Alejandro Ramos Chávez*

From Democracy to Infocracy In Virtual Communities

Markus Spiske/Unsplash.com

Information and communications technologies (ICTs), mainly the Internet, have brought about huge possibilities for generating an increasingly informed citizenry, as well as digital channels for the exchange of ideas, the enrichment of positions, and the possibilities for interpersonal communication with the creation of virtual communities with more and more weight in public decision-making. Along with these advantages, to avoid an idealized vision of reality, we must take into consideration certain problems that have also arisen.

Excess information or informational saturation, fake news, political alienation, and post-truth are all elements that we must keep in mind in our analyses. However, one problem that cuts across all of this is that, given the fact that many of today's communities are virtual, groups tend to close themselves off in their positions and points of view and do not seem willing to debate to enrich their opinions.

With phenomena as deeply entrenched as an overabundance of information and its questionable quality, a crisis of truth is spreading in terms of the facticities that make understanding possible. This, in turn, disintegrates society, fragmenting it into tribes or groups that prevent mutual understanding just as they undermine nations' democratic values and principles.

*Alejandro is a researcher at the UNAM Library Science and Information Research Institute (IIBI); you can contact him at aramos@iibi.unam.mx.

Increased Social Use of Technologies

ICTs opened a new dimension, first in terms of organization and later in terms of participation. This awarded different groups visibility and the possibility of being heard, both by government authorities and by other sectors of society. With that, certain groups that in the past had faced immeasurable challenges and had little or absolutely no way to air and discuss their affairs to resolve them, today, in the digital world, have made a broad impact. This is due to the characteristics of communication in the digital sphere: a massive reach, including the possibility of making certain content "go viral"; swift transmission; the breadth of the audiences; and the elimination of spatial-temporal limitations that in the past had constrained communication, making it slower among citizens and between them and other organized groups.

This also had a repercussion on the progressive loss of understanding of the citizenry as a homogeneous group with shared principles respected by all the individuals in any one nation. Today, more than homogeneousness, what

we see is a diversity in which groups exist that, based on their specific characteristics and problems, organize and participate to make their ideas and issues visible, to try to channel and resolve them, and, with that, approach a vision of citizenship with general principles for all individuals.

As mentioned above, technologies, mainly the Internet, have created new spaces for organization and participation that have helped these groups find channels for being seen and disseminating their ideas. Equally, the net made it possible to have greater access to socially relevant information, which brought issues to different sectors of society with their own principles and democracy; this has allowed them, together with forging public opinion, to have new tools and possibilities for developing nations' democratic states themselves.

These ICTs have also generated an accumulation of information that has sparked the interest of certain research groups in many parts of the world. I am referring here to the logs or "tracks" users leave behind in our interaction through the Internet in the form of data. With their analysis and use, they generate in turn new information that allows us to see the behavior, the needs, the situations, and even the mood of societies. From this arise new concepts, such as the Internet of Things, machine learning, intelligent cities, and even what has recently captured scientific and social attention: artificial intelligence.

Some derived neologisms are "datification," "dataism," or analysis of macrodata, which in general refer to the value of our Internet footprint for carrying out processes that generate new policies by public administration and products and services aimed at satisfying society's demands. These kinds of data constitute logs in quantified formats that, after collection, logging, tabulation, analysis, and reorganization, become useful feedback for decision-makers in the public or private spheres to create new services and ways of dealing with the citizenry's needs.

One clear example of promising datification can be found in the datification of health: the use of data to generate services ranging from medical care to projecting the infrastructure needed for care in a given community.

Equally, several analyses have brought out the importance of these technologies for generating collective action aimed mainly in organizing social mobilizations, but also in the implementation of formal mechanisms for guaranteeing the resolution of demands and problems. Government authorities habitually follow these bodies to try to channel the mobilizations and that way maintain acceptable rates of governability and remain in power. With that, public administration is not exclusively in the hands of authorities, but rather it is exercised more horizontally with the participation of those groups and individuals who use digital technologies, thus strengthening nations' democratic values and principles. However, at the same time that we note these advantages, we can also observe some problems associated with the increasingly intensive use of technology, some of which I will touch on in the next section.

