DIGITAL CHALLENGES TO DEMOCRACY: POLITICS OF AUTOMATION, ATTENTION, AND ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract: In the last decade, digital media platforms have grown out of their mere communication functions and became inherently political governance systems. They connect politicians, voters, large businesses, and major advertisement companies that commodify user attention. This is already changing the nature of the capital-politics relationship and is likely to significantly alter the nature of resource generation in online and offline political networks. Democracies are particularly vulnerable to the shift in online governance and rent structures due to higher Internet penetration per capita. The current business model of digital engagement, advertising, and political messaging are prophesied to lock all sides into a vicious circle increasingly threatened by more extreme content. Fake news, trolls, bots, and algorithms exploit this rent generation cycle by feeding on measurement metrics of the current rentier economics of digital media platforms. This trend has generated degrees of concern around concepts dubbed as “networked feudalism,” “Authoritarianism 2.0 or 3.0,” and “Cyber-Communism.” This article evaluates the claims of all three main critiques of online political structures from a political engagement and resource generation perspective. The article argues that digital space is still very much a democratic space, albeit imperfect, that needs to address two fundamental issues: fixing metrics of digital engagement and bringing human biases in algorithms into more expanded public and political debate. Ultimately, “saving democracy” in digital space largely depends on institutionalizing these two processes by giving users greater sovereignty over their data.

Digital interconnectedness was prophesied to usher in greater understanding between people. It was supposed to be good for democracy, political participation, and representation of disenfranchised segments of the population. Digital communication did some of these things, but failed to fulfill a range of other expectations. The golden age of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has witnessed greater political polarization, fiercer far-right, anti-immigration and authoritarian movements, and greater confusion within online
interactions through mass oversupply of information.¹ Social media has brought like-minded people closer together, but widened the gap between opposing views.² Digital tribes have begun to cluster around their online tribal structures and developed hostile views toward opinion, news, and expression from other tribes.³ Information-seeking behavior, long heralded as one of the strongest political tools of citizens, has been significantly manipulated by fake news. With the help of algorithmically generated search results and automated accounts known as bots that flood online debates with incorrect or old information, the very nature of information flow is disrupted.⁴ Information overload did not make people more “rational” and strengthen their verification heuristics; it made them more emotional and automatic in their responses toward content validating their pre-existing biases.⁵ By playing into the “feel good” aspect of human psychology, factually distorted news, produced in exponential quantities, have found a life of their own and influenced significant political processes, the most important of which being elections, the foundation of democracy.

Furthermore, perhaps more problematic is the role of technology companies in democratic participation. The social media revolution and its impact on social movements, political engagement, and information-seeking has rendered top social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube political actors, at least on par with media corporations. News feeds and featured posts are run by dedicated algorithms that are either tailored according to a user’s past digital behavior, such as likes, comments, and engagement with posts, as well as advertisers who pay large sums of money to be featured. This puts technology companies at the center of political information-seeking and agenda-setting, two fundamental processes of democracy. Furthermore, hate speech, group-targeting, and fake news disseminated by bots significantly increase the volume of negative messaging online, incurring greater weight over how policies are communicated and how voter preferences are formed.

At the heart of the problem is the “intentions versus business model” debate: namely, the discussion over whether technology companies are deliberately, or at least passively, facilitating negative political messaging, or if the issue is more structural, belonging to the for-profit business model of technology as a vocation. Maximizing user engagement to increase revenue, for better or for worse, inevitably leads to more extreme or emotional messaging on social media platforms and balloons into disproportionate effect by platform algorithms. As far as algorithms are concerned, users’ engagement volume, favorable or unfavorable, with cat videos and political violence belong to a similar demand pattern. The kind of political messaging users “like” and engage with, including political figures they support and share, lead to the appearance of similar figures and messages online, leading to self-
Digital Challenges to Democracy

Generated and algorithmically supported filter bubbles. Without equal exposure to different views, users end up thinking their view is supported by the rest of the population and develop more extreme and entrenched opinions on politics. This has led to unprecedented levels of polarization over emotionally charged policy issues, fed by bot-generated news that fit into our version of events. Bombarded with information overload, we rely on heuristics; we end up sharing what our like-minded friends share and submerging into the opinion tribe we create for ourselves, with the help of a business model that monetizes our attention.

