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The current influence of social media on democratic debate, political parties and electioneering

A influência das mídias sociais sobre o debate democrático, os partidos políticos e as campanhas eleitorais na atualidade

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Abstract

This article provides an overview on how digital social media influences the debate and some of the major democratic organizations — namely political parties and electioneering campaigns. Its specific objectives are: i) to expose the debate about the democratic essence (or not) of the internet; ii) to analyze risk factors for democracy brought about by the digitization of social communications; iii) to study the transformations brought by the Internet to political parties and electoral campaigns. Results: i) what will define if there will still be the possibility of some democratic degree in the use of the internet will

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta um panorama geral de como as mídias sociais digitais influenciam o debate e algumas das principais organizações democráticas — notadamente, partidos políticos e campanhas eleitorais. Tem como objetivos específicos: i) expor o debate Acerca da essência democrática (ou não) da internet; ii) analisar fatores de risco à democracia trazidos pela digitalização das comunicações sociais; iii) estudar transformações trazidas pela internet aos partidos políticos e às campanhas eleitorais. Resultados: i) o que definirá se ainda haverá a possibilidade de algum grau democrático no uso da internet será a predominância

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be the predominance of the forces (consumerist or communitarian) that build it; ii) immediacy, lack of moderation, lack of search for conformity and balance, anti-democratic technological strategies and technological colonialism expose the democratic debate to great risks of degradation; iii) participatoryism and disintermediation are ideological features of the new digitized parties that, at heart, hide a centralization around charismatic figures without a stable and fully definable electoral platform. It has a hypothetical-deductive method of procedure, qualitative approach, and bibliographic-documentary research technique.

Keywords: internet; democracy; risk; political parties; election campaigns.

das forças que a constroem (forças consumistas ou forças comunitárias); ii) imediatismo, falta de moderação, falta de busca por conformidades e por equilíbrio, estratégias tecnológicas anti-democráticas e colonialismo tecnológico expõem o debate democrático a grandes riscos de degradação; iii) o participacionalismo e a desintermediação são características ideológicas dos novos partidos digitalizados que, no fundo, escondem uma centralização em torno de figuras carismáticas e sem plataforma eleitoral estável e plenamente definível. Seu método de procedimento é hipotético-dedutivo, de abordagem qualitativa e técnica de pesquisa bibliográfico-documental.

Palavras-chave: internet; democracia; risco; partidos políticos; campanhas eleitorais.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The *Freedom on the Net 2019* report¹ brings alarming news to internet users concerned about the democratic character of the web: several countries that live in regimes considered democratic (among them Brazil, where, in the last election of 2018, fake news, false images and conspiracy theories proliferated on YouTube, WhatsApp and other social networks) presented a decline in the quality of democracy exercised on the internet — mainly related to freedom of expression on the web and its consequences. According to data from the report, more than 3.8 billion people have access to the internet in the world. And of those users, 71% live in countries where individuals have been detained or imprisoned for publishing content on political, social or religious issues; 65% live in countries where individuals have been attacked or killed for their online activities since June 2018; 59% live in countries where officials have deployed government commentators to handle online discussions; 56% live in countries where political, social or religious content has been blocked online; 46% live in countries where the authorities disconnected the internet or mobile networks, usually for political reasons; 46% live in countries where access to social media platforms has been temporarily or permanently restricted. Although it is possible to dispute the results of the said

¹ FREEDOM HOUSE. **Freedom on the net 2019: the crisis of social media.** 2019. Available at: https://www.freedomonthenet.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/11042019_Report_FH_FOTN_2019_final_Public_Download.pdf. Access in April 6th, 2021.

report, it is appalling to point to a possible fact: freedom is declining in the internet, and anti-democratic political reasons are a possible cause for this ongoing erosion.

Faced with this situation of increasing the presence of evidence in the sense of decreasing freedom of expression on the internet in countries that, at least so far, are institutionally democratic, the question that drives this article is raised: how much the use of the media social issues — such as those represented by Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, blogs, YouTube channels, among others — have recently affected the main democratic characteristics and institutions in the West?

As an initial hypothesis, it is presented that social media, considered as potentially democratizing politics — mainly due to the openness to all and the transnational reach of various forms and topics of political debate — currently make democracy pass through a critical period, in which the very democratic character of the web has been questioned — and this is reflected in several anti-democratic forms of communication developed recently — fake news, social bots, trolls, etc. — and used as tools of influence in the online political debate. Furthermore, organizations that are very important for institutionalized democratic development — mainly political parties and electoral campaign periods — are affected not only by these deleterious strategies, but also by important characteristics brought about by the internet, such as a lower hierarchy of electoral platform organization, greater openness to the plurality of voter interests and, therefore, less centralization around leaders.

An analysis of how much the internet can represent a public sphere of political discussion has already been done by Papacharissi.² Sunstein,³ on the other hand, has already given samples of the value transformation of democracy after the great penetration of social media in political debates in general. And Gerbaudo⁴ can be pointed out as being a great example of analysis of how political parties have been transformed with the increase in the importance of social media in communications. Perhaps what the work now introduced presents as an original for the state of the art of this discussion is precisely the confluence between these various positions, outlining a complex of democratic development on the internet — from its democratic character (or not), going through the challenges that the internet represents to the democratic debate and, finally, visualizing the practical results of the transformations that the internet has caused to such important moments for institutionalized democracy — the organization of the parties and the electoral campaigns.

² PAPACHARISSI, Zizi. The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere. In: STEMPFHUBER, Martin; WAGNER, Elke (eds.). **Praktiken der Überwachen: Öffentlichkeit und Privatheit im Web 2.0.** Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019. p. 43-60.

³ SUNSTEIN, Cass Robert. As mídias sociais são boas ou ruins para a democracia? **Sur**, São Paulo, vol. 15, n. 27, pp. 85-92, 2018.

⁴ GERBAUDO, Paolo. **The digital party: political organisation and digital democracy.** London: Pluto Press, 2019.

The main objective of this paper, which is an exploratory research, with hypothetical-deductive method of procedure, qualitative approach and literature review technique, is to present an overview of how digital social media influence the democratic debate and some of the main democratic organizations — notably, political parties and election campaign periods. In particular, its first section deals with a debate about the democratic essence (or not) of the internet. Its second section, on the other hand, is dedicated to an analysis of factors brought about by the digitalization of social communications that represent risks to democracy. Finally, its last section focuses on the analysis of transformations brought by the internet to political parties and electoral campaigns.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA AND INTERNET: DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC SPHERE?

The beginning of the 1990s was marked, among other important facts, by the rise of the internet as a means of raising public awareness. Despite some important antecedents of computerized communication (such as America Online in the USA, Minitel in France.), the Internet and the World Wide Web evoked utopian dreams and dystopian nightmares.⁵ Utopically, academic and popular speeches were enthusiastic about the belief that connecting to the Internet would inevitably democratize the world at several levels. Initially designed by Western countries as a tool for global connection,⁶ the Internet was conceived as a facilitator of independent political ideals and unconnected with national manipulations, since it would allow individuals to access information beyond territorial limits.⁷ At first, a real Information Revolution was envisaged, and it would modify vertical power relations and allow dissemination of power to virtual users.⁸ However, other authors, in reference to Orwell and Huxley, began to see dystopian possibilities in such technologies — totalitarian states of perfect surveillance, conformity to the unlimited pleasures and distractions offered by new technologies, etc..

The emergence of Web 2.0 and, more recently, platform imperialism and the compulsion of users to portray their routines, emotions, thoughts, are strong arguments presented in favor of the dystopian view. Democratic resistance to that, however, cannot be ruled out. Facebook and Twitter, although used by anti-democratic forces

⁵ ESS, Charles. Democracy and the internet: a retrospective. **Javnost: The Public**, London, v. 25, n. 1-2, p. 93-101, 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1418820>. p. 93.

⁶ In some Eastern countries such as China and Russia, the initial idea of the Internet is not suited to the Western vision of global opening of information and connections, but as a mechanism instituted under the mantle of the country's sovereignty and, therefore, subject to mechanisms to control content (STOYCHEFF, Elizabeth. Relatively democratic: How perceived Internet interference shapes attitudes about democracy. **The International Journal of Press/Politics**, [s.l.], vol. 25, n. 3, pp. 390-406, mar. 2020. p. 3).

⁷ STOYCHEFF, Elizabeth. Relatively democratic: How perceived Internet interference shapes attitudes about democracy. **The International Journal of Press/Politics**, [s.l.], vol. 25, n. 3, pp. 390-406, mar. 2020. p. 2-3.

