Chapter 9

Digital Democracy: The Winners and Losers

> Free and fair elections are the heart of every democracy. During the 2016 election, we were actively looking for traditional cyberattacks, and we found them. What we didn't find until later were foreign actors running coordinated campaigns to interfere with America's democratic process.
>
> Mark Zuckerberg

> There is no reason to believe that the foundation for liberty in cyberspace will simply emerge. Indeed, the passion for that anarchy – as in America by the late 1890s, and as in the former Eastern bloc by the late 1990s – has faded. Thus as, our framers learned, and as the Russians saw, we have every reason to believe that cyberspace, left to itself, will not fulfill the promise of freedom. Left to itself, cyberspace will become a perfect tool of control.
>
> Lawrence Lessig

The Digital Promise of Democracy

From the early days of the internet, the influence, power and reach of such hyper-connectivity was acclaimed as a potential vital instrument in democratising the world. There was a somewhat naïve assumption that once people were exposed to the virtues of democracy through the medium of the information super-highway, there would be inevitable civic transformation and popular uprisings towards such a political system driven by masses of well-informed citizens of former authoritarian and communist regimes. Many of these states and regions simply needed to know about the merits of democracy to completely and unequivocally embrace this political system, and they would get this understanding

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directly from the internet. And the basis of such optimism was promising. The outwardly unstoppable march of freedom that began in the 1980s and culminated, by the end of that decade, in the fall of communism in the Soviet Union brought with it a sense of victory: a sense of good winning over evil, of a world of common-sense politics prevailing over the perverse and malevolence. The triumph of the West, of the Western civilisation ideals, was evidence, it was claimed, of the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism leading to what Francis Fukuyama termed 'The End of History'.[1] In other states like China that called themselves communist, political and economic reforms were also heading in the direction of a liberal order, he claimed. But lethargy set in over the following decades with regard to approaches to international democratisation that was to see the resurgence of authoritarianism and the emergence and rise of a new form of populism that has now engulfed countries right across the world: from Brazil to Hungry, to Turkey, Egypt and the United States. All the while digital information and communication technology (ICT) was held out as a sabre of freedom that merely needed a deeper appreciation and activation and a willing population to revolutionise, reform and direct towards democracy. People would march to freedom just waving their smartphones in the air. Whether it was the 2009 Iranian 'Twitter' revolution, the Arab Spring or the more recent efforts of Hong Kong residents to retain a semblance of their own autonomy, all these civic uprisings and conflicts would be powered by the freedom enabled by the internet and a host of smart devices and that would ultimately lead to good triumphing over evil.

It is a very seductive notion to think that information alone sets us free and that access to the internet with its vast stores of information will lead those oppressed by authoritarians into the light of democracy. But such technological determinist thinking ignores the underlying social and economic realities that pre-exist and that are the real grounds for civil disobediences and revolution within nations in favour of simplistic cyber-utopianisms unreal expectations as to the power of digital technology and a raft of technological quick fixes. Such high exceptions of what digital technology could achieve in democratising the world have today given way to the reality that these very same digital technologies have now been weaponised by other more sinister darker forces in the world and have ironically and skilfully been turned against the very pillars of democracy itself. While many within established Western democracies dithered and failed to truly understand and embrace the real power inherent in digital ICT, others were less hesitant and seized upon the opportunity to use the technology to undermine the institutions of democracy in some of the leading countries of the West. Western liberal democracies not only have failed to truly understand the power that has been unleashed, many of them have been complicit in allowing such a situation develop in the first instance. By failing to rein in the immense influence, power and reach of big tech authorities in the West has abducted their responsibilities to protect their democracies and, in turn, have left their citizens helplessly exposed to persistent misinformation, lies, fake news and manipulation on a vast scale. Yet

[1]Fukuyama (1989).

while countries comforted themselves with blankets of cyber-delusionism, a few lone tech writers have been sounding the alarm bells for some time now.

Watching Freedom Fail

Evgeny Morozov is a writer, researcher, and intellectual from Belarus who studies the political and social implications of digital ICT. His 2011 book, *The Net Delusion*, challenges the myth of 'internet freedom' and argues that technology has failed to democratise the world as some had previously told us would happen.[2] Behind many of the eloquent words spoken in high praise of digital ICT lies a combination of utopianism and ignorance that grossly misrepresents the internet's political role and potential. Morozov argues that the West's irresponsible promotion of technological tools as pro-democratic agents has provoked a backlash from authoritarian regimes to crack down on online activity, not just closing down or blocking websites but using online social platforms to infiltrate protest groups and track down protesters and dissenters. They are also sowing the seeds of their own agenda and propaganda online and generally out-resourcing and out-smarting their own beleaguered people and governments of the West. Two misapprehensions about digital information technology, in particular, concern Morozov: cyber-utopianism and internet-centrism. Cyber-utopianism is the belief that the culture of the internet is inherently emancipatory and the stubborn refusal to acknowledge its limitations and downsides. It stems from:

