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What, if anything, is new about technology's threat to democracy in a digital age?

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Abstract:

There is growing concern around the threats posed by digital technologies to democracy. This paper explores two of the most potent digital threats, misinformation and echo chambers, against a two-part criterion of fundamental democratic features that come into close contact with these digital threats: the deliberative process and trust. I then compare the digital threats to their closest historical counterparts. I conclude that these threats are indeed both quantitatively and qualitatively new and distinct from their predecessors. This is based on five differentiating factors, which relate to the quality of misinformation, the type of echo chambers, persuasion methods, the transfer of trust, and polarisation.

Keywords:

Democracy, surveillance capitalism, misinformation, echo chambers, persuasion methods, social trust, polarisation

Introduction

Around half of the global population will be participating in elections in 2024 — 'the election year.' Amidst the flurry of campaigning and political news coverage, a considerable number of commentators have voiced their fears about how technology could adversely impact these elections and democracy more broadly throughout the upcoming years. This widespread apprehension raises a critical question: Are contemporary risks posed by digital technologies unlike anything we have seen before, or are they a reformulation of historical counterparts?

Employing an analytical framework that weighs the ascendant threats of misinformation and micro-targeting against a two-part criterion of fundamental democratic features – the deliberative process and trust – I argue that these threats are indeed a 'new' cause for concern, as they are qualitatively and quantitatively different from previous challenges to democracy. To demonstrate these qualitative differences, I compare contemporary threats against their closest historical equivalents and elucidate five novel features of the digital threats pertaining to misinformation, echo chambers, persuasion methods, the transfer of trust, and polarisation.

This investigation of digital technology's 'threats' considers not only current capabilities, but also the potential risks as these technologies grow more prevalent and sophisticated. For this reason, much of my analysis is US-centric as this is where some of the most salient and potent digital threats to democracy have occurred. I define the 'digital age' as the period from the late twentieth century to now, and the associated technologies within the scope of this essay therefore include social media and artificial intelligence (AI). The rest of the essay will be structured as follows. I will begin by describing my two-part criteria, which I will later use to assess the threat levels of digital technologies. These criteria have been selected based on their importance for a 'good' democracy and their high likelihood of

being impacted by digital technologies. Second, I will discuss the two most significant digital threats — misinformation and micro-targeting (in conjunction with echo chambers) — and explore how each of these impacts the criteria. Third, I will discuss how the digital threats to democracy compare to previous threats to democracy, and here I will explicate why I believe that digital threats are indeed 'new'.

Criteria for Assessing the Threats

To create a set of criteria for my examination of the digital threats to democracy, I will identify the most fundamental aspects of democracies that are at risk by drawing on commonalities in the theoretical literature.

Criterion One: The Deliberative Process

The first criterion is the importance of high-quality deliberation processes in a democracy. As Dahl (1971, p. 2-3) outlines, this process can be defined by the forums in which citizens determine their preferences and consequently articulate and signify said preferences to other citizens and their political representatives. Further drawing on Habermas' (2022, p. 167) emphasis on having a public sphere in which "competing public opinions" ensure "qualitatively filtered opinions," I argue that a high-quality deliberative process can be characterised as one in which the information available is accurate, extensive, and relevant; a range of perspectives are provided and considered; and there are ample opportunities for citizens to equally access forums to engage with this information and participate to form reasoned judgements. This is important because (i) a well-functioning democracy should be responsive to its citizens so that 'rule by the people' can occur; and (ii) a democracy with effective legislation requires citizens who are engaged in politics, understand different policy issues and how they may correspond to their interests, and can signify their opinions to influence legislation.

Criterion Two: Trust

The second constitutive element in the framework is the importance of trust. I define trust as believing in the legitimacy of election results, the government, and institutions like the judiciary; as well as a confidence and sense of shared interests in other citizens and in one's political or 'imagined' community (Warren, 1999; Locke, 1980; Anderson, 1983). I posit that this is important (i) to ensure social cohesion so that compromises can be reached and democratic decisions can benefit as many citizens to as large a degree as possible; (ii) to maintain respect for the authority of institutions so that authoritarianism is avoided and social order is maintained; (iii) to maintain political engagement and interest, which in turn is important for the reasons mentioned in the previous paragraph.

Although trust can be difficult to quantify, I argue that high levels of trust can be characterised by social cohesion; a respect for the authority of institutions and electoral processes; and high levels of political engagement, particularly but not exclusively in terms of voting. How well historical and contemporary democracies live up to these standards lies outside the scope of this essay; however, it should be said that no democracy is perfect. Moving forward, I will assess the threats posed by technology to democracies based on their challenges to deliberative processes and to trust.