⁸ MILLER, Michael L.; VACCARI, Cristian. Digital threats to democracy: comparative lessons and possible remedies. **The International Journal of Press/Politics**, [s.l.], vol. 25, n. 3, pp. 333-356, may. 2020. p. 4.

— which has even led social media companies to recognize that their products can jeopardize social stability⁹ — can also mobilize resistance. And movements such as the ethics of virtue, which emphasize good living beyond convenience and corporate profit, are being adopted in the design of ICTs, as part of broader developments towards slow tech and a post- new possibilities for more democratic development and emancipatory futures. But exploring such potentials requires better understandings, designs and use of these technologies in the service of democracy and the good life, so that they are not just consumed.¹⁰ Those ethical forms of measured resistance to technology, however, must be taken seriously, so that the realization of this perfect surveillance does not reduce the web to consumption and totalitarian observation.

Andrew Feenberg¹¹ considers that the focus of the discussion about democracy on the internet must be the possibility of extinction of its democratic potential because of what the web could become as a result of its regulation, as well as the transformations of technology itself, and not in the disappointment of the utopian-revolutionary potential that the network should have realized. The internet must then be analyzed as being, essentially, a technical system, with social meaning closely intertwined with this characteristic. This does not mean a return to technological determinism in theory, but that not just the technical character of society, but also the social character of technology, must be considered. And that, just as there are divisions in society, there are also those in technology — which is reflected in the ambivalence of technical systems, a dubiousness thus divisible into forces: i) consumerists: private forces that seek to reduce the internet to great entertainment, focusing on its commercial potential, due to the freedom of the market; and ii) community: actors who see the internet as a means of social participation for its users, and try to promote citizenship and personal growth of individuals, due to freedom of expression. Such models are ideologically and technically diverse: while the community started being developed before, based on the possibility of communication from one point to another — without technical capacity to support large mass media transmissions — for the consumerists it was necessary to develop the network to support the massive data transmission, which made it possible, without directly violating the net neutrality, to develop a paid “layer” of the internet.

Technologies are inserted in a broad social context composed of several actors and, therefore, their use cannot be interpreted without contextualization within that scenario. On the contrary, ICTs have their purposes defined based on their relationship

⁹ WISCHMEYER, Thomas. Making social media an instrument of democracy. *European Law Journal*, [s.l.], vol. 25, n. 2, pp. 169-181, apr. 2019. p. 171.

¹⁰ ESS, Charles. Democracy and the internet: a retrospective. *Javnost: The Public*, London, v. 25, n. 1-2, p. 93-101, 2018. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2017.1418820>. p. 94.

¹¹ FEENBERG, Andrew. *Technosystem: the social life of reason*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. p. 99-100.

of dependence with civil society, with political entities and also with economic entities. Due to their instrumental character, it is said that ICTs can be democratizing tools, serve for authoritarian purposes, and even for propitiating the fall into the economic abyss.¹² The (de) continuity of the democratic character of the network will depend on which forces will determine its code.¹³ So far, none of both models (community and consumerist) is hegemonic, with the internet prevailing as a space for struggle and coexistence. Thus, the internet does not have a single essence: it is not only a space where data produced by users are exploited commercially — although it opens up many opportunities for market exploitation — nor just a space in which alienated users simply confuse political participation with action — when issuing their opinion, or when signing online petitions — due to the creation of a supposed new subjectivity, due to the lack of seriousness of the online contents — despite the immense amount of these.

Technological advances provide a kind of symbiosis between virtual space, which includes a series of aspects of real life, and the physical environment, nowadays.¹⁴ Current society is entirely technically mediated. Education, health, leisure and transportation, for example, have been totally transformed by technology. And the entire world population is involved in the many new functional networks. Most of its participants are not assembled locally and in person, which weakens the political potential of the network and facilitates its administration towards commercial interest. But virtually assembled groups, in parallel to the many forms of technical mediation, unite individuals in networks of one type or another, nonetheless.¹⁵ The commodification of information generated on social media institutes new forms of advertising economics and inserts society into a new era of politics where democratic values and opinions become targets of influential marketing and new debates about the constitution of democratic space emerge.¹⁶ Politics is no longer the exclusive arena of traditionally constituted groups, therefore. The great challenge for the continuity of the internet as a democratic locus is reflected in the struggle for the preservation of community conditions, which have hitherto prevented the closure of the internet by business.

¹² JHA, Chandan Kumar; KODILA-TEDIKA, Oasis. Does social media promote democracy? Some empirical evidence, **AGDI Working Paper**, n. WP/19/031. Yaoundé: African Governance and Development Institute (AGDI), 2019. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/205001/1/1666944491.pdf>. Accessed in April 6th, 2021. p. 2.

¹³ FEENBERG, Andrew. **Technosystem: the social life of reason**. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. p. 101.

¹⁴ BASAN, Arthur Pinheiro; JÚNIOR, José Luis de Moura Faleiros. A proteção de dados pessoais e a concreção do direito ao sossego no mercado de consumo. **civilistica.com**, Rio de Janeiro, vol. 9, n. 3, p. 1-27, set./dez. 2020. p. 2.

¹⁵ FEENBERG, Andrew. **Technosystem: the social life of reason**. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. p. 109.

¹⁶ BECHMANN, Anja; O'LOUGHLIN, Ben. **Democracy & Disinformation: A Turn in the Debate**. Brussels: Flemish Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020. p. 11.

Tucker et al.¹⁷ agree with Feenberg about what regards to the technical character of the network; however, they increase the complexity of its characterization by adding another layer of analysis, mainly political — not necessarily imbued with economic interests, as Feenberg's lucid and current materialist dialectic develops. In recent years, the internet, once considered a pro-democracy way of fighting authoritarianism, has become a tool of anti-democrats. Recent concerns that extremists use online freedom to attack democracy have reversed the character of the discussion about social media. After the 2016 election in the USA, even the leaders of democracies called for greater "regulation" of the web, echoing, to some extent, the authoritarian rhetoric that promotes censorship and public opinion guidance. The utopian thinking of conceiving the Internet and social media as a space for conceiving a plurality of thoughts is then imbued with uncertainties that question its ability to effect democracy in the face of episodes of censorship experienced in recent years in several countries.¹⁸

The physical matter that constitutes the human being as a subject of rights and duties is reconfigured to include a virtual self-made possible, above all, with the advent of social media.¹⁹ In the democratic sector, social media can solve collective action problems that have long plagued pro-democracy voices excluded from mainstream politics, providing them with new ways to hold governments accountable and press for greater political inclusion. Hence came the hopeful initial arguments about libertarian technology as a feature of the digital age. However, it can also be the arena for other, more extreme voices. At the same time that the online environment enables informational openness and democratic participation, constituting the current scenario of the Information Society, numerous new risks arise linked to its use for anti-democratic purposes. The openness of the social media environment can even be used to foster censorship: freedom of information platforms can be exploited to silence other people. Such activities have been more visible in the responses of authoritarian regimes to online activities that seek to contradict them. Social media are seen as forms of manifestation of ICTs that have multifaceted communication. This complexity of the media when compared to the traditional means of communication — television, for example — makes them difficult to control/censor information.²⁰ However, censors learned to

¹⁷ TUCKER, Joshua A.; THEOCHARIS, Yannis; ROBERTS, Margaret E.; BARBERÁ, Pablo. From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media And Democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, Baltimore, vol. 28, n. 4, pp. 46-59, oct. 2017. p. 47.

¹⁸ JHA, Chandan Kumar; KODILA-TEDIKA, Oasis. Does social media promote democracy? Some empirical evidence, *AGDI Working Paper*, n. WP/19/031. Yaoundé: African Governance and Development Institute (AGDI), 2019. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/205001/1/1666944491.pdf>. Accessed in April 6th, 2021. p. 3.

¹⁹ BASAN, Arthur Pinheiro; JÚNIOR, José Luis de Moura Faleiros. A proteção de dados pessoais e a concreção do direito ao sossego no mercado de consumo. *civilistica.com*, Rio de Janeiro, vol. 9, n. 3, p. 1-27, set./dez. 2020. p. 2-3.

