



**THE IMPACT OF THE DIGITAL REVOLUTION ON DEMOCRACY AND DECISION-
MAKING PROCESSES.**

How can technology facilitate them in an era of changing technological environment and
disinformation?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research project analyses the impact of new technologies on topics such as democracy, values and liberties and how an increased e-literacy of the EU citizens may help promote them in a time of increasing technological evolution marked by the importance of big data, AI, deep fakes, etc.

Short bio

Mihai Sebe, PhD, is an expert in European affairs and Romanian politics, currently working at the European Institute of Romania. He is also a member in the Scientific Committee of the Institute of European Democrats. His area of expertise includes topics such as: the history of the European idea; populism; future politics. He writes extensively on European politics both at home and abroad.

** This represents a work in progress document that is going to be updated in the first quarter of 2021.*



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Currently the digital revolution has become an integral part of our societies, facilitating and at the same time disrupting the traditional ways of doing politics. The internet and social media have changed the citizens behaviour and have impacted their relationship with their national governments while the digital revolution has created a more chaotic world, more difficult to govern.

The paper would thus clarify **the main key concepts related to the digital revolution** while also analysing the **government legitimacy in the digital era** as the governments must meet the expectations of the citizens in different ways. It would analyse the digital transformation that is underway towards a more transparent and open relationship between the citizens and governments, as we are witnessing a period when the new ways of online communications are disrupting the traditional legal and political frameworks.

The research will present the determinants for political efficiency in the digital era, as the digital revolution is acting as a disruptor in the process of transition from e-government to Digital Area Governance.

The concept of e-democracy would also be explored and clarified while presenting the tools of democratic engagement in the digital era (new media, artificial intelligence, blockchain).

The safe use of internet is now of crucial matter for any democratic system as the cyber security and fighting disinformation are crucial for a safe democratic process.

The paper would end with a series of recommendations meant to increase citizen's participation to the democratic process through new technologies.

For the purposes of this exploratory study, I will assess relevant documents, reports and analyses, including: official statements, policies, reports, studies and communications made public by the European Commission and the European Parliament; etc. Additionally, I would use specific reports and studies to discuss the above mentioned topic.

This research proposal must be seen as a work in progress given the high volume of information available and the dynamics of this process.

When we are analysing the current digital revolution of our times we need to have clear in mind what are the main aspects of this period. For that purposes, and in order to facilitate the reading of this material I would like to use the following key concepts. For Fernández-Macías (Eurofound) (2018) **the digital revolution** 'can be defined as a general acceleration in the pace of technological change in the economy, driven by a massive expansion of our capacity to store, process and



communicate information using electronic devices.’ (p. 1). The beginning of this revolution can be perceived in 1950s and 1970s yet the ‘big-bang’ takes place in the 1970s as the microprocessor was invented.

This digital revolution generated in turn a **digital age**, defined by the above mentioned author as ‘a historical period marked by the widespread use of digital technologies indifferent aspects of human activity, including the economy, politics and most forms of human interaction’ (p. 1).

This digital age came up with three contentions, as Fernández-Macías (Eurofound) (2018), shows: ‘The **first contention** is that changes in the methods and tools used in the economy tend to cluster around periodic ‘revolutions’, rather than following linear and incremental trends. [...]

The **second contention** is that there is a time lag between the initial big bang of innovation provoked by a technological revolution and its full transformation of the socioeconomic structure. [...]

The **third contention**: for a technological revolution to produce valued and shared benefits to society, the institutional framework has to significantly change in order to deal with the broad socioeconomic implications of the new forms of economic activity.’ (pp. 1-2).

Another important aspect that needs to be taken into account as we analyse the question of future politics is to have a clear distinction between e-government, e-governance and e-democracy, as these concepts overlap yet they are not identical. For the purpose of this document I should use the definition used at the level of the European Parliament such as:

‘- **E-Government**: refers to the use of [Information and communications technology] ICT in the workings of the public sector, particularly to provide individuals with information and services from public authorities electronically (for example, payment of a speeding ticket).

- **E-Governance**: refers to the use of ICT to establish communication channels that enable the inclusion of the various stakeholders with something to say about the policy-making process (for example, through electronic public consultations on whether a particular speed limit should be changed, or local budget consultations).

- **E-Democracy**: refers to the use of ICT to create channels for public consultation and participation (for example, an e-parliament, e-initiatives, e-voting, e-petitions, e-consultations).’ (European Parliament, Report, 2017)

After these initial terminological clarifications, it is time to see what the current context is as regards the politics of the future.



General context. Main trends and challenges.

