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Could the Internet be a safety-net for democracy in crisis?

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Abstract

Democratic politics does not meet the expectations of citizens who have gradually become more critical towards representative politics and the political elite that represent them. From these well-known considerations and social evaluation spread among the citizenry, this paper focuses on political representation and the concept of citizenship in the age of the Internet. After discussing the positive and negative aspects of digital disintermediation (and hence *neo-intermediation*), this study concentrates on the potentialities of the role of the Internet, with its ambiguities, and monitoring of citizens' engagement as a possible safety-net for representative democracies in crisis worldwide.

Keywords: counter-democracy; monitorial citizen; monitoring democracy; post-representative politics; representation; representative democracy crisis

Introduction

There are some specific trends concerning politics and democracy that mark global society. On one hand, since the seventies the number of countries that have embraced democratic principles has grown even though over the past decade the amount of democratic countries has been slightly declined as annual research out by Freedom House show.

Many political systems have opened up to the institutionalization of civil liberties over recent decades. However, it must also be said that the most recent tendency is scale-down and mark time. According to the 2019 edition of the *Freedom in the World*[1] report, 44% of world countries are included in the group of the so-called 'free countries', and 30% are ranked as 'partially free'. Thus, 26% are reported as *not free* political systems. Populations that live in a *free country* are a minority of approximately 39% of the total world population. Using different indicators and ranking scales, a similar figure is also presented in the *Democracy Index* constructed by the Economist Intelligence Unit.[2] Both analyses reach the same interpretation: there is a 'deterioration of trust in democracy' as DemoIndex wrote, or there is a phenomenon of 'Democracy in Retreat' as reported in the Freedom House analysis. Something similar comes from the report *Freedom on the Net*, issued by the same organization. The latest edition (2018) has an emblematic title: *The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism*. The first few lines of this work are the following:

'The internet is growing less free around the world, and democracy itself is withering under its influence. Disinformation and propaganda disseminated online have poisoned the public sphere. [...] global internet freedom declined for the eighth consecutive year in 2018'.[3]

[1]See https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019.
[2]See http://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index.
[3]See https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/freedom-net-2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism.

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In the meantime, findings from Eurobarometer opinion poll show how European citizens' satisfaction with the democracy works at the individual national level has slightly increased between 1976 and the autumn of 2018. The proportion of European citizens who state being satisfied has been quite stable at 56–57% over the last four waves of data collection performed twice per year in 2017 and 2018. Considering all seventy times this indicator was collected over the last decades, the overall mean is around 52%.[4] In the end, this means that almost a half of Europeans are not satisfied with how democracy works in their own countries.

Conceptualized both as a founding principle and as a method of government, today democracy finds an even broader consensus in European and global public opinion. The desire for democracy has fostered citizens' mobilization to gain civil and political rights in different parts of the world.

This was the case from the 'Arab Spring' to the events known as 'Occupy Central' in Hong Kong, not to mention many other episodes throughout the world in which the Internet was an important 'tool' for organizing and communicating those protest events to global public opinion.

On the other hand, democratic systems arouse in their own citizens a sentiment of deep dissatisfaction with regards to concrete functioning and to the quality of the political process. An ever-increasing *gap* between *demos* and party politics, a kind of *void* that is very difficult to rule according to Peter Mair (2013), has been widening in western democracies. The political establishment is subject to different kinds of pressures. Social support towards institutions has weakened in terms of political legitimation by citizens. At the same time, from the perspective of represented and ruled citizens, real democracy presents problems of *responsiveness* and *accountability*. In other words, representative politics does not meet the expectations of citizens who have become gradually more critical towards governmental performance and the political elite that represent them.

This scenario is complicated and, in some sense, ambiguous. Democracy definitely assumes an important meaning in the global citizenry's perspective (Doorenspleet, 2019), but as well the delegitimating process of the main democratic and representative institutions are effective, as witnessed by the worldwide populist challenge. Thus, the aim of this paper is to respond to a fundamental question within the digital age: to what extent could the Internet be a safety-net for representative democracy in crisis?

Scholars are wondering whether 'democracy is in decline' and citizens are living a kind of democratic recession (Diamond and Plattner, 2015). In order to deal with this issue – where politics and technology are dialectically intertwined, citizens live within a sort of 'democratic limbo' after the rise of the Internet, since the 'transition to something different seems to be radically incomplete' (Coleman, 2017: 83) – the general framework and literature will be addressed in the following section on the *crisis of representative democracy* which frames the whole study. Some key issues will be discussed throughout the next two sections, where the first one addresses the issue of a new paradigm for understanding citizens' engagement and the second one discusses light and shadow closely related to the digital disintermediation created by the media technology revolution. After this section, and before final remarks, the study will focus on the metamorphosis of western democracies towards a post-representative politics.

