

# **e-Democracy is increasing political ignorance**

*PhD Raluca LUȚAI*

*Department of International Studies and Contemporary History  
Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeş-Bolyai University  
raluca.lutai@ubbcluj.ro*

*PhD Paul POPA*

*Department of International Studies and Contemporary History  
Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeş-Bolyai University  
paul.popa@ubbcluj.ro*

## **Abstract**

*In the century we live in, the main scene of political display is the virtual space of the internet. It is used by political agents to promote their own agendas and by citizens for demonstrations and political support. Cyber-activism is being strengthened every day, and the general belief is that the new generations, “clean” from any ideological perspective, through the informational exchange facilitated by the internet, will want to promote and consolidate democratic values. One of the main ideologies that started this type of belief is cyber-utopianism. In this paper, we will try to outline, starting from the hypotheses of this ideology, that e-democracy can become the worse of all kinds of democracies, because it’s based on instruments capable of building its own censorship. The information overload determines that relevant information can be overlooked and misjudged leading to risky vulnerabilities for the healthy development of democracy. We can accept that e-democracy can be very helpful in promoting democratic values in autocratic regimes around the world, but it’s risking a failure at home. Exposure to too much information it’s just a new type of mass political communication, that can backslide to other extremes. The lack of information and information overload can mirror the same effect: political ignorance.*

**Keywords:** *cyber-utopianism, e-democracy, e-government, overload information, political ignorance.*

## *Overview*

Dynamics of digital media forces us to constantly reconfigure our daily and professional activity. From economic or financial to artistic behavior, we rely on the online. Political activities are no stranger to this. The tweets, shares and posts of politicians is replacing, most of the time, the long speeches and detailed analyses. The flow of information creates a perspective of standardizing values and political motivation. In the last decades we have seen elections won using

exclusively the online environment. Revolts, revolutions like Arab Spring and political demonstrations have been determined by the use of social media. The opinion makers are becoming more and more diverse, leaving the impression of a truly democratic debate.

Since the beginning of the Internet, it has been outlined the crucial role it will play, even in political events. Democracy, as it has been promoted by Western states, should be encouraged and strengthened due to access to information, the exchange of values and debates. Easy access to Internet creates the possibility of greater involvement of the citizens in relation to the political decision. Due to the promotion of good practice models, the need to establish or consolidate the rights and freedoms specific to democratic regimes, more social and political positions have taken place in states without democratic experience.

Even in consolidated democracies, media technology is being used at its maximum to strengthen political debates. Many of the manifestation that we've witnessed, like the assault on USA Capitolium, were due to promotion on social media. We are in the situation where we can spread democracy faster and sooner. But, are we really? Political regimes have always used promotion and consolidation mechanisms of power. Revolutions were made back in times without internet. Wars were won without social media. Are we to expect that online will help increase democracy? Or it's just another platform for political debates, resulting the same effects like the television in last decades. Can it get actually worse? Such a huge platform, with so many opinions, it can easily create confusion. Even in experienced democracies.

In this article we will try to evaluate the perspectives drawn by cyber-utopianism that establishes a strong connection between internet and increased democracy. Definitely we need to evaluate also the vulnerabilities that can be brought to that certain approach, to understand what are the effects of digital media in relations to democracy. Is it helpful or can actually create disadvantages? The article is structured in the following parts: the evaluation of cyber-utopianism perspective and the developing e-democracy and later its vulnerabilities created by overload information. What we are trying to demonstrate is that, in certain cases, there is not a strong link between using digital media and increasing democracy. On the contrary, we believe that democracy must be supported by a strong civic education, having relevant information, where the internet, with all of its information, is failing.

