

new technology and the apparent failure of democracy: an educational response

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The two big political campaigns of 2016 that led to a vote for Brexit in the UK and the election of Donald Trump as president in the USA seemed to actively engage many people who had not previously been involved in politics. In both cases ‘underdog’ campaigns, which were initially expected to lose, claimed that the ‘mainstream media’ were biased against them and in collusion with the ‘establishment’.

The two big political campaigns of 2016 that led to a vote for Brexit in the UK and the election of Donald Trump as president in the USA seemed to actively engage many people who had not previously been involved in politics. In both cases ‘underdog’ campaigns, which were initially expected to lose, claimed that the ‘mainstream media’ were biased against them and in collusion with the ‘establishment’. In both cases these underdog campaigns used social media to appeal directly to the people claiming that they should ignore the opinions of ‘experts’ because they were all just part of the establishment. From its inception the Internet had brought with it the promise of more direct democracy. In facilitating access to important decision making debates of many who previously felt excluded from politics the Internet seems to have realised something of this early promise.

So is the reason why so many commentators are blaming social media for a failure of democracy just evidence of the political bias of educated elites? Partly. It is difficult for commentators to blame ‘democracy’ or to blame ‘the voters’ and so they blame social media instead. The main crime of social media seems to be revealing how voters really think. It is possible, probable even, that most voters have always been ignorant, credulous and malevolent in their private thoughts and private conversations, the number of political exchanges carried now by social media just makes it possible for us all to see this clearly as if for the first time. One Trump supporter challenged on TV to justify remarks by Donald Trump, remarks about third world countries which all ‘mainstream media’ commentators seemed to disapprove of, responded ‘he is just saying what everyone really thinks’.

However, there is also a slightly more substantial claim against the role of the Internet. This is that the use of social media in elections privileged ‘fake news’. More people, for example, read the false story released over Facebook that the pope endorsed Donald Trump for president than read the rebuttal of this story.¹ This tendency to promote falsehoods might be structural. Companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter, have established personalization algorithms that cater specific information to individuals’ online newsfeeds.² This is driven by what people like or might like and not at all by what is good for them or what is true. These algorithms are intended to make advertising more focused and so increase revenue for these companies following a capitalist

implicit logic rather than any explicit political agenda. The unintended political consequence, it has been claimed, is supporting ‘fake news’ and cultural tribalism.

If algorithms are causing this problem, this issue can and should be addressed through democratic steering mechanisms. But there is also a more obviously educational issue here. The claim that false news spreading on Facebook influenced the outcomes of elections in the USA led to Facebook developing a tool giving users tips on how to read posts and how to spot ‘fake news’ stories and the strong advice not to pass them on through sharing. This is not enough of course, but it points the way to an educational direction that we need to take further.

A problem with the concept of ‘fake news’ is that it depends upon an implicit contrast with the concept of ‘true news’. Is ‘true news’ perhaps intended to be the sort of news we used to get before the advent of the Internet? But of course, all such truths, and untruths, have to be constructed in order to reach us. The contrast here is not only between ‘true’ and ‘false’ but also between traditional media and new media.

Perhaps the prevalence of ‘post-truth’ and ‘fake news’ is a product of readers who have been educated to accept the truth of what they read and hear through one dominant set of media now being exposed to new media. Classic media are all centralised ‘one-to-many’ broadcasters meaning that someone at the centre owns the printing presses or the tv stations. New media enable everyone and anyone to be a producer of the news. This shift in dominant media might mean that consumers of news have to learn to take a more critical and co-constructive attitude towards the truth: triangulating various sources before accepting a story as true, for example.

The ‘true’ news and the ‘truth’ that is implicitly presumed to have existed before the ‘post-truth’ age was always already biased and always already should have required a more critical way of reading. Creating and delivering news effectively via the Internet requires a shift in readers from being passive recipients of other people’s version of truth to active criticism and participatory co-construction of their own truths. This is potentially a good thing for democracy even if, initially, the failure to make this shift leads to the apparently harmful effect of believing and sharing false news. Education here might have an important role to play in teaching children and students how to read critically and participate more effectively in political debates.

Commentators who complain that the Internet is undermining democracy probably do not understand democracy to be simply a matter of counting votes. The claimed failure of social media is a failure to adequately support the kind of constructive dialogue that is a key feature of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy is about making decisions only after reasoning together according to good democratic norms like allowing all to speak, listening to all voices with respect and, of course, not threatening others or telling lies designed to trick them.

The concern over the role of social media in democracy could be taken as a prompt to schools to reinforce efforts to teach everyone the norms of deliberative democracy. However, the value of education into deliberative democracy has been questioned by influential voices within academia. Gert Biesta, a widely cited educational theorist and researcher, argues against the teaching of any moral norms or discourse norms using an account of democracy he borrows from Rancière (Biesta, 2007, 2011). Rancière claims that any system of norms, including the procedural rules of deliberative democracy, becomes a kind of regime or what he calls a ‘police state’, which inevitably includes some and excludes others. According to Rancière, real democracy is not to be found in any normative system but only when the system is challenged in the name of equality.

Democracy is therefore only to be found sporadically. According to Biesta, we should educate in a way that allows for such sporadic events and supports their educative potential. The argument from Rancière and from Biesta seems to be that democracy is not something we have and can give to others by including them with us in our democratic system, but, almost the reverse of this, democracy can only be learnt through the act of challenging the system (Rancière, 1995, p. 48; Biesta, 2007, p. 9).

