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BEYOND COMMERCIAL PLATFORMS: THREE MODELS FOR DIGITAL POLITICS FROM THE GRASSROOTS*

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MÁS ALLÁ DE LAS PLATAFORMAS COMERCIALES: TRES MODELOS DE POLÍTICA DIGITAL DESDE LA BASE

Abstract
This article explores possibilities of digital participation which are autonomous from large commercial platforms. Firstly, it questions the democratic value of the current digital environment dominated by big tech in an era marked by individualism and depoliticization. Secondly, three models of democratic participation through alternative platforms in opposition to commercial ones are analysed. The first is the representative model, which seeks to innovate parties through technology. The second is the participatory model, which emphasises the direct engagement of citizens through civic platforms. The third is the deliberative model, which proposes a decision-making process based on a representative random sample, which activates an inclusive delib-

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eration process also using ICTs. In conclusion, the article discusses, through mental examples, the challenges of integrating these models into a system that responds to the current needs of democracy.

Keywords

digital media; democracy; participation; platforms; deliberation

Resumen

Este artículo explora las posibilidades de una participación digital autónoma de las grandes plataformas comerciales. En primer lugar, se cuestiona el valor democrático del actual entorno digital dominado por los gigantes tecnológicos en una era marcada por el individualismo y la despolitización. A continuación, se analizan tres modelos de participación democrática a través de plataformas alternativas a las comerciales. El primero es el modelo representativo, que busca la innovación de los partidos a través de la tecnología. El segundo es el modelo participativo, que enfatiza el compromiso directo de los ciudadanos a través de plataformas cívicas. El tercero es el modelo deliberativo, que propone un proceso de toma de decisiones basado en una muestra aleatoria representativa, el cual activa un proceso de deliberación inclusivo utilizando también las TIC. En conclusión, el artículo discute, mediante el uso de ejemplos mentales, los retos de integrar estas formas en un sistema que responda a las necesidades actuales de la democracia.

Palabras clave

medios digitales; democracia; participación; plataformas; deliberación

Introduction

The current structure of the digital network is defined as the "Internet of platforms", characterised by the dominance of big tech companies and their business models. While in recent decades private platforms have increased their power in managing information flows, citizens have remained within this digital environment. Moreover, this configuration exists within a social environment marked by individualism and fluid relationships, and in a political landscape defined by the concept of "post-democracy" (Crouch, 2004).

This article focuses on some possibilities to strengthen digital participation as an alternative to the mediated participation of big tech companies. Against the idea that public power is slow and non-innovative, refuted by Mazzucato (2013), many local authorities in recent decades have promoted civic platforms, ranging from open data to platforms for engaging the population. Some parties have also moved in this direction (such as the Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy or Podemos in Spain). Moreover, some scholars have put forward the hypothesis of deliberative democracy, which can be supported by digital technologies (the Liquid Feedback platform can be considered an *ante litteram* case). The underlying idea in which these efforts are grounded is to increase popular participation with the support of ICTs in an era of crisis of mass parties and conventional forms of activism.

On a theoretical level, civic technologies can support three different models, the merits and limitations of which are examined in this study. The first approach can be labelled as "representative" and consists in renewing party organisations through communication technologies. The second possible approach is denominated as "participatory", which intends to facilitate the involvement of citizens. However, politically engaged citizens are rare due to limited rationality (Kahneman, 2011) and increasing social specialisation (Durkheim, 1893). This results in only a minority of the population, e.g. those highly interested in the issues being debated, participating in these platforms, creating potential "particularist" distortions. The alternative, and third possible approach, is "deliberative" experimentation. In this case, an arrangement oriented towards the collective good is re-established, as participants are identified by drawing lots, turning them into a statistically representative sample of the entire community. Since they are also fewer in number, they can receive a charge allowance and use the platform to inform themselves, follow streaming seminars held by experts, and compare notes with each other. The problem with this model is that it is inherently anti-party and not suitable for making many decisions quickly.

The exploration of various models of digital democracy is intended to provide an overview of the potential and challenges of incorporating technologies into democratic

practices that are alternative to the communicative circuit of large private and commercial platforms.

