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Media influence on Politics: global challenges and new perspectives with AI. A crisis of democracy?

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Introduction

In an increasingly globalized and ever-connected world, the results of every transformation, directly or indirectly, affect the whole world triggering a chain of other major changes. The advent of media radically changed our society, furtherly highlighting this global intertwinement. Indeed, almost every realm has undergone a significant and profound transformation to adapt to media capillary diffusion and velocity.

The present work aims to examine how the media influence the political realm and, particularly, democracy. Its purpose is to analyze whether they possess the ability to deeply affect democratic principles and to enhance the current democratic recession. Do then media enhance democracy's vulnerability?

Undoubtedly, global challenges will enter the discourse to better understand the process as a whole. Particular attention will be given to democratic innovations and their role to effectively exercise the so-called e-democracy.

The discussion cannot prescind from the exploration of social media platforms and how political communication has evolved to adapt to such instruments. Furthermore, the influence exercised by Big Tech and their ever-growing power will be explored.

However, an objective analysis must necessarily also consider the whole set of risks and implications deriving from the use of media and, specifically, from an uncontrolled one.

The analysis will then focus on the power of Artificial Intelligence, in the light of its last developments and achievements. The possible future scenarios offered by AI include applications of it in the political sphere. Big data and their utmost importance will be at the heart of the discussion. Again, not only opportunities and advantages will be considered. Conversely, the risks and threats posed by AI will be deeply observed.

Does Artificial Intelligence pose threats to democratic values? Do algorithms possess an ideology of their own? Can we prevent harmful scenarios?

CHAPTER 1:

Media and politics: a mutual influence.

1.1. Mass media and new media: the Network Society

It is undoubted that the advent of technology radically brought significant changes and gave rise to profound transformations in our society. The Digital Revolution and the birth of Information and Communications Technology constitute two of the major and most revolutionary achievements of human existence. The impact of such events is of an incredible magnitude and their consequences affect, directly or indirectly, every context reaching every single individual. Moreover, the globalization process played a crucial role in the consolidation of such consequences, creating and promoting an interconnected and ever faster communication. In particular, the advent of mass media contributed to the transformation of traditional communication shifting from a slow, general, and local communication towards an immediate, targeted, and global one. In our analysis a distinction between traditional “mass media” and the “new media” proves to be necessary. Indeed, this distinction turns out to be essential in order to grasp and highlight the existing difference between the two. We define as mass media all those means of mass communication used to spread information. Among them, we identify tools such as television, the radio, and newspapers. The latter, conversely, are defined as all the “digital technologies for creating, distributing, and consuming content” (Dhiman, 2023:1). Examples of new media comprehend social media, websites, podcasts, blogs, etc. Among social media we distinguish different platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and many more. Although mass media and new media present many common features and are often confusingly interchanged, significant differences can be underlined. The main difference lies in the communication strategies of the two. While the mass media aim at spreading information reaching the largest amount of population, the new media have a further purpose. Indeed, the latter aim, not only at diffusing information, but also at collecting the widest possible quantity of people’s data. Another important difference concerns the position of individuals, more precisely defined as “users” in the digital world. In the mass media the role of audience is more passive while with the new media it becomes more active. In fact, the new media create an interactive and ever-present system of communication between

users without limits and borders. The individual can actively participate in the process creating contents and taking part in debates. Moreover, the communication provided by the new media, being constantly “online”, provides continuous and uninterrupted stimuli able to constantly influence individuals.

It has been observed how changes in technologies imply changes in communication. As a matter of fact, the communication sphere is transforming very fast, and this is a demonstration of how complex and dynamic the digital system is.

It can be thus stated that there has been a transformational shift towards what Castells define as “the network society”. In his book *The Rise of the Network Society*, the first book of the trilogy *The Information Age*, the sociologist Manuel Castells describes our contemporary society as a system of networks that rely on micro technologies. Indeed, according to the author, social networks already existed in the past. What characterizes this new “network society” is to be tracked on the use of ICT. These networks are to be understood as “open structures, able to expand without limits” (Castells, 2011); indeed, the network society can be seen as a system of nodes that can ensure a multilateral communication and interaction. However, as every kind of network, there is the inclusion of some individuals and the exclusion of other form the process, the latter being a consequence of the former. This is how social relations are organized in the Information Age. This is more and more true with the development of new media platforms and the ever-growing deep mediatization process (Hepp, 2019). Deep mediatization is defined as “an advanced stage of the process in which all elements of our social world are intricately related to digital media and their underlying infrastructures” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Indeed, we live in a society where all activities and processes are digitalized and where media have increasingly interrelated one another. Information and knowledge have become the pillars of our society and represent the points around which everything orbits. Power, politics, and the economic system are all transforming with the informatization and globalization processes. All the previously mentioned networks are undergoing a rapid process of widespread diffusion, and this does not necessarily imply positive achievements and consequences. Indeed, global challenges such as climate change or the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the potential dangerousness of such a system. In particular, the pandemic underlined how potential threats to our own survival can potentially and widely spread through those

networks of contact. As a consequence, such networks turn to be effective multipliers of potential destruction processes. They not only multiply their effects, but they even enhance their magnitude, especially in a global system of networks that knows no bounds. Time dimension and space dimension seems thus to be annihilated.

Mass media and new media are instruments able to influence public opinion and to direct individual's preferences. New media provide new global spaces and arenas for public discussion and debates. This enables people to have a voice and to freely express their own ideas but, as we will analyze later, this can simultaneously have direct and indirect implications.

In addition to being information and communication vehicles, they have the capacity of establishing and, even, impose a dominant ideology or cultural belief. Therefore, media can manipulate and control people's thoughts and behaviors but, at the same time, may undergo a process of manipulation which is translated into a subjugation to another power's control. To what extent then mass media and new media are expressions of democratic principles is a matter of relevant discussion and the topic need to be deeply analyzed in the following sections of the present work.

1.2. Big data: the new gold

The advent of new media and their ability to collect and store huge quantities of personal data revolutionized the technological system. All the digitalized activities and processes started to focus more and more on personal data which then became very relevant. Moreover, the new developments of AI and its ability to process unimaginable amounts of big data brought a radical change in our everyday lives.

We define big data as the extremely big amount of data that are generated every day (Balusamy et al., 2021). Data generate on the Internet through social media platforms, websites, streaming services platforms, messages, photos, etc. The development of big data technologies allows the processing and analysis of information, their understanding and even their transfer.

Recently, the volume, the speed and the amount of data has enormously increased together with data storage capabilities. Indeed, more and more large, and detailed sets of

data are collected and processed every day. The process of “data mining” through which information is extracted and interpreted represents a key point in big data analysis.

The use of big data involves many different sectors and contexts but, surely, the economic and the political fields are probably the two spheres in which data represents the most precious resource that can be available. Almost every company or small business instrumentally use people’s data in order to refine and implement effective marketing strategies. It is enough to consider how many times per day we are bombarded with consent requests for the collection of our personal data through the so-called “cookies”. And 99% of the time we do not even read the terms and conditions of such an action. Similarly, political actors are concerned with individual’s personal data in such a way that targeted messages and actions can turn to be extremely efficient.

Through an analysis of citizens’ preferences and inclinations, political marketing strategies can be built and directed so as to influence the majority of voters.

Understanding people beliefs and behaviors proves to be essential in order to ensure and promote a successful communication. Data can also be used to predict electoral results and even to attempt to change them.

Big data can be thus defined as the “new gold”. They not only are the expression of our own person, but they also represent the most precious resource for today’s processes.

They contain our personal information, characteristics, health specifics, ideas, thoughts, interests, and desires. Moreover, the new technological developments permit not only their collection and storage but, above all, their composition into a full single profile. In this way, complete and exhaustive profiles of people are available and will be then used for specific purposes and targeted actions. Very often these data profiles are sold and transferred to third parties which, in their turn, use them for statistical and economic purposes. Therefore, big data companies hold an immeasurable power. Of course, this has innumerable implications, some of which extremely harmful. Among them, we can find the manipulation of personal data and even the tempering of them, an invasion of privacy, the lack of informed consent for the collection and analysis of data, the use and gathering of sensitive information, and many more. This must alarm ourselves and encourage us to pay closer attention to our personal data and their circulation.

