

Democracy, Truth and Opinion Influencers in the Age of Social Media

by Andrea Butruce

The digital revolution has brought about a paradigm shift in the modalities of state-society relations and the very concept and functioning of democracy. Social media, in particular, has impacted the process of information sharing and gathering, now simply a click away, and influenced the perception of truth.

While on the one hand this may satisfy growing calls for immediacy in democratic societies, which have grown disillusioned with long and uncertain decision-making times;¹ on the other, the speed with which information is consulted and shared has fundamentally reduced critical thinking by users. In the most extreme of cases, the combination of speed, diffusion of information and the lack of appropriate monitoring and fact

checking tools have distorted the distinction between true and false, fact and opinion.

These trends have allowed social media, and Facebook especially, to present itself to users as a neutral and highly personalised space for the production of truth, a sort of "site of veridiction",² which fully embraces market logics. Just as the price of a good is defined by the relationship between supply and demand, in social media, information acquires the appearance of "truth" according to the number of likes and shares it receives. The diffusion of a given post acts as a sort of autopoiesis, a self-generated respectability that is totally detached from the authenticity of sources or the critical analysis of information.

¹ Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy. Political Ideas in Twentieth-Century Europe*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 2011, p. 242; Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1988, p. 19.

² Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics. Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979*, edited by Michel Senellart, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 32.

Andrea Butruce is a MA student at the Law Faculty of Sapienza University of Rome. This is an English translation of a winning article (1st place) submitted to the 2019 edition of the IAI Prize contest and presented at a public debate organised by the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) in Rome on 24 September 2019.

All of this has facilitated the spread of fake news, which in turn could be embraced as the basis for political decisions, particularly if the spread of information follows the prospect of monetary gain, embracing the principles of advertising which relies on sensationalism, or if the information is packaged and specifically directed influencing the policies of another state.

Social media is therefore impacting the very structures and modern paradigm of representative democracy, paving the way for the emergence of "liquid democracy".³ Here, electoral preferences can shift and readjust according to specific issues and citizens are able to immediately verify how one's elected representative is voting in parliament on a given legislative proposal, and eventually re-direct political support accordingly.

Liquid democracy seeks to combine the principles of representative democracy with growing demands for direct democracy. A poignant example are e-voting systems, whose immediacy allows for referendum voting on a potentially infinite number of legislative proposals. E-voting systems can increase social participation in decision-making processes, but it also carries multiple risks:

1) Especially when conducted remotely, e-voting can reduce secrecy of voter preferences by eliminating the

³ Nicolás Mendoza, "Liquid Separation: Three Fundamental Dimensions within LiquidFeedback and other Voting Technologies", in *JeDEM: eJournal of eDemocracy and Open Government*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2015, p. 45-58, <https://doi.org/10.29379/jedem.v7i2.408>.

voting booth and potentially allowing phenomena such as electoral bribery, group think tendencies or voter bandwagoning. But above all, voting itself can become a habit, deprived of its original meaning in terms of civic duty, and reduced to a mechanic action when it should be the very expression and celebratory moment of democracy.

2) If combined with blockchain's identification and immutability mechanisms, e-voting fails to comply with the EU's new General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) with regards to privacy and the right to be forgotten.

3) E-voting platforms cannot guarantee data security, as evidenced by the recent case of the Rousseau Platform linked to the anti-establishment political party, the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle* – M5S), which Italy's Data Protection Authority has criticised as exposed to security and privacy breaches.⁴

4) Lastly, in times of urgency, when there is little room for critical analysis of a given question, as is often the case during referendums, e-voting could simply become a sort of plebiscite, where electoral preferences are given on the basis of sentiment and short-term political or personal preference that can be easily influenced by fake news. This tends to skew political debates and governability, since it prevents the minority from exercising efficient and

⁴ Italian Data Protection Authority, *Provvedimento su data breach* [Measure against data breach], 4 April 2019, <https://www.garanteprivacy.it/web/guest/home/docweb/-/docweb-display/docweb/9101974>.

factual opposition, potentially opening the doors to the tyranny of the majority.

Social media's "veridiction" mechanism may also be exploited by people interested in political or personal gain: so-called influencers or opinion leaders, individuals who present themselves as influential sources of information and who tend to canalise and respond to political tendencies through a careful use of data processing software. An example is provided by Matteo Salvini, leader of the far-right, anti-migrant League party and until recently Italy's Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister. Much of Salvini's success on social media stems from a software called "the Beast", which is used by his communication staff to analyse user interactions, preferences and trends, suggesting posts or tweets that play on and exacerbate the polarisation of views for political gain.