> [T]he starry-eyed digital fervor of the 1990s, when former hippies, by this time ensconced in some of the most prestigious universities in the world, went on an argumentative spree to prove that the Internet could deliver what the 1960s couldn't: boost democratic participation, trigger a renaissance of moribund communities, strengthen associational life, and serve as a bridge from bowling alone to blogging together. And if it works in Seattle, it must work in Shanghai.[3]

Internet-centrism is the conviction that every important issue and concern about modern society and politics can be framed in terms of the internet. It is not a set of beliefs rather; it is a philosophy of action that informs how decisions are made and long-term strategies are developed. Internet-centrists tend to react and response to every question about democratic change by first reframing it in terms of the internet rather than the exact context in which that change is to occur.

Morozov presents a good example of the unrealistic expectations and the broadly misrepresented impacts of digital ICT in social and civil unrest. In June 2009, mostly young Iranians took to the streets of Tehran and other cities to protest what they believed to be fraudulent and rigged elections, later to become known as 'the green revolution' or green movement. While these protests grew in number, a counter argument surfaced among many other Iranians that the

[2]Morozov (2011).
[3]Morozov (2011, p. xiii).

elections were, in fact, fair and they set out to defend the incumbent president of the day Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. As the two sides – representing modernity and conservatism – squared up to each other, the country faced its worst social and political crisis since the 1979 revolution which saw the return of the Ayatollah Khamenei. Meanwhile, in the West, a very simple and alluring narrative of what was occurring began to emerge and of how the internet was beginning to usher in the building blocks of freedom and a new dawn of democracy in Iran. In a series of blogs for The Atlantic, Andrew Sullivan proclaimed 'the revolution will be twittered' in which he claimed that the microblogging site Twitter not only managed to avoid the shutdown of communications in the country but that it was becoming a critical tool for organising the resistance in Iran.[4] He offered little evidence to back up such claims. But his claims did echo with many cyber-utopianists who had patiently waited for digital tech's big break in beginning about global democratisation, and if the evidence was not as apparent yet it was only a matter of time before it emerged. Such optimism quickly went mainstream with prominent print media organisations such as *The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, Baltimore Sun* and *Financial Times*, as well as other non-governmental organisation (NGO) and religious publications, eulogising the power of Twitter – and by default the internet – for its ability to organise and empower ordinary citizens in the face of authoritarianism and tyranny. Even when Twitter scheduled maintenance for the website, the US state department requested the company to postpone this work so that the service would not be interrupted as, they claimed, it was being used to rally people into the streets to protest against the election. Former deputy national security advisor in the George W. Bush administration, Mark Pfeifle, even launched a public campaign to nominate Twitter for the Noble Peace Prize arguing that 'without Twitter, the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy'.[5]

But this story was not to have its fairy tale ending. The green movement quickly lost much of its momentum in the months following the election, and realisation slowly began to dawn on those people so fervent in their belief that the internet was destined to be a liberating tool against the oppressors across the world. Young people, merely armed with their smartphone and a Twitter account, were not, in fact, leading the charge to freedom and the spread of democracy. So, what had gone so wrong? It was later discovered that estimates of fewer than 1,000 active Twitter users were actually living in Iran at the time of the election and not all had joined the demonstrations.[6] Many supporters of the green movement were from outside the country – the Iranian diaspora is highly active on social media – and got carried away by the enthusiasm of the protests, and numerous Twitter users across the world switched their location setting to Tehran in an attempt to confuse Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's security forces and shield individuals within the movement.

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[4]'The revolution will be twittered' for *The Daily Dish Blog*, featuring Andrew Sullivan, for *The Atlantic*, June 13 2009. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2009/06/the-revolution-will-be-twittered/200478/

[5]Morozov (2011, p. 4).

[6]In 2009, the population of Iran was estimated to be around 73 million inhabitants.

The Iranian government itself also worked to audaciously turn the technology against the protesters, and officials from within the regime started several fake opposition accounts on Twitter which began tweeting propaganda and misleading information. Iran had not undergone a Twitter revolution, and it was argued by Reese Erlich, an author and freelance journalist who had covered the election and had extensive knowledge of the circumstances of the protests, that the term simultaneously mischaracterises and trivialises the important mass movement that had developed at that time in Iran.[7] Later, similar claims were made about the influence and power of Facebook, YouTube and other social media platforms as a catalyst for change in the context of the Arab Spring, and although there's some evidence that these were used for mobilising and organising street protests and gatherings, the true vehicles for change during that period of time were the protests themselves and the underlying grievances against the ruling authorities. Digital ICT has the potential to play a significant role in unifying and rallying people around a cause, but in the face of subsequent leaderless disorganisation, what happens then? It is also earlier for authorities to combat such protest by simply spreading misinformation through the same medium used to organise in the first instance and to single out individual deemed to be arranging such protests.