The Neointermediation of Commercial Platforms

Technological progress has influenced power structures throughout history. Such transformations are evident in examples such as the adoption of gunpowder, which favoured the evolution of artillery at the expense of static fortifications, or the introduction of the nuclear weapon, which redefined relations between world powers and gave rise to new paradigms of conflict (e.g. deterrence). Similarly, the emergence of digital media has caused significant shifts in the fabric of power in long-established democracies, influencing how different actors interact. The architectures of digital spaces determine the conditions within which language, communications and political dynamics manifest themselves (Ruppert et al., 2017). In a digital age, it is therefore interesting to focus on the architectural configuration of the Net, which modifies the environment in which political actors move, and thus also influences their behaviour.

The Internet departs from hierarchical organisational models. Whereas conventional structures, such as a company, an army or a university, are articulated through a series of hierarchical levels with a clear apex, intermediate levels and an extended base, the digital network exhibits a non-hierarchical configuration. It is characterised by a fabric of nodes, which may represent individual entities, organisations or corporate entities, interconnected in a manner that supports multi-directional exchanges of information. In this context, there is no single fulcrum of authority or control, but rather a distribution of exchange points. Such a description of the structure of the digital network might evoke the prospect of an era in which traditional disparities of role and power dissolve. However, this view may not consider the power dynamics that persists and transforms within the digital environments themselves, as well as the new forms of stratification and centralisation that may emerge (Mansell, 2016).

Indeed, within the Internet, nodes are characterised by significant inequality in terms of size and number of interconnections. We identify, within this system, some nodes of colossal size, such as the major digital platforms, which act as hubs for billions of connections. Then there are nodes of intermediate stature, represented by certain institutions, major public figures or corporate entities, which act as hubs for millions of connections. Most of the nodes, representing individual users or small collectives, show a reduced scale, being linked by thousands or hundreds of connections. It is true that the classical hierarchical configuration is outdated. However, in a context where such a dimensional disparity between the nodes of the network prevails, the strength

of a large platform or a prominent influencer far outweighs that exerted by a collection of lesser-known activists. Thus, even in the absence of a formal hierarchy, a very strong asymmetry nevertheless manifests itself based on the ability of certain nodes to exert predominant influence and direct far-reaching communication flows.

In light of these considerations, the notion of disintermediation, frequently regarded as a defining characteristic of the digital age, deserves critical analysis. Described as the process by which intermediaries are eliminated from a chain of relationships or transactions, disintermediation is often cited as a phenomenon that has radically transformed various sectors (Chadwick, 2007). Historical examples include the replacement of physical visits to banks for financial transactions through home banking, the abandonment of travel agencies in favour of autonomous online booking of flights and accommodation, and the shift from the purchase of printed newspapers to the consumption of news through digital platforms. This transformation indicates a real decline of traditional intermediaries, as can be observed in the gradual withdrawal of bank branches, the crisis of newsstands and the reduction of newspaper circulation. However, although disintermediation captures real dynamics, it offers a partial perspective of the phenomenon and does not consider the complex evolution of the intermediation landscape (Garon, 2009). For this reason, rather than speaking of disintermediation, it would perhaps be more accurate to speak of "neointermediation" (Giacomini, 2023), carried out by the major digital players. Indeed, although certain forms of traditional intermediation have been eroded, the digital context has in fact given rise to a plethora of new intermediaries: online platforms, search engines, social networks, digital communication agencies, web portals, algorithm-based moderation systems. These new actors exert a non-negligible influence, configuring a landscape of "neointermediation" that is different from previous forms of intermediation but no less influential or pervasive.

In a landscape characterised by the neointermediation of large platforms, and the predominance of large nodes within the Net, the question emerges as to the role and action of ordinary citizens, i.e. those who do not have significant resources of influence.