Digital Challenges to Democracy: Networked Feudalism

The mainstream understanding of digital feudalism builds upon the Habermassian interpretation of enclosure and distributionary monopoly to examine how political participation is negatively influenced by private technology actors. According to this interpretation, technology companies' monopoly over "closed technologies," software and platforms that don't allow users to alter or modify interface, incurs significant biases over how users interact with digital communication, which in turn alters how political participation through these technologies reinforce centralized control structures, rather than participatory politics. If we accept the Marx-Engels influenced interpretation of feudalism as a system where the power rests with those that control modes of production, this logic is partly true.

However, the definition needs some expansion, especially since the original understanding of feudalism refers to a rather different state of affairs than just centralized control structures. Feudalism in its origins and rationale orbits a military logic of creating a fighting caste that is organized into three layers of power separation: lords, their vassals, and fiefdoms. Even when feudalism as a concept is stretched, it includes the clerical establishment—religion—and its binary oscillation between the wielders of armed authority in the control of the means of production. The fundamental logic of feudalism is the supply of protection in exchange for service. Those with either material resources of protection, like the ability, authority, and legitimacy to raise an army, or religious capital, including the ability to bless, shame, or excommunicate with authority, oversee vassals and fiefs that supply the system either with military or non-military services. To that end, it is not those who control modes of production, but those who can coerce modes of production that accumulate the real power in feudalism.

Therefore, the understanding of digital feudalism that is more in tune with technology would be rather different. First, it would have to entail a fundamental understanding of security and survival, since these two pillars form the basis of why feudalism emerged in the first place. Yes, cybersecurity is an important aspect.
of digital space. But it is one that is still not fully independent from physical variables of security. Second, it has to link security provision with rent generation; namely, the rent generated in digital space should overwhelmingly feed the primary providers of digital security. The for-profit business model of digital technology is indeed in danger of developing feudalistic tendencies, but advertising and digital content by themselves cannot be interpreted as feudalistic structures. Digital security is not a monolithic term and means different things to different players in the digital domain. For most users, digital security implies identity, asset, and basic rights protection in an interconnected domain. It can imply anonymity, VPN-masking, and privacy measures. For online sales and advertising companies, security means trusted exchange, meaning no fraudulent transactions and better authentication, along with cybersecurity of their network: defense against malware, viruses, and worms, etc. For governments, the challenge is more complex, since they must navigate both their own security considerations, such as access control, monitoring, and surveillance, as well as constitutional and legal responsibilities to address the security concerns of citizens and businesses.

Furthermore, the control of enclosed digital territories by a small group of powerful corporations, or closed groups of programmer oligarchies in control of algorithms that have power over the digital experiences of millions of people, still does not fit into the feudalism concept. Resources generated from these interactions don’t necessarily determine security relations in this network, and power is still very much determined in profit metrics, rather than security metrics. Deriving from securitization literature, the debate on digital feudalism does not have a referent object.\textsuperscript{11} We don’t have a commonly agreed understanding of what needs to be protected, nor a primary “warrior class” that provides security, so that a singular feudal organization around it can be formed. We can certainly talk about feudalisms embedded within micro understandings of securitization in a digital order, but this is never discussed as such in the existing debate. More importantly, neither states nor technology companies are at the top of the digital food chain. States challenge other states, as well as nonstate actors; in turn, states, too, are challenged by nonstate actors themselves. This prevents the emergence of a commonly agreed-upon concept of feudalism, as different actors securitize the Internet and digital interconnectedness in often mutually exclusive ways with no single actor dominating the security modes of production of the digital space.

**From Each According to His Attention: Cyber-Communism**

What about, then, two other possibilities to “digital democracy” that are theorized in mainstream debate: Cyber-Communism or Authoritarianism 2.0/3.0? There are several interpretations of both authoritarianism and communism in
digital space, mainly structured around the redistribution mechanisms of both, along with the role of the state in production modes and with respect to their citizens. Digital communism is hard to distinguish between digital Marxism and socialism as they are discussed in mainstream debate, but it is often interpreted as free distribution of digital commodities, such as eliminating intellectual property rights, or presenting commercial software, codes, and algorithms in open-source venues. Another variant of digital communism focuses on decentralized Internet relations, favoring autonomous structures of self-administering digital systems, much like the social economy model posited in Leninist variants. This reflects one of the core dilemmas in communism, whereby a centralized distribution of goods and services, along with autonomous social economy structures, are equally advocated. More specifically, how the notion of common access to file and data sharing platforms, as well as knowledge cooperatives like Wikipedia, the Open-Source Movement, and pirated material, relate to modes of production is the subject of extensive debate. General social knowledge, in Marxist terms, could be a direct force of production, and thus systems and platforms that are tasked with the accumulation of this general knowledge are parts of the collective capital.