²⁰ JHA, Chandan Kumar; KODILA-TEDIKA, Oasis. Does social media promote democracy? Some empirical evidence, *AGDI Working Paper*, n. WP/19/031. Yaoundé: African Governance and Development Institute (AGDI),

work with persecution, promoting anti-democratic values, distraction (data flooding techniques, for example) and interrupting online services to silence critics and close or distort the information space. Furthermore, anti-democratic forces within democratic regimes have learned to use authoritarian methods to exploit open information platforms (such as trolls and bots, for example).

This dubious reality of the open online world corroborates to explain the ambiguity about social media when it comes to its implications for democracy.²¹ The heart of the matter is the fact that while freedom of information online is inherently democratic, social media are not: they constitute spaces where political interests struggle for influence, and not all of such interests are liberal or democratic. This explains how social media can be, at the same time, libertarian, repressive, and also challenge the status quo in democratic societies — including previously marginalized extremists. Social media can also be useful for pro-democratic voices in democracies and anti-democratic voices in autocracies. The extremes can be observed empirically; while social media was used to gather and organize the waves of protests that took place in North Africa and the Middle East in favor of the implementation of democracy and better living conditions — popularly known as the Arab Spring — in the same globe, Iran and China studied new ways to implement online surveillance tools and repression of divergent individuals.²²

The internet has made the emergence of a new public space that facilitates political debate possible, but that does not guarantee the renewal of a culturally exhausted public sphere. Cheap, fast and convenient access to information does not necessarily make all citizens more informed or willing to participate politically. Greater participation in the discussion contributes to democracy, but it does not guarantee its quality, as nothing guarantees diversity, since these means are still available only to a part of the population.²³ Thus, the complexity of the network is further increased by the fact that its users have diverse and heterogeneous cultural origins, which would make it difficult to create a unified public sphere — either inside or outside the internet's social media. The most appropriate way to observe the virtual sphere would be to consider it as being constituted of several culturally fragmented cyber spheres that occupy a common virtual public space. Users gathered in common interest groups generally debate and perhaps strive to achieve cultural goals. Much of the political discussion that takes

2019. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/205001/1/1666944491.pdf>. Accessed in April 6th, 2021. p. 4.

²¹ TUCKER, Joshua A.; THEOCHARIS, Yannis; ROBERTS, Margaret E.; BARBERÁ, Pablo. From Liberation to Turmoil: Social Media And Democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, Baltimore, vol. 28, n. 4, pp. 46-59, oct. 2017. p. 48.

²² MILLER, Michael L.; VACCARI, Cristian. Digital threats to democracy: comparative lessons and possible remedies. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, [s.l.], vol. 25, n. 3, pp. 333-356, may. 2020. p. 7.

²³ PAPACHARISSI, Zizi. The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere. In: STEMPFHUBER, Martin; WAGNER, Elke (eds.). *Praktiken der Überwachten: Öffentlichkeit und Privatheit im Web 2.0*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2019. p. 56.

place online does not sound and is not different from that which occurs in face-to-face interaction. The widening gaps between politicians, journalists and the public will not be bridged, unless that is the wish of all these groups.

It may be clear that even a theory about the internet that observes it as being essentially technical is capable of presenting itself as considering its political and legal implications. Furthermore, considering this essence of the network adds even more layers of complexity to its observation as a political space. Political strategies have been translated into technical devices, in what they call “algorithmic turn” — the consideration of the central and strategic role that data processing and automation (of electoral processes, governance and decision) currently have.²⁴

Mass media technologies have long been politically used — radio, cinema and newspapers in war propaganda, smart phones and big data in current elections, etc. But the current unethical use of Big Data and machine learning that manipulates information on an unprecedented scale — ending, for example, with the informational opening of the electoral politics arena, which becomes a secret machine script. And the issue becomes even more complex when analyzing which tactics of the “post-truth era” — such as virality, fast reach of information, multiplicity of narratives, appeal to emotionality, bots and flooding, etc. — are used in this algorithmic turn, manipulating individuals influenced by information. It follows that, despite the possibility of new efficient forms of data-based elections, the definition and control of those technologies is exercised by an elite, which ends up defining the public sphere. Electoral experiences in the USA and the UK have already demonstrated how marketing agencies and government elites come together to use ICTs as tools for political manipulation, influencing the democratic debate through the massive diffusion of misinformation content, including bots for the rapid spread of fake news.²⁵ In other words: the formation of audiences is put at risk by technological manipulation, with the interaction of citizens directed to echo chambers that only expand and reinforce the biased character of political communications, undermining rational deliberation. In such a way that social media have an ambivalent sense regarding the consequences for the said democratic pillars — freedom of expression and popular sovereignty.

The implantation of calculation and regulation technologies — mainly through algorithms — which are currently ubiquitous, starts to act on social classification, creating autonomous repertoires of action and reaction: by replacing institutions, algorithms start to govern, structuring possibilities for behavior, preferences, consumer

²⁴ GURUMURTHY, Anita; BHARTHUR, Deepti. Democracy and the algorithmic turn: issues, challenges, and the way forward. *Sur*, São Paulo, vol. 15, n. 27, p. 39-50, 2018. p. 40.

²⁵ MILLER, Michael L.; VACCARI, Cristian. Digital threats to democracy: comparative lessons and possible remedies. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, [s.l.], vol. 25, n. 3, pp. 333-356, may. 2020. p. 9.

orientation, content production, signal quality definition, commercialization, etc.²⁶ The State itself becomes the set of techniques used to govern through data, and information — converted into machine language, incomprehensible to ordinary people — is converted into knowledge.

Added to these new technical potentialities of weakening democracy are still others, empirically verifiable.²⁷ First of all, it must be pointed out that social media are not good in moderation, as they expand intention, opinions, moods or agendas. Its emergence marked the replacement of the balanced press statement by the provocative tweet. Democratic politics is based on a certain level of compliance. In the media, the public broadcasting system was designed as a great leveler, whose function was not just to inform, but to “shape” public discussion and “filter and distribute” information. However, social media on the Internet creates information spheres with curation and, therefore, demands and rewards singularization — in other words, this values radicalism.

Furthermore, the immediacy of communications on social media breaks the idea of mediation. Individuals can reach their followers directly and do not need to rely on traditional filters, such as press, broadcasters, etc. Even the elaboration of communications addressed to the general public by political parties ignores the traditional media. The social price of that is the erosion of substantive and legal, ethical, and procedural standards to which the traditional media also adhered with democratization.

Although protection against the State and powerful private actors remains extremely important, fundamental rights in the media field should not be understood only as a defense against the influence of the State. It is necessary, with regard to the regulation of social media, to develop a positive system that protects against any misuse of a new medium — whether through the State, other social groups or individuals, and which ensures that the media reflects the diversity of subjects and opinions.²⁸ Floridi,²⁹ by his turn, enunciates that the virtual space called the Infosphere, is where individuals are spending more and more time of their lives, and this transforms and influences aspects of physical life — education, economics, entertainment, politics, work — in a single online sphere and which, therefore, must be interpreted and governed as a common resource of humanity.

²⁶ GURUMURTHY, Anita; BHARTHUR, Deepti. Democracy and the algorithmic turn: issues, challenges, and the way forward. *Sur*, São Paulo, vol. 15, n. 27, p. 39-50, 2018. p. 43.

²⁷ WISCHMEYER, Thomas. Making social media an instrument of democracy. *European Law Journal*, [s.l.], vol. 25, n. 2, pp. 169-181, apr. 2019.

²⁸ WISCHMEYER, Thomas. Making social media an instrument of democracy. *European Law Journal*, [s.l.], vol. 25, n. 2, pp. 169-181, apr. 2019. p. 180.

²⁹ FLORIDI, Luciano. Trump, Parler e Regulating the Infosphere as Our Commons. *Filosofia e Tecnologia*, 2021, p. 4.

It would be tempting to theorize the level of democratization of citizens based on their level of formal literacy — in this sense, it would be logical to associate that the more skilled the individual in reading, the better the information he receives — and, therefore, better parameters one has to decide politically conscious. This would lead to greater equality of access to quality information among the different groups that make up a society, enabling more and more individuals to deal with the analysis of complex social issues and, consequently, as a whole, the society in question would become more democratic.

But this is not empirically verifiable. By analyzing experiences of 177 countries from 1990 to 2013, Yoon³⁰ proved that. In addition to literacy (basic education), the author focused on secondary education, in addition to internet access (currently fundamental). Thus, it was discovered that none of those factors are directly related to the degree of democratization of a given society. Socioeconomic conditions — development, social fragmentation, class structure, etc. — are more important for the than the cognitive aspects of the information flow and the ability of individuals to use it. Thus, access to the internet combined with formal secondary education does not mean a higher level of democratization in a society. This fact does not corroborate positions contrary to the need for education or access to information here — but rather, that the Internet further complicates the democratic analysis of its use.