1.3. How is politics affected by the media?

The connection between politics and media is characterized by a mutual tight influence. It can be stated that indeed the two are linked in a relationship of high interdependence. However, this correlation is not a new and recent event. Indeed, the two seem to be reciprocally linked by the first half of the last century when the first media were born. The advent of new media outlets simply intensifies and multiplies this interrelation between politics and media.

There are several ways in which politics is affected by the media. Firstly, the media play a crucial role in forming and shaping public opinion. As previously mentioned, through the collection and interpretation of citizens' personal data, the media can provide a complete and accurate representation of individuals' beliefs, preferences, and behaviors. In the political game this is translated into an incredible and powerful tool to analyze, predict, and even direct the thoughts of people. Politicians and their collaborators can thus understand people's opinions and inclinations of voting in advance, and this turns out to be extremely advantageous in order to change the course of elections. Moreover, after a deep understanding of which topics people are more sensible to, a precise and targeted communication will be conducted in order to effectively reach voters' minds.

Secondly, media coverage and the representation of some topics instead of others, can influence the composition of the public agenda. The more emphasis is put on specific sensitive topics, the more the topic will be at the heart of politicians' campaign.

Thirdly, the new media offer a space for public and active debate between citizens. In this way, ideas and opinion circulate, data are collected, and the most sensitive topics will be instrumentally used during the campaign. Moreover, the more direct relationship between users and political leaders and the ability of freely express opinions and release comments, can be used as a litmus test of politicians' conduct. This is why the public sphere is undergoing a process of radical transformation due to the advent of mass and new media. In particular, the process of political communication significantly changed and is still changing very fast. In fact, the advent of new media requires the replacement of old styles of communication and the adaptation to the contemporary ones. Political communication is thus entering a new phase where communication must not be thought of as a unilateral process, but rather as a multilateral process between political actors and voters. This new phase of political communication is principally characterized by

three distinctive features: immediacy, specification, and emotionalization. The first element is the key for a successful communication strategy, especially amongst younger generations. The incredible speed of the circulation of information and the relative huge amount of data that are constantly sent and collected highlight the need for an immediate efficient communication. The second feature, i.e. specification, presupposes an adequate and accurate use of data mining techniques in order to obtain a complete profile of each voter. In this manner, a targeted communication plan can successfully reach the relative user and obtain his or her attention. The third element relies on the necessity of obtaining the emotional engagement of voters. This necessity is a consequence of the phenomenon of the spectacularisation of politics, “which increasingly takes place in online contexts, [...], where entertainment is crucial to engage citizens” (Gómez-García et al., 2023). Together with the spectacularisation of politics we observe a personalization of politics where political leaders overcome the traditional role of parties. This is not only highlighted by the media, but it is rather reinforced. However, a more detailed analysis of this phenomenon will be provided in chapter 2.

In a society where individuals are constantly subjected to millions of news and information, the attention and engagement of people turns to be an essential priority in communication. The real participation of voters in the political game is of an utmost importance, especially in a media-dominated world where indirectly campaigns become almost permanent. The emotional appeal is thus the key to obtain this purpose, overcoming the need to always provide fully truthful and credible information. Very often, politicians send emotionally relevant messages that contain partially true contents and notions. Leveraging on people’s ignorance and misinformation in order to obtain an active engagement has in fact become more and more frequent.

Undoubtedly, the moment in which the relationship between politics and media and their reciprocal influence becomes tighter is the moment of elections. The media indeed, play a pivotal role in all the phases of electoral campaigns. Their crucial importance is highlighted by the existence of two phenomena: political advertising and political marketing. The first one has been defined as “a purposely placed piece of communication, using a range of media, designed to garner positive feelings towards the sponsor” while the second one as “the use of marketing tools, concepts and

philosophies within the field of policy development, campaigning and internal relations by political parties and organizations” (Lilleker, 2006). These two concepts reveal to be extremely important during electoral campaigns since their purpose directly affect candidates and political parties. They not only serve as tools to influence public opinion but rather they are to be considered as powerful mechanism for changing electoral outcomes predictions. More specifically, a successful political advertisement must possess the following features. It must be extremely simple, have a dramatic impact, it shall rely on familiar themes, and it has to be centered on real people and not on political actors (Sanders, 2004). On the other side, political marketing must focus on a precise analysis and understanding of voters’ preferences and behaviors so as to produce tailored communication procedures. Both processes must aim at the persuasion of the electorate and their complete engagement.

Mass media also possess the ability of internationally represent national events and given the purpose of the present work, political actors. This is why politicians must necessarily rely on such instruments and cannot ignore their scope and potentiality. Indeed, media not only influence national public opinion and individuals, but they act globally. Leaders’ reputation is built both locally and globally since we live in an interconnected world. Indeed, people through new media freely express their thoughts and their level of satisfaction concerning the administration of the res publica and therefore this turns to be extremely important today. As a matter of fact, in a democratic context, an effective government cannot prescind from the direct legitimation of the governed.

1.4. The role of social media platforms in shaping public opinion

As it has been observed so far, the advent of mass media and new media radically changed our society and the entire communication system. More specifically, their emergence significantly revolutionized the political landscape. Their use for political purposes in fact highlight their potential ability to affect a nation’s government and its future. Among new media, the appearance of social media platforms probably represents one of the most relevant moments of the digitalization process. Indeed, they turn to be the dominant actors of our contemporary society.

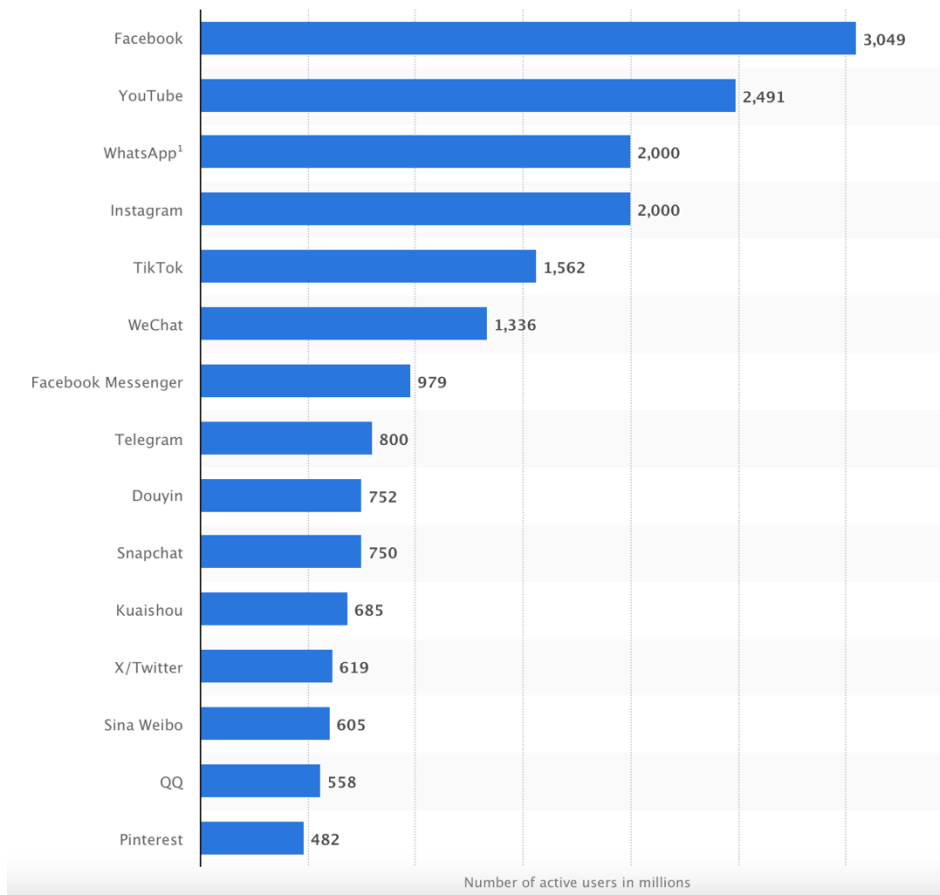


Figure 1.1 [Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2024, ranked by number of monthly active users] Source: Statista.