Threat One: Misinformation

Misinformation and disinformation caused by digital technologies negatively impact deliberative processes in democracies in three key ways. First, political misinformation is rife on social media platforms (Richter 2017), which is concerning since 47% of adults in the UK consume political information from social media (Ofcom 2023). Although social media platforms like Instagram have tried to introduce fact-checking measures to limit the spread of misinformation, this is difficult to achieve. Before misinforming content can be flagged, it

often spreads widely enough to be influential. This is a result of the virality-maximising algorithms that ‘big tech’ companies employ. These algorithms reward engagement, which is achieved by novelty, exaggeration, and emotional provocation at the expense of truth. As such, fake news is more likely to become viral than posts discrediting fake news (Vosoughi et al., 2018).

Second, digital technologies have become increasingly accessible and effective at generating content, including content that can be accidentally misinformative or content with the intent to maliciously misinform (Palano, 2019). The advent of AI is further reducing these costs and increasing the quality of content produced (Kreps et al., 2022). Misinformation is even causing voter suppression, whereby false information about voting times, registration processes, and locations has led to individuals not having their votes counted in elections (Garnett and James, 2020). These quantitative factors enable actors to flood social media with misinformation that spreads rapidly and has effects that are difficult to reverse, thus hampering deliberative democracies.

Third, misinformation is also becoming qualitatively more dangerous with the rise of deepfake technology. I define deepfakes in line with Pawalec as “synthetic audio-visual media of human faces, bodies, or voices, often created using artificial intelligence” (2022, p. 2). Since falsifying audio-visual content is far more difficult than falsifying text-based content, there has generally been a high level of trust in the former (Bernaciak and Ross, 2022). AI deepfakes are worryingly convincing and especially dangerous in the political sphere for two reasons. First, because individuals trust audio-visual content more than text-based content, they are less likely to critically engage with deepfakes; therefore, they are more likely to believe false content. For example, a 2021 study found that when subjects were shown a deepfake video of a politician, less than fifteen percent of them doubted its authenticity (Dobber et al., 2021). Second, deepfakes require far more sophisticated

technology to identify and regulate than text-based speech, thus posing a difficult and expensive challenge for governments and social media platforms. Deepfakes therefore are a more potent form of misinformation than previous technologies.

Using deepfake technology to disseminate disinformation in elections has already begun. In the 2023 Slovakian elections, "AI-generated audio recordings circulated on Facebook, impersonating a liberal candidate discussing plans to raise alcohol prices and rig the election" (Mirza, 2024). Similarly, in the 2023 Nigerian elections, "an AI-manipulated audio clip falsely implicated a presidential candidate in plans to manipulate ballots" (Mirza, 2024). Ekpang et al. (2023) found that the use of deepfakes in the Nigerian election led to an increase in negative perceptions of politicians implicated by said deepfakes, demonstrating a direct link between deepfakes and the deliberative process. As the number of manipulative deepfakes in electoral contexts rises, the damage to the deliberative process will become more widespread, and the sheer quantity of content and the time necessitated to discredit disinformation does not alleviate concerns regarding democracy's stability.

These disruptions to deliberative processes are compounded by the erosion of democratic trust. As Pawalec argues, the "fear" of deepfakes is their "greatest threat to democracy" (2022). This demonstrates that the threat of deepfakes is twofold: not only does it breed misinformation, but the very fear of deepfakes can also cause "trust decay" as the electorate becomes sceptical of even authentic content. Such mistrust also gives rise to the "liar's dividend", enabling individuals or organisations to attribute genuine evidence to deepfakes, AI, or related technologies (Pawalec, 2022). Increasingly, consumers are likely to not know what to believe, leading to an undermined trust in institutions, information, and within societies. This again enlarges the vicious cycle of trust decay and can lead to echo chambers.

Threat Two: Micro-targeting and Echo Chambers

Social media algorithms and targeted advertising have created unprecedented capabilities for manipulating both individual decision-making and collective democratic discourse. Echochambers, which ensure that users receive the content that they already like, are getting worryingly close to the "Daily Me" predicted in 1995 by Negroponte – a personalised news feed with exclusivity of the individualised content the user wants (Sunstein, 2017). This leads to a very narrow information feed and a lack of diverse perspectives. As a result, users are likely to be more radicalised as their existing views are subtly and continuously reinforced. This is exacerbated by the fact that social media platforms enable all users to act as authors of content in addition to being consumers, increasing total content production, and causing further fragmentation as users are more able to find content they agree with (Habermas, 2022).