Nevertheless, it is important to point out the differences between pure and simple access to the internet and the presence of social media that make use of the internet, in terms of democratization — here are the results of the research in 125 countries carried out by,³¹ which points to results quite different from those of Yoon. According to this latest study, there would be a strong and positive correlation between the use of social media and democracy: countries with a greater presence on Facebook have a stronger democracy. Furthermore, the effect of social media on democracy is greater for low-income countries than for high-income countries.

Moreover, the effect of social media on democracy is economically considerable: even with lowest estimates, an increase in a standard deviation (about 18 percentage points) in Facebook penetration is associated with an 8 percent points improvement in the score of democracy for the world sample and more than 11 points in the sample of low-income countries. Thus, it is likely that in countries with a greater presence of social media, citizens will demand and fight for more political rights and civil liberties, leading to an improvement in the country's democracy scores.

³⁰ YORK, Jillian C.; ZUCKERMAN, Ethan. Moderating the Public Sphere. In: JORGENSEN, Rikke Frank (Eds.). **Human Rights in the Age of Platforms**. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019. p. 11.

³¹ JHA, Chandan Kumar; KODILA-TEDIKA, Oasis. Does social media promote democracy? Some empirical evidence, **AGDI Working Paper**, n. WP/19/031. Yaoundé: African Governance and Development Institute (AGDI), 2019. Available at: <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/205001/1/1666944491.pdf>. Accessed in April 6th, 2021.

Thus, it can be preliminarily concluded that the internet is essentially technical, but its use can even be political. What will define whether there is still the possibility of some degree of democracy in its use lies, precisely, in the predominance of the forces that build it: if it becomes the technical predominance of those that act solely for the purpose of marketing, it will become more and more closed; but if other voices are raised, in order to continue to act in favor of their opening — even if living with the market and commercial layer — there will be the possibility of continuing to be a space for debate. The online space, if organized and structured as a common good of humanity³² should, at first, recognize the potential of social media for the perpetuation of content harmful to democracy and, from there, there are rules that guarantee the transparency of information, non-discrimination and social awareness.³³ In order to avoid collapsing at the extremes and guaranteeing the use of social media as a public space for debates, Floridi³⁴ proposes the creation of a legal structure of ethical values that guarantees a responsible and impartial performance in the digital environment.

Even the continued opening of the internet adds more complexity to the debate — behold, it is not just a dialectical position, a “technical class struggle” between market forces that fight to break the net neutrality versus community forces that intend to continue with such a principle, maintaining it an arena of political discussions, constructive debates and learning. And in the continuity of this open space, political clashes between freedom and authoritarianism can be glimpsed — be it from the State that persecutes dissidents, or from undemocratic outsiders who communicate their ideas within freedom regimes.

3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND RISKS TO DEMOCRACY

Minds are shaped in the process of social production of meaning, which has, as its main source, the socialized communication — and such a communication is, by its turn, definable as the process of sharing meaning based on the transfer of information existing in the public domain with the potential to reach society in general.³⁵ Thus, the battle over the human mind is largely fought in the communication process, and this is

³² FLORIDI, Luciano. Trump, Parler and Regulating the Infosphere as Our Commons. **Philosophy and Technology**, v. 34, n. 1, p. 1-5, mar. 2021. DOI: 10.1007/s13347-021-00446-7. p. 4.

³³ STOLLER, M.; MILLER, S. Donald Trump being banned from social media is a dangerous distraction. **The Guardian**, 2021. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/jan/11/trump-twitter-ban-capitol-attack-facebook-youtube-google>. Accessed in April 6th, 2021.

³⁴ FLORIDI, Luciano. Trump, Parler and Regulating the Infosphere as Our Commons. **Philosophy and Technology**, v. 34, n. 1, p. 1-5, mar. 2021. DOI: 10.1007/s13347-021-00446-7.

³⁵ CASTELLS, Manuel. **Communication Power**: mass communication, mass self-communication and power relationships in the network society. In: CURRAN, James; HESMONDALGH, David (Eds.). **Media and Society**. New York: Bloomsbury, 2019. p. 83.

true in the society of networks, the social structure of the Information Age, characterized by the diffusion of communication networks in multimodal hypertext.

There is sufficient evidence to affirm the emergence of a new form of socialized communication — the mass self-communication, self-generated in terms of content, self-directed at the broadcast and self-selected at the reception by many who communicate with many.³⁶ Along with the activation of social movements, the emergence of a new wave of insurgent policies, which is being formed outside the system and produces significant changes in the political system, is also being witnessed. New horizontal communication networks are essential in this process. Insurgent policy is one that emerges from outside the system to include citizens who were previously marginalized in the process, making them believe in the possibility of change. This type of policy requires a space of communicative autonomy that only the Internet can provide — although other mass media still have relevance for popular campaigning and mobilization.

Despite those interesting definitions by Castells, one needs to take a step back and evaluate social media not only in terms of its potential for change in terms of giving voice to repressed marginalized people, but also to those who previously had little (or none) relevance to the political process, but seek to ignite, in their self-produced communications, anti-democratic positions. And also, out of the interest of those who are not marginalized, but have such anti-democratic interests, and offenders of fundamental rights. In this sense, Deibert³⁷ lists what he calls “three painful truths” about social media: i) the social media business model (“surveillance capitalism”) is based on deep and relentless surveillance consumer personal data, aiming to better advertise and collect/market information — passed on to various types of companies, especially “data analytics”; ii) that kind of surveillance is voluntary and intentionally allowed by consumers — either because the diffusion of social media creates strong incentives and discouragements, favoring the participation of the data owner in these services (“infrastructure imperialism”), or because the large companies related to digital media are aware of behavioral/psychological reward schemes, promoting compulsiveness in their users; iii) social media are very compatible with authoritarianism, having shown themselves to be their effective facilitator — thanks to them, authoritarian governments cross borders and prospect dissenters’ content/communications, usually with dangerous consequences.³⁸ Furthermore, neofascism and “tribal” policies benefit both

³⁶ CASTELLS, Manuel. **Communication Power**: mass communication, mass self-communication and power relationships in the network society. In: CURRAN, James; HESMONDALGH, David (Eds.). **Media and Society**. New York: Bloomsbury, 2019. p. 89-94.

³⁷ DEIBERT, Ronald J. The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths About Social Media. **Journal of Democracy**, Baltimore, vol. 30, n. 1, p. 25-39, jan. 2019. p. 26.

³⁸ DEIBERT, Ronald J. The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths About Social Media. **Journal of Democracy**, Baltimore, vol. 30, n. 1, p. 25-39, jan. 2019. p. 34.

from the lack of quality of the speeches and from all the tactics developed for the subterfuge surveillance throughout the internet — played through social bots, flooding, fake news, phishing, etc.

As for access to the diversity of discourses, the social media model, with its rapid flow of information and cacophony of opinions, is degrading public discourse. Therefore, consumers resort to cognitive shortcuts that direct them to opinions that fit their already consolidated beliefs, generally.³⁹ Furthermore, the constant torrent of leaks, conspiracy theories and other erroneous information fuels cynicism, being citizens increasingly tired of trying to discern between objective truth and erroneous/false opinion amid the actual bombardment of news that the production of content expands, coupled with the increasing connectivity that everyday devices ubiquitously provides.

The disruptive power of new technologies also serves immoral interests through the already naturalized practices of collecting personal data and monitoring users' actions in the virtual environment — their record of clicks, search history, purchases made, interactions in social networks, its geolocation, among others — for the creation of profiles.⁴⁰ The current situation of the power of surveillance and the concentration of personal data collected by a small number of public and private entities, based in a few jurisdictions (USA and EU, mainly) is more complex than imagined, as they lead to a rapid erosion of the sovereignty of the State and democracy.⁴¹ This power to monitor the present and predict future behaviors, not only of individuals, but of entire populations, is unprecedented. And the issue becomes more alarming when you see the merger between public and private sectors in corporations in search of global domination, penetrating all governments, popular movements, mediating every action in the life of each person connected through digital devices and collecting of data.