The crisis of representative democracy as a frame

A complex notion by itself, representation also has a problematic relationship with democracy. *Representation* and *democracy* are an 'Uneasy Alliance' as stated by Hanna Fenichel Pitkin (2004) in a self-proclaimed 'slightly revisionist' but also quite pessimistic essay about

[4]Our analysis on data from Eurobarometer Standard opinion pool which is usually carried out twice per year in the *spring* and *autumn waves*.

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representation. After her seminal book – *The Concept of Representation* – first published in 1967 and now a classic work of political theory, she again highlights how complex this notion is:

'[t]he concept of "representation" is puzzling not because it lacks a central definition, but because that definition implies a paradox (being present and yet not present) and is too general to help reconcile the word's many senses with their sometimes conflicting implications' (Pitkin, 2004: 335).

Like other eminent scholars such as Bernard Manin (1997) or Alessandro Pizzorno (2017), Pitkin reaches to the conclusion that the representative government is a new form of oligarchy with ordinary people excluded from public life. Representation has had a sort of backward effect on democracy itself where one of the three obstacles to a genuine participatory democracy concerns idea and their formation in the age of electronic and digital media. Citizens

'become habituated to the role of spectator. The line between fantasy and reality blurs […] As for those who set policy and shape the images, insulated from any realty check, they soon become captive to their own fictions. All this does not bode well for democracy […]' (*ibidem*, 341–342).

In this framework, the Internet plays an important role in the political and public sphere. The digital revolution has been working in the direction of fragmentation of the audience and public opinion space (Manin, 2017: 45). The different theoretical perspectives proposed by scholars have not yet come to a common conclusion, in part because of the difficulties in measuring and empirically verifying the possible *proto-political* effects this kind of connection could have (Dahlgren, 2009). In the meantime, empirical research has not found any negative relationships between the use of the Web by citizens and their civic involvement (Christensen, 2011). The discussion about its impact on the political sphere is, therefore, still open.

At the base of this discourse, however, there is an important question that must be considered – that is, the malaise of representative politics, the so-called *demopathy* which is due to the convergence of diverse phenomena: cultural, political and technological (Di Gregorio, 2019).

Representation is a conceptual model, but it is also an inherent part of the democratic process. It has both theoretical elements and political practicality, and so many other implications (Pitkin, 1972).

On one hand, there is nothing new in this regard. It is a sort of truism in some respects. On the other hand, this scenario is called into question by different but connected phenomena that have an impact on the *democratic innovation* processes, discussed by Gram Smith (2009). There is a shift in citizens' political culture, especially among young generations, and increased Information and Communication Technology (ICT) innovation (not to say revolution) which is strictly related to the 'civic and political use' of the Internet. There now exist *e-democracy* procedures, taking part in deliberative arenas and also in *open government* initiative as well as various modes of *e-participation* such as becoming informed and fostering mobilization. All of them might strengthen and innovate the relationship among citizens, institutions and the political process itself within the frame of representative forms of democracy in crisis (De Blasio, 2014, 2018; Sorice, 2014).

From this standpoint, it is the concept of democratic representation as a whole that shows clear signs of trouble being stimulated, or better challenged, by populist phenomenon and by the idea of an anti-establishment and direct (or *immediate* that is without mediation) politics. The combination of important processes, such as the weakening of the nation-state – which for a long time has framed traditional political participation – and the growing international interdependence of political, financial, and economic interests make global governance ever more complex. From environmental problems to financial flows, from the issue of migrants and refugees to the risk of International terrorism, political questions today are (about) closely linked issues. Rulers today face more difficulties in outlining future scenarios and making choices in ways that are consistent with social demands, changing political culture, and identity within the frame of the *globalization backlash* as understood by Colin Crouch (2018).

Moreover, the progressive rise of populism and *sovereignism*, with its related political forces and fostered by the sentiment against political establishment, are rooted in this framework of limited

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responsiveness and weak *accountability*. Thus, it has become increasingly more problematic for politicians – belonging to both the so-called *mainstream* and *anti-establishment* parties – to respond to voters who voted for them on the basis of election promises made during campaigns. As well, electoral campaigns have become progressively more dramatic both in tone and content. Consequently, once in public office it is very difficult to put into practice promises candidates made: they become prisoners of their communicative rhetoric.

Moreover, the global world consists of both a complex network of international interests and new kinds of problems, where economic-financial powers hold a position that highlights a sort of structural weakness of the political sphere. Thus, the institutions of political representation and mediation of interests – such as political parties, trade unions, but also parliaments – are actually the political bodies most affected by the crisis of representative democracy. Populist discourse takes place within this frame. Without mentioning it directly, Pitkin herself affirmed:

'[D]espite repeated efforts to democratize the representative system, the predominant result has been that representation has supplanted democracy instead of serving it. Our governors have become a self-perpetuating elite that rules – or rather, administers – passive or privatized masses of people. The representatives act not as agents of the people but simply instead of them' (Pitkin, 2004: 339).

