

Democratic Culture and the Automation of Information: What is really at stake?

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Extended Abstract

The purported democratic threat of various automated means for creating, ordering, and manipulating information in the digital sphere has received considerable academic attention [1-3]. Here, we endorse, and seek to build on, two recent directions in this debate. First, we deepen recent attempts by democracy theorists to move beyond the focus on political democracy (or democratic government) by, for example, focusing on Habermas' "informal track" of democratic decision-making [4]. In particular, by adopting the vantage of "democratic culture" [5-7], understood here—following Dewey—as an overarching phenomenon concerning the character of interpersonal and social interactions appropriate for realizing normative ends in pluralistic settings. In short, the notion posits what people require for making informed collective decisions and how they are to engage one another to reach and enact them.

This shift allows one to move beyond the narrow worry over voter manipulation and disinformation tactics and consider the constitutive elements for collectively advancing individual well-being entailed in democratic culture and whether the automation of information poses a genuine threat to these. Specifically, we explore how three broad ways in which information is automated—generation, filtration, and alteration—may interfere with the ability of individuals to meaningfully engage others and together make 'intelligent' choices that ultimately advance the public good.

However, the second proposed shift suggests that any determination here may require a caveat. In particular, we advocate the need to bridge the gap between armchair theorizing and the expanding empirical cognitive research exploring human decision-making and information processing [8-12] in order to advance a more grounded perspective of what such technologies might be doing in the context of democratic discourse. Accordingly, we critically evaluate whether such technologies are merely bringing to light the many ways in which humans—either individually or socially—are already poorly equipped for realizing the demands of democratic culture, and to ascertain whether the values democratic culture ultimately seek to realize are, as a result, out of reach (with or without help from such algorithmic interventions into information dispersion).

Ultimately, in light of these two shifts in focus, we argue that the worry over democracy tracks far deeper than the literature has thus far acknowledged and necessitates a renewed and proactive inquiry into the social conditions that have landed us here. The task ahead is to identify concrete aspects of social life that might be targeted to secure the collective pursuit of normative goals despite our cognitive limitations, biases, and tribalistic

tendencies (and the technologies that exploit or support them). Specifically, we suggest that the shared value in the functioning of democratic culture be reinvigorated by constructing secure spaces to practice it. These would seek to create common ground around that same democratic pursuit so as to side-step the radical antagonism of social polarization from whose vantage any necessary openness to the “changing of minds” or even to health is incredibly unlikely to subsist [8].

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