Cyber-Communist variants, including Marxism and socialism, have been constructed in close proximity to the politics of media power in the writings of Dallas Smythe, Hans Magnus Enzenberger, Herberg Simon, and Graham Murdock. Dallas Smythe was one of the earliest scholars to conceptualize the political economy of media and communications within the context of Marxism, using eight analytical nodes. These eight analytical nodes are materiality, monopoly capitalism, audience commodification and advertising, media communication as the base of capitalism, labor, technological determinism, dialectic of hegemony, and dialectic of science. Hans Magnus Enzenberger expanded upon these nodes by conceptualizing the media structure as the “mind industry,” which prioritized the sale of the existing order. This order isn’t the sale of a product, as for Enzenberger, modern communication technologies “have no product.” Instead, the modern structure of technology sells itself, and it does so by selling better versions of users back to themselves in the form of social approval, including likes and retweets. This was later reconfigured by Herbert Simon’s emphasis on “attention as a commodity” and “attention as an economy.” Audiences are exploited by the very means by which they engage with media—attention—and that is then sold as a commodity in the form of advertisement. For Smythe, this was less exploitation and more surplus value generation, as he constructed users not as passive objects, but participants in a wider structure, driven by their desires for approval and consumption. Users are taking part in media capital generation structure, not because they are obligated to, as in communism, but because they choose to do so, as in
consumerism. Graham Murdock built upon these claims to construct the power of media companies' production means within the context of their agenda-setting power and on their "economic and political structures." These structures are built on their ability to "sell the status-quo," rather than a specific line of product. In that line, both the approval and criticism of the system has to be communicated through the system itself, commodifying all exchanges regardless of their sentiment and belief in the status quo.

Simultaneously, a separate line of "culture industry" scholarship established more direct connections between media regimes and politics. Horkheimer and Adorno both diagnosed the rise of German fascism, Stalinist lineage, and consumer capitalism in the same light: failure of the revolutionary potency of the working class. For both, the failure of workers to generate their true movement has led to their bandwagoning with Hitler in Germany, hijacking by Stalinism in the USSR, and exploitation by capitalism in the US. Marcuse diagnosed this continual failure of the working classes through "technological rationality": the emergence of ever more sophisticated technological interactions that generate individual reaction, not action. Marcuse understood technology as an inherently addictive domain, whose constant evolution into more advanced forms of interface and immersion was creating constant alienation. In adopting from Marx's notion of fetishism, Lukács hypothesizes this as "phantom objectivity." Phantom objectivity inserts technological advances into the heart of human relations in a way that intensifies human interactions but overwhelms human attention to the extent that it conceals the fundamental nature and reflexes of human communication.

The nature of how digital media platforms are designed both in terms of interface attractiveness and social validation mechanisms, specifically reinforces this mechanism of addiction. According to Christian Fuchs, such feedback loops of attention, attraction, and commodification inevitably lead to a reduction of human agency toward mere consumption of digital advertisements. In addition, what is essentially consumed aren't products themselves but cultural commodities to which humans belong. Digital media systems have to sustain versions of the message that capitalism is the only possible system that can produce and disseminate meaning for consumers and the cultural context to which they belong. Indeed, Smythe posits that "the starting point for a general Marxist theory of communications is the theory of commodity exchange," which in our terms is how attention to digital content becomes a currency that rises into the primary medium of financial interactions. Fuchs pursues this line in asserting that social media has become a new medium of capital accumulation, which attracts participation and engagement through attractive, and often addictive, platforms, including the "promise for change" and championing human agency to "make a difference."
was evidenced in the debate on "Twitter revolutions," "participatory cultures," and e-petitions, digitizing some state functions for citizen engagement, and generating a snowball effect that eventually clustered bigger investors and large quantities of people into the same manageable and pliant medium. "Platform Imperialism," as Dal Yong Jin posits, is structured upon this very premise: digital platforms sustain their hegemonic status by acting as the medium of dissent about all digital relations and interactions, including those that contain criticism about these platforms.24