Weaponising the Internet against Liberty

One of the most significant developments with regard to the organisation and ultimate collapse of the green movement and protests in Iran was the way the authorities fought back, in particular, the use of sophisticated means of disinformation by governmental officials and agencies. The regime quickly understood the real potential in the use of social media and how it can be a willing and more than capable instrument in disrupting the messages of the protest. Propaganda and government misinformation are nothing new, but social media and other forms of online broadcast media available on the internet just makes it much easier and much more effective. The real state originator of this use of online misinformation was Russia, and they have been doing this for some time now. Long before the 2016, US presidential election and the Brexit referendum, Russia, China and Iran were just some of the states who had begun to use such cyber techniques to thwart dissidents and opponents of their own regimes. As the Soviet Union began to crumble in the early 1990s, the enormous cost and elaborate planning that went into surveillance of individuals began to be questioned. Such expense and time were also no indicator of success, and the human factor could easily ruin months of diligent surveillance work.

The shift in communications into the digital realm solved this problem. Not only was the storage of enormous amounts of data now possible, mining through such data was made much simpler. Identifying keep words or phrases in communications such as 'democracy', 'freedom', 'free elections' or 'Putin must go' was achievable by a simple search for such keywords or phrases, thus exposing the individuals involved

[7]Erlich, R. (2009). It's not a Twitter revolution in Iran. *Reuters*, June 26. Retrieved from http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2009/06/26/its-not-a-twitter-revolution-in-iran/

in such communications. What's more, much of this information is given up freely and widely available online, so authorities do not even have to hack communications for some evidence. Many people elect to freely give away much of their personal data on social networking platforms and are then surprised when authorities know so much about them. Morozov recounts the story of a young activist from his native Belarus who was called into his university to talk to the KGB, which still exists and remains very active in that country.[8] The officers had detailed knowledge of Pavel Lyashkovich's travel arrangements, his involvement with anti-government organisations and his associates in the dissident community, merely from checking his online social networking activity. While it is easy to say that Lyashkovich is to blame for his own predicament, the point is social networking platforms were initially set up as the means for us to stay connected to one another, but now even our most casual conversations broadcast online can be intercepted and misrepresented by authoritarian regimes and others to build a damaging case against us.

A persistent myth with regard to the internet and authoritarian governments has been that they are weak and ineffective regimes that do not truly understand the technology nor how to use it effectively. But anti-democratic forces have become very savvy and immensely sophisticated at manipulating the Web, and one of the main reasons for this is that they have surrounded themselves with the best and brightest talent and online visionaries from their country. The Kremlin, for example, have been particularly successfully in cultivating strong connections with Russia's vibrant internet culture and have used such experience to their own ideological advantage. Morozov suggested that no one embodies this level of sophistication and linkage more than Kontntin Rykov, a key figure of the early Russian internet and now working as head of the internet department of the Russia' Channel On, and creator of a range of political websites and staunch ally of Vladimir Putin. In addition to his own personal involvement in Russian politics, Rykov has also reportedly used his internet credentials and relationship with Kremlin officials to involve himself in various political campaigns and referendums in both Russia and other countries.[9] Rykov developed tactics to help the Kremlin boost support for its image online and showed how to spread competing narratives on social media to deflect attention away from reporting that was critical of that regime's activities. These kinds of disinformation techniques and campaigns were used to great effect when the Russian Federation annexed Crimea in 2014. In 2015, Rykov built a new website using the domain Trump2016.ru, which marked the beginning of active campaigning for Donald Trump and Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections. According to the special counsel investigation's *Mueller Report*, the first indication of Russian interference was the use of the Internet Research Agency, a Kremlin-linked troll farm based in St Petersburg, to wage a social media campaign that favoured Donald Trump and

[8]Morozov (2011, p. 155).

[9]Schwartz, M. (2018). The man who taught the Kremlin how to win the internet. *The World*, May 31. Retrieved from https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-05-07/man-who-taught-kremlin-how-win-internet

disparaged Hillary Clinton in those elections.[10] These campaigns also sought to provoke and amplify political and general social discord across the United States by spreading fabricated election articles and disinformation. For such transnational meddling to truly succeed, trust in traditional media and pillar institutions of state first needed to be undermined and then their creditably destroyed.