Those States and companies have three elements that most developing countries do not have:⁴² i) capital and intellectual resources; ii) dominance over the current national and international legal architecture (mainly of intellectual property), which prevents small countries from adopting policies that favor the production and purchase of domestically produced goods and services, with the threat of lawsuits in international Courts for the adoption anti-competitive measures — which limits the capacity for research and innovation; iii) availability of financial capital to test and design

³⁹ DEIBERT, Ronald J. The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths About Social Media. *Journal of Democracy*, Baltimore, vol. 30, n. 1, p. 25-39, jan. 2019. p. 30-32.

⁴⁰ BASAN, Arthur Pinheiro; JÚNIOR, José Luis de Moura Faleiros. A proteção de dados pessoais e a concreção do direito ao sossego no mercado de consumo. *civilistica.com*, Rio de Janeiro, vol. 9, n. 3, p. 1-27, set./dez. 2020. p. 3.

⁴¹ PINTO, Renata Ávila. Soberania Digital ou Colonialismo Digital? Novas tensões relativas à privacidade, segurança e políticas nacionais. *Sur*, São Paulo, vol. 15, n. 27, pp. 15-28, 2018. p. 16.

⁴² PINTO, Renata Ávila. Soberania Digital ou Colonialismo Digital? Novas tensões relativas à privacidade, segurança e políticas nacionais. *Sur*, São Paulo, vol. 15, n. 27, pp. 15-28, 2018. p. 17.

innovations, through public funds, venture capital or public-private partnerships, with this small number of countries investing massively in research and development to maintain their dominant position in the sector and expand aggressively to the largest possible number of markets, as well as to explore innovative ways of integrating information technology in all aspects of public administration, the private sector, its defense and security and the fulfillment of citizens' rights.

Such actors also have influence and high capabilities for political interference to outline international standards that serve their business models, increasingly based on data collection, monitoring and identification of patterns, inevitably eroding privacy in those processes. Thus, the disparity between those countries leads to digital colonialism reinforced by the fact that, unlike the first international digital inclusion policies, only those consumers increasingly dependent on the supply of such companies are taken into account, not being considered the creative power of those individuals over the technologies themselves — in other words, they do not emancipate them in a way that allows to also develop technology.⁴³

When democratic processes are being discussed, one has to take into account that discussion, negotiation, commitment and deliberation are paramount for their full development.⁴⁴ Voting is just the final phase of a much longer succession of events, which for the most part is still conventional and almost invisible. And it is this succession of steps — which are non-linear, communicative, complex and totally social, regardless of the communicative substrate that it uses (whether oral, printed or digital) that the bubble filters and fake news harm — that is, they destroy in the democratic process. The process of interconnectivity of ICTs is moving towards the formation of a new revolutionary wave that will form a society where information flows easily. The beginning of this process is already seen with the advent of the Internet of Things (IoT), for example. And it is within this context that fake news become a growing concern, due to the speed through which they can be disseminated.⁴⁵

For social media and democracy, fake news and the proliferation of information bubbles are very serious problems that result in increased fragmentation, polarization and extremism.⁴⁶ The utopian thinking that is consistent with considering the insertion of the individual in the virtual environment as a phenomenon of expansion and

⁴³ PINTO, Renata Ávila. Soberania Digital ou Colonialismo Digital? Novas tensões relativas à privacidade, segurança e políticas nacionais. *Sur*, São Paulo, vol. 15, n. 27, pp. 15-28, 2018. p. 18-21.

⁴⁴ MOROZOV, Evgeny. **La internet non salverà il mondo:** perché no dobbiamo credere a chi pense che la rete possa risolvere ogni problema. Milano: Mondadori, 2014. p. 308.

⁴⁵ FARHALL, Kate et al. Political Elites' Use of Fake News Discourse Across Communications Platforms. *International Journal of Communication*, v. 13, p. 4253-4375, 2019. Available at: <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/10677>. Access in April 6th, 2021. p. 4.

⁴⁶ SUNSTEIN, Cass Robert. As mídias sociais são boas ou ruins para a democracia? *Sur*, São Paulo, vol. 15, n. 27, pp. 85-92, 2018. p. 86.

encounter of different thoughts in which the user will observe, analyze and choose based on fateful and exempt ideals is confronted by the phenomenon of filter bubbles. Users tend to meet harmonious thoughts, which confirm their political and ideological preferences, and, consequently, create a challenge for the internet as a democratic space.⁴⁷ Those who focus on a bubble come to believe in many falsehoods, and will not be able to find out about others that are really true — which is as terrible for democracy as the use of social media by entities with undemocratic interests. Information bubbles are not a historically new phenomenon, but the increase in technological capacity for self-ordering and personalization has created problems, as social media platforms facilitate certain types of segmentation and self-screening. The targeting of people prone to believe in falsehoods and echo chambers is a novelty.⁴⁸ In addition, the prevalence of false online stories obliterates well educated political decision-making and makes voters less likely to choose based on genuine information, rather than lies or misleading “turns.”⁴⁹

The current online public sphere is ambiguous, being simultaneously mediated by algorithms and centrally controlled. Owners of social media platforms have enormous power over what can be said, and the algorithms they implement control the (in) visibility of possible perspectives. Moderation, whether to prevent, to promote or to demote the publication of a content, is the mechanism of affirmation of control over the networked public sphere.⁵⁰ Content moderation works as an extremely sophisticated method of private regulation — which is exercised by the digital platforms themselves, such as Facebook or YouTube — of online content based on their own definitions of abusive content.⁵¹ An example of this is the kick-off of the Facebook platform for the construction of the so-called Supervision Committee, with the aim of inspecting the content posted and shared on the network. The Committee, designed to be composed of twenty individuals, will observe in its activities the fundamental right to freedom of expression, keep users’ privacy, and check informational veracity.⁵²

⁴⁷ MILLER, Michael L.; VACCARI, Cristian. Digital threats to democracy: comparative lessons and possible remedies. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, [s.l.], vol. 25, n. 3, pp. 333-356, may. 2020. p. 14.

⁴⁸ SUNSTEIN, Cass Robert. As mídias sociais são boas ou ruins para a democracia? *Sur*, São Paulo, vol. 15, n. 27, pp. 85-92, 2018. p. 90.

⁴⁹ PERSILY, Nathaniel. The 2016 U.S. Election: Can Democracy Survive the Internet? *Journal of Democracy*, Baltimore, vol. 28, n. 2, pp. 63-76, apr. 2017. p. 68.

⁵⁰ YORK, Jillian C.; ZUCKERMAN, Ethan. Moderating the Public Sphere. In: JORGENSEN, Rikke Frank (Eds.). *Human Rights in the Age of Platforms*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2019. p. 147-148.

⁵¹ HARTMANN, Ivar Alberto; IUNES, Julia. Fake news no contexto de pandemia e emergência social: os deveres e responsabilidades das plataformas de redes sociais na moderação de conteúdo online entre a teoria e as proposições legislativas. *Direito Público*, Brasília, vol. 17, n. 94, p. 388-414, jul./ago. 2020. p. 395.

⁵² RUBIÃO, André; MIOTTO, Giovanna Zago. Liberdade de expressão e risco à saúde nas plataformas digitais durante a pandemia da covid-19: uma análise do controle dos discursos científicos a partir do caso mikovits. *Direito Público*, Brasília, vol. 17, n. 94, pp. 218-249, jul./ago. 2020. p. 237.

Two are the main ways through which social media platforms moderate communications: i) soft control: control of what users pay attention to, using algorithms that determine what is shown in a given feed; ii) hard control: direct determination about the acceptability of content for publication on the platform. Both types of moderation employ algorithms — usually combined with human intervention — through processes that are opaque to users and therefore difficult to review, analyze and criticize.

In addition to these two strategies, there are community guidelines, which aim to educate users about the rules of a platform in clear and easy to use language. Those guidelines vary across popular platforms, but generally include a ban on hate speech, sexually explicit content, support for violent extremism, harassment and copyrighted content. Platforms may have a legal responsibility to remove certain content, depending on the jurisdiction in which they are located, but community guidelines often include content that is otherwise legally permitted. There are also legislative initiatives to elaborate regulatory rules for the online environment that organize the attribution of responsibility to social media platforms, such as the Brazilian Civil Rights Framework for the Internet (Law n. 12.965) of 2014.