Burned-out Engagement: Algorithmic Activism and Individualist *Zeitgeist*

Since most online practices are situated within the framework of commercial platforms, citizens must confront the complexities of algorithms to promote their demands. As Bonini and Treré (2024) pointed out, citizens who wish to be politically relevant on the Internet of platforms seek to "appropriate" algorithms to tell their stories and frame issues in their own terms. In addition, movements seek to attract public attention and insert their issues into the political debate (Yang, 2016; Tufekci, 2017). On the one hand,

this entails conscious efforts by movements to enhance their presence in the media and increase the virality of their messages, aiming to strengthen their popularity. On the other hand, it may also entail an effort to diminish the visibility of certain antagonistic actors, such as government institutions, heads of state or political entities perceived to be adverse.

One of the most sought-after goals is to understand the logic of neointermediary platforms to exploit it to one's advantage. Therefore, it is important to understand on what criteria the content recommendation algorithms work. An effort of this nature took place on Twitter in the form of "hashtag activism" and the creation of trending topics (Jackson et al., 2020; Feenstra et al., 2017). The Indignados in Spain used online pads for collaborative drafting and joint selection of promising hashtags to build the narrative of their movement. These tools made it possible to brainstorm and debate hashtags. Once the most suitable hashtag for the specific initiative was identified, variants were created, which in turn were distributed through internal channels to coordinate the official publication on social media. An understanding of the functioning of Twitter's algorithm was achieved through continuous experiments. In particular, the activists realised the algorithm favoured recent content and changed trending topics every twenty-four hours, making it essential to tweet simultaneously to increase visibility.

A similar methodology was adopted in Israel by some left-wing movements on Facebook (Halperin, 2022), who kept track and shared the posts of right-wing politicians on Facebook through their own group. Subsequently, a certain number of members would engage in visiting these posts and writing critical comments. Once the comments were posted, another group of 200-300 members would quickly mobilise to like these comments. Since Facebook's algorithm favoured content that received more interaction, critical comments tended to gain more visibility. This process allowed progressive activists to position their critical comments prominently, influencing public perception and suggesting broad dissent from conservative positions.

Ordinary citizens, if coordinated among themselves, can also ostracise initiatives from above, e.g. from government agencies. An interesting case occurred in the context of K-pop, a Korean music phenomenon characterised by a very active fan base with a history of commitment to social justice goals. This spirit was evident in the context of the Black Lives Matter mobilisations following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in 2020 (Ohlheiser, 2020). When mass manifestations against violence against black people broke out, the Dallas Police Department asked the public to upload any videos of "illegal activity" by protesters onto an app. However, the police did not get the evidence they expected. In fact, K-pop fans downloaded the police app *en masse*, gave it low

ratings to make it less visible in stores, and flooded it with short videos of their favourite artists. The result of these coordinated actions was the removal of the app.

These examples suggest that, even in a world characterised by neointermediation and the centrality of platforms, there remains a space for action for the citizens to fit into the framework defined by platforms and use it to their advantage. The possible actions, Bennett (2012) points out, are manifold. *Information politics* is based on the ability to generate relevant information and communicate it. *Symbolic politics* refers to the use of symbols and narratives. *Accountability politics* concerns the ability to make state organisations more responsive and accountable. *Leverage politics* is about organising threats or sanctions for non-compliance with a just principle. From the Spanish Indignados to Occupy Wall Street, from Nuit Debout in France to Black Lives Matter, the role played by social media for activists is emphasised (Gerbaudo, 2017; Way, 2021). Digital media can be used for purposes such as combating climate change or gender inequality. This is the case of Friday for Future, which brought millions of young people around the world to protest the insipience of institutions on the issue of global warming, or the MeToo Movement, which used social media to encourage women to report sexual harassment (Martinez Sainz & Hanna, 2023; Hosterman et al., 2018).

Despite the opportunities introduced by digital activism, however, a question arises concerning its ability to be truly incisive and structured. Indeed, social movements do not always succeed in producing stable and tangible political results (Zimmermann, 2015). Firstly, interdependence with digital platforms is a non-negligible constraint. Even when movements try to manipulate the logics of platforms to their advantage, they remain essentially constrained by the imposed rules. Moreover, questions are raised about the cultural predisposition of most citizens towards active political participation. The transience of such mobilisation initiatives seems to limit their consistency and persistence. In this context, the question of citizens' actual inclination towards forms of political involvement assumes critical relevance, with significant implications for the assessment of the impact and sustainability of digital activism in the contemporary democratic landscape.