The populist style adopted by various political actors based on the widespread anti-political sentiment of citizens, the revaluation of (online and offline) direct and deliberative democracy, as well as practices like the *referendum* (Milligan, 2016) are all connected to the possibility of popular control and reshaping democratic mechanisms.

The very presence of the model of personalized parties, when not 'personal' (Calise, 2010; Bordignon, 2014) recasts the notion of representation itself and thus the specific concept of representative democracy. This state of affairs has also led to a rethinking of the broader concept of democracy, progressively enriched with prefixes and attributes in recent political literature. These re-conceptualizations include *hyper-democracy* (Rodotà, 2013), *counter-democracy* (Rosanvallon, 2008), *post-democracy* (Crouch, 2004), *monitoring democracy* (Keane, 2009), *hybrid democracy* (Diamanti, 2014), *audience democracy* (Manin, 1997), *in-direct democracy* (Urbinati, 2013), even *stealth democracy* (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002) and, of course, *e-democracy* (Chadwick, 2009; Coleman and Blumer, 2009) to mention a few.

They also include 'immediate' democracy, meaning a kind of *referendum democracy* with weak mediation bodies; a democracy in the framework of post-representative politics (Tormey, 2015). In other words, it is the sign of a mutation underway in the form of representative governments: the *peoplecracy* (Diamanti and Lazar, 2018).

The theoretical discussion on democratic dynamics focuses on the pivotal process of disintermediation, which implies re-intermediation through new actors and mechanisms. This could be named as *neo-intermediation* and is a category that was already used with particular reference to new media and social networking (Giacomini, 2018: 87–114). Yet, it might also be extended to the logic of the political scenario.

The Internet, and more specifically the Web 2.0 – social media and mobile connection – has contributed to shaping a particular model of community. The 'traditional' model has gradually turned into the so-called *network society*, as defined by Jan van Dijk (1991, 2006) and Manuel Castells (1996) over the Nineties. However, the concept of social relations was already discussed more than a century before by the classical social theorist Georg Simmel who, in his famous *Metropolis and Mental life*, focussed on the modernization process of his time and its effects in shaping the new *forms* of it. In this regard, referring to the role of ICTs in late modernity, Rainie and Wellman (2012) discussed three revolutions – the rise of social networking, the consolidation of the Internet, and the always-on connectivity of mobile devices – that have strongly contributed to re-design the contemporary society's 'operating system' and have changed the traditional and established *patterns* of social relationships.

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The present world has increasingly been marked by the processes of globalization and has changed deeply over the last few decades. A citizen of a global society is definitely a new actor. S/he is an individual who approaches everyday (political) life with the strategies of dis-intermediation (i.e. *individualized collective action* as discussed below) and s/he is also approached by political leaders through the same model of direct communicative interaction (due to social network platforms). Meanwhile, *neo-intermediation* structures were created – especially within the Internet arena, in which new and digital intermediators have undermined traditional ones.

In terms of political culture citizens are reinventing the forms of participation in order to be part of the political community to which they belong. For this reason, the relationship between citizens and their political community becomes a fundamental question for discussion.

In the post-modern era, the socialization process is strongly sped-up by technological change and by new models of social relations that distinguish this society and its *media generations* (Bolin, 2017). Classical mediation bodies have resided within representative democracies, but political parties have also changed deeply at the organizational level, in terms of communication strategies. Of course, even in the *audience democracy* (Manin, 1997) the party apparatus continues to have significant weight in the party itself, but the leader's public image and thus their political fortunes are built mostly by means of a direct relationship between leader and voters, where different types of media are used to reach the audience without intermediation.

The need for new 'lenses' to understand citizen engagement

Political parties reflect social change and transformations in citizens' political culture. Study of party transformation gives us the opportunity to shed light on the relationship between society and politics. It also allows understanding of how citizens have been reinventing their political activism.

Political citizenship in the post-modern era

Citizens' engagement has also changed. Voters are now living a disenchanted relationship with political parties. Party identification was stronger in the past. The vote is an essential ritual that belongs to the mechanism of representative democracy, even though criticism towards this process of selection is widespread in public debate. In this regard, a debate can also be seen on the rediscovery of democracy based on the drawing of lots to select rulers – as in the past (Van Reybrouck, 2016). From the perspective of citizens that live in western democracies, the meaning of the vote is different today than in the past. Voting has lost its relevance and its 'sacred' nature from the contemporary voters' viewpoint. The decline of voter turnout and the growth of electoral volatility are common features that characterize the modern democracies and are clues concerning the broader on-going change.