Ultimately, digital communism debates concern a broad number of issues ranging from corporations' online commodity production, including capital concentration and centralization in digital platforms, production of media capital, and labor relations of digital platforms, and commodity circulation designed to sustain their hegemonic status at the heart of the means of digital production. Too often, however, the term "digital communism" is used as a pejorative term to define open-source software, content, or crowd-sourced platforms and digital initiatives like Innocentive, Hypios, Innovation Exchange, Kaggle, Wikipedia, and so on. However, it is built on a vision of information society as one that is ruled by transnational platform corporations, pervasive surveillance, and intrusive governments. The general purpose of the system is its own continuity and status-quo power, with those that have the greatest market influence also possessing the largest weight over content production, curation, and directing global digital attention. While states' impacts are measured through their control over news and agenda-setting power online, "platform capitalism" is engaged in a symbiotic relationship with them, building their independent networks of influence and framing online, while playing along with state interests to recentralize power back in the hands of a controllable elite.

Believe, Obey, Retweet: Authoritarianism 2.0

Digital Authoritarianism, as conceptualized in mainstream tech debate, is mainly about order and control-oriented, top-down practices that incur restrictive costs for online expression, engagement, and digital rights.25 Another variant of this conceptualization is the proliferation of pro-fascist messaging in the form of Internet trolls and bots and the diffusion of far-right extremist content on the web.26 The 20th century debate on technology and the management of life as a whole, as posited by Foucault and Canguilhem, fits modern ICT debates better.27 The way technology and science are ordered by fascist regimes eventually becomes a social force, extending beyond its utilitarian origins, and starts determining the bounds of expression and rights in a modern society. As far as the centrality of technology is concerned, there may be some cases of arguing for the validity of "techno-fascism." But authoritarianism is also heavily state centric: "...all within
the state, nothing against the State, nothing outside the state."28 There is no higher organizing order other than centralized and repressive regimes that are substantially different than the private-capitalist structure of modern technology.

Authoritarianism-as-modernism pursues the same radical understanding of progress compared to older forms of European conservatism, seeking to experiment with newer and more repressive forms of organization in social life to maximize progress as understood by advances in science and technology.29 In such experimentation with social life, all sub-groups of organization are suppressed to uphold the dominant single group and its symbols. Views that don’t conform to the hegemonic ideology are eliminated, along with competing forms of labor organization; both are far from the diversity seen in digital space.30 Umberto Eco’s reconceptualization of “eternal fascism” does bring certain new elements to the old definition.31 However, none of Eco’s fourteen points, be it “rejection of the Enlightenment,” “disagreement as treason,” or “contempt for the weak,” apply to the digital space. Despite problems with resource generation mechanisms, ICTs are modernist, rife with disagreement, and often mobilize to aid the poor and those in need. A much better conceptualization of digital media fascism was made in Herbert Marcuse’s “one-dimensional man,” whereby in a consumer society “humans become extensions of the commodities that they buy,” generating their self-worth and self-view through ownership of technology.32 This renders technological societies, by definition, fascist in Marcuse’s view as it relates to total control of social relations through a centrally overseen network of interactions. Although all social interactions are overseen and monitored by states and technology companies, it is currently hard to assert that this surveillance mechanism has generated an Orwellian system of direct repression. This point was later criticized by Alasdair MacIntyre for being excessively pessimistic of consumers’ passivity in the face of advertisement and techno-determinism, arguing instead that users have agency and they must be criticized for their choice in sustaining dysfunctions of tech capitalism, rather than pitied as a passive sufferer.33

ICTs did have positive impact on political participation by making political campaigning, grassroots networking, voting, information-seeking, and even protesting easier.34 But it also made censorship, surveillance, citizen profiling, and tracking highly granular, as well as rendered extremism and disruption more problematic.35 States have adapted to ICTs and their impact on politics through a multitude of measures, ranging from censorship, information overload, and troll and bot armies, to restrictions, heavier controls on ISPs, and using ICTs to expand surveillance powers as a whole.36 Although for countries like China, Iran, or Russia, ICTs were already securitized to merit nationalization of platforms and search engines, for much of the Western world, the Occupy Movement, Syrian
refugee crisis, and the rise of the Islamic State became reasons for increased counterterrorism surveillance and restrictions online. In the same vein, foreign and domestic terrorists and extremists in the West substantially benefited from the Internet and ICTs, recruiting, planning, and communicating online. Moreover, digital platforms themselves have adopted a hybrid role between dissenters and governments. Numerous studies have demonstrated how digital tools, essential for protest and dissent planning and coordination, deliberately or passively worked with governments and intelligence agencies to help spy on these movements.