Since the "golden thirty years" of Western democracy, the period that spanned the 1940s and 1970s characterised by high participation rates, healthy parties, strong economic growth, increasing equality, and the development of the welfare state, profound changes have been observed. According to Mauro Magatti (2012), within this framework, two main currents of thought have exerted a decisive influence in shaping the contemporary landscape. The first current found expression in the student protests of 1968, which, despite their collective nature, were a vector of individualism insofar as

they celebrated self-determination and the rejection of all social constraints and coercion. This movement promoted positive emancipation from oppressive constraints in the family, educational and religious spheres, but also, as a "side effect", contributed to transforming social priorities in a subjectivist key (Slonecker, 2017). The second movement, neoliberalism, emerged in the 1970s and emphasised the importance of personal success through the market and deregulation, outlining a society conceived as an aggregation of autonomous individuals. This approach contributed to a weakening of community and solidarity ties, placing the individual at the centre of the social and political horizon (Taylor-Gooby & Leruth, 2018).

Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck analysed contemporary individualism by framing our society as characterised by liquidity and uncertainty. Bauman (2013) described a "liquid modernity", where social bonds and structures become more flexible and less reliable, causing individuals to experience feelings of isolation and precariousness. Beck (1992) introduced the concept of a "risk society", characterised by the need to face choices in the absence of certainties and solid structures, highlighting how individualism has become a survival strategy in a world marked by instability and continuous transformation. Consistent with these social characteristics, the "culture of the collective", fundamental to democratic participation, is experiencing a period of crisis. There is no shortage of political initiatives in the contemporary era: from algorithmic activism to digital parties, from awareness-raising initiatives via social media to civil rights or environmental movements. However, the current individualist *zeitgeist* risks making them ephemeral, transient and eroding the social fabric.

Reviving the democratic spirit. The representative, participatory and deliberative models

In today's context, characterised by both technological development and liquid and transient forms of activism, the question arises whether it is possible to structure public participation in a more autonomous way from commercial platforms. Emancipating – at least in part – political participation from the ecosystems of big tech companies means rebalancing the "playing field", offering citizens the chance to interact in spaces not conditioned by market logics. This could enable forms of public participation that are more genuine and less susceptible to manipulation, ensuring a more plural and dialogic interaction between members of society. Digital participation free from commercial mechanisms could have advantages: encouraging debate, organising protest actions, capturing the attention of mainstream media, and increasing citizen awareness (Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Gray-Hawkins, 2018). The possible directions of development

of non-commercial platforms reflect three main democratic models: representative, participatory and deliberative.

The representative model is based on the delegation of power to elected parties. At this juncture, platforms are used to renew party organisations. In recent decades, a crisis of mass parties has emerged, characterised by a decline in electoral participation and in the number of citizens willing to engage in party organisations (Mair, 2013). Yet, in recent years, some experiments attempt to structure "platform parties", also called "digital parties", which try to renew conventional forms of participation in their functioning (Gerbaudo, 2018). Think of the German Pirate Party, focused on the promotion of digital rights, or the more "generalist" Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy and Podemos in Spain: these movements have resorted to internal platforms for the collection of opinions and the involvement of supporters in the making of certain decisions. Even though these platforms attract significantly fewer users than social networks, they nevertheless represent initiatives that take shape through digital means and aspire to promote civic participation. It is relevant to note that in a period marked by a "party crisis", new formations are emerging that heavily rely in technology.

