



DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP IN A DIGITAL AGE

BRIEF BY DOMEN BOŽEGLAV

INTRODUCTION

From the Ancient Greece, relatively little has changed when we take democracy and citizenship into consideration. However, the changes digitalisation is bringing today are overwhelming and terrifying at the same time. We can easily say that what used to take years could be achieved in weeks or even days. According to the European Digital Economy and Society Index, 98 % of Europeans have the access to fast broadband internet, whilst citizens' digital skills are constantly improving. Although the use of Digital Public Services varies across the EU countries, one thing is clear – the overall level of usage inside EU is constantly growing. For instance – online news is read by 70% and social media used by more than 66% of all European citizens.

In June 2017, an ELF roundtable on “Democracy and Citizenship in the Digital Age” took place in Ljubljana. The participants from various focus and expert areas shared their views, hopes and concerns on digitalisation and came to the conclusion that we will inevitably have to adapt to the new reality. This goes for everyone from citizens to politicians. Whilst digitalisation appeared to be of interest to only a few governments in the past, today the importance of its disruptive force is being addressed by a growing number of governments.

Fast connectivity, open data, artificial intelligence and recent technologies like Blockchain and distributed ledger systems are already significantly and irreversibly transforming the way we live. Our decisions rely on big data analytics. They are fact based and hence much better. The ever-growing number of environmental threats can be predicted thanks to the power of High Performance Computing. Also the way we do business, run companies and even governments could be transformed upside down with the help of distributed ledger systems. However, the enthusiasm aside, one important question arises. How can we liberals adapt to a new disrupted reality in a safe and controlled manner, whilst being able to weight the interests of citizens, businesses and governments and focus on facts and true potentials when taking important decisions ranging from concept adoption to regulation?

SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

Today many experts would say that Trump won the elections solely by the help of social media and digitalisation. The use of Facebook for instance significantly helped his election team by raising the campaign fund – in value exceeding 250 Mio \$, according

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to some estimates. Besides, despite the mass media predictions and results of polls, it was the Artificial Intelligence that correctly predicted the outcome of the US elections. This raises an important question. If there are, or used to be, credible editors behind the local and global newspapers, who control social media now? Some would state that social media is owned by people. Others think that it is solely controlled by companies who are able to tweak the algorithms, displaying the news feeds in the manner which is in favour of their own interests. With the information currently available, we can safely assume that neither is unswervingly true. Nevertheless, the fact remains that social media users are caught in the filter bubbles, supplying them only with information and facts they would like to hear, while leaving non-conflicting data and views outside their news feeds and search results – hence depriving them from a broader picture and potentially relevant facts.

THE IMPACT OF FAKE NEWS

Although we have been confronted with fake news for millennia, the social media is the platform that really accelerated its spread and especially its impact. Whilst some fake news are pranks only and generally harmless, others appear to be very elaborate and can have a significant impact on large proportion of social media users. In some cases their impact can be seen even beyond social media.

Fake news is a tool that is commonly used in political campaigns where the public perception on diverse topics can be elaborately and consistently shifted to one side or the other. Various so called independent experts today are acting as fake news catalysts; but only if the community cannot see through their cherry-picked and vague communication. It is sadly noted that these fake experts can often become opinion makers and are able to shift the public perception against the facts. Not to mention many cases where satire became fake news just because of the power of social media.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A POLITICAL TOOL

The use of social media varies among politicians. Some may use it as their primary communication tool, whilst others are often unaware of its existence. When we talk about social media as a tool we can certainly embrace its power, especially in liberal attempts to promote transparency or using it as one of the tools of communication to reach our voters. As discussed at the round table in Ljubljana, it is very encouraging that liberal politicians are already using social media on the day-to-day basis to talk to their voters, often even on a peer-to-peer basis.

As far as political campaigns are concerned, social media is already very well established as a grassroots platform. Raising funds is just a minor objective addressed, whilst focus is shifting towards the programme and the vision that the party or politician in question is trying to promote.

NEW TOOLS, NEW CONCEPTS, NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Despite social media being marked as one of the most powerful tools used in politics today, the real change to the way we perceive and empower democracy, will be brought by new technologies.

E-voting has opened incredible new ways for democracy to be embraced by many countries in the EU and the world as a whole. Though being present in some countries for years, the question of security and especially trust is still open for debate in many European countries. Despite the often conflicting views of experts, we can safely say that today the technology is ready for the next step. However, with the lack of institutional and public trust, we have to focus on the issue of trust building first. We need to start by preparing the State Electoral Commission and continue by holding smaller referendums on the local scale and online voting for our expats. Once the trust in modern technology is established we can take the next step forward.

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THE DISRUPTIVE EFFECT OF BLOCKCHAIN AND DISTRIBUTED LEDGER TECHNOLOGIES

Whilst the majority of liberals is already familiar with the concept of cryptocurrencies such as Blockchain, many are still unaware of the disruptive potential that the distributed ledger technologies and block chain are about to bring to democracy. With the arrival of the Ethereum platform in 2015 the potential of cryptocurrency seems only like the tip of the iceberg.

Until a few years ago unimaginable levels of security and transparency in various private and public digital services can be provided, by using distributed ledger technologies. So, it is no coincidence that some countries are already rebuilding their land registries on Blockchain technology. The next ground-breaking step is certainly the use of smart contracts – shortening the time for existing contracts to be fulfilled from months or even years to merely minutes. Not to mention the reduction of costs and user-centeredness such contracts will bring.

GOVERNMENTS 4.0 AND POLITICIANS 4.0

The digital tools and the opportunities they bring to politicians and governments are truly overwhelming. With big data and smart analytics, we are already able to make informed decisions that are smarter and better. With automation, our citizens will be able to focus on more interesting and better work tasks. Here we have to stress that throughout history, it has been countless proven that new technology never reduces the number of overall jobs but merely redistributes them.

With the digitally enhanced emerging two-way communication and collaboration between politicians, governments and citizens, we will soon have to ask ourselves a few important questions. Will the states of the future still need city halls and other government buildings? Will we with the potential of distributed ledger and Blockchain technologies have the courage to question the way we govern our biggest enterprises and even countries? Are we sincerely ready and willing

to let go at least part of the decision-making power to our citizens? And, are our citizens ready for such a vast responsibility?

THE LIBERAL APPROACH TOWARDS EMERGING DIGITAL OPPORTUNITIES

As liberals, we should be open to innovative ideas and the opportunities they bring. With digitalisation, we can seriously support our core values, such as openness and transparency. With the free flow of data and the removal of geographical as well as bureaucratic barriers, new business models like the collaborative economy will flourish.

It is quite safe to state that we can soon expect drastic changes in the role of government and politics, with digitalisation acting as the main catalyst.

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