According to this recent statistic provided by Statista, the globally most used social media platforms are in order: Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok. Some of them are part of the Meta Company, an increasingly prominent multinational company in the technological field whose CEO is Mark Zuckerberg. It can be easily noted how millions of active users rely on these platforms every day. The system of networks that originates from this global connection is something never seen before. However, although the existence of a global connection, it must be observed that not all countries allow the full free use of such instruments. Indeed, especially in those countries in which dictatorial regimes rule, media are partially or, in some cases, totally censored. This of course represent a huge limitation for a complete understanding of users “online” behaviors.

People use social media platforms for interaction, entertainment and even to get information. Indeed, it is not surprising that lots of people receive information only through online channels, websites, and social networks. This is mainly due to the incredible speed and the easier availability of online information. However, several problems can originate from an exclusively online information, but this will be addressed in the following chapter.

For political purposes, the most relevant platforms are definitely Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. What is interesting to note is that each of these platforms owns peculiar characteristics and thus requires specific styles of communication. As a consequence, new professional figures have emerged to properly address these issues. Media and communication experts have the role to support political actors guiding their decisions and helping them in building a strategic communication plan. These experts are fundamental not only during the electoral campaign, but they become an everyday essential presence for the politician's public image.

Undoubtedly, the advent of social media platforms and its use for political purposes completely transformed the concepts of political participation and political engagement. Such digital instruments are incredible resources that possess the ability of really influencing individuals' choices and tactically obtain their political engagement. Controlling peoples' minds has always been considered essential both from a sociological and from a political perspective and information represent the key to it. The power of digital campaigns and the subsequent permanent presence of political actors on these platforms highlight the importance of social media and their incredible strength in shaping and directing public opinion. Media consent the constant transmission and reception of stimuli through which people attention can be captured. Indeed, millions of news come to people every day and that's why communication and, given the aim of our analysis, political communication must be grounded on extremely innovative strategies and techniques.

The omnipresent interconnection and global interaction provided by social media not only permits to reach every single individual, but it also gives to each of them a real and powerful voice.

1.4.1. The role of Tik Tok in electoral campaigns

Among the previously mentioned social media, TikTok surely represents one of the most innovative and, in a way, revolutionary platforms that have been lately created. It has been defined as the “new fertile space for political communication” (Cervi et al., 2023). Indeed, this platform brought significant changes to the social, economic, and political landscape. Moreover, it completely changed the way information is communicated and transmitted.

TikTok in fact presents peculiar characteristics that differentiate it from other social media platforms. Firstly, the home page is divided into two parts. In the first one there is the “following” section where there are all the contents and videos posted by the people you decide to follow. The second part is the so-called “for you page” where you can find videos that TikTok proposes to you on the basis of your preferences and tastes. Of course, this derives from an accurate analysis of personal data, elaborated by a complex and “intelligent” algorithm. This algorithm takes into account not only users’ preferences and interactions, but also their geolocation and language. The way through which people navigate and see contents is a mechanism of “scrolling”. Users simply move their finger from the bottom of the screen to the top and a new content appears in the homepage. Through this continuous “scrolling”, TikTok saves your preferences and proposes more appropriate contents.

The second aspect concerns the length of TikTok videos. Users can create contents whose duration ranges from 15 seconds to a maximum of 10 minute and can also start lives interactions. This time feature is what mostly revolutionized the entire communication system. In fact, communication must be fast, immediate, and extremely clear in order to be efficient. The message at the core of the communication that has to be transmitted must be direct and, above all, extremely compelling. As a matter of fact, the threshold of attention has enormously declined, and this is particularly true among younger generations. Especially after the advent of media and the constant exposure to an incessant flow of data and information, attention deficits are more and more common. Undeniably, new media platforms such as TikTok and the mechanism on which they are based, enhance this issue.

Another interest aspect concerning Tik Tok that must be absolutely considered is the age-rating of users. Currently, TikTok requires a minimum age of 13 years. This means

that a large portion of users has not reached the age of legal majority yet. This represents a big issue of debate if we consider TikTok not only as a mean of entertainment for young people, but a place of real debate and of economic activities. As a matter of fact, almost every company rely on TikTok and its advertising potentiality to promote and enlarge their business. In some cases, users can also do online shopping directly through the platform. Moreover, TikTok offers a “monetization” option through which users have the possibility of obtaining a real and actual income.

If we focus on the implications deriving from the use of TikTok for political purposes, several considerations emerge. A first aspect concerns the previous consideration of the age of digital users. The fact that the largest majority of them have not reached the age of legal majority yet constitutes a real and relevant problem. Firstly, younger people whose personality traits and preferences are not yet fully formed may be more sensitive and vulnerable to certain topics. Moreover, they can be more easily influenced and convinced. Secondly, politicians and marketing experts must tailor their communicative styles in order to intercept younger people, also considering the fact that a large portion of them does not go to the voting booth. Politicians may take advantage of this sowing a seed that will be collected in the future. TikTok thus reveals to be an extremely powerful instrument for politicians that can, in this way, radically influence masses. Italy’s last elections are a clear example of a massive use of TikTok by political candidates as a tool to expose electoral programs and shaping public opinion. Likewise, 2024 US presidential elections will surely rely on this powerful and influential social media to a great extent. And it is not surprising that some of the candidates have already landed on the platform.

1.5. Politics affecting the media: The *Cambridge Analytica* scandal

We have seen how strong and powerful the interdependence relation between media and politics is. And more precisely, the possible ways in which media can influence politics have been analyzed. Now, politics influence on media will be considered. Specifically, a concrete case will be introduced in order to grasp the key points of the discussion. It will serve the purpose of representing and expressing the main implications of politics influence on media.

The influence of politics on media can be implemented in different ways. Firstly, politics can exercise a “domination” function over the media controlling contents and, eventually, censoring some of them. This would of course threaten the very same democratic essence of our contemporary society, but we know that indirectly this may happen quite frequently. The control of the narrative together with the control of people’s behaviors and beliefs seem to be more and more common nowadays. Secondly, politics in a sense regulates media through policymaking and law enforcement. In this way, the law governing media processes can influence the circulation of some news and exclude others. Thirdly, as in the case of 2016 US presidential elections, media can serve the interest of political actors which, through the control and even the misuse of digital data, pursue their propaganda purposes influencing media representation and public opinion.

Cambridge Analytica was a political consultancy firm founded in England in 2013 and closed in 2018 in the aftermath of a huge scandal. The company was concerned with the collection of data about voters’ behaviors and preferences and their analysis to influence political campaigns and electoral outcomes. Cambridge Analytica in fact used microtargeting techniques to successfully target the audience with tailored political advertising strategies. However, in 2018 it was revealed that Cambridge Analytica was held responsible for the harvesting and misuse the personal data of millions of Facebook users which did not express their consent to do so. These data “played a key role in Donald Trump’s successful campaign against Hillary Clinton in the 2016 presidential election” (ur Rehman, 2019). Indeed, detailed profiles of users were created and psychological inclinations were examined in order to influence voters’ behaviors and to realize an effective political advertising.

This scandal is of an extreme importance since it involved several implications. It not only raised awareness towards privacy and ethical concerns, but it highlighted the urgent need to implement and enforce adequate privacy regulations to enhance the protection of personal data and their safeguarding. Moreover, it underlined how microtargeting can threaten democracy and individuals’ freedom. Indeed, microtargeting is to be considered a concrete problem “because it exploits personal data without informed consent; because it allows for the sharing of misinformation; and because it blurs the boundary between advertising and other forms of content (Heawood, 2018)”.

CHAPTER 2

Digital democratic innovations: opportunities and risks.

2.1. Democratic innovations in the “platform society”

There is no doubt that the impact of technological developments and the specialization of new media radically affected, affect, and will affect ever more our lives. As a matter of fact, the overwhelming majority of activities have been digitalized. With digitalization here we mean the use of technological tools to transform information, activities, and even entire processes into a digital dimension. This means that high technology comes to support or, in some cases, even substitute the traditional forms of execution, performance and organization of activities. Moreover, the digitalization process allows for an easier, more permanent, and effective collection of information and data that, with the help of AI algorithms, can be functionally interpreted and analyzed. This process of digitalization involves many different aspects of our everyday lives that range from basic bureaucratic activities to more complex and delicate sides such as, for example, health procedures. The issue of security and the question of whether this digitalization process leads to greater safety will be analyzed in the following sections of the present work.