*Democracy made online*

Dependency on media technology has determined that political positions are more widespread, more updated and more evaluated than ever. Easing communication has determined that ideas and information are quickly spread and models of good practices are taken over and exchanged. Ideologies, social movements, political agendas can be formed much easily. When ICT (Information and Communications Technology) are being used in different stages of democratic process it creates the digital dimension of democracy. Electronic democracy or e-democracy is using information to enhance representativeness, deliberation and decision making. It can have a consultative dimension – where citizens are expressing their opinions to the government and deliberative characteristics – in case which *deliberative forums are integrated in policy discussions* (Chadwick). e-Democracy has developed forums for engaging in knowledge exchange and civic technology in order to develop inclusive engagement and active citizenship in political decision-making.<sup>1</sup>

A good example is the Italian *5 Star Movement* political party (MoVimento 5 Stelle-M5S) founded by an Italian blogger and comedian who managed to create and consolidate one of the most important current political parties in Italy. Natale and Ballatore present in their article *The web will kill them all: new media, digital utopia, and political struggle in the Italian 5-Star Movement*, a complex analysis of how a movement promoting a new form of *web-based direct democracy* managed to win 2nd place in the Italian elections of 2013. The article highlights how digital media has become the mandatory platform for political debate and analysis, but also how a movement based on a speech about web-democracy has won so much electorate (Natale & Ballatore, 2014, p. 106).

Such a result, like the Italian elections, on web-based direct democracy discourse, was anticipated since the beginning of the internet. In their essay from 1996: *The Californian Ideology*, Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron have examined the development of a cyber-utopianism, based on the interconnectivity of technological determinism and individual needs (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996, pp. 44-72) and which will inevitably create a *self-organizing system* (E. Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism*. New York: Public Affairs, 2013, p. 286 cited by Natale & Ballatore, 2014, p. 112). Many of the positions on libertarian cyber-utopianism were projecting a “market of ideas”, lack of bureaucracy, decision making free from state intervention and

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see <http://forums.e-democracy.org/>, an online platform for e-forums and deliberative e-democracy promotion.

non-boundary interaction that later has evolved in a symbiosis with the existing daily life political and socio-economic systems. Democracy ended up to be understood through the perspective of the digital citizen where digital media can amplify the individual liberties (Dahlberg, 2008, p. 179). Among the advantages of cyber-democracy, many supporters could highlight the reduced cost of information flow, so that more and more people could have access to information about the political agenda. This aspect inevitably leads to the possibility that many will be involved in the political decision, thanks to the easy access to technology (Barth, & Schlegelmilch, 2014).

Council of Europe is promoting the idea of e-democracy linking it to transparent administration and exploring governance at its best (Council of Europe, 3 September 2009). Also, European Parliament (2020) is suggesting that digital democracy is at the intersection of three trends: demographics, urbanization and technology considering that in many cases protests for democracy in authoritarian countries were due to the access on digital media (The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019). In this regard, Claassen (2020) in his article *In the Mood for Democracy? Democratic Support as Thermostatic Opinion “democratic mood” of a country* establishing through his analysis that the need for democracy is very strong related to the lack of freedoms and rights thus, spreading the democratic values will eventually trigger the need for political reforms.

A structured analysis is offered by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in its book released in 2003: *Promise and Problems of E-Democracy: Challenges of Online Citizen Engagement* where it highlighted the positive aspects of using digital media in the process of democracy and democratization. The OECD claims that the policy life-circle: *agenda setting-analysis-policy creation-implementation-monitoring* is much easier through digital media (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2003, pp. 20-34). Moreover, many of the solutions offered by the OECD 20 years ago for the consolidation of e-democracy remain valid even today. We will not list all the positive aspects of e-democracy because it is not mainly the objective of our analysis. Many of the *e-democracy instruments* are clear and their contribution is well recognized. Online debate platforms, access to information, consultation and petitioning are indisputable tools in supporting and strengthening the democratic process.