In particular, the Pirate Party in Germany decided to use the Liquid Feedback platform with the intention of promoting more internal debate. Podemos in Spain, on the other hand, was born in 2014 on the initiative of Pablo Iglesias, a political science researcher, and gathered the experience of the Indignados. The success of Podemos has depended both on the communication skills of its leader and on the creative use of socials such as Twitter and Facebook. In addition, the formation equipped itself with a series of tools to give voice to the grassroots: the site hosted a discussion area, called "Plaza Podemos", and a voting area, called "Participa" (De Nadal, 2023). The case of the Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy is similar. The Internet was chosen by the two co-founders, Beppe Grillo and Gianroberto Casaleggio, as the main arena through which to challenge the political class (Tronconi, 2015). Subsequently, the participatory platform "Rousseau" was released, later replaced by "SkyVote" (Giacomini, 2022). Registered users voted on decisive decisions for the future of the M5S, chose candidates for public office and proposed their own bills. The idea is to use technology as an opportunity to revitalise the links between the centre and the peripheries, opening the party to direct citizen participation.

Although the adoption of platforms represents an attempt at modernisation, this approach is not without its shortcomings. One of the main flaws is the limited effective participation, which tends to involve only a fraction of potential stakeholders. Moreover, in line with Robert Michels' "iron law of oligarchy", even these initiatives, which purport

to be open and horizontal, tend to develop oligarchic dynamics. Gerbaudo (2018) introduced the concepts of "hyper-leader" and "super-base". If the super-base consists of a core of highly motivated and technologically capable supporters who participate from below, the hyper-leader is a charismatic figure who dominates party communication, often using digital media to establish a direct relationship with voters. These concepts highlight how digital parties, although they use participation platforms, are still characterised by vertical and personalistic structures, where the leader assumes a central role in organisation and strategy. In this context, party leaders and the IT technicians running the platform (Casaleggio, co-founder of the M5S, belonged to this category) may end up dominating the decision-making process. This may undermine the pursuit of ideal goals and may cause disaffection among members excluded from the "real" decision-making dynamics.

The participatory model, on the other hand, emphasises the importance of the direct involvement of citizens in political decisions, transcending traditional methods such as elections, holding party offices or supporting political campaigns (Barber, 1984). In the participatory model, the activation of aggregations belonging to the "sub political" area such as autonomously organised movements, groups born on social networks, civil rights collectives, global justice movements, NGOs, algorithmic or environmental activism networks, local solidarity initiatives, associations related to the professional or trade union sphere is considered (Eliasoph, 2011; Nez, 2012; Lee, 2015). These energies could be channelled through civic platforms for information, participation and involvement. Technological developments have extended the field of possibilities for political engagement: citizens can actively participate through online information acquisition, writing posts, participating in forums, signing petitions, participating in both physical and virtual assemblies, adopting collaborative governance practices, and contributing to crowdsourcing projects.

De Blasio (2018) traced two macro-types of civic platforms in Europe: on the one hand, those dedicated to increase the transparency of institutions and, on the other hand, those that aim to offer tools for participation. In Italy, in addition to digital public services, their main focus has been on transparency measures. Establishing rights of access to public administration information, also through open government platforms, is aimed at enabling citizens to monitor the activity of institutions and journalists and the media, as well as researchers or activists, to carry out their functions effectively. More active participation, on the other hand, was achieved through consultation practices that include both questionnaires with predefined answers and the possibility of leaving free comments. Themes focused on specific areas of interest, such as education and

local development projects. These initiatives often refer to the need to promote equality and inclusion of citizens, with a focus on the idea of restoring trust in institutions. The principle is that citizens should also be able to organise themselves online to contribute to the administration of cities and the construction of public policies. These platforms are free from commercial mechanisms and have certain advantages: greater respect for privacy, less personalised content, easy access to public information, potential increase in the quality of interactions.