What the digital age brought is an interconnection between the people globally that was never seen before in history. Ever since the telegraph and the radio waves connected the world in the XIXth century, we are now living in a historical time when almost everyone on Earth is within our digital reach. The figures are clear and they are staggering. “By 2030, the number of devices connected to the internet will have reached 125 billion, up from 27 billion in 2017.” (Gaub, 2019)

In the second quarter of 2020, Facebook is the biggest social network worldwide with over 2.7 billion monthly active users. In the third quarter of 2012, the number of active Facebook users surpassed one billion, making it the first social network ever to do so (Clement, 2020).

In February 2020, WhatsApp supports more than two billion users around the world (WhatsApp, 2020), being the most use Messenger app in the world (Iqbal, 2020).

As regards the Internet users, the October 2020 figures have shown a 4.66 billion Internet users (60% penetration rate); 5.20 billion unique mobile phone users (67% penetration rate) and a total number of 4.14 billion of active social media users (penetration rate of 53%) (Digital, 2020).

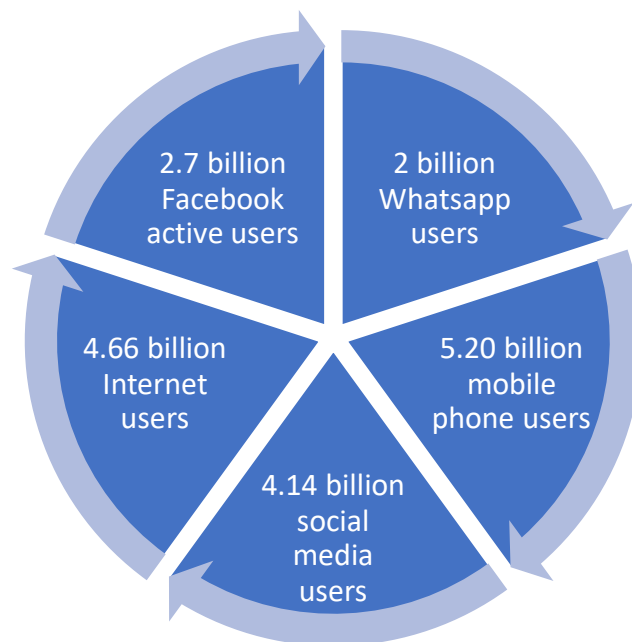


Figure 1. Social Media and Internet users (own representation) Current context. Future trends and challenges ahead.



We therefore see the importance of the social media and of online platforms as the new arena where the policy of the future is taking place. The debate held traditionally in town halls, in Parliaments or in other traditional space have now recessed in front of the social media, that allows connecting people, sharing of documents, assigning tasks, voting and so on.

All over the world the social media has started to become both a tool and an igniter of protests movements and of democratic actions. For instance the 2019, protests in Egypt were called via social media. We witnessed a similar situation in Sudan, where the authorities even implemented a complete Internet shutdown. According to Barnett (2019): ‘Social media makes it easy to organize protest movements, as anyone with access can set up an event through Facebook’s ‘event’ function or via a group messaging service. Access to social media is therefore important in supporting modern day democracy. Any move by authorities to restrict access to, censor or block social media sites should be recognized as an infringement on freedom of speech and our right to information.’

Social media act by simplifying the organization of protests, by facilitating the coordination of large groups of people while the downside is the low cohesion of the protesters (Ovide, 2020).

Social media have also become a tool for many political leaders. For instance in 2020, the most followed leader on Twitter was Donald Trump with approx. 81 million followers while being also the most effective world leader with an average of 24 053 retweets. The most followed EU leader is the French President Emmanuel Macron, with 5,293,346 followers as of June 1, 2020 (Twiplomacy, 2020).

That being said one clear idea emerges – that the online space is becoming dominant (especially during this pandemic) as the main space where politics is unfolding. The full digitalisation of politics is now in our grasp and a reasonable period of time of maybe a decade or two seems to separate us from that reality. That feeling is more than exacerbated by the comparison done, almost involuntarily, with the way the traditional politics unfolds and from the way our interactions with the traditional setup of politics unfolds these days.