A Free and Open Press

One of the central tenets of a democratic system is a free and open press, which is also critical to sustaining the rule of law. In the past, traditional newspapers and broadcasters created the possibility of a single debate or conversation on an issue of national importance. This helped citizens to join together, not in a like-minded set of opinions but rather a singular conversation. Newspaper and broadcast journalism were required to conform to formal and informal ethical and moral codes of practice. But the rapid and wholesale shift in advertising revenue to digital internet giants has, within just a short decade or so, severely damaged the ability of both traditional print and broadcast media to investigate, collect and report on malpractice and convey essential information. This has led some media outlets discontinuing reporting news altogether, and yet others to assume an extreme partisan position in their reporting. The arrival and proliferation of digital online media means there are no longer common debates nor common narratives. Indeed, it is argued, that people have always had different opinions, but now they are presented with different facts.[11] Anyone and everyone can now be anonymous and no one needs to take responsibility for what they report or say, or whether it is true or false. In what he termed 'the cult of the amateur', Andrew Keen argues that our most valued cultural institutions – our professional newspapers, magazines, music and movies – are being overtaken by an avalanche of amateur, user-generated free content.[12] In this present self-broadcasting culture, where amateurism is celebrated, and anyone with an opinion, however ill-informed or ridiculous, can publish a blog or post a video on a sharing platform, the distinction between accomplished and experienced experts and uninformed amateurs has become dangerously blurred. When anonymous bloggers and videographers, unconstrained by professional standards or editorial norms, can alter the public debate and manipulate public opinion, then truth becomes a commodity to be bought, sold, packaged and reinvented. The ongoing erosion of trust, whether it be in the political realm or in the media, weakens the democratic system, and the ever-changing and developing digital ICT landscape and an evolution in the way people now consume news has brought about critical challenges in how we do politics and what we want our society to look like. Among them, fabricated and misleading news stories shared on social media sites and a tendency of readers

[10]Read and search the full Mueller report. *CNN Politics*. Retrieved from https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/18/politics/full-mueller-report-pdf/index.html
[11]Applebaum (2020, p. 113).
[12]Keen (2007).

to only consider news stories that adhere to their own political ideology are undermining press freedoms and leading to levels of mistrust that are severally damaging for a free, open and democratic society.

Lawrence Lessig suggests that unless we find a reason for democracy, there is no fight for democracy to be had.[13] As a former self-confessed apologist for the internet, he is now a critic of how digital-enabled news has become fragmented and polarising and is damaging to the ideals and notion of democracy. In his analysis of the twentieth century and the development of the television, he notes that in 1977 almost 90% of people in the United States got their news from just three networks, and these were the sole sources of national and international news. Having this concentration of news through channels that was inherently understandable to everybody – the ordinary citizen as well as the elites alike – gave everyone an egalitarian exposure to politics because they were exposed to trusted sources that created a common understanding and common set of facts. Instead of just polarised extremes voting in elections, ordinary people were much more engaged and turned out to vote based on knowledge and understanding, and this shifted the political landscape of the country in true expressions of democracy. While he does not set out to eulogise this era and does point to issues of bias within this system at that time, he argues that the underlying architecture made it possible for a public to understand a common set of questions and issues. However, in the twenty-first century, there are no longer concentrated, universally trusted sources of news information, and many people now consume news through social media platforms, which are unrestrained by any form of editorship or formal and informal codes of conduct. Such fragmentation of news information means there are no longer any common stories, common facts, and the resulting radical polarisation is damaging for democracy. More worrying, he suggests that the business model now employed by many of these new digital media outlets is to increase this polarisation, thus increasing media brand loyalty.

But traditional media organisations themselves must foot some of the blame. The 24-hour news cycle, made possible by advancements in digital technologies over the recent past, can be distracting for many individuals and, it is suggested, is trivialising much of what we now understand as news.[14] The *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* provides crucial new insights into key issues including people's willingness to pay for news, the move to private messaging applications and groups and how people see news media from around the world performing their civic and public roles and responsibilities.[15] The report is based on a survey of more than 75,000 people in 38 markets, along with additional qualitative research, which together make it the most comprehensive comparative study of news consumption in the world. The report pointed to a complex set of enduring challenges for the news industry specifically and for the media environment more broadly. This included the ongoing disruption of the inherited business model for news,

[13]Lessig, L. (2017). How the net destroyed democracy. *TEDxBerlinSalon*, August 10. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHTBQCpNm5o

[14]Dobelli (2020).

[15]Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, and Nielsen (2019).

persistent evolution in how individuals use digital media and the ways in which we are constantly reminded of how some of the information we come across is untrustworthy and sometimes spread with malicious intent and social upheaval associated with the rise of populism and general low trust in many state institutions. While the arrival of democracy usually results in enhanced levels of social trust, especially trust in government, this trend commonly reverses after several years or decades of citizens' unmet expectations. It is argued that government is often the least trusted social actor, ranking below governing bodies, security institutions and the media.[16] This finding is somewhat inconsistent across societies however. In some of the most populated countries, such as the United States, Russia and China, people have more trust in the government than the media, which is now the least trusted institution in both the United States and Russia:

> From a normative perspective, these results should be viewed with some concern. In democratic societies, the media are entrusted with the responsibility of serving as a watchdog for the public interest and to scrutinize the movements of all three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicative). A media system in which citizens do not place their trust in will be hardly able to watch over any authority or institution.[17]