However, even participatory practices are not without their criticalities. In some cases, participation may be too "hot": when citizens directly intervene in decision-making processes on issues that affect them personally, emotional responses or extremist tendencies may emerge. In addition, the potential bypassing of intermediate bodies may compromise some valuable functions performed by representatives and parties, which include the ability to negotiate compromises and mediate between different interests, the synthesis of particular interests into collective ones, the introduction of innovations even when they are not immediately understood by the population, and the maintenance of an organic management of state functions (Diamond & Gunther, 2002). In contrast, it is plausible to assume that for many public issues ordinary citizens may show little or no interest: it is unrealistic to expect most citizens to develop a passion for the broad spectrum of public issues. Although the Internet may facilitate participation, there are significant obstacles: from a cognitive point of view, individuals' mental resources are limited and tend to be prioritised for personal life issues such as work and intimate relationships (Kahneman, 2011); from a social point of view, we live in complex and highly specialised societies where public issues require increasingly detailed analysis and investigation (Durkheim, 1893). This results in the "Pareto principle", according to which only a minority of citizens actively participate, while the vast majority follow silently and passively, only to re-emerge under particular conditions.

Finally, the deliberative model aims at reaching consensual decisions through in-depth discussions among citizens, emphasising the quality and depth of dialogue beyond the mere expression of preferences. In light of the problems of both the representative and participatory models, studies such as Fishkin (1995), Ackerman & Fishkin (2005) and Pateman (2012), have pondered the possibility of a decision-making architecture that enhances people's input, limiting the problems of a traditional participatory approach. Their proposal seeks to apply Jürgen Habermas's (1962) "discourse principle", represented in these instances by so-called "deliberative polls", a method that uses drawing lots as a selection mechanism. This criterion, which is as horizontal as possible, has its roots in the democracies of antiquity.

The operational process of the random-deliberative method can be described as follows: let us imagine that a community, be it a city or a nation, must make a decision on a specific issue, from building a new school to the law on living wills. Initially, a census is taken of the members of the community, from which a representative and proportional group is randomly drawn. The composition of this group, which emerges from the random process, faithfully reflects, in statistical terms, the demographic distribution of the community, including a fair proportion of women, employees, the elderly, the young, entrepreneurs, freelancers, and so on. These individuals, selected not through elections but on a statistical basis, take on the role of "deliberative representatives". For a defined period – which may vary from one week to two months, up to one year – group members examine the issue through peer discussions, consultations with experts and associations, in order to reach a well-informed and informed decision. Similarly to a municipal or regional councillor, depending on the level of decision-making, the chosen citizens receive an allowance that enables them to devote the necessary time to analysing, studying and debating the problem with undivided attention.

This approach could mitigate the problem of limited participation, i.e. "Pareto law": the appointment of "deliberative representatives" would empower a few people, who could concentrate full-time on defined issues. These representatives (in the statistical sense) would have the task of dealing with complex issues, supported by an educational process prior to decision-making: they would organise hearings with experts, study detailed reports and take part in debates, proceeding to the final decision only after adequate investigation. Such a model would be cognitively sustainable since, during their community engagement, representatives would take leave from work and receive an appropriate office allowance. Moreover, the random selection of "deliberative representatives" would ensure that they represent the general interest of the community, thus avoiding the risk of over-representation of directly involved interests, which is frequent in traditional participatory processes. This system could also limit the problems typical of conventional representative democracy, where electoral selection tends to favour oligarchic dynamics and benefits those with greater economic resources to promote their campaigns. The protection against such distortions would be greater since "deliberative representatives" would be chosen randomly and rotate frequently, with limited terms of office and no possibility of immediate re-election. The application of "deliberative polls" could be extended to different levels, from the local community to the international level (think of the European Union). Digital technologies could also effectively support this model, facilitating the management of demographic databases and providing participants with tools such as online forums, videoconferencing platforms and other

digital collaboration resources, as well as a wide range of training materials accessible online, such as documents, research papers and webinars.

Although the deliberative model offers several theoretical advantages, it has some weaknesses that limit its practicability. Firstly, the implementation of a deliberative system is inherently "anti-party", as it challenges the established power of political parties, which tend to resist changes that might diminish their control over the decision-making processes of democracies. This resistance can make it extremely difficult to implement the random-deliberative model on a large scale. Moreover, while the deliberative model can be effective for addressing specific issues, such as civil rights, which benefit from a reflexive and inclusive approach, its application is less practical for the day-to-day management of public affairs, which often require quick decisions. Deliberative polls require a significant investment of time and resources, both in terms of organisation and citizen participation, which limits their applicability to issues of particular urgency. In this sense, "deliberative polls" can hardly go beyond supporting representative democracy as we know it.