This extreme connection between the “digital” and the “real” is getting increasingly stronger. This is furtherly enhanced by the advent of digital platforms and the consequent process of platformization. With this latter term we mean “the penetration of infrastructures, economic processes and governmental frameworks of digital platforms in different economic sectors and spheres of life, as well as the reorganization of cultural practices and imaginations around these platforms” (Poell et al, 2019). We consider platforms as all the “digital infrastructures that facilitate and shape personalized interactions [...], organized through the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetization, and circulation of data” (Poell et al, 2019). Some examples of such platforms can comprehend social media sites such as Facebook, websites, the Microsoft’s services, Amazon, and many more. In addition to this, the term platform encompasses all the instruments aimed at the facilitation of democratic processes and through which citizens can actively participate in the political system. These platforms

include online voting platforms, public debate forums, assemblies, online citizenship platforms, information websites, political party platforms, and others.

As a matter of fact, all these platforms are “gradually infiltrating in, and converging with, the (offline, legacy) institutions and practices through which democratic societies are organized” (Van Dijck et al, 2018). That’s why we can talk of a platform society, “a term that emphasizes the inextricable relation between online platforms and societal structures” (Van Dijck et al, 2018). What is important to consider is the idea that this system of platforms not only guides interactions and processes, but it even creates the very same social order. Indeed, we can state that “platforms do not reflect the social: they produce the social structures we live in” (Van Dijck et al, 2018).

The ever-growing importance of platforms is radically changing the contemporary society, its organization, and its institutions. Indeed, since we live in a globalized and interconnected world, every change, independently from its magnitude, leads to other major transformations.

Both social, economic, and political activities are thus undergoing a process of profound transformation. The advent of the so-called democratic innovations fueled the connection between the traditional and the digital. The birth of such innovations shall be contextualized within a broader discussion relating to democracy and its recent crisis, but this will be deeply argued in the following sections of this second chapter. The present section will be limited to the provision of a clear definition of such instruments and their scope of application, and of an analysis of the consequent opportunities deriving from them.

Democratic innovations emerge from the people’s need for a more active participation into the political system. Indeed, especially in western liberal democracies, citizens are complaining about a sense of underrepresentation and thus demand for more control of the democratic processes. The consequent lack of trust together with a sense of disillusion towards politics enhance the need for a real voice in the system. The advent of new media, of course, paved the way to the application of technology for such a use. We thus define democratic innovations as “all procedures aimed at facilitating and increasing citizens’ access and political participation, which are realized both through institutions specifically designed to increase public participation and through bottom-up experiences capable of providing connections to institutional practices in policy-making

and political decision-making processes” (Sorice, 2020). Digital democratic innovations include e-voting platforms, crowdsourcing platforms, online petition websites, digital identity systems, participatory digital platforms, online forums for debate, government information websites, and many others. Citizens may also collaborate into the decision-making processes concerning budget and the allocation of financial resources. With the term “crowdsourcing” we mean the collection of data, opinions, advice, or even concrete actions from a heterogeneous and large group of individuals in order to develop projects or performing specific tasks. This “provides the ability to scale-up the level of engagement by increasing the number of expert or non-expert participants” (Taeihagh, 2017) in decision-making processes or public projects. The idea behind is embodied in the concept of collective intelligence, understood as “the ability that a group has to find solutions to problems collaboratively that are superior to any of the solutions that members of the group might have found individually” (Boucher et al, 2023). Indeed, since “politics is by nature a collective art with collective consequences [...], the challenge of governance is to put in place and use the decision-making processes that will help meet the needs of certain populations, with their particular preferences and interests” (Boucher et al, 2023).

The advent of social media surely boosted the growth and diffusion of digital platforms specifically developed for citizens’ political participation. As a matter of fact, democratic innovations have the purpose of increase participation through efficiency, transparency, and inclusiveness.

The opportunities emerging from the spread of democratic innovations and digital platforms for political participation are countless. The civic engagement of people and the inclusion of different heterogenous voices into the policy-making processes is what the now weakened democracy is asking for. Keeping government and institutions accountable and obtaining a stronger and effective representation turn to be the essential foundations for the full exercise of democratic principles. Sufficient to say that without legitimation, democracy is nothing but a faraway dream.

2.1.1. E-democracy, e-government, and e-participation

The concept of “democratic innovations” encompasses a wide range of processes aimed at the more inclusive participation of citizens into the political scene. Indeed, it

comprehends both digital and non-digital procedures. For the purpose of the present work, we will focus only on digital democratic innovations and the implication deriving from them.

Democratic innovations can be defined as tools to exercise and enhance e-democracy, understanding the latter as the use of Information and Communication Technologies to increase citizens' political participation in the support of democratic decision-making processes.

Very often the concept of e-democracy is misleadingly interchanged with the terms “e-government” and “e-participation”. The difference between the first two concepts is a little thinner while the meaning of the latter is easily understandable. Indeed, e-participation can be understood as a foundational element of e-democracy since it can be defined as the engagement of citizens through digital platforms.

Although e-democracy and e-government may in a sense overlap, they concern two distinct processes.

E-democracy, as previously mentioned, concerns the use of ICT to enhance democratic processes and to increase individuals' participation to decision-making processes. It “allows for the transition from an intermittent and low-intensity democracy, in which political participation takes place and is exhausted only during the electoral moment, to a participatory democracy capable of committing citizens” (Sorice, De Blasio, 2019). On the other hand, e-government concerns the use of Information and Communication technologies for the “administrative and governmental functions of public administrations and institutions” (Sorice, De Blasio, 2019). More precisely, with “e-government” we mean the supply, through digital platforms and systems, of government services. The main goal of such a process is definitely to improve administrative efficiency and enhance bureaucracy. It can be easily observed that the two processes follow two different logics. On one side, e-democracy works on a horizontal perspective in which citizens are actively engaged and give their relevant contribution to the democratic processes. On the other side, e-government is built on a vertical logic where citizens are supplied with services and information platforms which serve the purposes of the government itself.

E-democracy and e-government, apart from the common fact that they both rely on Information and Communication technologies, thus reveal to be distinct concepts.

Nevertheless, their intersection is what allows and encourage an effective, inclusive, and transparent democratic government: a demonstration of their extreme intertwinement.

2.2. Possible risks originating from the uncontrolled use of media

New media surely bring significant benefits and represent a great resource of opportunities and developments. However, the improper and uncontrolled use of these instruments constitute a big issue nowadays. Endless quantities of information are spread and generated by the media every day and almost everybody can create, modify, and diffuse news through online platforms. This means that every individual may potentially have the intention of voluntarily disseminate false or misleading information. As a consequence, distinguishing what is reliable and true from what is false or not fully accurate may not be so immediate. That's why we speak of information disorder. In order to better understand its definition, three main concepts must be introduced: mis-information, dis-information, and mal-information.

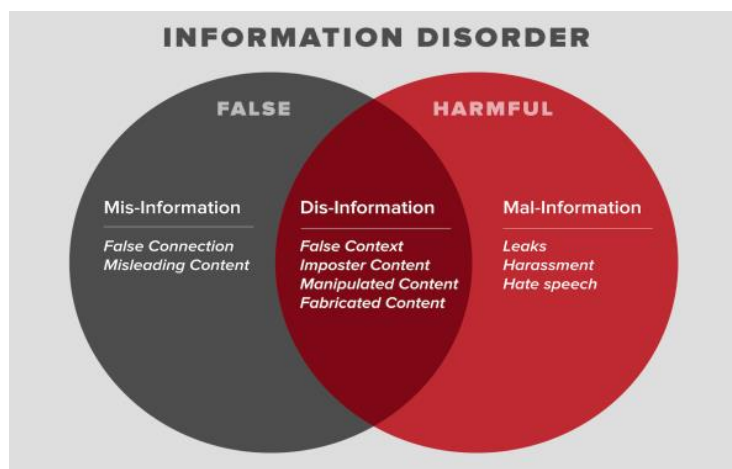


Figure 2.1. [Information disorder] Source: Wardle & Derekhshan, 2017.

