

The Encounter between Democracy and the Internet: European Societies and the Digital Age

by Antonella Consoli

Article 1 of the Italian Constitution states: "Italy is a democratic Republic founded on labour. Sovereignty shall belong to the people and be exercised by the people in the forms and within the limits of this Constitution."¹ The term "democratic Republic" refers to a form of government in which citizens enjoy equal voting rights and delegate the responsibilities of governance to elected officials for fixed terms.

Democracy traces its roots back to the classical world and specifically the ancient Greek city of Athens. In the second half of the 20th century, after centuries of eclipse, democracy became the main form of government in much of the West, albeit implemented via different constitutional designs that vary from country to country.

¹ *Constitution of the Italian Republic*, 2nd ed., Rome, Senate, 2018, http://www.senato.it/application/xmanager/projects/leg18/file/Costituzione_Ingl_secon_ediz.pdf.

By the beginnings of the 21st century, democracy is finding itself caught between contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, we are witnessing a crisis of representative democracy, which manifests itself in widespread feelings of detachment and distrust towards institutions and governing elites; this is a crisis of the "agora", the peoples' assembly in ancient Greece, which is being weakened by growing individualisms and the sirens of a consumer society. It is also a crisis of traditional political parties, in the decline of collective engagement and rising fears about the future or "the other".

On the other hand, we are witnessing the massive development of new information and communication technologies that are profoundly changing both private and public life, potentially enabling new, immediate and expanded forms of

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popular participation in politics and society. The digital dimension is also influencing political thought, democratising knowledge by making information accessible to everyone. It increases opportunities to connect, creating a favourable climate for the exchange of ideas and for the unlimited acquisition of knowledge related to a wide range of issues. It allows people to exchange opinions without censorship and to interact with those coming from other nations. It is thanks to this engagement, this accessibility and this dialogue that democratic awareness can be strengthened.

These developments have boosted inter-personal networks, within communities and virtual territories in which, as Pierre Lévy says, "proximity is semantic, no longer geographical or institutional".² Going beyond traditional national, regional or local differences, the digital domain has allowed intensified processes of political integration at a supraregional and supranational level, with the European Union representing the most prominent example.

Against this backdrop, many hoped the digital revolution would help revitalise democracy, providing new tools to strengthen the relationship between citizens and government while empowering individuals and breaking down social, economic and geographic barriers. In this respect, the digital domain can help to overcome present feelings of "democratic

fatigue". Yet, this can only happen if democracies remain vigilant to the risks and not only the opportunities posed by the digital revolution, including the way information can be distorted online or the impact that technology can have on politics and the vary principles underpinning representative democracy.

Two interlinked phenomena are particularly worrying in this regard. The first revolves around the growing personalisation of politics, which can lead to plebiscitary forms of democracy centred on leaders who maintain a direct and constant contact with their followers via social media and the Internet. The second stems from consequent tendency of these leaders to bypass traditional intermediate bodies (such as political parties, trade unions and institutions) in order to respond to the growing calls for "directness" or "immediacy" in decision-making.

Such demands, however, neglect the fact that the effectiveness ensured by the speed and immediacy of the web in terms of judging participation or exchanging views does not necessarily translate into effective decision making and deliberation, a realm in which careful and thorough analysis is required.

While being mindful of these risks, and striving to harness the positive potential of technology, the digital revolution can still have positive effects on democracy. Specifically, it can:

- 1) Strengthen the transparency and accountability of public institutions and elected bodies through digital

² Pierre Lévy, *Cyberdemocrazia. Saggio di filosofica politica*, Milan, Mimesis, 2008, p. 65 [Translation by the author].

platforms made accessible to all.

2) Incentivise popular initiatives for legislative proposals, through legal instruments which make such initiatives possible via the web.

3) Encourage citizens to contribute to the political agendas of parties and institutions through active and constant participation, generating “pressure” on decision-making bodies, in order to favour the transition from the *dutiful-citizen* – who limits his/her political participation to voting and who passively embraces the supply of packaged political messaging – into what authors have termed the *self-actualising citizen*,³ which implies a more active and persistent participation in political, social and decisional processes.

4) Facilitate the identification and implementation of a new model for political parties, which is neither the old mass identity party – unthinkable and rather obsolete today –, nor the “virtual” party. Rather it could become something akin to a federative party, bringing together civil society associations and other private and public actors, or a network-party made up of similar actors but inspired by the very values of the Internet: freedom, sharing and participation.

5) Raise youth awareness on public issues, elevating the education levels from that of “digital natives” to the status of “digital citizens”, who respect

a code of ethics that accustoms them to a correct participation in the public debate while being mindful of the dangers of fake news.

6) Create a “European public space”, which allows people to engage and lobby EU institutions allowing for the promotion of popular initiatives.

The digital dimension can therefore be useful not only to the practical processes of democracy, but also to the achievement of its ideal goals in so far as it encourages freedom of thought, allowing citizens to express their uniqueness within society, groups and movements, and to participate in political debates that are the beating heart of every democracy.

Indeed, it is from this dialogue, debate and disagreement – including heated debates, as long as these remain respectful – that civil and social growth springs. Of course, freedom of expression must also be based on respect for diversity and equality of rights, another cornerstone of democracy that needs to be safeguarded in the digital age.

It is implicit, but worth emphasising, that in order to remove economic and social obstacles for the effective and universal attainment of freedom and equality among citizens, as mentioned in Article 3 of the Italian Constitution, a genuine “digital democracy” must actively and consistently counter the digital divide, ensuring equal access and involvement irrespective of social, political or geographic disparities.

³ Marco Marzano and Nadia Urbinati, *La società orizzontale. Liberi senza padri*, Milan, Feltrinelli, 2017, p. 53.



Overcoming the digital divide, in fact, is a fundamental precondition for the attainment of a true digital democracy, namely the universal right of access to the Internet, in addition to those fundamental individual rights inspired by the French Revolution.

To contextualise the benefits that the advent of the digital age may bring to democracy, it is worth recalling the optimistic view of French philosopher Michel Serres. Referring to the so-called "smartphone generation", Serres has noted how citizens are growing accustomed to the horizontal nature of the web, which is translating into a society which is less inclined to join homogeneous, compact and closed groups, or to accept the hierarchies and authoritarianisms of the past.

There is no need to long for the "good old days". Social media will gradually erode the asymmetrical and pyramidal structure of our societies and power relations – which Serres describes using the metaphor of the Eiffel Tower – not destroying modern representative democracies, but forcing them to reinvent themselves and redistribute power between central and peripheral institutions, between state institutions, citizens and civil society.

To paraphrase from Serres's metaphor: "the foundations of the Eiffel Tower have the same dignity as its apex, which all of us hope will someday disappear. Luckily, we will not build anything like this again. We will no longer imagine our society as structured in that way. We will no longer trust old-fashioned politics nor these old institutions, from the Egyptian pyramids to the Eiffel

Tower, so static in their formal structure which has remained unchanged, recreating familiar tyrannical models disguised as Republics. Democracy is on the ascendance; or rather, will it finally be born?"⁴

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⁴ Michel Serres, *Contro i bei tempi andati*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2018, p. 65 [Translation by the author].

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