Companies like Facebook develop tools that make the information accessible to each user available based on their personal interests — something that evolves as the individual's use of the platform intensifies, feeding the algorithm that guides such a filter. This undermines democracy, based on the consideration of three essential principles of democratic communication:⁵³ i) exposure of citizens to materials that they have not chosen in advance — which may cause their pre-existing perspectives to be opposed through diversity; ii) most citizens must have access to a wide range of shared experiences — which provides greater social homogenization, in the sense of unveiling humanity from otherness, providing shared experiences between different; iii) citizens must be in a position to distinguish between what is true and what is false — and to know when democratic processes are being manipulated.

It can be said that, from the point of view of the health of liberal democracy, the great promises of the Internet are also its pitfalls. Its liberating and anti-establishment potential can be harnessed by demagogues who appeal to the masses' worst impulses. In providing for the disruption of outdated established institutions, the Internet has left a vacuum filled with direct appeals from candidates, fake news and propaganda. In addition, the anonymity and lack of accountability that give communicative power to the internet — for whistleblowers in repressive contexts — also allow foreign intervention in campaigns, allow trolls to spread their prejudices through harassment — which

⁵³ SUNSTEIN, Cass Robert. As mídias sociais são boas ou ruins para a democracia? *Sur*, São Paulo, vol. 15, n. 27, pp. 85-92, 2018. p. 87.

is added to the possibility of information bubbles for alienate users in experiencing alterity in online discourse.⁵⁴

Furthermore, under pressure from religious, nationalist and cultural forces revived by the Internet, global politics is increasingly complex, controversial and fragmented. While many in the West see the Internet as an opportunity to revive the less reliable fragments of modernization theory — the once popular belief that, with some assistance, all developing societies can reach a starting point where they put their history, culture and religion in stand-by and start to follow the political stages of the more developed ones — these ideas become blurred in reality.⁵⁵

Nor, unfortunately, can one rule out the interference with authoritarian governments targeting liberal democracy by various non-military means. Although the means employed in that kind of interference — clandestine diplomacy, geoeconomics and disinformation — have been used for strategic purposes throughout history, at least three circumstantial facilitators make them more effective today:⁵⁶ i) cybernetics, that has dramatically increased the effectiveness of those means and added new tactical options with high thresholds of detection and attribution; ii) social hyperconnectivity increases the opportunities for using these types of media; iii) liberal democracy and its characteristic openness — mainly expressed in the restricted State, pluralism, freedom of media and open economy — allow external forces to interfere in the Western political space through a variety of means. Because of this characteristic openness, authoritarian powers have a relative advantage over Western democracies in applying interference as a strategy. Being more closed regimes, authoritarian governments are potentially better able to combat external interference.

There are at least four ways through which cyber attacks (internal or external) can influence elections:⁵⁷ i) manipulation of opinions and facts that instruct citizens to vote — through propaganda, bots and fake social media reports, for example; ii) interference in the voting itself, with adulteration of electoral registration lists, etc.; iii) changing the voting results; iv) dilapidation of confidence in the integrity of the vote. Such threats have come from countries like China, Russia and Iran in recent years, targeting countries in the democratic West. Some examples: The Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service specifically identified Russia, China and Iran as threats to national security due to cyber attacks; the FBI and the US Department of Homeland

⁵⁴ PERSILY, Nathaniel. The 2016 U.S. Election: Can Democracy Survive the Internet? *Journal of Democracy*, Baltimore, vol. 28, n. 2, pp. 63-76, apr. 2017. p. 71-72.

⁵⁵ MOROZOV, Evgeny. *The net delusion: the dark side of internet freedom*. New York: Public Affairs, 2011, p. 247. p. 247.

⁵⁶ WIGELL, Mikael. Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy: a theory of external interference in liberal democracy. *International Affairs*, Oxford, vol. 95, n. 2, pp. 255-275, mar. 2019. p. 274.

⁵⁷ PICCONE, Ted. Democracia e Tecnologia Digital. *Sur*, São Paulo, vol. 15, n. 27, pp. 29-39, 2018. p. 30.

Security (DHS) repeatedly stated in 2016 details of Russia's connections to recent attacks and leaks intended to influence the US elections; French President Emmanuel Macron, in May 2017, accused the official Russian media of spreading false news and misleading propaganda to influence election results in favor of his opponent.

Despite the many traditional causes attributed to the current erosion of democracies — such as economic inequality, slowing economic growth, bad governance, and cultural transformation — the sharp increase in political polarization in recent years is undeniable, and it undermines the civic culture that is so important to make democratic governance more efficient. Furthermore, new populisms and nationalisms have generated a new identity policy that threatens liberal democracy from the inside.⁵⁸ But the idea that the external and the internal could, in some way, be linked, has been largely ignored in the debate about democratic deconsolidation. Election intrusion is only the most prominent example of external interference in Western democracy; that interference also occurs between elections, with the deliberate aim of provoking political polarization, and thus, undermining liberal democratic governance.

Americans have already expressed their criticism for the big technological companies regarding this topic, understanding that they harm the political discourse. Opinions differ between Republican and Democrat voters. Nine out of ten Republicans say social media platforms are likely to censor conservative political views; 69% say tech companies favor liberal content. The majority of Democrats (73%) approve that social media should censor content considered to be inaccurate or misleading, while 71% of Republicans disapprove of this practice, intending to say that platforms do not have the capacity to determine which posts on their platforms should be censored.⁵⁹

The reflection of all this is the public's distrust of technology and democracy. In research, the opinion of experts who maintain that technology will weaken democracy by 2030 was highlighted. Pew Research Center⁶⁰ analyzed the response of 979 experts in the area (among technological innovators, developers, business and political leaders, researchers and activists), and among them, 49% share this concern with democracy. Among his arguments are the speed and reach of distorted reality with the emergence of deepfakes, cheapfakes and other misinformation tactics. They claim that those tactics will lead to a lack of belief in reliable sources, causing a decline in journalism. In

⁵⁸ WIGELL, Mikael. Hybrid interference as a wedge strategy: a theory of external interference in liberal democracy. *International Affairs*, Oxford, vol. 95, n. 2, pp. 255-275, mar. 2019. p. 275.

⁵⁹ ANDERSON, Monica; PERRIN, Andrew; VOGELS, Emily. **Most Americans Think Social Media Sites Censor Political Viewpoints**. Pew Research Center, 2020. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/08/19/most-americans-think-social-media-sites-censor-political-viewpoints/>. Access in April 6th, 2021.

⁶⁰ ANDERSON, Monica; PERRIN, Andrew; VOGELS, Emily. **Most Americans Think Social Media Sites Censor Political Viewpoints**. Pew Research Center, 2020. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/08/19/most-americans-think-social-media-sites-censor-political-viewpoints/>. Access in April 6th, 2021.

addition, they highlight the power that technological companies have in democratic discourse. In this regard, public opinion agrees with this concern. It has been quantified that 72% of American adults say that social media companies have a lot of power and influence in politics today.⁶¹

In order to analyze the damage that disinformation does to democracy, it is important to analyze it due to the complex interactions between the media and the political system, not reducing democracy only to elections. A healthy system provides the public with an epistemic function, influencing the population to make decisions and create opinions based on facts and logic. However, misinformation harms this function, when fake news is spread, promoting erroneous perceptions and devaluing reliable epistemological sources, enabling citizens to be indifferent or hostile towards this epistemological process. In addition, the system complies with the ethical function, promoting mutual respect between citizens. However, when fake news are directed in an attempt to harm the morale of groups or people, affective polarization can occur, making the debate between different perspectives very difficult. And finally, the democratic role responsible for promoting inclusion and equal opportunities for participation in the decision-making process is in check when it is discredited by disinformation campaigns. False information spread through fakes accounts, bots, and/or trolls, generated a mistrust on the part of the citizens with the true information and its origin. Thus, in addition to the false information that circulates on account of the false accounts, the “perception of inauthenticity” circulates. Thus, disinformation campaigns are launched in addition to changing the electoral result, aim to undermine institutions and social conditions for democracies to function.⁶²

4. RISKS TO DEMOCRATIC VOTING PROCESSES OFFERED BY SOCIAL MEDIA

The role of digital media practices in the reformulation of political parties and electoral campaigns is driven by a tension between control and interactivity, but the transformations related to this for the party organization are uncertain. It would be an exaggeration, however, to point to the extinction of the parties — which, perhaps, are due to a long adaptation to the post-material political culture. This process, as pointed out by Chadwick and Stromer-Galley,⁶³ is shaped by interactions between

⁶¹ ANDERSON, Janna; RAINIE, Lee. **Many experts say digital disruption will hurt democracy**. Pew Research Center, 2020. Available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/21/many-tech-experts-say-digital-disruption-will-hurt-democracy/>. Access in April 6th, 2020.