Distrust, Disinformation and Discontent

Returning to the issue of interference in the 2016 US presidential elections, Russian's use of social media platforms to spread propaganda and disinformation was expansive with the use of Facebook, Twitter and a host of other publicly accessible online outlets coming under the spotlight. Advertisements bought by Russian operatives for circulation on the Facebook social media website were estimated to have reached 10 million users, while many more users were also contacted by accounts created by Russian actors. In total, 470 Facebook accounts are known to have been created by Russians, of those accounts six generated content that was shared at least 340 million times according to research done by Columbia University's Tow Center for Digital Journalism and New Knowledge, Canfield Research.[18] The Mueller Report also found the Russian-financed Internet Research Agency spent some $100,000 for more than 3,500 Facebook advertisements from June 2015 to May 2017, mostly anti-Clinton and pro-Trump proclamations. Facebook initially denied that fake news on its platform had influenced the election and insisted it had been unaware of any Russian-financed advertisements. They later admitted that Russia-based operatives had, indeed, published about 80,000 posts on the social network platform over a two-year period in an effort to sway US political opinion, and that about 126 million Americans

[16]de Zúñiga et al. (2019).
[17]de Zúñiga et al. (2019, p. 245).
[18]DiResta et al. (2019).

may have seen the posts during that time.[19] While Facebook claim to have made significant changes to reduce the spread of misinformation and provide more transparency and control around political advertisements, in August 2019, a group of philanthropies working with the company to study the social network's impact on democracy threatened to quit saying the company had failed to make data available to researchers as pledged.[20]

Further insight into the growing sophistication of user manipulation for unfettered purposes was made public during the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Cambridge Analytica, also discussed in an earlier chapter, was formed around 2013 initially with a focus on the US elections, with $15 million in backing from billionaire Republican donor Robert Mercer and the backing of former Trump White House adviser Steve Bannon and funding from several UK Conservative Party's biggest donors. It was an offshoot of the wider SCL Group, which had worked on psychological targeting methods across the world. Having trialled their methodology in poorly developed countries with weak data protection laws, often on behalf of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military objectives, they went on to commercialise their product for use in targeting voters during elections and referendum campaigns in some democratic states. Cambridge Analytica markets itself as providing consumer research, targeted advertising and other data-related services to both political and corporate clients and was staffed by mostly British workers. In an undercover investigation by Britain's Channel 4 News, the company boasted it had developed psychological profiles of voters, which was the 'secret sauce' it used to sway such voters more effectively than traditional advertising ever could. They had been able to achieve this by harvesting the data of some 50–87 million Facebook users by a means that deceived both the users and Facebook itself. They were then able to specifically micro-target political advertising back at these Facebook users that would psychologically appeal to some of their base instincts as voters. In identifying people most susceptible to persuasion, they were able to induce them to vote in a particular way: to get voters to see the world as you wanted them to see it. They called this group of susceptible individuals 'the persuaders'. The company also stands accused of voter suppression, particular in the context of 2010 'Do So' campaign and election in Trinidad and Tobago.[21] Ted Cruz had initially hired Cambridge Analytica to help with his

[19]Ingram, D. (2017). Facebook says 126 million Americans may have seen Russia-linked political posts. *Reuters*, October 30. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-russia-socialmedia/facebook-says-126-million-americans-may-have-seen-russia-linked-political-posts-idUSKBN1CZ2OI

[20]Paul, K. (2019). Funders threaten to quit Facebook project studying impact on democracy. *Reuters*, August 28. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-election-research/researchers-studying-facebooks-impact-on-democracy-threaten-to-quit-idUKKCN1VI04F?edition-redirect=uk

[21]This 2019 documentary *The Great Hack* lays bare the circumstances surrounding Cambridge Analytica's harvesting of personal information from millions of Facebook users, and how these data were used in a number of different ways of voter suppression and manipulation: see https://www.thegreathack.com/.

presidential campaign, and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign further utilised the harvested data to customise messages and target specific voters in key swing states. Cambridge Analytica was also hired to assist Leave.eu and the UK Independence Party throughout 2016 and assist with efforts to convince voters in that country to support leaving the European Union in the Brexit referendum.[22] In her testimony before a committee of UK parliamentarians, former Cambridge Analytica employee Brittany Kaiser, who has a deep understanding of the operations and techniques used by the firm, suggested that the psychographic micro-targeting used by the company should be classified as 'weapons grade' techniques and only used is conflict situations.[23]