Information disorder comprehends these three distinct concepts. Mal-information is the spread of true information to cause harm and damage to individuals or groups of people. This comprehends hate speech, harassment, and leaks. The term mis-information concerns the “dissemination of incorrect facts, where individuals may unknowingly share or believe false information without the intent to mislead” (World Economic Forum, 2023). On the other hand, dis-information concerns “the deliberate and

intentional spread of false information with the aim of misleading others” (World Economic Forum, 2023). It can be easily noted that mis-information and dis-information presuppose the spread of false or incorrect news contrary to mal-information which rely on true facts.

All these three processes represent a huge threat to people’s education, information and even integrity. Moreover, the ever-growing presence of fake news and misleading information enhance the risk of manipulation of people and their opinions. It has been observed how a large portion of the population is unable to recognize and distinguish fake news. According to the research by PBS NewsHour made in the occasion of US elections of 2020, this problem was made particularly evident.

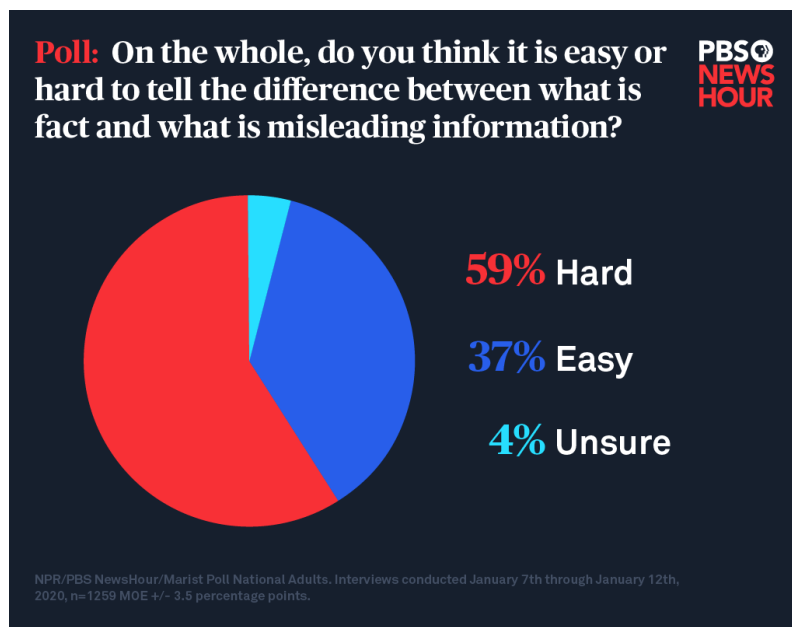


Figure 2.2. [Poll: On the whole, do you think it is easy or hard to tell the difference between what is fact and what is misleading information?] Source: PBS NewsHour, 2020.

As the graph shows, 59% of interviewees admitted that to them spotting the difference between a real and a misleading information is hard. It can be easily noted that this percentage is the highest and includes the vast majority of respondents.

Another important aspect to consider is determined by the emergence of the so-called filter bubbles and the consequent development of echo-chambers. The Cambridge Dictionary defines filter bubble as “a situation in which someone only hears or sees news and information that supports what they already believe and like, especially a

situation created on the internet as a result of algorithms (= sets of rules) that choose the results of someone's searches". Algorithms thus become a key player in the definition of our preferences and inclinations. They decide what we have to see, when we have to see it and how, on the basis of an accurate analysis of our tracked behaviors and online activities. This allows for the creation of the so-called echo-chambers, where people are situated on the basis of their ideas and preferences. In this way, people are supplied with targeted information and interact only with people that share their values and opinions. This creates an online and, as a consequence, a concrete environment of extreme ideological and cultural division and polarization. Therefore, any possibility of exchange and discussion is suppressed, and this translates into a real danger.

In addition to this, the uncontrolled use of media can also lead to privacy concerns and dangerous phenomena such as data leakage. We have previously analyzed the case of Cambridge Analytica and the unauthorized collection of data from millions of Facebook profiles, but this is just one case among countless others. Indeed, billions of data are stolen every day and used for economic and political purposes. Cybersecurity is still very fragile and needs to be properly addressed with specific and, above all, effective regulations. We must also take into account the enormous power that platforms, or even big companies such as the Big Five (Meta, Microsoft, Apple, Google, and Amazon) hold in the storage of data and their non-proper protection. As the Cambridge Analytica scandal highlights, their power is counterbalanced by the dangerous lack of specific regulations that are being slowly developed.

Another important issue is represented by the growth of the digital divide and the risk of people's exclusion. As a matter of fact, the use of media requires the use of technological devices. The problem is that the costs of such instruments and their availability are not for everyone. As a consequence, we face the risk of a real and proper alienation of all those subjects that cannot afford this online connection. This exclusion is not only material but even and mainly ideological. A form of discrimination and a dangerous threat to people information and opportunities.

If it is therefore true that on one side new media represent an opportunity for the exercise and the strengthening of democracy, it is equally true that their use must be controlled, conscious and informed. In order to implement these opportunities and to

make them real, the aforementioned problems must be effectively and properly addressed.

The next section will in fact serve the purpose of explaining the role of media in enhancing the crisis that democracy is undergoing and of analyzing the risks involved.

2.3. The role of media in enhancing democracy's vulnerability

The threats posed by the use of new media and their application within the political realm undermine the very same democratic principles of our society. Added to this is the already existing and visible crisis of representation in liberal democracies. As a matter of fact, the birth of new media is turning out to be a major factor in the amplification of it. It is as if they play the role of sounding boards, highlighting the already existing features of this weakness period, and even creating new fractures.

This current phase that democracy is going through mainly concerns the representation of citizens. Indeed, people increasingly complain about feeling unrepresented and this translates into a weakening of the democratic foundation of legitimacy. As previously discussed, citizens' demand for more representation translates into the demand for a more active political participation through democratic innovations. The advent of media and particularly new media underline this fragility; on one side they provide necessary tools to potentially exercise such a request, but on the other hand they contribute to the formation and strengthening of polarization. The aforementioned mechanisms produced by the so-called filter bubbles and the consequent echo chambers contribute to the fragmentation of ideologies. The fact that individuals are exposed to news that algorithms have studied and labelled as right for them, constitutes a real problem for free and open constructive debates. People are engaged through emotionally appealing news and contents, and they are targeted with what they want to hear. This enhances the polarization of peoples and ideologies. As a consequence, people's preferences are more volatile, and the centrality of political parties progressively collapses. This constitute a huge problem since parties are to be considered as the democratic determinants of political life. Political parties now turn to be only a supporting frame for the emergence of the figure of the leader. It has been observed how the emergence of a populist wave is extremely linked to the emerge of digital ecosystems. Leaders seek legitimation and power through the media and in this way the relationship between political actors and

voters becomes more direct. Indeed, “the tools of democratic innovations (such as e-democracy, particularly a truly deliberative e-democracy) can reinforce democratic participation; however, they often do the opposite, becoming effective enhancers (directly or indirectly) of populist tendencies” (De Blasio & Sorice, 2018).

Moreover, the huge and uncontrolled flows of data devalue the figure of experts leading to the ever-growing circulation of erroneous information. The emotional engagement of people becomes more important than the full reliability of news and information. That is why we speak of a post-truth era. According to the Oxford Dictionary, which has appointed it as word of the year in 2016, the concept post truth is used for “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping political debate or public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”.

In addition to this, media enhance the problem of voters’ trust and disenchantment towards political actors and institutions. Indeed, the credibility of leaders and the efficiency of government can be influenced by the media representation. Citizens’ perceptions are thus influenced by how the media portray them. A high sense of disillusionment implies the disengagement of citizens, a decreased interest in politics and lack of commitment. It is therefore no coincidence that the levels of political apathy are regularly increasing since the use of media in politics have been intensified.