In that context, digital authoritarianism debates are also strongly related to how artificial intelligence interacts with digital communication platforms. As the Internet and digital interconnectedness widened the space outside states' control, states fought back by investing in surveillance technologies that aim to centralize communication regulation, monitor large segments of the population through real-time data, engage in mass propaganda, and do all of this with a diminishing reliance on slow human capital. Both machine learning and artificial intelligence architectures are built on the premise that human relations—political, economic and social—can be distilled down to common characteristics that are identifiable and sortable through non-human mechanisms. Algorithms are key to offering digital media services reliably and continuously to make increasingly more complex decisions, and to streamline collection and storage of human behavior into quantifiable patterns. From that perspective, there is an inherently authoritarian dimension to automation, orbiting mass-surveillance and the collection of unprecedented amount of citizen information in the government-private sector nexus. Yet the nature of human biases embedded in algorithms are usually omitted from the wider debate on their political effect. When the Shanghai Jiao Tong University created a facial recognition system to "predict" criminal behavior, for example, testing convicted criminal faces against those of innocent civilians, it completely omitted the possibility that the variances of facial expressions could be a result of prison conditions, rather than dormant criminal tendencies. This embedded bias then became the foundation of an algorithm that, in theory, could test the "criminality" of individuals based on their facial patterns, potentially leading to significant misjudgments.

Algorithms have also been offered as a sacrificial lamb by governments and tech companies against mounting criticism of automated bad decisions. When Facebook and Google pushed anti-refugee campaign content in key swing states before the US elections, both blamed algorithms as the culprit, arguing that the automated increase in screen time of such content was a result of advertisements. Regardless of the intentions of specific tech companies, the fault lies at the heart of a wider business model. The foundation of the contemporary digital media system rests
on the monetization of digital attention through metrics that emphasize engagement, such as likes, comments, and retweets, which, as a social behavioral trend, tends to cluster around emotionally-charged, extreme content.\textsuperscript{45} Such content then appears more frequently in users' news feeds and selected posts, offering ad companies the ideal intersection of profitability and ad efficiency. This locks all sides in a polarizing vicious circle whereby extreme content gets more interaction and is measured as more popular in online platforms, leading to the clustering of exponentially greater volumes of money around the production and dissemination of such content.\textsuperscript{46} This directly feeds into political campaigns and political advertising, in addition to the tone of regular political messaging people encounter in digital platforms. In a medium that is designed to encourage and reward extreme messaging with engagement, the natural result is unprecedented polarization and offline political engagement with leaders that sustain this extreme narrative.\textsuperscript{47}

With the way both production means and resource generation mechanisms are structured in digital communication, trolls and bots are an inevitability. Trolls address hyper-engagement with emotionally charged content, exploiting psychological response mechanisms of online users. What bots do is simply increase troll effects exponentially, bombard users with larger volumes of fake or manipulated content, and exploit the very organizational model of online interaction mechanisms.\textsuperscript{48} Unchallenged by counterarguments from rivaling views, people submerge into their respective truths, eliminating the effect of doubt and maximizing self-righteousness about one's own views. People, too, are responsible for this state of affairs by blocking and muting tools provided by the system, again, as a result of their own demand. What renders social media and digital advertising link as "authoritarian," perhaps, is less the top-down organization of the system, or the presence of a dictatorial body on top of the system, and more the culture of engagement and resource generation. All levels of the digital hierarchy are operating in this culture as parts of the same asymmetrically automated relationship.