Echo chambers can also be amplified by micro-targeting. I define micro-targeting to be the strategy of exposing specific consumers to specific content. This is facilitated by surveillance capitalism: Zuboff describes how companies like Google and Facebook harvest a wealth of user data, which enables companies to understand and predict consumer interests and behaviour (2019, p. 352). Using this data, companies can 'nudge' consumers, selectively displaying information that guides them towards specific websites and products, thus "shaping [their] subjectivities in unprecedented ways" (Harcourt, 2015, p. 22). These nudges are so ingrained into the media that many do not even notice their subtle influence. Not only is this a highly invasive practice, but it has significant ramifications when used in a political context.

Cambridge Analytica's infamous role in the 2016 US presidential election illustrates how micro-targeting can dangerously impact deliberative processes and levels of trust. While the Trump victory was not the sole doing of Cambridge Analytica, their role in the election

was significant (Berghel, 2018). Cambridge Analytica used a Facebook personality quiz to gather data on its users and their friends, and subsequently provided them with micro-targeted political adverts, which were disproportionately shown to swing state voters (Berghel, 2018). This process was opaque and invasive to users' privacy. Cambridge Analytica was able to "identify and target political hot buttons down to the voter level" (Berghel, 2018, p. 85), meaning that those with strong pro-life stances may receive ads relating to abortion laws, those who support the 2nd amendment with laws relating to guns, the elderly with healthcare, and so on. The narratives that followed the election and the infamous role that Cambridge Analytica played in it have increasingly led to consumer fears being manipulated or misled (Hinds et al., 2020). This is also likely to provoke emotional reactions and can cause individuals to form political judgments premised on incomplete or inaccurate information, hence inhibiting deliberative processes.

A similar impact can be observed by the example of Russian interference and micro-targeting in the 2016 US presidential election. Foreign actors can launch organised disinformation campaigns by utilising fake accounts operated by humans – "sock puppets", or fake accounts operated by algorithms or AI – "political bots" (McKay and Tenove, 2021). In 2016, Russian disinformation campaigns bombarded consumer feeds with information intended directly to undermine trust by exacerbating existing tensions in the US (McKay and Tenove, 2021). Disinformation campaigns often use emotionally charged language, normalise hostility, and use an 'us' versus 'them' mindset framing (McKay and Tenove, 2021). This can lead to fragmentation and a lack of trust between members of a community who consequently view those who hold opposing views with hostility, and have diminished faith in their shared institutions; a process McKay and Tenove deem to be 'techno-affective polarization'. Hence, digital technologies enable disinformation actors to undermine trust both in institutions and within society, and digital technologies have made this process far

easier for foreign disinformation actors specifically.

Perhaps the best example of how such mistrust may culminate and lead to a potential downfall in democracy is the Capitol riots on January 6th,2021, in which thousands of Trump supporters stormed the building protesting the 2020 election results (Berlinski et al., 2023). Following Diamond (2021) and Zechmeister (2021), I attribute this event to a combination of hyperpolarisation in American society, fuelled largely by minimal social cohesion and a lack of respect and trust in the electoral process, democratic institutions, and political parties. The 2020 election was characterised by many of the same issues that plagued the 2016 election–foreign interference, micro-targeting, and widespread populist rhetoric; all of which directly link to digital technologies and can cause said hyperpolarisation. Runciman (2018) argued that a democracy can be considered a failure when an incumbent who loses an election fails to peacefully transfer power to the winner. Whether or not we consider American democracy to have failed, the destabilising threat posed by digital technologies to democracy is apparent.

Comparison of Threats: Digital Technologies Versus their Historical Counterparts

Having established the most pressing threats posed to democracy by digital technologies, I will now examine their novelty by comparing contemporary and historical threats. The historical cases I will use to illustrate my argument will be the counterparts to contemporary information communication technologies, namely the print media and television. I have already discussed the quantitative factors, namely the immense speed and scale of production and dissemination of content through information communication technologies today compared to before. The remainder of this essay will emphasise the qualitative novelty of contemporary threats.