The opportunities brought by the media and democratic innovations are thus counterbalanced by potential threats to the democratic foundations. The manipulation of voters’ preferences and thoughts together with the unequal access to such instruments undermine the very basic premises of democracy of freedom and equality. Of course, manipulation, “which carries with it the negative connotations of propaganda and deceit”, must be distinguished from persuasion “which is a universally recognized function of political actors in a democracy” (Mc Nair, 2011). However, the dividing borders between these two concepts is made more blurred by the power of media. It is important to highlight the idea that a single threat to democratic principles and values translates into a dangerous threat for democracy as a whole. Digital innovations must thus be realized only in compliance with the criteria of democratic rule and must be regulated and controlled by institutions. Therefore, “digital democracy can renew representative parties and institutions, but it cannot replace them” (Gallo, 2020).

Another issue is represented by the misalignment of power that media creates and strengthens. To this must be added the disproportionate economic power and supremacy of big companies, which are able to influence the system as a whole. The risk is that the digital environment becomes a domain of a few. Again, the set of democratic principles and values are subjected to a concrete menace. It is precisely here where we can speak of, in the words of Nick Couldry and Ulises Ali Mejias, “new colonialism”. The idea behind this concept is that “our digital lives today, and the kind of relationships we have with the corporations which make those lives possible, involve fundamental changes in power relations that can only be fully understood within the framework of colonialism, and the profound change in the world’s resource distribution that colonialism engendered” (Mejias & Couldry, 2024). Big tech companies thus assume the role of colonial powers and what they are in search of coincides with our precious resources. Clearly, those resources involved in the process are the whole set of our personal data and information that such companies exploit for economic or societal purposes. A process that involves, albeit presenting different features, violence, and oppression as Colonialism:

“Yes, data colonialism exhibits different forms of violence from those encountered in the past. As we know, the inhabitants of the colonized lands were discarded or eliminated by the millions. But instead of the vicious physical brutality of historic colonialism, data colonialism makes possible novel forms of symbolic violence, such as those that come with discrimination, loss of opportunity and the classification of people into disadvantageous categories by AI and its algorithms. [...] In other words, data colonialism has its own distinctive forms of oppression. Violence in historical colonialism was organized through racial hierarchies, and its impacts were felt through brute force. Although violence in data colonialism may be less brutal, and its particular tools and techniques may be new, its impacts are still concentrated in certain populations, and they often continue the legacy of racist, sexist and class violence that started with historical colonialism. (Mejias & Couldry, 2024)

This has several implications that have the potentiality to undermine our human rights and, above all, our freedom. This new colonialism not only create discrimination and oppression, but it also fuels the disappearance of enriching diversity and freedom of thought.

All the aforementioned processes and implications are furtherly enhanced by the advent of global challenges. They not only question democracy's strength but they contribute, also through the media, to its crisis. Even though it would be more appropriate to speak of a crisis in democracy, rather than a crisis of democracy.

Once again, the boundless power of technology and its ability to exercise a remarkable influence turn off any shred of the cyber-utopian dream.

2.4. The importance of media literacy and regulations

The democratic roots on which our society is grounded must be defended from all the threats posed by the uncontrolled or uninformed use of media. This will hold particularly true in light of the new advancements of Artificial Intelligence that will be analyzed in the third chapter of the present work.

Different solutions may be proposed in order to effectively address this problem. Firstly, democratic principles must be protected through education and information. The set of skills to properly use and understand the media is commonly defined as media literacy. This group of abilities must be developed so that the use of these tools reveals to be advantageous and not dangerous. However, this can be possible only through specific initiatives aimed at the diffusion of accurate knowledge and at the formation of individuals. Media literacy plays a crucial role for the reduction of echo-chambers and for the realization of democratic forums for open and informed debates. "Direct democracy, even if implemented through digital instruments, requires a comprehensive and deeply political education among all of its participants" (Peloso, 2021).

In addition to this, the digital divide must be progressively defeated to enable everyone to equally access technological devices. A high rate of digital divide is at odds with the very same key principles of democracy.

Another important aspect to consider relates to the diffusion of fake news and misleading information. Checking mechanism must be enforced by institutions and organizations to narrow down this huge issue.

Cybersecurity and the protection of users' data must be the core of effective regulations. Governments, organizations, and companies must create an enforcing mechanism of laws and directives to effectively safeguard people's data and privacy. People must become aware of the importance and preciousness of their personal data and the implications that may derive from their theft or misuse. Moreover, individuals must be held accountable for their online behaviors, which shall conform to the norms of respect and equality.

Democratic innovations and the progressive use of media in politics can be considered as sources of opportunities and developments if and only if they are in alignment with the democratic foundational elements. Otherwise, they shall be considered as a deadly poison for the values of democracy.

CHAPTER 3

New frontiers with AI. Is democracy in crisis?

3.1. What is AI?

We have seen how the advent of mass media, and the birth of new media radically changed our everyday lives and interactions. Our habits and activities have adapted so as to incorporate those instruments and to make the most of them. However, if it is true that such technological developments brought significant changes in our society, it is equally true that the emergence of Artificial Intelligence overturns our world even further, leading to profound transformations never seen before.

Finding a single unique definition of AI turns to be extremely difficult since it is in continuous expansion day by day. In their book *Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach*, Russell and Norvig proposes eight definitions organized into four categories.

Thinking Humanly “The exciting new effort to make computers think . . . <i>machines with minds</i> , in the full and literal sense.” (Haugeland, 1985) “[The automation of] activities that we associate with human thinking, activities such as decision-making, problem solving, learning . . .” (Bellman, 1978)	Thinking Rationally “The study of mental faculties through the use of computational models.” (Charniak and McDermott, 1985) “The study of the computations that make it possible to perceive, reason, and act.” (Winston, 1992)
Acting Humanly “The art of creating machines that perform functions that require intelligence when performed by people.” (Kurzweil, 1990) “The study of how to make computers do things at which, at the moment, people are better.” (Rich and Knight, 1991)	Acting Rationally “Computational Intelligence is the study of the design of intelligent agents.” (Poole <i>et al.</i> , 1998) “AI . . . is concerned with intelligent behavior in artifacts.” (Nilsson, 1998)
Figure 1.1 Some definitions of artificial intelligence, organized into four categories.	

Figure 3.1. [Some definitions of artificial intelligence, organized into four categories] Source: Russell & Norvig, 2010.

The definitions at the top of the table concern the idea of creating instruments capable of replicate human and rational reasoning with technological algorithms and

computations. The other four definitions below instead focus more on the idea of creating systems and machines to teach how to be able to reproduce human actions. We can thus highlight the idea that Artificial Intelligence is the application of digital technology and computations to create and develop “intelligent” machines and software able to reproduce and simulate human logic reasoning and actions. AI finds many different applications in innumerable fields. Examples include economy, healthcare, art and design, music, automotive industry, agriculture, security.

“Now that the promise of AI and machine learning has been demonstrated, and the computing power needed to operate sophisticated AI is becoming readily available, few fields will remain unaffected” (Kissinger et al, 2021).

Nowadays AI finds application also in warfare and defense strategies. This means that AI almost pervades every social substrate.

Recently, AI got to know unprecedented developments that highlight the potential of such technologies. One concrete example is represented by the Alpha-Zero AI program created by DeepMind Technologies. Through techniques of automatic learning, this system applies Artificial Intelligence to board games such as chess, shogi and go. What is incredible is the fact that Alpha-Zero came up with a chess strategy never seen before that humans did not teach to it. In just a few hours of training, the machine was able to reach human capabilities and even overcome human preparation. This highlights the power of AI and its instruments in challenging human presence and skills.

“The advent of AI obliges us to confront whether there is a form of logic that humans have not achieved or cannot achieve, exploring aspects of reality we have never known and may never directly know. When a computer that is training alone devises a chess strategy that has never occurred to any human in the game’s millennial history, what has it discovered, and how has it discovered it? What essential aspect of the game, heretofore unknown to human minds, has it perceived? When a human-designed software program, carrying out an objective assigned by its programmers — correcting bugs in software or refining the mechanisms of self-driving vehicles — learns and applies a model that no

human recognizes or could understand, are we advancing toward knowledge? Or is knowledge receding from us?” (Kissinger et al, 2021).

If it is true that on one hand AI brings several opportunities and benefits, it is equally true that if not properly understood and managed it can rather lead to disastrous effects. The next sections of this third chapter will be dedicated to AI applications in politics and to its overall implications for the democratic life.