⁶² MCKAY, Spencer; TENOVE, Chris. Disinformation as a Threat to Deliberative Democracy. **Political Research Quarterly**, Salt Lake City, vol. 74, n. 3, pp. 703-717, jul. 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920938143>.

⁶³ CHADWICK, Andrew; STROMER-GALLEY, Jennifer. Digital Media, Power, and Democracy in Parties and Election Campaigns: Party Decline or Party Renewal? **The International Journal of Press/Politics**, [s.l.], vol. 21, n.

organizations, norms and rules of electoral policy; by post-material attitudes related to political engagement; and by the possibilities and uses of digital media — which promotes experimental organizational cultures and party mentalities as a movement that would allow the rejection of the usual party discipline, hierarchy and loyalty. It is clear that this context can include populist and extreme speeches and attitudes, both to the left and to the right of the political spectrum. Thus, the authors are led to assume the occurrence of a party renewal caused from outside, as the digitally trained citizens renew an old form, redoing it, in certain ways, to their own participatory image. And this can turn out to be positive for democratic involvement and the decentralization of political power — at least in cases farther to the left of the spectrum.

Digital media is often accused of accelerating the decline of political parties as channels for citizen participation. But Vaccari and Valeriani⁶⁴ demonstrated that political engagement on social media can revitalize party activities, since these means allow party members and citizens to discuss politics and get involved with the parties. Through online surveys conducted in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, the authors found that party members engage in more types of party activities than the average individual, but the same can be said of non-participating members who discuss politics on social media informally. In addition, the strength of the relationship between party members and engagement decreases as the intensity of political discussion on social media increases. This suggests that political discussions on social media can reduce the division in party-related engagement between members and non-members and, to some extent, mitigate existing political hierarchies.

In this sense, digital media should be seen as part of the solution, not the problem, of the party crisis. Party activists are more likely to be involved with parties' social media presence — and also to use these platforms to distribute party messages in addition to supporters (among other things). Social media can help parties to mobilize support and obtain feedback from their main membership base and a broader set of engaged citizens who are not committed to the parties, but who have an affinity for online political discussion. Thus, social media contributes to hybridizing repertoires of party activism and party activists, bringing together older and younger types of participants who may have different views of party involvement and different reasons for participating in it.⁶⁵

3, pp. 283-293, jul. 2016.

⁶⁴ VACCARI, Cristian; VALERIANI, Augusto. Party Campaigners or Citizen Campaigners? How Social Media Deepen and Broaden Party-Related Engagement. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, [s.l.], vol. 21, n. 3, pp. 294-312, apr. 2016.

⁶⁵ VACCARI, Cristian; VALERIANI, Augusto. Party Campaigners or Citizen Campaigners? How Social Media Deepen and Broaden Party-Related Engagement. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, [s.l.], vol. 21, n. 3, pp. 294-312, apr. 2016. p. 305.

In this wake, transformed by social media and other digital technologies, the so-called digital parties emerge promising a true revolution in liberal democracy, in addition to the mere current dissatisfaction with the democratic regime.⁶⁶ This change is expressed in ideas closely related to the participatory discourse (openness, disintermediation, frankness, transparency, responsiveness, choice, change, connection, community, etc.) — and formations such as the Five Star Movement, Podemos and the Pirate Parties propose a solution to the failures and imbalances of a society affected by the crisis of representation and legitimacy in politics. They respond to those whose interests are not served by traditional mass parties, unions or party organizations centered on the media. To this end, they design a new model of political organization and new democratic mechanisms in their participatory platforms, which are presented as facilitators of more authentic political participation. Seeking to give voice to “connected outsiders” — people who, despite of their education and Internet access, face serious economic obstacles, precarious working conditions, periods of unemployment, low wages, and a general feeling of social and political alienation — such parties have an organizational logic similar to the platform of digital oligopolies (Facebook, Amazon, Google, etc.), being guided by data, free association and limited central team (as well as Silicon Valley companies), which obliges them to rely on the free work provided by their members/users to communicate with the electorate.

The platform-type organizational environment supposedly allows the expression of the authentic will of the people, but the platforms are not neutral, as they imply new hierarchies and power relationships: they often appear as a deception used by party leaders to give the impression of a nonexistent or weak leadership. and purely facilitative leaderships.⁶⁷ They propagate a participatory ideology, a disorderly emphasis placed on the participation process, which evolves from the mere contribution to a collective task, and becomes the main attribute of the morally just policy that these parties intend to follow. This ideology is accompanied by the movement’s imaginary and the objective of creating “open spaces” for civic activation. Furthermore, the populist rhetoric of the “people versus the elite” implies the intervention of all and the fluid direction of the movement, which is seen as a performative product of the people’s will at any time, without any other unshakable ideology or political orientation that restrict the field of possibilities.

The digital party is marked by the organizational polarization that strengthens the center and the periphery of the party at the expense of the intermediate

⁶⁶ GERBAUDO, Paolo. **The digital party**: political organisation and digital democracy. London: Pluto Press, 2019. p. 177-178.

⁶⁷ GERBAUDO, Paolo. **The digital party**: political organisation and digital democracy. London: Pluto Press, 2019. p. 179.

bureaucratic element.⁶⁸ Thus, a charismatic hyperleader allies with a digitally activated, but mainly reactive, superbase, leads to a situation where centralized and personalized leadership at the top exists in a state of tension with mass participation at the bottom. Figures like Falkvinge (Pirates Party), Cricket and Di Maio (Five Star Movement) and Iglesias (Podemos) are not just spokespersons, facilitators or guarantors of popular democracy: they are charismatic leaders, the source of collective identity and the pivot of the campaign, in parallel. They act as anchor points, maintaining a dispersed network together, and their presence compensates for the instability and the nebulous character of the identity and political objectives of these movements.

Although Gerbaudo provides an interesting observation about this new emerging model of digital party, it is important to analyze how generalized this model can be in practice. In contrast to the study analyzed above, Raniolo and Tarditi⁶⁹ look at the Spanish case, comparing the uses of ICTs carried out by four prominent parties: the old traditional parties — Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) and Partido Popular (PP) — and the new challenging parties — Podemos e Ciudadanos.

It was observed that the new parties use new ICTs more intensely and radically in all three internal dimensions: participation, organizational structure and decision making. For Podemos, the web is a constitutive resource that characterized its original model and was essential to aggregate and coordinate supporters of its political message; for Ciudadanos, on the other hand, the web is a tool that extends the party's organizational presence over regional borders, allowing it to penetrate throughout the country. Otherwise, traditional parties were forced to gradually adapt their organizations to the new digital and communications environment, while the new ones used new ICTs to create their organizations and solve the coordination problem. Thus, new forms of power relation and electoral influence emerge under the guise of digital domination and forms of persuasion that were once popular, such as leafleting, electoral propaganda on television and telephone surveys of public opinion, are replaced by online demonstrations, surveys carried out by artificial intelligence, behavioral analysis and identification of undecided voters based on algorithmic analysis.⁷⁰

Furthermore, while the parties to the left of the political spectrum (Podemos and PSOE) make greater use of ICTs to promote greater internal democracy and open up the party to supporters when compared to the center-right parties (Ciudadanos and PP). Podemos' members are regularly and systematically involved in "choosing things" and "choosing people" through digital channels. The members of Ciudadanos, on the

⁶⁸ GERBAUDO, Paolo. **The digital party**: political organisation and digital democracy. London: Pluto Press, 2019. p. 181.

⁶⁹ RANIOLO, Francesco; TARDITI, Valeria. Digital revolution and party innovations: An analysis of the Spanish case. **Italian Political Science Review**, [s.l.], vol. 50, n. 2, p. 1-19, 2019.

⁷⁰ BORN, Rogério Carlos. A dominação política digital. **Revista Jurídica Luso-Brasileira**, Lisboa, ano 7, n. 1, p. 1197-1231, 2021. p. 1200.

other hand, are involved more sporadically, in processes open only to party militants and limited to the choice of people to perform their duties.

With regard to the more traditional parties, only PSOE seems to tend to the introduction of digital tools that facilitate lighter forms of membership and participation. The need to seize the opportunities of the digital revolution, attract younger members and experience new possibilities for participation has been a recurring theme for PSOE since before the emergence of new challenging parties. On the other hand, PP is the least innovative party in terms of digitalizing its organization and its ability to involve its members in the regular party experience. Here, the use of ICTs is limited to communicative functions. This partly reflects the party's centralist and descendant conception.

