THE END OF POLITICS?

Are digital technologies making politics impossible?
It's a question addressed by political scientist
STEVEN MICHELS – who is not optimistic

The 2011 Arab Spring was a moment of great hope for the advance of freedom in the Middle East. At the time, the narrative credited social media for making the movement possible, insofar as Twitter, Facebook and blogs permitted citizens to circumvent the state to share ideas and organise. But the result was not a wave of democracy. Autocratic states can also use communications technology to consolidate their power and accomplish their aims. Thus far, only Tunisia, the place that started it all, has moved to a constitutional democracy. Meanwhile, the focus has turned to more pressing matters, including the rise of the Islamic State, the conflict in Yemen, and the Syrian refugee crisis. The calendar is seemingly moving backwards, and spring has turned to winter.

More shocking has been the rise of nationalist sentiments in established liberal democracies, aided by digital technologies. Forty-seven per cent of the 'remain' supporters in the UK think social media was decisive in the Brexit vote, and Donald Trump's narrow presidential victory included the emergence of 'fake news' and allegations of Russian hacking. Even techno-optimist Clive Thompson, author of *Smarter Than You Think: How Technology is Changing Our Minds for the Better*, concluded that the election of Trump was a time of reckoning for social media.

What does this mean for the future of self-government? If we follow Harold Lasswell in seeing politics as nothing more than 'who gets what, when, and how',[1] then politics could have no end. In fact, population growth, greater connectedness, and environmental challenges could make the coming decades a time of hyperpolitics. If, however, we take David Easton's more normative definition of politics as 'the authoritative allocation of values for society',[2] it is not difficult to see how digital technologies are making politics impossible.

AUTHORITY

Perhaps most troubling is what digital technologies have done to the authority and legitimacy of the state. There are serious questions about the extent to which Russian officials interfered with Trump's election. There is no evidence of ballot tampering, but the series of email hacks of members of the Democratic Party that were leaked in the run-up to the election could easily have tipped the election in Trump's favour.

An article in *The New York Times*[3] detailed how, according to its own analysis, the US government is not moving quickly enough to respond to the new digital environment, and it is not difficult to imagine how this could be the first of many such incidents. Angela Merkel has already expressed concern about how the upcoming election in Germany might be affected. Tampering is nothing new, but networking makes it a greater temptation. It is difficult to imagine how democracy could function if it becomes impossible to secure the integrity of elections.

Social media has also made it far easier for authoritarian states to track the thoughts and movements of their citizens. China, perhaps the most egregious offender, has dozens of 'cyber-dissidents' locked up for reporting, and it has blocked access to many websites, including Google, Twitter and even *Time*. One article[4] examined how

the Chinese government has deployed over two million people to fabricate about 448 million posts to social media sites in an effort to set the national agenda. These activities are not limited to autocratic states. In 2013, Edward Snowden gave journalists classified documents detailing the extent of the National Security Administration's (NSA) illegal surveillance apparatus. The subsequent reporting revealed, among other things, that CIA director James Clapper was not truthful in his 2013 testimony before Congress about what his agency was up to.

Surveillance is made easier by the unwillingness of citizens to protect their information or to know how much they are sharing. One study of Facebook[5] found that users' privacy expectations were matched by their settings only 37% of the time, mostly with users sharing more than they realised. The site's most recent attempt to simplify privacy settings included 32 separate interactive guides. The change might make users more mindful about the information they share with friends, if they are able to understand and navigate their options. And even the strictest settings do not stop the company from monetising the data it collects or from handing it over to governments when they come calling.

We also learned from the Snowden documents that the US has been spying on German and French officials, including Angela Merkel, which affected an already tenuous relationship between the two economic powerhouses. At the same time, the increased reliance on surveillance technologies has meant a decline in more traditional ways of intelligence gathering and a marked loss of reliable information about places where it is needed most.

One of the more underappreciated aspects of Hillary Clinton's private email server 'scandal' is the need for a modicum of secrecy for government. WikiLeaks is a great public service, when it serves the public's need to know, which cannot be absolute. The ability to penetrate the digital communications of other states will undermine diplomacy and could also lead to what sociologist Jürgen Habermas calls a 'legitimation crisis', as the everyday operations of the state are laid bare. Sunlight is the best disinfectant, as Louis Brandeis observed, but overexposure can burn the skin.

ALLOCATION

There is plenty of aggregate data demonstrating how the digitised economy has made things better on a global scale – in terms of poverty, literacy, and health. At issue, however, is whether those gains are equitable and sustainable and in a way that supports democracy.

The new nationalists and progressives agree that something is amiss about the neoliberal economy. But progressives point to corporations and economic elites as the problem, while conservatives point to immigrants and the less fortunate.

The greatest hazard to economic security comes not from foreign labour but from automated labour. The US, for example, has recovered from the 2008 recession and is currently experiencing record highs in manufacturing. But the increase in technology

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driven production has not meant a relative increase in manufacturing jobs. Similarly, agriculture, which used to employ a majority of the American workforce, now employs less than 2%. Scientists and engineers are in great demand, but the objective of many of these positions is to eliminate the need for human labour, irrespective of the economic or political consequences.

