

Digital Transformations of Democracy: Requirements for Successful Problem Solving in the Age of Anthropocene

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Extended Abstract

Digital transformations of society in general, and of its democratic regulation in particular, are being intensively researched. With “digital constellation,” (Berg, Rakowski & Thiel 2020) a concept has been introduced that emancipates itself from a narrow view – for example, on voting procedures, or electoral machines. Instead, it discusses decisive factors for the future shaping of democracy (as an attempt to broaden the scope of debate in political science, roughly following the example of disciplines like sociology).

With my approach, I would like to propose going one conceptual step further from there. *A socio-philosophical view of digitalizing democracy* can focus even more on the consequences of digital transformations for the functioning of democratic self-regulation. In other words, it is about which development paths make a successful further development of democratic practices likely, and which do not.

On the one hand, this is about drawing a connection between *public spheres’ transforming infrastructure*, and the *quality of democratic discourse*. On the other hand, the *structure of problems* that are to be debated in public spheres has also changed. To put it briefly: Ecological crises do raise the bar for democratic deliberation, while the structure of democratic public spheres is developing towards a direction that has recently been viewed rather pessimistically.

My focus is on the requirements that a digitizing public sphere must be able to meet under the conditions of Anthropocene. From this perspective, I will introduce the concept of a *judgment environment* (cf. Kruse 2023), and then utilize it to ask how successful democratic processes could be fostered in the context of a digital transformations.

Digital Transformations of Public Sphere and Democratic Discourse’s Quality

Historically, digital transformations of the public sphere used to be considered as further developing democratic forms, or having a certain potential for that. Nowadays, there is the impression that certain tendencies of digital life would rather endanger democracy: at first, the egalitarian-universalist claim for equal inclusion of all citizens would, as it seemed, have finally been fulfilled in the shape of new

media, but the lava of that anti-authoritarian and egalitarian potential would have soon solidified in Silicon Valley into a grimace, as Habermas put it in 2021 (cf. Habermas 2021, 488). What is this grimace about? It entails techniques of mass manipulation, exploiting data, or simply harmful inactivity for one-sided economic interests (such as not sufficiently moderating extremist content on platforms).

Problem Solving in the Age of Anthropocene

Today's pressing problems are exposing a new quality in at least two respects. For one, the notion of *multiple crises*, in distinction from a single one, has arisen in order to describe a much more complicated situation (at least) in western societies. Crises now seem to overlap and interact. And for another, there are problems and crisis tendencies associated with *Anthropocene*. Here, the point is not mainly overlap or multitude. It is more that, as defined by the concept, humanity has begun to alter the planet, which poses a risk for its very own survival. Now, moves to treat societal problems, or not to treat them, like with climate change, can have irreversible consequences. These are then *inelastic problems* (Kruse 2022) – in contrast, for instance, to (pre-anthropocene) political processes, which may have “windows of opportunity”, but are not strictly irreversible (simply put: no revolution is lost forever). It can therefore be said that the bar for democratic understanding and collective action is now much higher than it ever has been.

Requirements for Successful Democratic Problem Solving

Against this background, the question of development paths is posed differently: it is not just about a somehow functioning democracy, but a discourse that successfully addresses ecological challenges. This will include *political understanding* and *cooperation* (rather than viewing politics as a kind of battle), and *collective action* in many fields; and also, a stronger element of *planning ahead*.

Now, is digitizing public sphere's structure able to meet these demands, or would it rather undermine them?

For one, there is the claim that technological innovations would, in a sense, ‘overtake’ today's problem pressure. And strictly speaking, this would (have to) exceed instrumental-technical means (e.g., procedures for carbon dioxide storage). A society would also have to be able to agree successfully on taking such measures, and scaling them sufficiently.

From another angle, the situation might rather look like this: of all things, when the problems become bigger and bigger, the means become less. Why? Because a digitally transformed public sphere is nowadays often considered to be problematic in itself, for instance for providing new substrates for conspiracy theory. Think of phenomena like “post-truth”, “q-anon” and so on: of course, such tendencies will not help, but hinder democracies to solve crucial problems. And why is that? Because democracies coordinate themselves via discourse. And if that discourse does not work properly, problems are likely to become even worse.