Concluding remarks

Democracy has undergone continuous historical changes, shaping itself as a mixed system (e.g. simultaneous delegation to elected representatives coexists with direct mechanisms such as the popular referendum). Presently, democracy faces significant challenges, including the preponderant influence of large digital platforms on the public sphere, a marked increase in individualism in recent decades, and problematic impacts on the intensity of participation. However, these challenges also represent opportunities: digital technologies offer new tools that can enrich the "toolbox" of democracy.

Kant argued that examples are the crutches of reasoning. In conclusion, then, we can summarise the focal points through exercises in imagination. First, let us emphasise why the role of large platforms is relevant to democracy, even if it tends to be hidden. Let us imagine that we are in an underground car and witness a white supremacist attacking a black woman. The attacker insults her with abusive words and threatens her. A passenger decides to film the incident, producing a video with his smartphone that can testify to the assault. However, the supremacist notices that he is being recorded, approaches the passenger, snatches the smartphone from his hand and deletes the video. At that point, the passenger, back in possession of his device, decides to broadcast the incident with a live video on a social networking site. In this case, the supremacist cannot delete any video and seems helpless. However, in a cunning move, he broadcasts a recent musical hit at full volume through his smartphone. Since the social network's algorithms block direct videos

containing copyrighted music, the supremacist manages to get away with it. This example underlines that individuals have the power to bend platform rules to their advantage. First the passenger does it, by sending the video live, then the supremacist, by leveraging copyright protection. The key point, however, is this: in both cases, it is the platform that gives the "rules of the game" by which users act. The platforms give the modes and boundaries within which people can act.

Democratic participation can only become superior to commercial platforms if it has the possibility of breaking out of the logics imposed by the latter. This does not at all mean getting out of platforms forever or altogether but being able to have an alternative that balances power in the digital era. We have seen that there are essentially three ways in which digital technologies can be declined in a genuinely participatory sense, making processes autonomous from commercial neointermediaries.

Let us summarise the essential points by constructing different scenarios. Let us assume we are in Udine during the pedestrianisation of Via Mercatovecchio, the core of the historic centre at the foot of the castle. In the first scenario, the decision is proposed by the majority party, with a proposal confirmed by the online vote of its members. The Council accepted the proposal and approved it. The decision of the institution, therefore, is corroborated by the online vote, but the involvement of the citizenry is limited to the political area of the majority. Moreover, it was a vote on a decision already conceived by the party leadership. In the participatory model, a group of environmentalists organised a bicycle procession and presented the mayor with a proposal to make Via Mercatovecchio a pedestrian street. The mayor is in favour, but in the following days, the association of "residents of the historic centre" launches an online petition in opposition, fearing inconvenience in having to share the street with pedestrians and cyclists. This scenario shows an active citizenship, which pushes institutions to respond to different needs, but also highlights how the various groups, focused on their own interests, make mediation and the search for the common good complex. In the third scenario, a deliberative process is activated for the pedestrianisation of Via Mercatovecchio. Digitally drawn citizens represent the population equally, participating in both online and in-person discussion forums. This method directly involves ordinary people in the decision-making process, while ensuring that the final decision is more thoughtful and aligned to the common good. However, this is a lengthy process and one that parties experience as a delegitimization of their role.

These scenarios show plastically that the advent of technologies does not lead fatally in a certain direction, but that their use can be declined according to the values and orientations of the political community. Each model has both potential and limitations:

the representative model may at times seem detached from the real needs of citizens but allows for synthesis and stability; the participatory model, while involving the citizenry, runs the risk of seeing specific interests prevail; the deliberative model, on the other hand, seeks to harmonise these tensions through a more balanced decision-making process that is representative of the entire community, but is impractical because it is naturally anti-party and because it is not suitable for decisions that must be taken quickly. The main challenge, from a theoretical point of view, is to effectively integrate the three models enabled by digital technologies to strengthen the democracy of the present and the future.

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