The Retreat from Reality

In the 2016 BBC documentary *HyperNormalisation*, Adam Curtis maintained that over the past 40 years, politicians, financiers and technological utopians, rather than face up to the real complexities of the contemporary world, had retreated into a simpler version of the world in order to hang onto what they believed to be power.[24] And as this unpretentious world grew more and more, people went along with it because the simplicity was reassuring to all. These were mostly the 'starry-eyed' former hippies who were hopeful that the digital age would deliver on the expectations and dreams of the 1960s that Morozov had referred to.[25] But in this retreat from the reality, an entire generation was beginning to lose touch with politics and the realities of power and governance. Reflecting on the works of William Gibson, who coined the phrase 'cyberspace',[26] Curtis suggested that by the middle of the 1980s, the banks and new corporations were beginning to link themselves together through computer systems creating a series of major networks of information that were invisible to ordinary citizens and politicians. Such networks gave these corporations and financiers remarkable new powers of control in a cyberspace where there were no laws or, indeed, politicians or governments to protect ordinary citizens. This was a vision of a future of raw brutal corporate power at work. Meanwhile, a group of technological utopian visionaries were emerging on the west coast of America, based around Silicon Valley, who began exploiting Gibson's ideas of cyberspace and replacing this former frightening dark vision of a world oppressed and dominated by large and powerful corporations with a much safer cyberspace and world where radical dreams could come through. This, Curtis argued, was an ideal place for

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[22]MacAskill, A. (2018). What are the links between Cambridge Analytica and a Brexit campaign group? *Reuters*, March 21. Retrieved from https://www.reuters.com/article/us-facebook-cambridge-analytica-leave-eu-idUSKBN1GX2IO

[23]Brittany Kaiser testifies before MPs. *YouTube*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xZAvQzRhJ0I

[24]Curtis (2016).

[25]Morozov (2011, p. xiii).

[26]Gibson (1982).

progressives and radicals to retreat to leaving behind the very harsh real world of Regan's 1980s America and Thatcher's Britain. What made this retreat from reality easier for these radicals were their roots in the counterculture of the 1960s and in particular the use of LSD.[27]

The activists of the 1960s counterculture believed that taking LSD offered much more than just a short escape from their ordinary lives, it opened people's perception and the mind to an entirely new possible certainty normally hidden from them. It freed them from the normal day-to-day constraints of life, such things as basic political decision-making and the workings of mundane governmental power. The early period of the 1980s saw computer networks appear and offer a new alternative reality, a space to again retreat from the real world, only this time one that was not chemically induced. In this new cyberspace, corporeality people were freed from the realities of normal politics, decision-making and power, and individuals could begin to explore new ways of being and living. Indeed, one of the leading advocates of this new reality, John Perry Barlow, wrote *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*[28] in response to the passing of the US Telecommunications Act of 1996 in which he sets out a rebuttal to government and against interference with the internet by any outside forces. It declared that the states and politicians did not have the consent of the governed to apply laws to the internet as it was outside any country's borders. Instead, the internet was developing its own social contract to determine how to handle its own problems, based on language evocative of the US Declaration of Independence:

> We must declare our virtual selves immune to your sovereignty, even as we continue to consent to your rule over our bodies. We will spread ourselves across the Planet so that no one can arrest our thoughts. We will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace. May it be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before.[29]

Barlow had laid out an alternative existence to the harsh existing world in which people could be freer without the unnecessary oversight of interfering politicians and governments and the old systems of power. This vision has come to dominate the internet as we know it today. Meanwhile, moves towards Perception Management in the United States and Britain were beginning to blur the

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[27]Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) is an extremely potent hallucinogen and long-lasting psychoactive drug that distorts and alters perceptions and sensations. The use of LSD reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s when it was said by some to be the key to unlocking the inner mind, although this is heavily disputed by many in the scientific community.

[28]Barlow, J. P. (1996). A declaration of the independence of cyberspace. *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, February 8. Retrieved from https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence

[29]Barlow, J. P. (1996). A declaration of the independence of cyberspace. *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, February 8. Retrieved from https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence.

lines between fact and fiction by telling dramatic stories that would capture the public's imagination, and it did not matter if the stories were true or false.[30] Many of these stories, Curtis claimed, were simply devised to distract people and other politicians from the realities of what was happening around them and the real complexities and challenges of the modern world. Then, with the collapse with the Soviet Union and the crumbling of the iron curtain, a new type of politics began to emerge in the West; one that was no longer focussed on trying to change things but simply managing things, trying to predict risk into the further and seek out ways of avoiding such risks.

The computer age affords us the ability to collect and analyse vast quantities of data rapidly. Computers were also beginning to hold a mirror to individuals, and they liked how that made them feel. They began to not only predict societal risk but also, at the micro level, what people liked and wanted based on their interactions with digital computing. Politics now became just part of the wider goal of managing the world in very simplistic ways. This was best epitomised by the approach adopted by George W. Bush and Tony Blair who viewed the removal of Saddam Hussein in Iraq as a simple fight between good and evil. Politics, democracy and movements for change began to become irrelevant in this new managed world, and a resentment to this began to grow and fester. Even when millions worldwide marched against the impending war in Iraq[31] both Bush and Blair ignored this considerable public opinion in favour of their simple narrative and went to war in 2003 in the face of these protests. The effects of this are now widely felt. Not only did millions feel they were lied to when the true extent of the threat from the Saddam Hussein regime become known, but more importantly, they felt helpless in the world and believed that no matter what they did, it had no real positive effect on any eventual outcome. Protesting the war has been a waste of time, and they were demoralised and powerless about the world as it was around them.