Likewise, citizens have also changed the ways they engage, mobilize, and gather information. The 'cognitive orientation' is a fundamental dimension of a *participatory* political culture and is also a central element for defining and re-thinking the modern concept of political citizenship (Ceccarini, 2015).

The redefinition of citizenship norms has an impact on the ways in which citizens activate their political *responsibility-taking* (Micheletti, 2003). Likewise, it has an impact on participation in a political community and on the forms of participation – which are not declining but are merely changing. Citizenship norms have shifted from a pattern of *duty-based* citizenship to *engaged* citizenship (Dalton, 2008). In this regard, Pippa Norris (2002) talked about the 'democratic phoenix' to address the evolution citizens have demonstrated in reinventing political participation modes.

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In some respects, citizens today appear more demanding, critical, and undoubtedly distant from traditional politics and particularly from its main reference points – such as so-called *mainstream* political parties.

In the political landscape of post-modernization, of risk society and globalization, citizens' political identity assumes multiple, more flexible and hybrid forms than in the past – for example, at the time of *first modernity* when this notion had been intended as *unitary*, created through participation in and belonging to well-established institutions – first political parties and unions – oriented to the political system and its apparatus.

By contrast, over late modernity, *responsibility-taking* for common well-being embraces forms of democratic citizenship and political engagement which are increasingly founded on an *individual* basis. This reflects the processes of *individualization* described by scholars such as Antony Giddens or Ulrich Beck who first studied the consequences of globalization.

Participation in the post-modern era

However, according to Micheletti's analysis (2003: 24–34), this kind of societal atmosphere leads to the creation of *individualized collective action* modes that can take place in a variety of *subpolitical* places (Beck *et al.*, 1994), interlacing *self-assertive*, *self-actualizing*, and *self-reflexivity* traits which characterize some contemporary forms of political engagement. This shapes a sort of direct involvement based on both *every-day* and *do it yourself* (DIY) activism, as stated by Lance Bennett (1998) and Antony Giddens (1991), when they had respectively talked about *lifestyle politics* and *life politics*. Citizens are in the position to create their own political home, skipping *established* and territorially based structures such as membership-based organizations such as the traditional political parties and interest groups.

In the *liquid modernity* society, as described by Zygmunt Bauman, social relationships are by definition more fluid and unanchored by traditional and strong collectively shared identitarian references. All of this has an impact on how citizens approach politics and the role of the *sub-political* arenas that have become increasingly relevant to political participation. That is, new and different political spaces have emerged, giving unprecedented room to the manifestation of civic and political responsibility-taking with respect to public interest issues.

Traditionally, political participation actions have always had devoted places in which to develop, such as: polling stations during elections, public squares for contentious politics, party headquarters for political meetings, electoral committees for working volunteering for a candidate during the campaign, lobbies for lobbying and so on.

The crisis of mainstream political parties and the shift in political culture have both affected the modes of citizens' engagement. *Individualized* forms of participation can be seen as indications that strong transformations have taken place in contemporary societies. This framework includes the *critical citizen* which is a kind of *ideal-type* of social actor, critical towards the performance of the democratic government and its main institutions and open to new forms of political engagement. This kind of citizen does not disregard the very democratic principles in which s/he continues to believe. Instead, they express dissatisfaction above all for concrete governmental policies implemented and for democratic representative bodies that are strongly delegitimized by citizens themselves (Norris, 1999).

This stance targets specific actors and elements. For example, party loyalty is firstly affected by this attitude. The hard-core of the parties' electoral base has gradually been eroded over time. The same has happened to their membership, which is now deeply reduced.

But as structures of power, political parties continue to have strength and centrality despite having lost legitimacy with citizens. Political dynamics are broader and go beyond parties, although they continue to play a fundamental role even in scenarios where representative democracy is in crisis. There are specific domains in which parties remain crucial actors, such as parliamentary politics and electoral campaigns. Citizens, however, tend to *articulate* and then transmit their demands differently from the model of *party democracy*

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'(…) together with the erosion of loyalty to parties, the other salient change that has taken place in recent decades is the advent of non-institutionalized political participation. More and more citizens participate in demonstrations, sign petitions or submit their petitions directly to those who decide' (Manin, 2010: 281–282).[5]

Going beyond mediation

Transnational phenomenon like the Occupy movement and that of the Indignados are two recent and topical examples – among others – of this kind of trend that underlines how the mechanism of the representative politics is changing (Tormey, 2015). As well, various recent referendums such as Brexit in the United Kingdom or the Constitutional referendum in Italy – or others in other European democracies – are part of a revival of direct democracy.