There is something rather quaintly romantic and innocent about the way that Rancière is willing to see every state of order as a ‘police state’ and every challenge to this as a bid for equality and for freedom. In the recent context of elections in the USA and the referendum over ‘Brexit’ in the UK there were clearly voices that felt excluded challenging what they saw as the establishment. But as the philosopher John Gray points out, the challenges that relatively stable liberal “democracies” now face are often from those who, in his words, are “happy to relinquish their freedom as long as those they hate – gay people, Jews, immigrants and other minorities, for example – are deprived of freedom as well.”³ As Gray further points out, the apparent assumption often made by left intellectuals that everyone secretly wants freedom and equality is not well supported by the facts of human history.⁴ In this context how is it that norms and virtues implying the promise of democracy have arisen in some cultures and are constantly renewed through challenges and reformation? Perhaps education has something to do with this.

Stiegler (1998) has argued that western philosophy has been distorted by a failure to take technology into account. This distortion is particularly evident in the arguments of Rancière and Biesta. To describe education into shared norms as a bad thing (‘colonial’) as Biesta does (2007) implies that he is either ignoring or not valuing the context of communications technology. Induction into shared norms for reading and writing is not easy for children but has proved essential for collective thinking in which education enables each new child to participate in the ongoing cultural dialogue of language communities and potentially at least, of humanity as a whole. As a result of literacy, what it means to be human has changed and globalised. The ‘norms’ that children need to be inducted into for communicative rationality to work include virtues such as ‘openness to the other’ which implies being able to listen, to learn and to change as a result of any encounter. This is not a given. It is quite possible to present clear evidence and arguments for something as obvious as the link between the right to bear arms and the number of gun deaths or man-made climate change, for example, and to have this evidence rejected by those who lack basic communicative virtues (Rorty, 1991, p. 39). Just as education into literacy is essential if people are to be able to read, so education into norms and virtues is essential if people are to be able to follow arguments and give consent on the basis of understanding evidence. There is a very wide agreement that we need universal induction into shared norms in the form of literacy education in order to realise the benefits of literacy for the human race. Is it possible to motivate a similar consensus as to the need for induction into shared moral and communicative norms for the use of the Internet to support a future global democracy?

Biesta, following Rancière, seems to want to divide the spontaneous events that bring awareness of democracy as the event of calling for justice, from democratic norms and virtues, as if these two are unconnected. He acknowledges, however, that some ‘police states’ are better than others, especially those that have been shaped by the after-effects of previous events of challenge and democratic awakening. Perhaps the quality of spontaneous events of awakening to democracy and the normative structure that children are inducted into are not so completely unconnected after all.

Tarkovski, in his late film, 'The Sacrifice' (Wibom & Tarkovski, 1986), includes a story of a monk who planted a barren tree on a hillside and then carried a bucket of water to it every day for years. This seemed pointless. Then one day, miraculously, the tree blossomed. The blossoming tree might not have realised it, but there was a connection between the water that had been brought every day to its roots systematically and the apparently miraculous event of its blossoming. This story could be used as an analogy to what teachers do in modelling and encouraging norms and virtues everyday. Even when such norms and virtues are not apparently picked up by students at the time they might still have an indirect impact in awakenings later on even if this impact is unrecognised and remains unthanked. There seems to be a particular lack of gratitude for all the hard work done by generations of committed democratic educators since the Enlightenment stemming from those who prefer to see ethics as descending from a mysterious beyond – the 'incalculable' (Biesta, 2007), the 'ungovernable' (Agamben, 2009), the 'impossible' (Derrida, 1997) – while they condemn teachers and educational technologies as part of the apparatus imposing a 'police state'.

There is a simple contrast at the heart of the ideal of democracy. This is the contrast between taking decisions that impact on everyone in a community on the default basis of who has the most power and the democratic alternative ideal or promise: taking decisions on the basis of unforced agreement emerging out of free and open dialogue between all who have a stake in the outcome, where all participants are respected and listened to. At the heart of democracy then is not simply abstract rationality, but also the cultivation of the kind of emotions such as compassion and love that allow the sense of self-interest to expand in order to include others and so to create together, if only for a moment, a collective sense of self and a collective agency. Again, education is crucial to realising this possibility (Nussbaum, 2013).

At this juncture in human history, with the advent of the Internet and our general confusion about what to do with it, what we need is not the kind of research that is content to describe reality, and perhaps to complain about it, but the kind of research that creates a new reality (Wegerif, 2013). A possible model to follow here, as a metaphor, is the way in which aviation began in sustained design-based research where the only certainty was the aim, building machines that could enable humans to fly (O'Neill, 2012). We know roughly what we want now, which is an effective global democracy, but we do not yet know how to get there.

The aim for educational research should be to design educational technology systems to achieve this aim, evaluate their impacts, refine the designs, try again and eventually, like the aviation pioneers over one hundred years ago, we might have a system that flies. Of course, perhaps unlike most early aviation research, this kind of educational research is not only technical but has to engage with profound ethical and ontological issues about what kind of future we want and what kind of beings we want our children to become. The only real way we have to research such issues is by making designs and evaluating the impact of designs where we allow even our most fundamental assumptions and, indeed, our very selves, to be included in the ongoing self-reflective and self-reforming research process.

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