Similar tactics are also used by other politicians, particularly nationalist and populist leaders, such as Marine Le Pen in France, Victor Orbán in Hungary or Donald Trump in the US. All of them embrace a political strategy to polarise and delegitimise divergent opinions, depicting contrasting views as false, illegitimate or simply corrupt and evil.

Notwithstanding, the dubious ethical and civic vision that inspires such behaviour, and its worrying repercussions on society and social faultlines, such trends can also be considered a manifestation of democracy. An authoritarian drift, based on the legitimisation of a charismatic leader, which calls into question the foundational principles of democracy,

still appears an unlikely scenario, thanks to the bureaucratisation and interdependence of modern European societies.

What poses more of a risk is the modalities with which certain democracies are responding to these phenomena. The Internet was invented by the US military and has since been transformed into a geopolitical tool, as evidenced by recent cyber-attacks, disinformation and influence campaigns, but also by the adoption of cybersecurity regulations. The securitisation of the internet also poses challenges for democracy, potentially having important effects on freedom of expression.

Cambridge Analytica's documented role in support of the Brexit referendum in the UK and Donald Trump's electoral campaign in the US⁵ are further examples of the potentially nefarious use of data in the age of social media. Bots, fake news, behavioural micro-targeting and personalised advertising – also supported by a foreign state, Russia – influenced public opinion in both countries during 2016.

Such activities were made easier by Facebook's lax privacy and transparency rules, particularly regarding the financing of political ads and the illegal collection of enormous quantities of personal data from user

⁵ Matthew Rosenberg and Sheera Frenkel, "Facebook's Role in Data Misuse Sets Off Storms on Two Continents", in *The New York Times*, 18 March 2018, <https://nyti.ms/2GGTFUY>; Carole Cadwalladr, "I Made Steve Bannon's Psychological Warfare Tool: Meet the Data War Whistleblower", in *The Guardian*, 18 March 2018, <https://gu.com/p/89hj>.

accounts. Facebook's filter bubble also played a role,⁶ producing highly homogeneous contents based on a user's own interactions in the network, in turn restricting their access to alternative information sources.

States have responded to these trends with expanded control over the spread of news on social media, increased censoring of disinformation while pursuing the impossible goal of a normative definition of what is false and what is not. Laws which could herald a form of digital authoritarianism, by restricting online freedoms and concentrating power in the hands of few, have been adopted in the US as well as many European countries, including France and Germany.⁷

Yet, it is beyond the EU, in China and Russia, as well as in other states, that online freedoms are most restricted, creating a completely isolated Internet environment. The battle against fake news may ultimately transform the state – or private companies – into the guardians of "truth", a highly problematic scenario that does not sit well with the principles of democracy and free expression.

Instead of securitisation, another possible approach would be that of embracing the principle that the "ills

⁶ Carole Cadwalladr, "Facebook's Role in Brexit – And the Threat to Democracy", in *TED Talks*, April 2019, https://www.ted.com/talks/carole_cadwalladr_facebook_s_role_in_brexit_and_the_threat_to_democracy.

⁷ Adrian Shahbaz, "The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism", in *Freedom on the Net 2018*, Washington/New York, Freedom House, October 2018, p. 18, <https://freedomhouse.org/node/50501>.

of democracy can be cured with more democracy".

In this context, the challenges posed by social media should be embraced head-on, seeking to take advantage of their positive potential while trying to minimise the ills posed by certain features, including its "veridiction" mechanism, through an integrated system of private and public enforcement.

1) Internet service providers should strengthen disinformation reporting systems available to users and quickly verify reports. They should also develop means that allow users to limit the effects of filter bubble, in order to widen informative horizons.

2) Internal control should be left to the users, interacting in an EU dimension, without any censorship power, but instead through the independent work of fact-checking programmes with the support of traditional media. A debunking system may also be realised, implemented with artificial intelligence but under appropriate human supervision, to analyse and verify a greater amount of data simultaneously.

3) External regulation should be the remit of states and the EU, with laws – such as the EU Commission's Code of Practice – that ensure transparency, in particular on the financial dimension and equal access to information. They also should continue efforts to counter fake news or disruptive tendencies and seek to improve the user knowledge of these online risks, encouraging critical analysis and an ethical use of social

media.⁸

4) Finally, the eventual adoption of e-voting systems should be carefully monitored, at least at the present state of development, employing blockchain technology to track and protect data and source information in order to mitigate the aforementioned risks.

Through an effective combination of the above, it may be possible to draw on the benefits of connectivity and information sharing while at the same time mitigating the risks associated with the ongoing paradigm shift and its multidimensional impacts on state-society relations and the principles of democratic legitimacy and representation.

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⁸ European Commission, *Action Plan against Disinformation* (JOIN/2018/36), 5 December 2018, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52018JC0036>.

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Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

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