Moreover, numerous electoral processes that we have witnessed in recent years have demonstrated a clear aspect: the use of social media in the promotion and consolidation of democracy is vital. Although the consolidation of e-democracy is on the political agenda and are intensively promoted in the civic

spirit, some aspects cannot remain ignored. Mainly, the quick access to information and the possibility of a multipolar debate leaves room for numerous confusions, the possibility of massive polarizations, censorship or even disinformation and misinformation. In the following we will try to focus only on how overload information is representing the biggest vulnerability of e-democracy and can trigger the failure of e-participating contrary to what was expected.

### *Challenging e-democracy*

Political regimes have always used mass communication to promote their own agendas and consolidate power. From common rhetoric to media populism, different types of propaganda and lately social media. To influence and persuade peoples mind through digital media has proven to be quite an art itself. Mainly because the ability to juggle truth and information in the online is so decisive, focusing to determine people to reshape what they want to choose. If we are to review the forms of political communication, the way to persuade is always based on emotions, on people's willingness to develop conformism, so that all political periods can apply approximately the same recipe. Only the tools are always newer. The only difference this time is that the flood of information is overwhelming.

When it comes to e-democracy, the possibility of petitioning to the government or to create new platforms for deliberative issues can project a healthy democratic process. Yet, engaging in online communication with the government doesn't make it a strong democratic process. Donald F. Norris, in *E-government... not e-governance... not e-democracy: Not now! Not ever?* (2010) is challenging us to understand the differences between instruments of e-government that can easily be mistaken for e-democracy dynamics. Where e-government is delivering information and services, e-democracy involves a continuous e-participation of the citizens in order to influence directly the political decision-making (Norris, 2010 cited by Freeman & Quirke, 2013). So e-democracy is not just about e-consulting on various initiatives, but an ongoing political dialogue (Freeman & Quirke, 2013). In this sense, probably in many situations, we are mistaking these two concepts. Having online services doesn't mean we are engaging in democratic decision-making. E-democracy was gaining in the 90's popularity because it's facile implications of the new e-public in decision-making process will eventually reduce the democratic deficit encountered in developed societies. Furthermore, consolidating e-voting along every kind of e-participating (e-petitioning, e-deliberative forums, etc.) will encourage more e-citizens to be involved in political elections. And mainly, due to its endless platforms, Internet still encourages

scholars, although not as enthusiast as 20 years ago, to consider that e-democracy is the best way to consolidate political representativeness (Lindner, Aichholzer & Hennen, 2016).

Many analyses have been written about the benefits of e-democracy, which in the brief arguments above have proven to be indisputable. We can assume that further developing e-voting platforms, e-democracy will eventually become the most common form of democracy. Obviously, e-democracy can also develop vulnerabilities: cyber-attacks, privacy issues, technological challenges, political propaganda etc. But, in our point of view, all of these can be, in a certain degree, manageable, and new instruments can be created in order to protect personal data, building security mechanisms against cyber-attacks, instruments for evaluating fake-news and so on.<sup>2</sup> We can assume that many of the challenges can be easily pass, as long as the pillar of democracy maintains: the will to participate in the democratic process.

The democratic deficit was considered to be minimalized once people were exposed to lots of information through the internet. Having the possibility to evaluate all the political perspectives, without media censorship, it would have been supposed to be the peak of democracy. Instead, from our point of view, a more dangerous side effect appeared: too much information is creating its own censorship mechanisms. We believe a great focus needs to be on the dark side of endless information given by digital media, mainly in how flood of information determines that relevant information can be overlooked and misjudged creating risky vulnerabilities for the healthy development of e-democracy.

Since the beginning of modern democracies, a huge problem was the lack of information, citizens not knowing in many cases *what* or *who* they are voting. Later, news-papers, radio and later, television, became a more useful democratic tool, because there were faster, wider and probably easier to combat and expose politics and politicians. But that doesn't mean that there were not any kind of fallacies in the public political discourse. Misinformation and disinformation are old as politics. There were used and continue to be used in political dynamics. They are, let's say, encrypted in human political nature. Forms of autocracies and democracies have encountered these two instruments as being inevitable, and sometimes necessary for awakening civic implication. Every political regime, even the strongest forms of democracies were victims of these two. And these, completed with too much information can destabilize democracies.