Moreover, modes of participation without *mediation* imply two fundamental conditions. First is the disavowal of the traditional actors of the political representation is implicit. The second refers to a spreading sense of discontent with the political system as a whole, if not to open disapproval. This kind of activism is distinguished by three main characteristics, as underlined by Manin (2010: 284): dis-continuity, the single-issue approach and finally the dis-intermediated structure. In particular:

1. the intermittent and irregular nature of participation leads to an activism that develops when the windows of the *political opportunities structure* are open, that is, objective and favourable conditions to the explosion of specific instances, in many cases through *contentious politics*;
2. mobilization is achieved by focusing on a specific issue: it becomes a *single issue*, if not in small, granular, and scattered groups which are organized in a flexible way even around a *single event* (Bimber, 2003). This implies the presence of different types of activists and different audiences that are variable and composed of according to the issue at stake. This signifies, among other points, that there is a fragmentation through which post-modern political participation develops and, in turn, mirrors the complexity of the socio-political environment in which citizens live;
3. disintermediation is expressed through the direct transmission of social demand to those who decide: the rulers. The traditional and institutionalized structures of mediation are overridden by these modes of engagement that embrace a logic in which the mechanism of representation is scaled down in favour of a *direct* dimension. In this dynamic a sort of 'revolution against intermediate bodies takes place'. The demand for a new 'in-directness of politics' has been developed, where the potential of technological means of communication makes participation less dependent on the traditional resources, such as those related to socio-economic status. Internet is considered a factor that supports the process of democratization itself (Urbinati, 2013: 181–182). Targets, place, and forms of political participation are deeply affected by those changes.

Specifically, the public sphere is enriched by the opportunities available on the Internet and more precisely on Web 2.0 apps. This mediatized public space, which was first to the mainstream media, is *hybridized* by new media (Chadwick, 2013). The same has happened around more traditional and institutionalized forms of political activism. In fact, engagement is becoming more articulated and *fragmented* than in the past. It has assumed forms of *individualized collectivist action* (Micheletti, 2003) and sometimes even *creative* modes of political participation (Micheletti and McFarland, 2011; Van Deth, 2011).

[5]The excerpt is our translation from the Manin's *Afterword* – titled The Audience Democracy Revisited – to the Italian translation of The Principles of Representative Government.

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Today, studying how citizens become part of a political community has to take into consideration new paradigms and then new analytical categories for better framing and understanding what is going on in the relationship between society and politics. If scholars remain anchored to traditional theories, models, and indicators, they fail to fully grasp the extent of the transformations underway, their consequences in civil life and therefore in the evolution of the modern democracies.

The process of transmitting information has changed rapidly due to the boost in communication through *new media*. However, digital activism is not definitively able to replace offline participation activities, which remain the fundamental realm for citizens' engagement. It does, however, expand participation in a two-fold way. On one hand, digital citizenship enlarges the repertoire of collective action and on the other it is a fundamental element that links online and offline engagement.

Whether the scientific process continues to look at citizens' engagement and at public opinion formation with the 'lenses' of the past, the risk is to be unable to observe and grasp what is truly happening in society. Hence, conclusions drawn would refer only to categories such as disenchantment, decline, malaise. These also exist, but they are just a part of the whole story. Consequently, the outline drawn would be inaccurate and, therefore, the resulting representation would be limited and even distorted.

Light and shadow in digital 'disintermediation'

Given the above, citizens in the postmodern society might be called *individualized* actors, in the sense that traditional references for identity and for feeding their sense of belonging to large social groups have weakened over time. As a consequence, new models of citizens' participation have emerged and spread into *subpolitical* arenas. This has happened through direct and reticular forms of engagement, but also by means 'personal' and fragmented modes – which refer to the concept of *individualized collective action* as mentioned in the previous section.

Those traditional systems of individual identification have progressively lost their consistency. The *liquid society* is a category used to typify the postmodern world. In this scenario, models of relationships have a less hierarchical and institutionalized structure. Forms of discontinuous engagement are also manifested through Web opportunities for engagement, as well as within styles of individualized forms of participation and *lifestyle politics*.

The very normative idea of the *good citizen* has changed as well from the *omni-competent* model to a *monitorial* one. That is, '[c]itzens can be monitorial rather than informed' (Schudson, 1998: 310). Perhaps, Walter Lippmann's idea of *omni-competent citizen*, discussed in his work *Public opinion* (1922), has never existed, neither in the 'golden age' of the past nor today. Even in the traditional political community described by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and by Alexis de Tocqueville, this kind of well-informed and deeply-engaged citizen was not particularly widespread in the societies of that time. As these authors report highly *sophisticated* citizens involved in public interest issues have always been a tiny minority. Something similar also happened earlier in the direct democracy of the Greek *pòleis* when a set of incentives had to be established and then provided to encourage Athenians to participate in their ancient democracy (it was not representative but based on drawing of lots).