**Except for All the Others: Can Digital Space Remain Democratic?**

Digital space is not feudal because the production means are not centralized around a single, overarching understanding of security and survival that determines the nature of feudal relationship. It is not communist because the entire business model of online rent generation is structured around commodification of attention in a vaguely controlled capitalist environment.\textsuperscript{49} It is also certainly not fascist because it is not driven by central, direct economic planning, it is not quite militarist, and despite problematic applications, it does not constitute a state of suspension of the rule of law. More importantly, calls to reform digital space are not met with imprisonment or death. Digital space is still a democracy doomed
by its own rent-generating mechanics and institutions, similar to the challenges associated with offline democracy. The capitalism-democracy nexus has survived multiple crises and scored a longer lifespan compared to all other alternatives, and despite current ills, the digital space is already democratic, compared to other alternatives, albeit imperfect and vulnerable to manipulation.

The question of digital democracy links closely to debates on virtual community associated with studies by Howard Rheingold, Manuel Castells, and Craig Calhoun. Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community* constructs the web as a parallel reality to physical realities, with a fundamental transformative power to affect physical politics and social relations.\(^50\) This transformative power came from the Internet’s ability to offer a separate medium of interaction, rather than merely mirroring or complementing physical reality. It is there that Rheingold’s alternative realities of the Internet is an act of escapism, derived from his study of The Well (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link, one of the oldest virtual communities still active) where hierarchies and power relations are fundamentally restructured in favor of dissidents in the physical realm. This escapism also contains a potential to establish new communities, alternatives to those in the physical world, with the ability to impact, alter, and augment those physical communities. Castells does not separate virtual and physical communities; rather, he constructs digital space within physical space, as a part of physical communities. *The Information Age* depicts on-screen experiences as an extension of the physical experience, instead of alternate to it, but one that is unifying and centralizing.\(^51\) Castells diagnosed this unifying and homogenizing aspect of the Internet as the source of how virtual space can change reality in the physical work. Later in *The Internet Galaxy*, Castells argues that the growing irrelevance of geography through the Internet leads to a restructuring of social and political relations online through the creation of a digital community with similar political and world views and potentially having similar expectations from political processes, locality, and representation.\(^52\) Craig Calhoun focused on this indirect relationship and the resultant loose communities it generates by offering a middle way argument, stipulating that digital relations are supplementary to physical relations, rather than an alternative to them.\(^53\) Calhoun locates the power of digital community, engagement, and representation specifically in this reinforcing space; it is the multiplier effect of online social relations that enhance physical interactions and communities. Yet Calhoun was skeptical about the democratizing aspect of this multiplier effect. He found relations that are not culturally specific as inherently weak and lacking the power to reinforce representation and engagement. Digital space, therefore, brings like-minded people closer together but cannot create new political possibilities beyond those to which digital actors already subscribe.
H. Akin Unver

This debate is important because it links directly to current political trends in online versus offline political engagement. Despite the endogeneity problems associated with Internet use and political engagement, the relationship between the two is well established when controlled both for interest and efficacy or trust.\textsuperscript{54} Furthermore, digital space has so far recorded more vibrant criticism in social media, chat rooms, or messenger programs in both liberal and illiberal regimes, although the exact expression of this dissent yields different results in numerous studies.\textsuperscript{55} Pippa Norris, for example, demonstrated how participation in e-petitions, protests, and sit-ins has been altered through digital communication technologies, although her later work with Ronald Inglehart demonstrated how political polarization in Western democracies have largely resulted in a backlash against the much-prophesized digital democracy argument.\textsuperscript{56} In a study on American, Australian, and British young voters, political use of social media directly correlates to offline political activism, with similar patterns of polarization observed both online and offline.\textsuperscript{57} In another study, citizen-initiated campaigning outside the United States is observed as a political participation method largely benefiting the hegemonic party with little advantage to opposition movements.\textsuperscript{58} The relationship between political engagement and social media use is still being challenged, however, as numerous studies have found mixed results related to how online and offline political participation work in tandem.\textsuperscript{59}

Current contractarian trends in citizens' political engagement, evidenced by the e-petition movement in the UK, Estonia's transparency-oriented online state functions, Finland's open ministry, or Brazil's Marco Civil, are some of the examples of new adaptive processes of digital democracy.\textsuperscript{60} Despite its dangers of commodification, Facebook's "town hall" feature, which connects voters with their elected district representatives, is another pioneering move that will certainly bring together its own set of engagement problems, as well as irreversible new expectations of transparency and engagement.\textsuperscript{61} Election infrastructure will retain some aspects of vulnerability given the pace at which both hackers and patchers of global technology compete with each other. Fake news will not go away, nor will trolls or bots, since similar influences exist in offline media systems. People have outgrown them as they adapted to older technologies and will eventually outgrow digital spoilers as well.