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<sup>2</sup> For more details see Katsikas and Zorkadis (2017).

Consolidating e-democracy means using ICT at its maximum for sharing and evaluation. The public and political agendas become more complex and detailed. Everyday life is challenged by waves of information. It's becoming harder to trace and monitor politics, mainly because it doesn't respect one of its main obligations: to deliver relevant information. A media article published in 2018 by Washington Post resumed the irrelevant interventions that the president of USA had during a month (Klass, 2018), that can easily shadow the political agenda. The European Research Council published research emphasizing that political agents are also overwhelmed by the information processing (Walgrave & Johan, 2017).

Solutions are few because the internet is wide, everyone is entitled in expressing ideas and presenting news and facts. We cannot censor information just because it is too much, mostly not knowing which is actually true. The solution resides in the citizen and the capability of news curation. But the process is not an easy one. Dealing with enormous quantity of information, not always qualitative, is requiring the necessity to gather and analyze information beyond our cognitive possibilities. This leads to information overload.

The concept is not new. Scholars were focusing for decades on how information received must be controlled (Sweller, 1988, Cognitive load during problem solving: effects on learning, cited by Zhang, Akhter, Nassani & Haffar, 2022) and if it is too much, it will be rejected or will lead to frustration and lack of motivation, productivity and the capability of decision making (Matthes, Karsay, Schmuck & Stevic, 2020, "Too much to handle": impact of mobile social networking sites on information overload, depressive symptoms, and well-being cited by Zhang, Akhter, Nassani & Haffar, 2022). Julia Metag and Gwendolin Gurr in their article *Too Much Information? A Longitudinal Analysis of Information Overload and Avoidance of Referendum Information Prior to Voting Day* analyzed how information loaded leads to higher degree of avoidance. Information overload appears when information exceeds the cognitive capacities of the individual to process it causing distress (Metag & Gurr, 2022).

Moreover, studies revealed news overload is having a significantly impact on the news curation *and the news avoidance only mediated the relationship of news quality and news curation* (Zhang, Akhter, Nassani & Haffar, 2022, pp. 2-3). Having a content producer or curator can easily create biases, and their intentions is to *maximize client engagement*, determining increased information loading that inevitably will lead to general rejection or ideological fragmentation (Abdelzaher et al., 2020). Lewandowsky and Pomerantsev (2022) are proposing a paradox in which internet and social media *erode democracy and they expand democracy. The interaction between fundamental human cognitive attributes and the*

*architecture of the information ecology have created a perfect storm for democracy.*

Today's online dynamics, where it's hard to make the difference between politics and entertainment<sup>3</sup>, e-democracy is becoming a process of apathy and ignorance. Having the citizen's responsibility to evaluate so many public institutions, politicians and public agenda can become a frustrating activity. The increasing development of social media disponible on each smartphone<sup>4</sup>, where 24 h news can be issued can endanger the future will to participate in democratic process. We believe that e-democracy is challenged firstly by the information overload, and to this we can easily add others like misinformation, disinformation, propaganda etc. Refugeeing from the politics in necessity of rest and silence will develop a certain ignorance towards democracy. And autocratic leaders will profit from this degeneration of democratic will.

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It is clear that information overload will destabilize democracy as we know it. Many solutions can be brought to the apathy caused by e-democracy and its flooded information. It can be established new regulations in order to launch certain rules on political communication. So at least we have proper sources with relevant information. We can also focus on partitioning democratic involvement, in order to monitor political decision-making through increased civil societies platforms or NGOs destined to evaluate, analyze and share relevant content regarding a certain topic (rule of law, environment etc.) The present paper wants to be a first step towards an increasing and developed further research on this topic.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information see Kellner (2021).

<sup>4</sup> For more details see Tandon, Dhir, Talwar, Kaur and Mantymaki (2022).



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