Cultural Aspects, Learning, and Affordances

At this point, it is beneficial to stress that a very close connection between technology or structure on the one hand, and the capability of democratic publics on the other, is misleading. Of course, digital transformations of the public sphere bring with them a number of structural changes, and these must be taken into account theoretically. The punch line is rather: yes, platforms do have affordances, yet they do not determine how to be used. Recent perceptions of difficult, often unproductive and sometimes hateful derailment of communication on social media are not adequately explained by platform or media structure. For instance, why are there far more shame than, say, storms of love? In other words: there are aspects of miscommunication that point to underlying problems. In fact, structural changes of the public sphere are also connected with learning and cultural aspects. I will sketch this dynamic with recourse to an interpretation of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (Kant 2007), and then link it to recent findings.

From *Decontiguated Public Sphere*...

From my point of view, the question should rather be raised as to how citizens arrive at their judgments, how they form their opinions. That will be much more dispersed under digital conditions, much less predictable and expectable than in the public sphere of the 20th century, which was characterized by top-down distribution. Therefore, my proposal is to deploy the notion of a *decontiguated public sphere*, i.e., a public spatially and temporally decoupled. By that, I mean: there are fewer and fewer dominant formats or channels (even if there are still structuring elements). The experience of and participation in media is, in a sense, less centered. Also, new forms of AI bring about new challenges, for instance to the concept of truth. Which source, which footage is, after all, credible?

Against this background, it is now becoming increasingly important, as repeatedly elaborated by current judgment theory literature, for citizens to successfully agree on something, without there being anything like a predefined path for doing so. Situational judgment, scale, appropriateness, all these things become more important in characterizing public sphere under digital conditions.

Of course, communication does not have to succeed, judgments do not have to be appropriate – yet, both are helpful (and probably in the end essential) when it comes to solving problems, or averting crises. In these respects, it is worthwhile to search for the appropriate or correct judgment, as burdensome as it may be. For in liberal societies, for coordination to occur at all, social understanding must first succeed to a certain extent. As Linda Zerilli puts it:

“However we may share Arendt’s optimism, her valorization of opinion as the sole coinage of politics and refusal to regard political judgment as making cognitive validity claims that can be adjudicated according to shared truth criteria ... leaves her unable to answer what is arguably the most pressing question for a contemporary democratic theory of judgment; namely, how can we decide which judgment is correct?” (Zerilli 2016, 2).

So, within digital constellation, it seems paramount to foster citizens' ability to judge rationally, because there are less top-down-elements, and also more (and more severe) opportunities for judgment to fail.

...To a *Judgment Environment*

Now, if you ask how to learn to judge, the answer is: by judging (cf. Düttmann 2016). In advanced, pluralist and complex societies, though, judging almost always involves reconstructing the judgments of others. However, one will only gain certainty in one's own judgments if a certain amount of reconstructed judgments can actually be reconstructed in a meaningful way.

This is why, for Kant, “reason is further interested in ideas (for which in our moral feeling it brings about an immediate interest) having also objective reality ... at least [...] a trace or [...] a hint” (Kant 2007, 130). That is one of the central points of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, as it appears from today's perspective: the ability to reconstruct requires (in learning theory terms) a certain degree of reconstructibility. Judgments encountered should, accordingly, be intelligible and meaningful to at least some degree (an idea that also guides Hegel's theory of spirit, yet in a broader sense).

This is where the notion of a *judgment environment* comes into play. In a sense, it captures the landscape of found opportunities to judge, or the channels of typical patterns of experience in a digitized society. And these can be qualified from the sketched, Kant-inspired perspective, with a view to their suitability for supporting democratic processes. To put it another way, the possibility of citizens developing a critical consciousness, which seems structurally required in digital constellation, depends on the precondition of a certain (and flourishing) culture of understanding.

With this conclusion in mind, the focus of analysis shifts. Technological regulations are one thing; at the same time, from this point of view, they also appear as part of a sociocultural dynamic that is composed of diverse ingredients – i.e., as a judgment environment. In sum, this judgment environment must provide sufficient opportunities for individual judgment to develop. The bar to what extent this should succeed is higher today, because ecological problems are potentially irreversible. The concept of democracy is therefore even more closely linked to the concepts of understanding and collective action. And this requirement defines the outline of some kind of “new republic”.

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