Digital politics are facing a series of challenges, some of them crucial for the future development of this sector. Authors like Sgueo (2020) speak about three main trends:

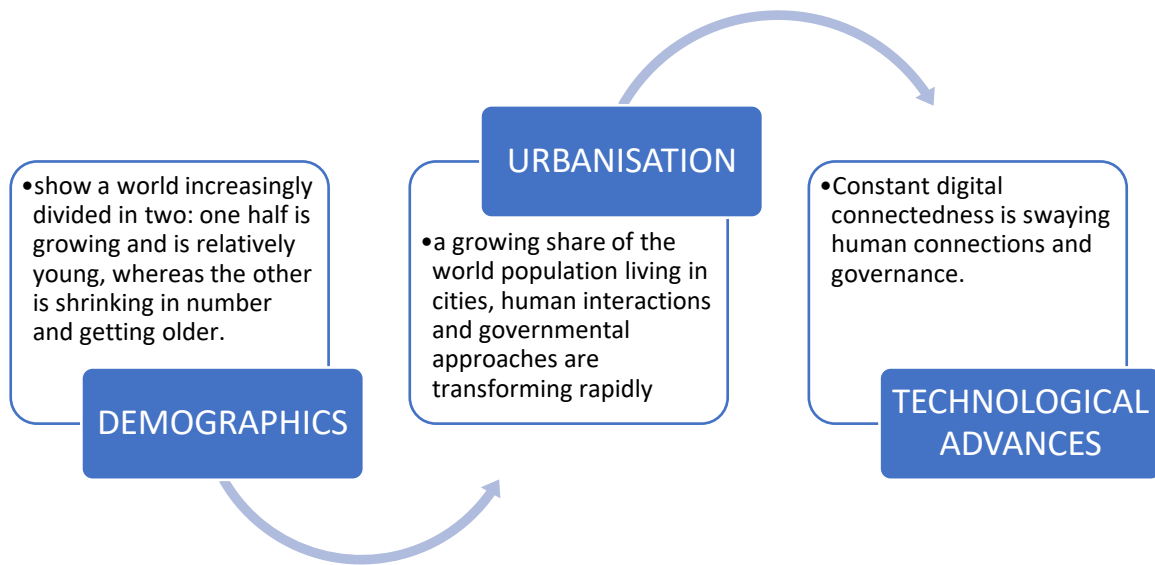


Figure 2. Three trends driving digital democracy (Sgueo, 2020)

Following this main distinction, we can say that, as regards the **demographic trend**, the first estimate is an increase of the population from 7.6 billion to 8.6 billion in 2030. As the figures predicts this growth won't be a unitary one. We will witness accelerated growth in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia as well as our Southern neighbourhood. On the other side of the scale, the EU would see a decline of the population as well as an increase of the life span (Gaub, 2019).

The world population would also be richer. We are witnessing an expanding middle class like we have never witnessed. In 2019, nearly half the world's population was already part of the middle class - out of a total of 7.6 billion citizens in the world, 3.6 billion now belong to the middle class. It is an accelerated process as the the middle class' centre of gravity is shifting towards Asia (Canals, 2019).

In accordance with Sgueo (2020) this would generate a disparity of access to democratic processes. 'Typically, only citizens with preferential access to three fundamental resources – time, money and knowledge – tend to engage civically. Their identikit picture is easy to sketch: male, college-educated, middle-aged and wealthier than the average citizen. By contrast, participation among women, racial and linguistic minorities, younger people and people with low-paid jobs and poor education tends to be less frequent' (pp. 4-5)



Add to this the linguistic barrier that may deter some minorities into entering the political arena. For instance in 2020, the first language of the Internet was the English language with approx. 25% of the users using it (Internet World Stats, 2020).

Another challenge lies in the fact that, in many corners of the world where the population is growing, we witness a retreat of the Democracy in many countries “Freedom House found that 2019 was the 14th consecutive year of decline in global freedom. The gap between setbacks and gains widened compared with 2018, as individuals in 64 countries experienced deterioration in their political rights and civil liberties while those in just 37 experienced improvements.” (Repucci, 2020)

As regards **urbanization**, there is a worldwide consensus among the experts – the world of tomorrow would be a urban world. As of 2019 more than 4 billion lived in urban areas globally and by 2050 it’s projected that more than two-thirds of the world population will live in urban areas (Ritchie & Roser, 2019). We are witnessing all over the world the birth of “smart cities” as a result of the rapid urbanization blending with more and more sophisticated technology. The megacities of the future are going to be highly connected, and often the “city-manager” may be more important than the local politicians (Khanna, 2015).

Concerning the **technological advances**, we can notice, as mentioned above, that more and more people are connected through social media and the use of mobile phones. Already billions of users worldwide are connected in these new forms of engagement. ‘Traditional forms of engagement, such as voting in elections or participating in council meetings, have been replaced by a wide variety of **'non-conventional' forms of engagement**. The former requires citizens to be able to engage directly with governments, often face to face, in a lengthy process of negotiation. By contrast, non-conventional forms of engagement are more volatile, but also less demanding in terms of time and cost.’ (Sgueo, 2020)

From the technological advances perspective, the question of **artificial intelligence** and its impact on democracy needs also to be addressed. The impact of artificial intelligence just came up on the radar as AI-powered technologies have begun to be used in the political system. One of such example is the use of bots (autonomous accounts) on Twitter, that were in favour or against certain candidates (like was the case in the 2016 US elections). We should add to this the fact that besides the use of bots that generate biased news and messages, the AI can also be used to have a profiling of the individual voters in order to provide them with tailored made messages. Also the social media algorithms tend to present customized news to the readers, based on their past preferences,



thus creating news bubbles, out of touch with other versions of the stories (Bird, Fox-Skelly, Jenner et al., 2020).