3.1.1. The Metaverse

When referring to AI one cannot help but refer to the so-called Metaverse. Very often people interchange this term with AI and do not properly distinguish the two realms. In a sense, it can be stated that AI is functional to the Metaverse, which in fact could not exist nor work without it.

Initially, the concept of Metaverse was born as fiction inside the book *Snow Crash* written by Neal Stephenson. Today, from fiction we have switched to a concrete reality that is quickly developing more and more.

The Metaverse can be defined as a virtual reality space where people can interact through avatars and can live immersive experiences. This requires the use of specific headsets capable and specifically designed to annul the surrounding reality.

Currently, the metaverse includes the possibility of buying spaces in it, working, playing online, attending concerts, visiting exhibitions, doing shopping, and much more. Surely, future developments of AI technologies and consequently of the Metaverse will pave the way for countless activities, achieving something never seen before.

AI thus reveals to be a catalyst for change not only for everyday reality but, and perhaps more importantly, for virtuality. The two increasingly difficult to distinguish at this rate.

3.2. AI in Politics

AI is undergoing a process of rapid growth and expansion. New scenarios open up day after day and new possibilities become closer. Among these new perspectives, for the purpose of the present work, AI applications into the political realm will be now considered.

What then could be the possible future scenarios resulting from the use of Artificial Intelligence in politics?

A first example concerns the use of AI in electoral campaigns. Indeed, political actors may use AI-generated contents, texts, or videos to explain their programs and to persuade voters. Moreover, through AI leaders can also studying voters' preferences and inclinations in order to adjust their promises, to spread targeted messages and to obtain their active engagement. If we want to include also extreme possible scenarios in our discussion, we can also think of a possible AI-created party or AI-generated political avatars.

However, several problems may arise from this possible application of Artificial Intelligence for political purposes. Firstly, AI creation of texts and programs may not take into account the heterogeneity of people's needs and beliefs and could not embrace all the different facets of the political realm. Moreover, the diffusion of fake videos generated with AI tools could radically affect electoral preferences and, consequently, outcomes. Recently, innumerable fake videos of politicians singing songs with their exact voices were diffused through new media. This means that it is not impossible to recreate their voices and physical traits and misuse them. As a matter of fact, the recent technological developments make almost impossible to distinguish what is real from what is obtain by Artificial Intelligence. What is impressive is that on TikTok some influencers and content creators published fake videos generated by AI and followers could not recognize them as fake. Indeed, the videos reproduced exactly the physical movements, the facial expressions, the voice, and the intonation of the creator.

Therefore, if fake videos were to be released and globally diffused before elections, especially if well done and credible, people's preferences would be deviated. This would be particularly true if those videos were to be diffused few hours before elections leading to a complete reversal of electoral outcomes. This could also comprehend the circulation of fake videos or photos of a scandalous content, or the dissemination of fake conversations or exclamation of the politician involved.

Another possible future frontier may concern AI-generated law drafts or public speeches. Specific programs could then contribute to the drafting of laws or even to the entire preparation of communications. If on one hand we have the possibility of dramatically reducing the time used to do such activities, on the other hand we face the

risk of a mechanization of processes that necessarily involve and presuppose the human logical reasoning.

Artificial Intelligence can also simply come to support governments' action and bureaucratic activities. Indeed, systems for the analysis of population's data in real time or programs for the organization and evaluation of the agenda can be effectively applied.

A not-too-distant development, as previously mentioned, involves warfare and defense strategies. AI can in fact be employed for the creation of innovative and highly efficient systems of predictions and of counterattacks. Sophisticated algorithms can be used to develop sensitive systems able to destroy and attack enemies. In addition to this, AI systems can allow the interception of adversary signals and communications. In this way, potential attacks or threats can be identified and addressed in advance. Moreover, digital software can be used to voluntarily diffuse fake wiretaps or conversations into believing that they are real. Furthermore, since wars are moving more and more towards a cyber dimension, Artificial Intelligence can offer several ways to attack the information technology security of possible rivals. This can happen through digital espionage, theft or tampering of personal data and information, and through cyber-attacks to governmental institution databases and devices. There is no question that this will be increasingly the case, especially since international relations largely rely on ICT. That's why we could speak of wars on data. Moreover, the scope of Artificial Intelligence developments can entail the creation of fake videos of conflicts and victims. This is probably one of the most threatening aspects of it since their diffusion can be unlimited and uncontrolled. They can try to confuse and deviate peoples' thoughts and to distract their attention.

All these possible applications of AI contain explicit and implicit risks and dangerous consequences. Especially when the subjected targets are individuals and their rights. The following section will be entirely dedicated to this issue.

3.3. Risks and implications

In the last few years an impressive growth of Artificial Intelligence has been registered. "Countries and regions from the United States and China to the European Union, France, the United Kingdom, and others have declared their ambitions to be leaders in

AI” (Tinnirello, 2022). The potential of such instruments reveals incredibly great everyday more. However, not a few risks originate from Artificial Intelligence developments.

As we have previously seen, AI finds application in many different fields and contexts. The economic sector surely holds one of the biggest percentages of AI technologies nowadays. It exploits its advantages for developing highly performative software and machines, to analyze and interpret huge quantities of customers’ data, to innovatively design and create products, and many others. Among the risks involved in these processes, we find the “digital vulnerability” of people (Helberger et al, 2021). This concept “describes a universal state of defencelessness and susceptibility to (the exploitation of) power imbalances that are the result of the increasing automation of commerce, datafied consumer–seller relations, and the very architecture of digital marketplaces” (Helberger et al, 2021). Of course, this is a huge issue that needs to be properly addressed in the present time. As deeply argued in chapter 2, this misalignment of power relations necessarily translates into the dominion of few and the subjugation of many. Big tech companies have reached values that have never been recorded before, and the hypothesis that these companies will hold an increasingly larger part of the global wealth should not surprise us. We have previously spoken of new colonialism to highlight the domination of the Big Five and their data race. As every form of domination and controlling power this turns to be highly dangerous.

AI can bring significant benefits but can also dangerously affect individuals and their own rights. Several risks concern the protection of data, the transparency and accountability of AI tools, the equal accessibility of it, the discrimination of some individuals, the invasion of privacy, and the manipulation of people minds and preferences. In his book, *AI & Data Literacy*, Bill Schmarzo states that probably the most dangerous threat posed by AI are the so-called “unknown unknowns”. He affirms:

“Maybe the biggest AI challenge is the unknown unknowns, those consequences or actions that we don’t even think to consider when contemplating the potential unintended consequences of a poorly constructed, or intentionally nefarious, AI model (Schmarzo, 2023)”.

In order to try to address such issues and given the lack of specific and enforceable regulations, the European Union is about to definitively approve the EU AI Act. Indeed, on the 9th of December 2023, the Council and the Parliament reached a provisional agreement on this. It constitutes the first specific regulation on Artificial Intelligence, and it aims at the reduction of all risks and threats to maximize its benefits.

Article 1 states as follows:

- 1) The purpose of this Regulation is to improve the functioning of the internal market and promoting the uptake of human centric and trustworthy artificial intelligence, while ensuring a high level of protection of health, safety, fundamental rights enshrined in the Charter, including democracy, rule of law and environmental protection against harmful effects of artificial intelligence systems in the Union and supporting innovation. This Regulation lays down:
 - (a) harmonised rules for the placing on the market, the putting into service and the use of artificial intelligence systems ('AI systems') in the Union;
 - (b) prohibitions of certain artificial intelligence practices;
 - (c) specific requirements for high-risk AI systems and obligations for operators of such systems;
 - (d) harmonised transparency rules for certain AI systems;
 - (da) harmonised rules for the placing on the market of general-purpose AI models;
 - (e) rules on market monitoring, market surveillance governance and enforcement;
 - (ea) measures to support innovation, with a particular focus on SMEs, including start-ups.

It can be immediately noted that the provision aims, among the many things, at the protection of fundamental rights and safety and it includes in the discourse the protection of democracy and the rule of law. Furthermore, the EU Act labels some systems as "High-risk" in order to provide specific requirements to ensure security and reduce the deriving harms. It even prohibits some forms of AI that can reveal extremely damaging for individuals and the environment.

Moreover, it puts transparency at the core of it introducing targeted rules.

