Gergely Rajnai

Technology and democracy

Publicity or the transparency it creates is usually considered a precondition for a modern democracy. This was made possible by the mass availability of many different mediums. It is not a coincidence that modern democracy developed at the end of the eighteenth century, when a revolution in communications technology made it possible for the masses to be informed about public affairs through mass media (the printed press). Thus, indirectly, the development of communications technology brought modern democracy to the West. Now, however, technology strikes back, and the next revolution in communications technology is perhaps the biggest challenge for liberal democracy today.

From the end of the 1700s up until the end of the twentieth century advances in communications technology contributed to the spread of liberal democracy. The new media (newspapers, radio and television) were edited by educated intellectuals, who were usually committed towards liberal democracy therefore the growth of publicity went hand in hand with the promotion of the new political system. The more households were reached, the more moderate, liberal democratic views came into the foreground, since the high maintenance costs of radio and television companies made it impossible for marginal, extremist groups to promote their thoughts this way. In the 1990s this process peaked and, thanks to technological progress, it seemed that history had come to an end; intellectuals and political elites supporting liberal democracy held firm control over what topics may be discussed publicly, thus the foundations of the political system could not be questioned.

All of this has changed in the new millennium. The internet is fundamentally different from previous mediums. On the internet, one needs very few resources to show off their political views, and it is very easy to form ideological bubbles, unlike television, where voters are inevitably informed about the opinion of the other side as well. This effect was only strengthened by the development of social media. These increasingly closed ideological bubbles made political discourse more diverse. Harsh criticism of liberalism and democracy, conspiracy theories and extremist thoughts are also part of this diversity. Everyone can find the bubble closest to his or her world view. Public discourse ceased to be the monopoly of
intellectuals committed towards liberal democracy, and this is a serious challenge for liberal democracy itself.

This challenge is more and more acute in the global West. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán and the Jobbik party, in Poland, Jaroslaw Kaczynski, in France, Marine Le Pen, in Spain, the Podemos, in Greece, the Syriza, in the United States, Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders owe much to the bubbles formed on the internet. These politicians and movements consciously criticize and discredit traditional media, and provide legitimacy to bubbles formed on the Internet, thus winning the support of their members.

Brexit is the most recent example of this process. Traditional British media published many different expert analyses, which argued that the United Kingdom should stay in the EU, and supported their argument by hard data. In addition, it was not uncommon that televisions and newspapers accused advocates of Brexit of being followers of bigoted, intolerant and/or racist views. On the other hand, advocates of Brexit claimed that experts of the traditional media do not matter anymore, as people are able to make their own decisions based on their own experiences and the information on the Internet. Therefore, they have also heavily built on the bubbles formed on the internet, and the key to their success was the distrust of traditional media.

Today we have reached the point where, thanks to the advances in communications technology, there is “too much” publicity for liberal democracy to handle. Advocates of liberal democracy should respond to this. One possible reaction, which is starting to take root, is limiting the discourse on the Internet (such as Facebook hides some news), but this raises serious questions concerning the freedom of speech. Other solutions may also be looked for, but one thing is certain: if the elite supporting liberal democracy responds to the technological advances by calling every member of the bubbles an extremist and bigot, then they are only pouring oil on the fire.