Another problem that needs to be addressed is not a technical one, but one related to the trust of the citizens in the democratic system. Nearly half of the European citizens do not believe that their voice counts – 47% of the EU citizens share this belief (Parlemeter, 2018, p. 31).

Also this increased connectivity comes with a price as disinformation is ramping up, alongside an increased polarization. “Information, especially news, will be drawn mainly from the internet, with fake news, slander and potential for polarisation and election meddling increasing. Emotions in communication will become more and more important as the distance between citizens and decision-makers shrinks.” (Gaub, 2020)

Also the online citizenship is subject to manipulation. “Connectivity means that individuals can identify with global policy issues beyond their borders, creating clusters of online citizenship. This could, or could not, be vulnerable to manipulation.” (Gaub, 2020)



Reccomendations. A possible way forward

The question of going forward as regards the digital politics has been tackled by many experts, institutions and public authorities. The author, after the literature survey, believes that the following reccomendations might be of interest and can be addressed by decision makers at European and national level.

A) The inevitability of the digital revolution and of the digital age

If we accept that the changes produced by the digital technologies are here to stay and that they are not temporary, the European Union and the Member States must initiate or develop the educational policies meant to equip their citizens with ITC skills .

B) ‘No one left behind!’ technological policy

A European wide programme of providing free or at least widespread access to Internet connections and subsidized prices for the devices used in the digital connection must be envisaged. The ‘digital divide’ must be reduced at all costs as no viable democratic system can function with a part of its population excluded from the democratic process. The Member States must promote and ensure access to technology for all the members of the society – a truly e-inclusive society is needed.

C) “The Internet is Dark and Full of Terrors” No more!

The European Union and the Member States must provide a safe online space for everyone. Aspects such as cyberbulling and cyberattacks must be dealt with sfiwty and firmly. Creating a more secure internet environment, especially with regard to information and data security, is essential for the e-democracy.

D) ‘Know thy citizens!’ Policy

An important aspect for any society is to know your citizens and their characteristics. Even from the early times having a clear image of your society and on the identity of your citizens was a high priority for every leader. That is why we need to establish secure digital public registers and to create a secure e-identity (by providing each citizen with a unique digital signature, among other things) in order to prevent fraudulent interactions of identity thefts.



E) The European Union and the Member States must use technology to improve the processes related to public consultations and impact assessment.

The existing national mechanisms must be standardized in order to have a European wide interface to facilitate the access to the public consultations. For instance a national platform can be envisaged where all the relevant authorities would submit their legislative initiatives for public consultation, instead of each of them having their legislative initiatives only on their own website. Also a follow-up and feedback interface may be designed where the citizens can put their input as regards the implementation of various legislative pieces or decisions of the national and local authorities.

F) The digital accountability

The above mentioned mechanisms as well as other that may be envisaged that help the public to participate and interact with the institutions and the officials must ensure a clear and simple access to information, provide transparency and encourage an active listening and a lively debate. That would help reduce the divide between citizens and the decision-makers whilst providing more accountability.

G) Let's go into the digital agora!

The public officials should be required, as a part of the job description, to have a digital profile and to take part in online forums dedicated to their area of expertise in order to stimulate debates with citizens.

H) Sharing is caring!

The European Union and the Member States should actively share best practices in the area of e-democracy as a way to move towards a better form of participative democracy, that corresponds to the needs of the digital age.

I) The European Union and the Member States must create networks that bring together universities and NGO's in order to encourage researches on the new communications and participation instruments.

J) Political organisations should be provided with incentives in order to open to the digital technologies and to create new structures adapted to the use of digital tools.

I) The European Union institutions should become the standard bearer as regards transparency and public participation using digital tools.

As a preliminary conclusion, it should be stressed that technical innovations will not in and of themselves solve the digital divide and the democratic deficit. The reasons of this crisis are deep-



seated and we must be careful in evaluating our policies. Solving old problems by the use of the digital tools should be done carefully in order not to generate new issues that were not taken into consideration in the beginning, when the digital tools were envisaged. in order not to create new problems that ICTs generate.



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