Curtis went further to suggest that liberals, radicals and a whole generation had by now retreated into another world that was free of such hypocrisy and what they saw as the corruption of power and politics. They withdrew into cyberspace and here they found comfort in the company of like-minded individuals brought together by filter bubbles and algorithms which sought out and grouped people by means of their own personal data and preferences freely given to mega online corporations and platforms. Such online companionship created echo chambers

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[30]Siegel (2005) defines perception management as the ability to shape worldwide perceptions in one's favour to foster compliance and facilitate mission accomplishment. A critical part of perception management is efforts to understand others' perceptions and basis for those perceptions as a path towards understanding how one might then influence them. The 'basis' for perceptions includes many issues that are not just outside Department of Defence's but US government control - such as television and cable sitcom or even the millions of personal home pages of American teenagers that are accessible to anyone with internet access.

[31]According to French academic Dominique Reynié, between 3 January and 12 April 2003, 36 million people across the globe took part in almost 3,000 protests against the war in Iraq.

which worked simply to reinforce beliefs and opinions rather than challenge them. But while such beliefs were being buttressed by compatible thought and opinion, such online environments did not allow for such beliefs to be challenged or developed by opposing viewpoints, a natural and healthy way for individuals to develop their own capacity for critical thinking. Moreover, it did not allow these radical or progressive thinkers to challenge opposing viewpoints from other individuals simply because the online platforms were keeping divergent groups apart. Through the worst of the financial crisis, which began in 2008 and lasted for several years, people retreated deeper and deeper into these online like-minded groups, shouting at the world but failing to understand or lay a transformative glove on power. There is an illusion of control and power online, but it was something completely different altogether; it is delusion.

Back to Reality: Enter the Showman

Then, in 2016, with the election of Donald Trump, the real fallacy of the power of cyberspace and the retreat from the real world became apparent. Here was a president who could regularly and pathologically lie to the camera and mismanage a pandemic in one of the most powerful nations in the world and yet remained unwavering in his views and unchallenged in his actions to any great extent. He is an extremely savvy media operator who can 'suck the oxygen out of the room'[32] and whose own online rhetoric is designed to make those tied to the ideals of liberal democracy shocked, insulted, angry and offended at every opportunity. Cyberspace is the preferred forum for many progressives and liberals to vent this anger, but this did not in any way affect nor change the Trump administration's policy positions. Meanwhile, Facebook, Twitter and other such social media platforms were teeming with comments and suggestions from individuals and groups feeling insulted, mistreated and angry and suggesting all manner of ways of removing Trump from office. Ironically, these people themselves are more removed from power that ever before in the democracy age. Trump supporters and those on the right of politics have also mobilised on social media platforms, albeit in separate filter bubbles and echo chambers. And as his presidency comes to an ignominious end in 2021, it is now the turn of these individuals to feel cheated, marginalised, angry and resentful, notwithstanding this is based on the lie of a stolen election. People have become more and more dissatisfied and demoralised as time goes by and blame their unhappiness on everyone and everything but themselves. Few point the finger at digital media, which in some cases is having a directly negative impact on our collective well-being.[33] Instead, retreating into cyberspace filled with echoes chambers and filter bubbles comforts individuals but also acts to widen the political divide between large sections of society, while fake

[32]Stokols, E., & Schreckinger, B. (2016). How Trump did it. *Politico*, February 1. Retrieved from https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/02/how-donald-trump-did-it-213581

[33]Twenge (2019).

news and the micro-targeting of voters with machine-generated messages designed to trigger individual prejudices reinforces the anger and hatred of the 'other side'.

The playbook of many at the extremes of politics and society is to sow confusion and doubt about the legitimacy and authority of the institutions of democracy to represent all of the people. And whether its 'fake news' mainstream media or 'draining the swamp' of established politicians, digital ICT is today the extremist's greatest weapon and means of spreading mistrust. There is an almost prefect symbiosis between conspiracy beliefs, such as the QAnon,[34] and digital ICT, which acts to channel anger and negative energy towards irrationality and illogical thinking and which ultimately harms social cohesion and democracy. Groups and individuals at the extremes of societal thinking use the maxim: to change society, you must first break it, and thus such forces seek chaos and a total disruption to the existing fundamentals of democracy. All the while big tech looks on and does nothing and in many ways must be viewed as complicit in such chaos.