I. Comparison of the Quality of Misinformation

Since the birth of the internet in the 1980s and the development of social media platforms in the early 2000s, there has been an immeasurable amount of political misinformation and disinformation spread through text and picture-based content (Burkhardt, 2017, p. 7-8). However, even comparing the dangers of misinformation from ten years ago does not fully elucidate the type of threat we face today and are likely to face in the coming years. Recent studies have found that deepfakes appeal at a "visceral level more than any text or picture ever will," thus increasing their potential to harm deliberative democracy compared to previous forms of misinformation (Pawalec, 2022). Whilst I concede that scepticism over deepfake content might increase as awareness of their potential harm increases, I maintain that deepfakes are likely to be far more convincing than text or picture-based content even in the future. Scepticism would likely be accompanied by a strengthening of echo chambers, as I have discussed previously. Furthermore, disinformation campaigns can now be launched by third parties with vested interests, such as foreign Russian actors in the case of the 2016 US presidential election. The increased accessibility for an increased range of actors to obstruct the deliberative process in democracies represents a further threat that differentiates disinformation today from historical disinformation.

II. Comparison of the Type of Echo Chambers

Under the domination of the printed press as the main source of political information, consumers tended to read publications that aligned with their existing beliefs or political stances. Whilst this is not close to the same scale as echo chambers in the contemporary usage of the phrase, there was a limitation of perspectives that individuals consumed. In the UK for example, the Daily Mail has typically leaned towards right-wing viewpoints and has generally supported the Conservative Party, whereas the Guardian has historically leaned

towards left-wing viewpoints and has endorsed the Labour Party (ICO, 2021). The different political perspectives individuals consume could be argued to have increased radicalisation and hampered the quality of deliberative democracy in a way that mirrors contemporary echo chambers.

However, digital echo chambers are far more dangerous because, as mentioned previously, consumers today can be the producers and consumers of content within their own echo chambers. This has two main impacts. First, as every individual is able to offer political facts and opinions for potentially widespread consumption, "disintermediation" has occurred whereby the "opinions of experts and amateurs" have been equated (Palano, 2019, p. 48). Previously, offering political commentary for the masses was a power circumscribed primarily to those with a certain degree of political, scientific, or journalistic authority. Now, there is a higher quantity and lower quality of information circulating in many echo chambers, enabled by social media. Second, when consumers are authors, their primary aim is often not to influence the political masses or to maximise profit, and many may also be shielded by anonymity (McKay and Tenove, 2021). This allows them to express more extreme opinions than what the legacy media typically expressed (as they were generally aiming to attract broad readership), which means contemporary echo chambers tend to be more polarised and fragmented (Palano 2019). This reduces the quality of deliberation in a democracy in a way that is far more dangerous than the results of historical echo chambers.

III. Comparison of Persuasion Methods

Micro-targeting is perhaps the most novel threat to deliberative democracy. I posit that micro-targeting crosses the thin line between persuasion and manipulation to an extent incomparable with previous forms of political advertising. Cambridge Dictionary (2019) defines *persuade* as "to make someone do or believe something by giving them a good reason to do it"; and defines *manipulation* as "controlling someone or something to your own

advantage, often unfairly or dishonestly". I argue that content in the printed press or on television can be classed as persuasion because the consumer is often aware that the content they are consuming is political and has been created to convince them of a particular political viewpoint; thus, it is generally *honest*. Consumers are more able to approach the political debate in a rational manner when engaging in deliberation. In contrast, I argue that micro-targeting is manipulation and not persuasion as it is both 'unfair' and 'dishonest'. It is unfair because micro-targeting often involves directly appealing to what one is sensitive to, preying on one's emotions to provoke them towards a certain political viewpoint instead of encouraging deliberated decision-making (Zuboff 2019). It is dishonest because there is a lack of transparency about how subtle, invasive, and pervasive the surveillance mechanisms and behavioural nudges are. The effectiveness of such manipulations only amplifies the severity of the issue. Micro-targeting can therefore potentially help to manipulate election outcomes, damage deliberative democracy, and undermine trust (Berghel, 2018).

IV. Comparison of How Trust is Transferred

Historical challenges to trust and legitimacy can arguably be said to mirror the risks posed by digital technologies. Following the invention and proliferation of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century, Europeans began to lose trust in the politically powerful Catholic Church. The printing press challenged the Catholic Church's monopoly over the production and dissemination of books and knowledge, which had allowed the Church to maintain its legitimacy by regulating public opinion and presenting 'Godly truths', and consequently rarely having to deal with challenges to its legitimacy (Kertcher and Margalit, 2005, p. 14-15). The spread of new ideas that was facilitated by this technological advancement, such as Protestant ideals in the early sixteenth century, effectively caused a "socio-political reconstruction of political authority in Europe" (Kertcher and Margalit, 2005, p. 18).