The fundamental problem of digital space is its main currency, attention, which calls for a new political economy model properly contextualized in global politics. To that end, although digital space isn't Marxist, some of the most fundamental critiques of digital space come from the Marxist tradition. Digital communication platforms are the bridges between commodified human attention and media corporations that have become business ventures. In being so, they
automatically feed in content that elicits greater volumes of engagement, leading to more extreme types of message proliferation and attraction of capital online. This emotional attention trap fuels the rise of digital spoilers like trolls and bots and benefits leaders of extreme, and often fabricated, views. In a digital information economy of oversupply, users rely on heuristics that help validate information, which clusters them into digital tribes made up of people that think alike. Thus, interactions with opposing views are minimized, generating unprecedented polarization. Furthermore, access to the Internet is still very much defined by global and regional inequalities, preventing us from coming up with an overarching conceptualization of democracy. Digital freedoms and capabilities mean different things in different parts of the world.

However, this polarization argument needs to be contextualized. Although it has become a truism that social media contributes to political polarization, four studies remind us to contextualize these claims in context-specific cases. Vaccari et al. demonstrated how Italian and German users' political disagreement patterns regarding 2013 elections on Twitter persisted despite their ideological homophily. This is one of the major warning signs that polarization and disagreement on social media can exist between ideologically proximous users and agreement/disagreement patterns can be context-specific. In the same vein, Fletcher and Nielsen's six-country, multi-platform, comparative study demonstrates that online political audiences aren't necessarily more polarized than offline ones and, once again, that polarization is a contextual, rather than medium-specific phenomenon. Finally, Beam and Kosicki derive from a US-based survey that social media users with high levels of partisanship don't display increased partisan news consumption patterns, substantially challenging "echo chamber" or "filter bubble" arguments, at least in the US context.

For the short term, digital space is likely to remain an imperfect democracy, where the quality of representation and participation will be driven mostly by users' physical location. Users in authoritarian countries will continue to experience the web as a restricted and obsessively monitored domain, developing counter-measures such as IP masking and VPN services. They will be jailed for tweets or fined for using encrypted messaging services. They will use complex masking systems to mobilize against authoritarian governments and build elaborate layers of secret ties to privacy developers in the West. The fight for digital democracy in these countries will be more vital and survival-oriented for the future of digital technologies and will produce substantial lessons for the study of digital politics in the world beyond Western democracies. Users in liberal democracies, on the other hand, will experiment with more representative forms of political engagement, such as the Flux party in Australia, digital urban design in Canada, the g0v movement in
Taiwan, and the crowd-sourced constitution of Iceland.65 These experiences will enrich the content of democracy as a whole and define the main course of progress between technology and society.

Two key challenges remain, however: first, that the resource-generating model of digital space benefits emotionally-charged content over verified information, creating the very environment in which trolls, bots, and fake news thrive. This relationship isn’t automatic and context-specific, as explained earlier, yet is sufficiently problematic to disrupt and influence political processes during crises and emergencies. Second, political debate, as well as voter awareness, on algorithmic structures in charge of deepening and maintaining human-machine interactions is still elementary. Despite the emergence of a promising field that explores political and social implications of algorithm biases, that debate still has not attracted global mainstream political focus. Both issues can be resolved by realizing that ICTs are complex political and governance systems that generate significant public and policy attention to their political institutionalization, not always with accompanying regulation, along with measures to democratize user data and open up space for individual sovereignty in the digital world.66 While certain trends in ICT research can yield potentially authoritarian and polarizing results, this relationship is not structural, but is more context-specific. This, in turn, calls for more case study research, as well as continued debate and restructuring of the relationships between attention as a resource, digital political engagement, and architectures of automation.

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NOTES

1 Michael D. Conover, Jacob Ratkiewicz, Matthew R. Francisco, Bruno Gonçalves, Alessandro


16 Dallas W. Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory 1, no. 3 (1977), 1-27.


Digital Challenges to Democracy


Digital Challenges to Democracy


H. Akin Unver