We now live in a world where most political debate happens on partisan public media outlets or bias online forums. In cyberspace, to challenge authority, protest against injustice or seek redress or social change, you no longer need to take to the streets and convince others who may not hold similar views. The new form of way of revolution looks nothing like past ones. You simply login to a website that articulates like-minded views or converse with others of comparable views on social media platforms: that never-ending cyber filter bubbles and echo chambers that comfort people into thinking they are doing something meaningful. Political action in the form of Facebook and Twitter 'likes' and 'shares'. But such online activism is frequently perceived as nothing more than white noise which in many democratic countries is simply ignored but in more authoritarian states exposes the individual as a person of interest to repressive regimes and security forces. As frustration grows, leading to a change in the public mood, a shift in civic sentiment, and the collapse of political party allegiance, many in the West have turned to the strongman and embraced the concept of all-powerful authoritarian rule. Donald Trump is the poster boy president of the digital age, carried to victory in no small way on the shoulders of big tech and complicacy about the need to continually work to protect and strengthen democracy.

As authoritarianism grows and expands across the world, it is interesting to observe how such regimes develop and receive their support. Anne Applebaum, a leading historian of communism and contemporary politics, maintains that the 'authoritarian predisposition' is not one of closed-mindedness but rather simple-mindedness.[35] People who are attracted to the notion and ideals of authoritarianism are bothered by complexity; they dislike diversity and prefer unity. They seek

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[34]QAnon is a disproven and discredited far-right conspiracy theory network that alleges, for instance, that a cabal of Satan-worshiping paedophiles – made up of liberal Hollywood actors, Democratic politicians and high-ranking government officials – is running a global child sex-trafficking ring and plotting against President Donald Trump, who is battling against this cabal.

[35]Applebaum (2020).

understanding and solutions in new political language that makes them feel safe and more secure. There is a revival of nostalgia, a disappointment with meritocracy, there is appeal in conspiracy theories, and a part of the answer may lie in the contentious, cantankerous nature of modern discourse itself; the ways in which we now read about, think about, hear and understand politics.[36] And much of this authoritarian validation and unity is seeded and fomented online. Our new digital lives mean people have now become unaccustomed to the normal political and social public discourses that occur in functioning democracies and instead have become entrenched and obstinate in their opinions and mindset.

The Wizards Behind the Curtain

The digital ICT revolution promised much for democratic politics in the twenty-first century but so far has delivered little but disruption. The dawn of the internet age was to bring a decisive shift towards the citizen and information was to become free and limitless, and enlightenment and empowerment would follow. But while digital technologies provide us with the opportunity to accumulate quantities of information that one time may not have been possible, big tech and the state remains much better equipped than any private citizen to take full advantage of this opportunity. In many ways, digital technology has been weaponised against the very system it was purported to support and defend and the citizens it was meant to engage, protect and enlighten. Authoritarian regimes across the world have seized upon the opportunities provided by such technology to increase surveillance and control of their people while simultaneously spreading misinformation and confusion, undermining many of the established Western liberal democracies. It would be rather naïve to think that democratic governments are not also regularly using similar digital surveillance technique under various guises and security apparatuses. And all the while big tech is the real big winner. The pioneers of surveillance capitalism Google were emboldened and benefitted from historical events when a national security apparatus, galvanised by the attacks of 11 September 2001, saw the emergent capabilities and the promise of some certainty in how Google's storage and use of huge stocks of personal data could be used to shadow and predict the behaviour of individuals.[37] Zuboff believes that the concepts underpinning surveillance capitalism are facilitating the overthrow of the people's sovereignty and is a prominent force in the perilous drift towards democratic deconsolidation that now threatens Western liberal democracies themselves.

And this is a common complaint in the twenty-first century; democracy itself has lost control of corporate power in the form of big tech companies, who use whatever means possible to hoard vast wealth and influence while fuelling inequality, damaging the planet and avoid paying their fair share of taxes.[38] Today's big tech behemoths exist in a political culture that has grown accustomed and accommodating

[36]Applebaum (2020, p. 109).
[37]Zuboff (2019, pp. 9-10).
[38]Runciman (2018, p 161).

to their every need, and Runciman argues, in the United States, this was further cemented by the Supreme Court decision in the Citizens United case of 2010 to grant corporations the same rights to free speech as individual citizens.[39] The ideals and very notion of liberal democracy are now under constant pressure from many angles, and the traditional hierarchy of power is also under increasing danger. The power of modern corporate power, in the form of big tech, has grown exponentially over the past decade to the point where it now has the wherewithal to undermine how democracy itself operates and not be overly worried about the consequences. A major imperative now for every citizen and democratic nation must be to reassess the inequitable influence of big tech corporate power and the internet, particularly as it relates to our personal data, and to question: who owns and controls such power, and what right do they have to use and misuse our personal data to undermine our key democratic institutions? Democracy must be seen to represent the wishes of the people rather than viewed as a system of corporate tyranny.

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[39]Runciman (2018, p. 132).