It is not only repetitive, manual tasks that are being automated. Advances in artificial intelligence and big data are placing healthcare workers, architects and educators at risk of becoming irrelevant. Computers are even learning how to make music and art. One study from the University of Oxford[6] determined that 47% of the world's jobs are at risk of being automated. We are not only on the brink of the end of politics, but also the end of work as we know it.

According to the World Bank's January 2016 report on technology and social inequality,[7] digital technologies have not done anything to reduce inequality and might actually be making it worse. The benefits related to the ready availability of information on a global scale favour the well-off and seem to be short-term. The primary cause is the disparate access to technology (the digital divide), with only 40% of the world's population having access to the web. Also problematic is the favourable and sometimes-monopolistic market position of existing corporations. As writer and cyberpunk William Gibson remarked in 1993, "The future is already here – it's just not very evenly distributed."

The rise of new nationalism in Europe and the US is partly a response to the ascendancy of the global, digital economy, which has not brought much in the way of economic security. As Ronald Engelhard and Christian Welzel write,[8] levels of trust and toleration are often a product of economic development. They also note how economic crises can lead to relapses of authoritarianism and xenophobia.

Economists are united in their view that tighter borders and tariffs will adversely affect workers, as economies slow and the cost of goods and services goes up. In that sense, working class opposition to trade is an irrational but understandable reaction to powerful and unseen forces. Even so, it is not the cool calculations of *Homo economicus*; it is the more emotional behaviour of *Homo psychologicus*.

What is less certain is the impact that anti-globalisation forces will have on economic elites. Corporations have shown a consistent ability to evade regulations and tax law, and pit localities against one another. Global capital likely prefers small and polarised states to ones that are effective and truly representative. To that end, the kind of policies we see might not be about protecting markets from competition, as much as about protecting capitalism from democracy.

Further complicating the tension between the ➡

global market and political boundaries is the appearance of digital currency. Bitcoin grew by over 122% in 2016, after having been deemed dead by many prominent observers. Bitcoin provides corporations and individuals a way to trade goods and services independent of states. The central banks are paying attention, and are looking to adopt some of Bitcoin's model. But it will be interesting to see what happens if their assessment changes from opportunity to threat.

A peculiar oversight in most economic modelling concerns the environmental costs of development. It is likely that the inability of countries to develop an enforceable plan (after the 2016 COP22 climate change meeting in Marrakesh) will lead to a rise in sea levels and other natural disasters that will disproportionately affect indigenous populations and the world's poor. At the same time, population growth will place even greater burdens on resources, health services and political institutions. When it comes to the commons, technology has proven to be more adept at development than sustainability.

VALUES

Legitimacy in the modern world requires liberal democracy of some kind, and it is not difficult to see how digital technologies could support those values. Indeed, Matt Leighninger, author of

INTERNET GOVERNANCE TO THE RESCUE?

Amid all the gloom about threats to democracy and freedom, the UN's Internet Governance Forum (IGF) is recognising the issues in its own 'bottom-up' multistakeholder model, unwieldy though this is. As *Intermedia* reported from the last annual IGF meeting (see the January 2017 issue), held in Mexico, the stakeholders who discuss the various topics that the IGF focuses on, such as cybersecurity, digital economy and human rights, do have at least the chance to influence the 'high-level' inter-governmental bodies that deal with these fundamental global concerns.

The IGF also agreed last year to set up a best practice forum on anti-corruption (which is in its initial stages) and also featured internet trade as a main session in Mexico.

While technical issues such as internet exchange points and domain names are still to the fore, the growing number of 'dynamic coalitions' and best practice forums on broader global topics such as human rights, and also more national and regional forums, is a sign that the internet's political effects are becoming more important. It was notable that apart from the major theme of the Mexico IGF, which was links with the sustainable development goals (SDGs), there was an attempt to integrate young people more into the debates, which will be vital to translating their often transitory engagement into governance tools that could apply on the medium they use the most.

Marc Beishon

The Next Form of Democracy, identifies the increased use of online tools among his six principles for deliberative democracy.

But that is not exactly what we have seen. The 2017 Freedom House report on democracy revealed the 11th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. For the period since the 11 year slide began in 2006, 109 countries have seen a net decline, and only 60 have experienced a net improvement in areas such as freedom of expression and the rule of law. Not surprisingly, the Middle East and North Africa are the hardest hit.

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Technology has not even meant more voting. Estonia, with its population of 1.3 million, has been using online voting since 2005 but has not seen a turnout increase. Disillusionment, not convenience, is the primary reason often given for not voting, which means digital technologies could actually lead to a decrease in voting if states are deemed to be ineffectual, non-responsive, or illegitimate.

Instead, digital technologies offer the illusion of citizenship. The web enables low-grade forms of participation, such as sending an email to a representative, signing an online petition, or offering an opinion on Twitter. These actions are easily done and easily disregarded, especially when they are drowned out by competing voices.

