly drifted away.

We are in the midst of a transitional era and our generation, the generation Z, must not be a mere spectator of the radical developments. We are the generation which has to manage the heaviest ever volume of information in human history with the greatest speed of transmission in a world that should continue to exist and move forwards under the principles of liberal democracy. Are we all set? One thing is for sure: our parents' heritage is heavy. We should not let them down and I am positive, my dear colleagues, that we will make it.