The last aspect to consider before moving to a discussion about AI algorithms ideologies and to the analysis of democratic threats, is the risk of a de-humanization process. The progressive substitution of humans by machines for the development of certain activities and the ever-growing ability of such tools seem to suggest a path towards automatization rather than humanization. The intensification of AI power may thus undermine the human capabilities to adequately govern and manage such instruments. Even if this can be seen as a hyper-pessimistic perspective, an old saying reminds us that prevention is better than cure. Global solutions are thus to be considered as extremely urgent. “Nothing seems to fuel the threats to humanity more than AI” (Schmarzo, 2023).

3.3.1. The ideology of AI algorithms

Algorithms are the roots on which AI is grounded. They are the engine of Artificial Intelligence machines and programs and thus represent the most important elements of it. Through algorithms, AI instruments are taught how to perform specific tasks and how to obtain certain skills. Since algorithms are not to be found in nature, but they are rather the outcome of long and complex procedures and instructions ideated by human beings, problems may arise at this point of the discussion.

One may be tempted to think that if algorithms follow mathematical operations and instructions, they therefore necessarily follow the logic of objective and neutral reasoning. However, this may not always be the case. And it is precisely because such algorithms require the work of human minds, that neutrality cannot always be there. All those operations are taught to machines by humans which possess ideologies and preferences. This of course is entailed into the processes of designing and creation of AI algorithms. Creators’ preferences and ideologies may thus influence the way in which machines perceive instructions. In their turn, devices become echo chambers able to amplify and strengthen those ideologies and reasoning. “Here we see that models, despite their reputation for impartiality, reflect goals and ideology” (O’Neil, 2016). Of course, also cultural differences and perceptions may contribute to the formation of an ideology of AI devices. If on one hand we consider China and on the other the US, we can easily observe that no unique systems of artificial intelligence exist. Conversely,

different instructions and reasoning operations shape Artificial Intelligence machines differently. As a consequence, the risk that AI algorithms may contribute to the reflection of humans' preferences and beliefs is not that low.

Different is the affirmation that algorithms possess an ideology of their own. Currently, it does not seem that machines are capable of having their own ideology, but future perspectives do not exclude this possibility.

3.4. A dangerous threat to democracy

Among the several risks previously mentioned, the question whether AI may threaten democratic principles and values will be now addressed.

In chapter 2 we analyzed the main features of the crisis of representation that liberal democracies are going through. We have seen how mass media and new media enhance it in a certain sense, reproducing and transferring all the weaknesses into a digital dimension. If it is true that media strengthen the crisis of representation, it is equally true that similar grounded convictions and considerations may concern the advent of AI. The AI-generated electoral campaigns and the manipulation of voters at 360 degrees surely constitute the first threats to the democratic consensus and legitimation. The destruction of differences and the ever-growing orientation towards the single thought constitute a real menace to democratic foundational elements. Moreover, AI generated videos and voluntarily created fake information significantly reinforce the loss of leaders' credibility and the lack of voters' trust.

Another aspect to consider concerns the AI application for the constant surveillance and monitoring of people. Countries such as Turkey, Russia, and China already use such instruments to control their population. Indeed, AI systems offer the possibility to continuously monitor people's behaviors, actions, and communications, providing real-time instant data. However, one may be tempted to argue that the aforementioned countries are not liberal democracies and that therefore democratic principles are not directly menaced by AI. Several strong objections thus originate. Firstly, these AI systems may be able to monitor the whole set of personal data and behaviors of individuals living in liberal democratic countries, overcoming every physical boundary. This would directly affect our lives and threaten our liberal democracies. Secondly, people may perceive such instruments as responsible for the consolidation of a good and

efficient government relying on the economic achievements of the previously mentioned countries. This would lead to the recognition of such non-democratic mechanisms as extremely desirable and advantageous, directly affecting democratic premises.

The lack of specific and effective regulations on this matter furtherly highlights the whole sets of potential risks and threats. The power seems to be shifting from the *demos* to machines and the big companies behind them. But if we lack the power of the *demos*, how can we talk of democracy anymore? It is not surprising then that the democratic recession has intensified with the rise of AI. The weakening of democratic premises, ranging from consensus to basic rights, is what drives us to considering AI domination power.

Added to all this is the increasingly blurred border between reality and virtuality. AI recent advancements make almost impossible to distinguish what is the result of reality from what is generated by Artificial Intelligence. And it is precisely this ability of permeate reality coming to the annihilation of perimeters what must alarm us.

The progressive substitution of AI in decision-making processes that traditionally require the human control highlights the urgency of global solutions. This is furtherly enhanced by the advent of serious global challenges such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the climate change, and the wars going on. Regulations must comprehend privacy concerns and must ensure the transparency and accountability of AI machines. Fundamental rights must be at the heart of such provisions and the respect of the planet, and its resources must necessarily be taken into account. Digital ethics shall enter the discussion in order to develop efficient and comprehensive control mechanisms. As a matter of fact, the regulation of Artificial Intelligence and its implications cannot prescind from an exploration of ethical dimensions. In the words of Schmarzo:

“AI will force us to reevaluate how we define and measure ethical conduct within our society and our institutions. It is crucial that we prioritize long-term societal benefits over short-term individual gain. Given AI’s incredible capacity to learn and adapt at an unprecedented scale, it is imperative that we accurately define, develop, and implement ethical standards in the design, development,

and deployment of our AI models. The consequences of getting this wrong could be dire” (Schmarzo, 2023).

Again, the cooperation between nations, governments, intergovernmental organizations, and associations is essential to make such laws enforceable.

The capillary diffusion of Artificial Intelligence necessarily requires data literacy. We define it as “the set of instructions and principle to ensure that everyone is aware of and educated on their role in ensuring the responsible and ethical definition, design, development, and management of AI models. It is a framework designed to be equally accessible and understandable by everyone” (Schmarzo, 2023). Education and prevention thus play a crucial role in the supervision of Artificial Intelligence.

To conclude, we can affirm that the advent and developments of AI are what lead to the shift from a crisis in democracy (namely the crisis of representation) to a crisis of democracy since its very foundational principles and values are in danger. Therefore, to adequately address the democratic threat we need strong and successful global solutions. After all, who would ever dream of living inside *1984*?

Conclusion

Do then media enhance democracy's vulnerability? Does Artificial Intelligence pose threats to democratic values? Can we prevent harmful scenarios?

These were some of the questions posed at the very beginning of the present work.

A first conclusion that can be drawn in the light of the discussion is the fact that the influence between media and politics is definitely reciprocal. The *Cambridge Analytica* case underlines how politics can exercise an influence on media, exploiting and misusing them for political aims.

The role of social media platforms and their application for electoral campaigns demonstrate the power of media, particularly new media, in shaping public opinion and directing preferences.

The use of media for implementing democratic innovations proved to be a source of both opportunities and risks. The unequal opportunity of access to such instruments, the control and the manipulation of people's minds and preferences are just some of the risks derived.

Furthermore, the present work analyzed the role and expanding strength of the so-called Big Five (Apple, Google, Amazon, Meta, and Microsoft). Indeed, these Big Tech have been defined as powers of a "new colonialism" where data become the most precious resources.

It has also been observed how media enhance the crisis of representation (a crisis in democracy) that liberal democratic countries are going through.

The use of media then must necessarily rely on an adequate education and regulations must be enforced. Media literacy plays a fundamental role for preventing damaging effects such as the information disorder. Statistical data demonstrated the urge of collaboration to address these issues in an effective and exhaustive way.

Artificial Intelligence proves to be an extremely powerful but threatening phenomenon. Its potential capability of opening harmful scenarios highlight the urgency of targeted and enforceable regulations. Currently, the EU AI Act is one of the few examples of such a needed action. People must be properly informed and educated so as to reach

awareness of the importance of data and to avoid dangers.

Machines turn to be more and more “intelligent” and capable of realizing something they have not been taught to. If not properly contained and addressed, this can translate into something dramatic.

To conclude, the present work highlight how Artificial Intelligence is threatening the very premises and values of democracy and, as a consequence, democracy itself.

Indeed, AI is what prompt the shift from a crisis in democracy to a crisis of democracy.

This is all it takes to truly reverse course. We have the opportunity to consciously choose our future and we better do it, before it gets too late.

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