For these reasons, Matthew Hindman's *The Myth of Digital Democracy* questions the extent to which communications technology has and can make large-scale direct democracy possible. The web, it turns out, can foster democratic discourse, but it is also likely to follow the winner-takes-all pattern of existing technologies. The names of the players have changed (with GE, Ford and AT&T swapped out for Microsoft, Apple and Google), but the rules of the game have not. Technology is simply a tool, and we should not be surprised that it has simply grafted itself onto existing power structures.

SOCIETY

As Auguste Comte has it, society requires a consistency and integrity of structure and function. Technology provides the opportunity for greater organisation and communication, but it also presents new risks and obstacles.

For one thing, we have not seen an increase in public awareness about current events and policy. In a world that includes a 24-hour news cycle you can carry in your pocket, it takes a great deal of effort to stay uninformed. Yet we see much evidence to that effect. Bill McKibben, an American environmentalist, calls this the 'unenlightenment' and an 'age of missing information', for the depth of ignorance about the pressing issues of the day.

Governments are having a difficult time keeping their citizens informed. 'The Leaders' Report', published by the consulting firm WPP,[9] studied 40 countries to see how effective they are at sharing

information. The group found an increase in the anger and distrust citizens felt toward government. Training is an issue, but so too is the size and complexity of the bureaucracy, where messages need to be crafted and cleared sometimes by multiple offices before being disseminated. Unlike companies like Amazon and Facebook, government cannot easily tailor its messaging.

We have also seen the emergence of 'fake news' – that is, fictitious news stories that are designed to exploit political biases for the sake of a profit. One recent study from the Berkman Klein Center at Harvard[10] found the increasingly polarised politics in Egypt, Tunisia and Bahrain are now reflected in the social media outlets. India's 2014 election was called a '#TwitterElection' because of how social media supported democracy on such a large scale, but it too is experiencing a wave of these kinds of stories on Facebook and especially WhatsApp, which boasts over 160 million active users there. One post-Brexit survey revealed that 68% of Britons think that Facebook and other social media outlets need to do more to control their feeds, with only 13% thinking it is good as it is. The web was initially seen as a means to share information, but it seems more effective at institutionalising differences than strengthening society.

Google reported banning 200 publishers in November and December 2016 and taking down 1.7 billion ads for all of 2016 for violating its terms of service, an increase of more than double from the previous year. The actions are impressive but also illustrate the scale of the problem. In response to warnings of fines from the German government, Facebook is rolling out some quality filters, but it is an open question about whether they will be effective or will merely lead to some clever workaround. There is a strong incentive for media companies to provide a service that reflects the likes and dislikes of its customers, regardless of what that means for the body politic.

There is also a powerful psychology at work here. Bill Bishop's 2010 book, *The Big Sort*, chronicled how people segregate according to political and cultural attitudes. This becomes easier and is amplified by the algorithms of most social media platforms. Eli Pariser, an internet activist, calls it a 'filter bubble'. Indeed, PRRI's American Values Survey from 2013 found that the social media of white people was 91% white, with 75% of them lacking any non-white presence. The result is an extreme form of invisible and even unconscious self-sorting that merely reinforces our existing worldview – or what media expert Ethan Zuckerman has deemed 'imaginary cosmopolitanism'.

One prominent sociological theory, the 'contact hypothesis', holds that levels of tolerance and acceptance are positively correlated with familiarity. Indeed, a survey of 87,000 Trump supporters in April 2016 found that they were more likely to live in the more homogenous parts of the US. To the extent that their fear is unfounded – the respondents were also found to be doing better than average in terms of income – the data seems to support the 'group threat theory', which holds that members of a dominant group often respond to perceived provocation from subordinate groups.

As Harvard psychologist Joshua Greene explains, human morality emerged out of a physiological need for group survival, at the expense of others. It is also this drive that works against a more inclusive morality, and it can even colour how we interpret information. In that sense, what we are seeing is not a move from progressive liberalism to conservatism, but a move from tolerance to tribalism, all made worse by communications technology.

CONCLUSION

Digital technologies are plural in design and in use, but their consequences are singular: they are eroding our capacity for constructive political discourse and decision-making. "If you're tired of arguing with strangers on the internet, try to talk with one in real life," Barack Obama suggested in his farewell address.

Social media might make us more connected, but it also makes those connections less meaningful and less impactful. We need politics to grapple with any number of policy issues, including the looming crisis of employment and income, healthcare, education, and refugees from failed states. There are also the twin existential threats of climate change and weapons of mass destruction. Milton Friedman wrote, "Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change." And so might it be with technology and politics.

On January 21, 2017, the day after the inauguration of Donald Trump, millions of people in hundreds of cities on every continent gathered to show their support for women's rights. It was a broad and inclusive gathering that was focused on similarities rather than differences. What the demonstrators shared was a commitment to be seen and be heard and to move from the anonymity of their screens to the urgency of the public square.

It was a remarkable coming together that no online petition or distribution list could ever match. To the extent that the march proves to be effective, it will be because it was unmistakably analogue. It might even mark the return of real politics.

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