However, I maintain that the erosion of trust today is occurring in a novel manner. In the case of the loss of trust in the Catholic Church, this was increasingly replaced by new forms of trust and legitimacy, such as more transparent information exchanges (initially due to the widespread publication of books in the vernacular rather than Latin) and democratic political institutions. As the decline of the feudal system eventually led to the formation of democracies within Western Europe, it can be said that the invention of the printing press was not a threat to the political system, but instead a threat specifically to the Church's legitimacy In contrast, I posit, in line with Palano's argument, that trust today is slowly being transferred 'horizontally' due to the increased polarisation caused by digital technologies, meaning that news from a family member or a friend may be trusted more than news from an authoritative source (2019). Though this process is far from complete and is instead only at its initial stages, it is likely that increasing polarisation will lead to most individuals not believing in the authenticity of information which conflicts with their worldviews (Bail et al., 2018). This again points to the cycle of polarisation and trust decay that I have discussed throughout this essay. The transfer of trust horizontally instead of to varying forms of political authority is indeed a new threat to contemporary democracies.

V. Comparison of How Polarisation Manifests

Through the examination of data gathered between 1995 and 1997, Norris (2000) concluded that higher levels of watching television are directly associated with lower rates of social trust, reduced voluntary activism, and relatively low political participation. Whilst Norris' study offered no causal mechanism, I would argue in line with Putnam (2000) that the rise of television meant people spent more of their leisure time alone, thus interacting less with their community and developing more individualistic attitudes. This can be equated to lower social cohesion, which can indicate higher levels of polarisation; a danger to both deliberative democracy and to general respect for the legitimacy of electoral processes and

political institutions (Eurofound, 2024). Furthermore, reduced activism and low political participation impede deliberative democracy by limiting the range of perspectives heard and reducing the diversity of interests represented in the democratic process.

Today, however, a fusion of politics and entertainment due to social media means that polarisation stemming from political disagreements now leads to divisions across many, if not all, areas of society, rather than being limited primarily to the political sphere. A widely cited Stanford University study found that in 1960, four percent of Democrats and five percent of Republicans would feel 'displeased' if their child was to marry a member of the opposite political party, but by 2010 that number rose to thirty-three percent and forty-nine percent respectively (Iyengar et al, 2012, p. 12-14). The fact that Americans with conflicting political views are increasingly avoiding social relationships with one another demonstrates how political fragmentation has permeated into other areas of life. A lack of exposure, understanding and empathy for those with differing political views will only create a vicious cycle in which polarisation continues to exacerbate. Thus, society will continue to fragment, creating more extreme views, undermining social trust, and disrupting deliberative democracies in new ways.

Conclusion

I have assessed the two main threats posed by digital technologies to democracies – misinformation and micro-targeting in conjunction with echo chambers – against my criteria of deliberative democracy and trust. After using these criteria to compare the threats posed by digital technologies and their historical counterparts, I have established that the contemporary threats are indeed new. Not only are there significant quantitative differences which enlarge the magnitude of the contemporary threats, but I have also argued that there are five qualitative differences which clearly distinguish the contemporary threats to democracy from what we have seen before.

First, misinformation and disinformation today are far more convincing and therefore difficult to recognise. Since this type of information can take the form of audio-visual content, it has the potential to appeal at a much deeper and more emotional level than text or picture-based content, worsening the quality of deliberation to a greater extent. Second, social media offers all consumers the opportunity to be the producers of content, meaning that echo chambers become more fragmented and are fuelled by lower-quality information, again hampering deliberative democracy. Third, micro-targeting preys on emotions and vulnerabilities through a deep invasion of privacy in a manner so subtle that many consumers and voters are unaware of how they are being influenced. I have argued this crosses the line between persuasion and reaches the territory of manipulation. The effectiveness of this practice poses a threat to democracy unlike what we have witnessed in the past. Fourth, whilst the breakdown of trust due to information communication technologies historically led to the same trust being transferred to other authoritative and generally democracy-benefitting sources, the same cannot be said for the breakdown of trust today, which is increasingly being redistributed horizontally. Fifth and finally, polarisation as a result of digital technologies is not limited to the political sphere but increasingly affects all aspects of life, creating a new type of distrust and enmity between those with differing political beliefs, endangering political trust, societal trust, and any scope for real political compromise. Whilst this essay has taken a largely negative view of contemporary democracies, I would hope that by better understanding these threats and their novelty, we may be better equipped to address them. Future research aimed at addressing these problems should not assume that old solutions for old problems will work as effectively in the current world. As our problems are so novel, it is likely our solutions will have to be too.

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