Infocracy, the Lack of the Debate of Ideas and Retreat from Fact-based Principles

Infocracy

Phenomena and processes have emerged that, more than strengthening democracy, have put in check elements that are inescapable for any social functioning that fosters development and cohesion. One of these phenomena is infocracy, characterized by permanent surveillance of individuals' activities, facilitated by the logging of the data (footprint) that their day-to-day interactivity leaves in intelligent devices and that makes it possible to predict and even control their social behavior.[1]

In that scenario, scholars have talked about a new regime based on processing the information extracted from our data that allows for domination through the recurrence of algorithms and artificial intelligence. In turn, that would determine, or at least influence, the development of political, social, and economic processes. Social communication is a means for surveillance that is perfected to the extent that we utilize ICTs. Paradoxically, the population sidesteps that domination when individuals feel free as long as the Internet of Things has made it possible to create smart homes that minutely register the daily lives of their residents.

The Debate of Ideas

At the same time, the aforementioned loss of spaces for deliberation should be analyzed. In that sense, undeniably, debate and decision-making are fundamental pillars in the construction of both a participative citizenry in a quality democracy, and of the development of the public

sphere. This capability to deliberate and develop a line of reasoning permits greater plurality and enrichment of the point of view from which collective issues are analyzed and dealt with. Today, these processes of exchange of ideas are being left behind, even though they constituted the most important principle for human understanding. They are being replaced by a constant, fast-paced wave of information that smothers cognitive practices such as being able to judge, develop knowledge, accumulate experience, and exchange knowledge, practices that nourish positions regarding public issues.

This tsunami of massive amounts of information is leading to short-term vision in dealing with issues, which does not allow for thoughtful following and rational actions that make possible really understanding and dealing with them. The greatest danger in the loss of these deliberative processes is that autonomy and free will are linked to rational action; without them, processes unfold on a subjective level that definitely can condition and influence our behavior and actions. One very well-known example is the manipulation of certain Facebook users by the British company Cambridge Analytica to affect the 2016 U.S. elections. We should add to this the phenomenon of intolerance for anything different, for anything that seems alien to us or that does not jibe with our ways of thinking, that questions or even contradicts our ideas or ways of acting; that is, intolerance for otherness. Discourse needs to differentiate opinion from identity.

In an ideal scenario, differentiated opinions could exist without affecting our identities, or, in the best of cases, the former would help us reinforce or enrich the latter. However, in the emerging context, if people do not have discursive capabilities, we could try to hold on to our opinions to not allow our identities to be threatened. This guarantee to failure the attempt to make someone or a group of people change their minds, since the capacity to listen to others has also been lost, another of the elements that contravene a healthy democracy.

Along these same lines, it is more and more common to hear people talk about the filter bubble or ideological frame, which are nothing more than discriminatory mechanisms on Internet that make whatever we look up reaffirm our positions and opinions; and the ideas of our contacts on digital social media are so similar to ours that they are continually reinforced, excluding what is different or plural. The danger here is that this leads us to defend

> Given the fact that many of today's communities are virtual, groups tend to close themselves off in their positions and points of view and do not seem willing to debate to enrich their opinions.

our beliefs without any possibility of exchanges that would allow us to enrich our perceptions. Our openness to otherness will depend on how broad or narrow the range of information we consult is. This means we run the risk of being increasingly closed off in realities that we consider absolute, without questioning ourselves or being willing to nourish or modify our opinions about this or that issue.

The Retreat from Fact-based Principles

Hand in hand with this is the retreat from fact-based realities, understood as fact-based or true principles that allow us to have basic certainties for human understanding. These principles allow us to make dialogue more agile and reach agreements, since they foster unquestioned shared certainties. These are now being replaced by beliefs and adherence to small, closed groups, making it more and more common to hear people mention "digital tribes," which give their members a strong feeling of belonging and identity.

In these tribes, information is not seen as a resource for knowledge, but as something that reinforces one's own identity and rootedness in the group, where the feeling of belonging is linked to the act of sharing beliefs and ways of thinking, even if these narratives contradict factual principles. Many of these digital tribes are directly linked to conspiracy theories; this means that their followers, not even minimally open to dialogue, exclude everyone who thinks differently. An example of this kind of digital tribe that question the facts are the flat-earthers, whose members sometimes, more than absolutely and rationally believing in their suppositions, defend them to feel included.

Undoubtedly, these digital tribes undermine democracy: they are based on dictatorial attitudes that constrain opinion and identity, making it impossible and refusing to exercise any communicative rationality as they bring into doubt factual principles.