However, with regard to the dimension of the organizational configuration, none of the four Spanish parties in question can be considered an adequate digital party, since none of them has completely exchanged physical structures for virtual network.

As for election campaign practices in times of the Internet, it is interesting to analyze the vast study carried out by Stromer-Galley⁷¹ around the American elections. In this line, the author presents that the practices of electoral campaign have changed to reflect the context of communication in which the world society currently finds itself. Thus, digital communication technologies have been designed to be ontologically non-hierarchical and for interconnections in the foreground both between people and between groups and, as campaigns use them, they are affected by their use to change their practices. Like the Internet itself, the campaigns adopted elements of the philosophy of Web 2.0 in their daily practices — of which we can highlight the non-hierarchical and user-centered approach that can, over time, allow connections between groups, moderating the individual propensity selectively expose oneself to people and issues that correspond to personal preferences.

But in addition to this positive side, which has the potential to mitigate polarization and fragmentation, it is observed that, as they adapt to technology, political campaigns still reflect the following: political elites continue to be suspicious of undisciplined, weird, and often unbalanced people that make up the American electorate. The campaigns mobilize the public at their service, but being very close to them, really listening to and empowering them, is disadvantageous. While it is indisputable that the public can be overly intense and/or irrational, a healthy democracy allows for full participation, which means that political elites contemplate these perspectives and make changes because of them.

The creation of images and messages have become more complex in the web 2.0 network environment, where messages can be amplified with the combined power

⁷¹ STROMER-GALLEY Jennifer. **Presidential Campaigning in the Internet Age**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. p. 171-177.

of the most popular platforms (YouTube, Facebook and Twitter). Challenging or insurgent candidates are more likely to get support from networks that can help create, but do not always guarantee, a strong digital campaign. But digital practices still represent only part of the overall work, and even with the best digital media campaigns, failures occur for other reasons. Thus, other factors that contribute to success in campaigns should be studied in order to better contextualize the use of digital technologies in such a context.

Regarding the symbolism of campaigns in times of the Internet, although the technological availability allows greater visibility and involvement of citizens in political campaigns, even with the transition from the era of mass media to that of the network, there is an impulse in campaigns, in controlling and seizing citizens as a means to an end. New technologies allow greater interaction between campaigns and citizens, or between citizens, but campaigns usually limit these interactions and, in general, direct them towards public relations work.

Factors that help to create a winning bid in the internet age should consider very emphatically the organization, the fundraising, the role of the mass media and public opinion polls, the candidates and the image they build, and politics inserted in the social context. The role of citizens in campaigns is increasingly important, with a notable change in recent times by campaigns that involve supporters more actively. In each electoral cycle, campaigns strive to harness the power of the two-step flow, making voters not pass passive political announcements, but rather disseminating and actively talking to voters, seeking to engage the undecided, or to share on one platform the enthusiasm for the success of posts on others.

In terms of total or genuine interactivity — with response and promotion of the candidates' supporters' messages by the campaigns — efforts made throughout the campaigns aim to build transactional relationships with the supporters, in which support is a currency whose amount the campaigns intend to increase, and not a partnership with citizens using digital communication technologies. They use supporters as objects that they must manage through controlled interactivity in order to achieve their goal of winning the election. Political elites see the Internet, therefore, as little more than a large electronic auditorium, where the masses gather to speak, but which have little impact on the policymaking that governs them.

Still in the context of electoral campaigns in the USA it is interesting, to analyze the results obtained in an extensive survey conducted by Grosheck and Koc-Michalska⁷² about the 2016 elections in that country and the relationship between the use of social media and the support of voters to populist candidates (both Democrats and

⁷² GROSHECK, Jacob; KOC-MICHALSKA, Karolina Koc-Michalska: Helping populism win? Social media use, filter bubbles, and support for populist presidential candidates in the 2016 US election campaign. **Information, Communication & Society**, London, vol. 20, n. 9, jun. 2017.

Republicans). We add to the discussion here a possible relationship that social media behavior may have in expressing support for populist political candidates. Voters who actively participate in the social media environment (reading, creating and sharing content) have different standards of support for populist candidates when compared to those who are the most passive recipients of online political content: i) those who are active on social media have more likely to support Democratic populists than Republicans; consequently, those who were more active users of social media were also less likely to support Trump as a candidate; ii) the most passive users of social media were more likely to support Republican populism in general; iii) those who reported not having access to the Internet were more likely to support populist Republicans in general.

Solutions for controlling the digital environment involve the role of the government, or of the platforms themselves as censors of content. However, Kornbluh et al.⁷³ outline recommendations to protect the information ecosystem, without restricting freedom of expression, or innovation. They aim to focus on updated offline protections at the heart of the user's choice, undermining the responsibility of governments to define appropriate content. It proposes the adoption of a more transparent design by social media platforms, in which users have the possibility to customize algorithmic recommendations, and to track content complaints. They propose the restoration of the Honest Ads Act to regulate online campaign ads by media platforms, in which they must verify who is actually funding ads, and what facts are presented, limiting the targeting of these ads. In addition to these, they advocate the need to update civil rights/human rights protections laws, as well as accommodation laws for the digital age, to thwart discrimination/harassment. Concomitantly, platforms should create and apply rules for content removal and algorithmic prioritization that are consistent, transparent, and appealing. Finally, platform transparency would be necessary to share information about violent extremism or foreign electoral interference between the platforms themselves, the government and users. The creation of an independent non-commercial support for journalism of public interest, with the verification of facts, electoral information and media education. Finally, the promotion of knowledge to users of how content is cured by algorithms and which targeting policies are used. Also like the support of civil society as researchers and the government to evaluate information flows.

5. CONCLUSION

It is currently possible, after all the arguments above, to present some important conclusions about the relationship between internet, social media and democracy.

⁷³ KORNBLUH, Karen; GOODMAN, Ellen; WEINER, Eli. **Safeguarding Democracy against Disinformation**. Washington, D.C.: The German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2020. Available at: <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/safeguardingdemocracy-against-disinformation>. Access in April 6th, 2021. p. 5-6.

Initially, it may be concluded that the internet is essentially technical, but its use can even be political. What will define whether it is still possible some degree of democracy in its use is precisely the predominance of the forces that build it: if it becomes the technical predominance of those that act solely for marketing purposes, it will become closed; but if other voices are raised, in order to continue to act in favor of their opening — even if living with the market and commercial layer — there will be the possibility of continuing to be a space for debate.

Many factors contribute to the degradation of the more or less democratic character of the use of the internet, however. The increasingly intense and decisive use of algorithms distances political communication from the public's language, the state of the organization through institutions, and exposes the possibility of maintaining democratic spaces on the internet to the interests of those who have technical and economic capacity to decide their technological future. In addition, communications established on the internet about political issues suffer from immediacy, lack of moderation, lack of search for conformity and lack of balance. And voluntary surveillance by users, who are commercially and politically exploited, is very compatible with anti-democratic strategies — such as opinion bubbles, social bots, fake news and trolls. This degrades democracy on social media even more. This is terrible from the point of view of the democratization of society, because the main pillars of democracy, in terms of discourse — exposure to different opinions, formation of a shared experience with people from other groups and the ability to distinguish between true and false arguments — are totally undermined by such technological strategies. And technological colonialism can also be an important factor in the degradation of democracy in less developed countries, which can be added to the possibility of interference by (external and internal) undemocratic forces within countries that still have strong democracies.

Social media can transform political parties into horizontal and plural organizations, driving party renewal, in the sense of greater possibilities for communication, debate and participation by citizens and their most engaged members. However, in practice, the spread of a participatory and disintermediatory ideology has been observed, since these new parties, by giving the impression of a reduction in the bureaucracy of traditional parties, only hide a new conformation of power, in which charismatic leaders without a proper political program proliferate. Ideas according to momentary circumstances.

However, although the model of the digital party, of organization in a virtual “software pattern” and with a participatory ideology can be seen as a pattern of analysis in empirical social research, it cannot be generalized in all its features, and the Spanish example illustrates very well how its elevation to the maximum power in the structural-organizational analysis of both new and traditional parties that seek to adapt to the new digital environment may prove to be mistaken and exaggerated. Finally, electoral

campaigns on social media drove success of populist candidates (both on the left and on the right) lately, but it is interesting to say that this happened in conjunction with other more traditional forms of media — such as television, for example).

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