Chapter 10
Can Digital Technologies Threaten Democracy by Creating Information Cocoons?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the extent to which digital technologies can threaten democracy by creating “information cocoons,” within which information is filtered and tailored to our tastes and prevailing opinions. Digital technologies allow us to filter information and contacts in a very efficient way, thereby creating a risk that we end up exchanging information only with like-minded people. Since humans’ bounded rationality cannot cope with the amount of information available on the Internet, we are confronted with problems of cognitive dissonance that we attempt to solve by ignoring opinions and arguments that differ too much from our own. Recent political events in the Arab world suggest that digital technologies support democratisation. But there is also a risk that these technologies might impoverish democratic debates and reduce exchanges amongst the stakeholders of a given political arena while radicalising their points of view. This threat is serious and needs to be investigated. To do so, this chapter suggests a methodology to evaluate that risk, as well as ways to mitigate it. Various methods have been used to analyse the polarisation of opinions in human societies, such as the ones analysing the traces left by Internet users in blogs or hypertext links. The authors provide a review of these methods after having explained the main factor conducive to the creation of information closure.

INTRODUCTION

A public problem can be defined as “the transformation of some social fact into a public issue and/or state intervention (…) if it has been constructed by the voluntary action of various operators” (Neveu, 1999). All public problems follow a specific path, which can be divided into the four phases of the transformation of private difficulties into public problems, the flourishing of speeches describing prejudices and the formulation of claims, the institutionalisation or bureaucratisation of the public problem, and the publication and realisation of a programme of public action (Cefaï, 1996).
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This paper explores the role that information and communication technologies (ICTs) can play in the emergence of public problems. Indeed, if these technologies can support democratic claims, they can also hamper their expression. The transformation of a private claim into a public problem is a key step in the process leading to its integration in the political agenda.

Few studies have analysed the factors that can block this process of transformation (Pariser, 2011). In order to better understand how ICTs can impact the emergence of public problems, we will first introduce the theoretical framework of this analysis. We will then examine the various ways by which ICTs can influence this emergence, and suggest ways to identify them by analysing the case of information cocoons.

BACKGROUND

Human societies have always used some form of communication, even long before the development of language. Today, communicating involves the use of digital technologies, which are often equated with stronger and more transparent democracies. Indeed, they allow politicians to communicate in real time and to engage in more participatory policy-making. However, ICTs also have negative effects on democracies, which tend to be underestimated. Before examining one of them, this next section underlines the key role of the first stage of the construction of public policies.

Many sociologists of public problems such as Emerson and Messinger (1977), W. Felstiner et al. (1980 - 1981), Dewey (1991), or Cefaï (1996) have sought to understand the processes by which private issues are transformed into public problems (Chateauraynaud, 2011). For example, the carrying capacity of public arenas as well as the “degree of dramatisation” reached to capture public attention have a strong influence on the selection of public problems (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). In L’État au concret, J.G. Padioleau argued that a problem emerges when social actors perceive gaps between what could happen and what should happen. ICTs can indeed be used to widen this gap, e.g. by placing a greater emphasis on public problems, even if they are not a major concern for citizens.

The histories, trajectories, owners and places of emergence of public problems can be traced through the three stages of naming (identification of the public problem), Blaming (identification of who can be held responsible for it), and Claiming (what can be asked for compensation) (W. L. F. Felstiner et al., 1991). If one stage is missing or is too weak, the problem may not emerge as a public one. And some actors which are more powerful than others, such as the “moral entrepreneurs” (Becker, 1997), have a stronger capacity to alter the development of these phases; starting with the first one during which public problems emerge. Nowadays, they are even more powerful if they master the art of communicating, which is making an increasing use of ICTs. Indeed, power consists in the capacity to match one’s own definition of a problem with the definition of what needs to be done (Etzioni, 1976).

The media play a critical role in this process, since they can offer efficient channels of communication to name, blame, or claim. S. Cohen has underlined their influence in the transformation of mere rockers gangs’ fights into a major national security problem (Cohen 2002). Today, digital technologies are a very important tool to diffuse and manage information. This has led to a profusion of information that has forced end-users into using multiple filters to access (some of) it. Such a surfeit of information can be detrimental to the emergence of public problems. Despite this important democratic issue, as underlined in the next section the role of digital technologies in the construction of public policies has seldom been analysed (Greffet, 2011).