Fact checking and 'monitoria'

Information abundance (Keane, 2013) and the digital disintermediation that mark present society make the exchange of information easier, with lower costs for the citizen. It also implies some risks to the democratic process. Just think of the debate around *fake news* spread via social media and the dispute about *post-truth* that exploded during 2016 after the vote on Brexit in June, the election of Donald Trump in November, but also in the aftermath of the Italian

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constitutional referendum held in December. More recently, about 2 weeks before the 2019 European election-day, Facebook Italia, following a complaint from Avaaz[6] Ong, deactivated 23 pages (with 2.4 million followers) because they were spreading misinformation and hate speech contents.[7] That document reports that approximately half of those pages were close to 5-star Movement or Lega political parties. 'Fake news' has become a post-modern category that actually labels an ancient phenomenon involving events based on political calculation.

Therefore, this does not concern only the Web and social media, even though it must be considered that this kind of news goes viral quickly in the *networked society* because of the potentiality of the Internet itself. On the other hand, the Web is also the main channel through which citizens who had believed real *fake news* can uncover them. In Italy, for example, recent research[8] shows that more than half of Italians (56%) have considered true false news that they read on the Internet. About 23% say they have shared *fake news* that believed true. Yet, in the new media one out of three Italians have also had the opportunity to realize those news were false – vs. one out of four in the *legacy* media. Therefore, the web is both the place of the fallacy but also the place of demystification, once more underscoring the ambiguity of the Internet.

At the same time *fake news* pushes civil society (online) monitors to face, or at least to discuss[9] this complicated issue. Those watchdog entities indirectly enhance the function of the scrutinizing bodies through *fact-checking* activities within the main worldwide consolidated democracies.[10] This kind of activism is strictly linked to the 'rate' of trustworthiness of the news and of those news sources and journalists that diffuse or uncover them, with repercussions for their public image. In other words, it has to do with the verification of the sources and the contents of the news, which is a typical and an essential practice of good journalism.

The responsibility of the big media companies, such as search engines or social media *apps*, is called into question for implementing surveillance strategies in order to ensure the quality of the information provided (or how personal information are used by third parties, as shown by the well-known story regarding the big data company Cambridge Analytica). News from these sources enter the political debate and contribute to the formation of public opinion as well as to voters' reasoning about their choices in elections.

For example, one of the most recurrent issues during the first part of the Italian pre-electoral debate in the run-up to the 4 March 2018 General election was devoted to fake news. The Democratic Party has begun to publish a periodical and partisan report on fake news that, so far, has been issued four times. It is named the *Disinformation Report*,[11] and it accuses the PD's competitors, such as the League and particularly the Five-star Movement of being the two main fake news producers against the Democratic Party via a number of Facebook groups which supported those parties.[12]

The other side of the Internet

The Internet has also another, less-dark side in terms of how citizens can gather information. Today looking for news on collective interest subjects, at local, national, or global levels has a

[6]The Avaaz report in available at https://avaazpress.s3.amazonaws.com/ITNetworks-ExecSumm-11_05_2019.pdf.

[7]Avaaz report states that there is a wider disinformation network that includes 104 pages and six groups, with a total of 18 million followers and 23 million interactions over the 3 months before the report was presented (3 May 2019).

[8]Survey carried out by Demos&Pi on December 2017, available at http://www.demos.it/a01462.php.

[9]See the civic campaign about fake news, supported by communication studies scholars, at http://www.digitaltransformationinstitute.it/2017/12/05/fakenews/.

[10]For the Italian case, see fact-checking platforms such as *bufale.net*, *disinformatico.info*, *factchecking.it*, *pagellapolitica.it*.

[11]Available at https://www.democratica.com/focus/quarto-report-pd-fake-news/, accessed 28 February 2019.

[12]Press investigations made by *Buzzfeed* and then deepened by *The New York Times* a few months before the General Election of 2018, reached the conclusion of a connection between those parties and some partisan Facebook pages involved in online disinformation.

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decisively lower cost in comparison even with the recent past. Moreover, citizens also have the opportunity to play an active role in this regard, both *personalizing* the information obtained through notification systems and using online participation opportunities for their own political and civic *responsibility-taking*.

Information circulates with particular dynamism. It is fast, viral and also *on demand*. There is a real possibility for citizens to personalize their media diet, breaking time and space limits thanks to streaming services or choosing which notifications to receive by particular *news web portals*. Digital dis-intermediated communication systems expand the models of circulating information, which is no longer just a *one to many* transmission scheme but includes the *many to many* logic. Social networks are at the centre of a tangle of new and mainstream media entities where the *hybridization* process takes place.

Moreover, contents spread directly or indirectly on the Web and reverberate through interpersonal discussion in everyday life, affecting public opinion formation (Campus *et al.*, 2015) and shaping the voting choice (Ceccarini, 2018). In the digital realm, un-searched information also reaches citizens (or at least their mobile devices) through the continuous flow of *notifications*. Furthermore, an increasing proportion of Internet users are *always-on* via portable devices that allow them to use a mobile connection to the Internet.

In the online dimension, this particular type of media environment objectifies the well-known category of the *third place* of Ray Oldenburg (1991). Offline third places such as bars, coffee shops, general stores, and others are essential to community and public life. These are informal and ephemeral dialogical fields that add to another two places. The first is *home* and the familiar environment, the second is the *workplace* and colleagues. From this scholar's perspective, the third place is also central to local politics and democracy and to community vitality. Information – even political information – circulates in *third places* since they provide anchorages to the community to which citizens belong.

Given the diffusion and ease of use of social media, as well as instant messaging *apps* (IM), this ephemeral space is going to end up affecting not only the younger generations[13] that are naturally suited to this kind of communication, but also other segments of the population which are less skilled in the use of those tools, thanks to the user-friendliness of them.

For this reason, the traditional theory of *generations* – developed first by the Italian historian Giuseppe Ferrari (1874) and over the Twenties by the German sociologist Karl Mannheim (1952) and the Spanish philosopher Ortega Y Gasset (1931) – combined with the far more recent discussion on the media landscape and its role in generations formation – as examined by Göran Bolin (2017) who discussed the idea of *media generations* – permits an understanding of the on-going shift that has been affecting contemporary democracies. In fact, the 'objective' media landscape can be considered a contextual structure that, together with the political and cultural realm, affects generational identities, their perspectives and guide citizens' action towards politics. The totality of media landscape has then become a very formative component for young citizens and their experience. They are naturally socialized with new media technologies which can be used as a tool to be part of the political community and to participate within it. Embracing a generational perspective allows scholars to understand the ways citizens gather general and, more specifically, political information and then how they are going to seek them in the future (Bentivegna e Ceccarini, 2013: 196; Ceccarini, 2018: 82–86). In addition, this perspective also allows us to know how they take and how they will take positions on public and political interest issues, and the possible shift from the past and mainstream media users.

[13]According to Demos&Pi survey carried out on December 2017, 69% of Italians (15 years and older) use an IM app. Among them, during the year before the interview, 33% have received texts on political issues, 22% have sent messages on political arguments, and 26% have discussed politics on this app (methodological information is available at http://www.demos.it/a01462.php).

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Online public sphere?

The growing pervasiveness of the Web also pushes scholars to re-think the classical problem concerning the *digital divide*. Studies in this field have developed various models through which citizens with different skill sets use the Internet. Thanks to new online platforms and the latest generation devices (smartphones in the first place) the gap in accessing and using the opportunity of the Web is to a certain extent mitigated. Increasing user-friendliness, helpful even for citizens with fewer skills, fosters this trend. Social networking and notification systems allow users to be reached directly and favour exposure to content of political interest, in some sense like in a traditional (online) *third place*.

Furthermore, the controversial issue concerning the effects of the *echo chambers* and *filter bubbles* do not seem to be particularly widespread and influential, neither within western democracies nor in Italy, as showed by recent Itanes research findings focussing on the electoral campaign (Legnante and Vaccari, 2018: 71–74). This is primarily because citizens use and combine multiple sources of information, such as new media, legacy media, and face to face communication to get informed and shape their political opinions. In addition, citizens who discuss politics via web-blogs or social network are a minority of the population (about 13%). The percentage of citizens who are engaged in political discussion offline is much higher, roughly six out of ten (62%).[14] Of course, they are involved in a different form of interaction. It is not the same thing to have a face to face conversation as to discuss issues via online device. Furthermore, and particularly important, there are no significant differences in terms of internal homogeneity in political orientation between offline and online social groups in which politics is discussed. Respondents who say that most of the components in their discussion groups share the same degree of political orientation amounts to about one out of three in both groups.[15] This means that in two cases out of three those citizens interact in online political discussions where the heterogeneity of the political view is concrete – exposing members to differing viewpoints (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995). A certain degree of political homophily of discussion networks is then a trait that also concerns offline social groups, and not just those citizens active on Web discussions. Moreover, the process of public opinion formation is by its nature something complex and not limited to the influence of only one source of information. This will certainly not correspond entirely to the normative idea of the Habermasian *public sphere*. If anything, it refers to its ephemeral conception. The *eco-chamber* effect, relating to political background homogeneity of the online communities where citizens are engaged in political discussion, must also be assessed in the light of these data that, at least, characterize Italian societies and beyond.

The Internet as civil society monitor

In this scenario *monitoring power* can be seen as the other side of distrust. The very concept of distrust can have various connotations. It has usually been understood as the basis of political disenchantment and disengagement, and it is closely related to the decline of civic potential within a political community. Yet it can also be understood in a different way: as a stimulus and a fundamental premise of democratic control initiatives. The idea of *counter-democracy* proposed by Pierre Rosanvallon (2008) considers built-in Web opportunities a key element on which is founded the second meaning of mistrust – the one he calls *democratic distrust*. The Internet is seen and defined by the above-mentioned French historian as a 'political form'. In the

[14]Data source is the opinion poll carried out by Demos&Pi on December 2017. Methodological details are available at http://www.demos.it/a01462.php.

[15]According to Demos&Pi survey carried out on December 2017, the exact proportions of 'mostly agree with you' are: 31% concerning the offline political discussion groups and 35% for online groups (methodological information is available at http://www.demos.it/a01462.php). Similar figures come from Itanes post-electoral opinion poll 2018: about 20% is the proportion of electors who had discussed politics over the electoral campaign within groups in which most of the members shared the same political opinions (Legnante e Vaccari, 2018: 72).

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constellation of *supervisory* powers, the Web can be used to play a helpful role in improving the quality of (representative) democracy in the age of distrust (*ibidem*, 66–67).

Within this framework, *counter-democracy* must not be understood as something anti-democratic that denies democracy. Instead, it constitutes a democratic space that is complementary to the elections, which are necessarily episodic by their own nature (i.e. usually about every 4 or 5 years): 'The citizen as watchdog gains what the citizen-as-voter loses' (*ibidem*, 253). In other words, it can be seen as a corrective of *representation* in the hands of supervisory citizens who activate themselves directly (online and offline), through intermittent participation and within *post-bureaucratic* organizational forms that are detached from political parties (Bimber, 2003).

Civil society monitors as well as mobilizes organizational activities facilitated by the potential of the Web. Specialized web-sites for implementing online petitions or social networking platforms used to organize campaigns or like *Meet-up*, *FixMyStreet*, include new-generation lobbying models such as the one represented by MoveOn.org (Karpf, 2011). These are good examples of those civil society monitors. The basic problem behind this is how to control elected officials and rulers as

'elections are aristocratic if representatives are independent in the sense that constitutional theory gives to the term – that is to say, if they are not bound by instructions or imperative mandates' (Manin, 1997: 152).

Internet, of course, on its own guarantees neither a better trade-off between representatives and represented nor the affirmation of a *civis nobilis* 2.0 engaged in the post-modern civil society. Moreover, this 'on-line citizen' would not be an authentically new type of citizenship, but rather the *digital empowerment* of an *ideal typical* model already discussed in the political literature: the *civis nobilis* according to Giacomo Sani (2007).

Slacktivism and beyond

Moreover, the Web itself could also lead to the downfall of civic and political engagement, as argued by Evgeny Morozov on the risk of slacktivism for citizens politically engaged online:

'Thus, many of them join Facebook groups not only or not so much because they support particular causes but because they believe it's important to be seen by their online friends to care about such causes. In the past convincing themselves and, more important, their friends that they were indeed socially conscious enough to be changing the world required (at a minimum) getting off their sofas. Today, aspiring digital revolutionaries can stay on their sofas forever – or until their iPads' batteries run out – and still be seen as heroes' (Morozov, 2011: 187).

This specific kind of clicktivism is an approach that may have no impact on political life and politics itself, but it only satisfies the lazy activist, who through a simple *click* believes s/he has engaged her/himself in a collective interest issue. In doing so, this active citizen would not contribute beyond their ephemeral and fragmented action. Sometimes s/he would not transcend even the single event, taking part only with a simple donation, *posting* or *liking* an online content, which is something different than authentic on-the-ground civic or political engagement and in the traditional places of participation.

Beyond these fair critiques of the logic of social media and its embedded individualistic if not 'narcissistic' nature, the following should be also considered:

- the *expressive* dimension of participation – vs. the *instrumental* dimension – is a fundamental element for both the individual involvement in politics in general and, in particular, for being part of the community and participating in civic or political engagement projects towards it;
- social media allow forms of *expressiveness* – vs. *deliberation* (development is certainly limited by the online platforms because the very nature of this media) that facilitates the circulation of political information and opinions, which is the essence of any form of participatory involvement and connection between online and offline realms.

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– Finally, it should also be emphasized that this mode of engagement is expressed through a *micro-activism* carried out by small, scattered, informal, decentralized groups acting with limited resources online and offline at local, national, or international levels. These may be Facebook group activities, deliberative arenas, civic monitoring initiatives, locally based or wider, global campaigns. They may also be re-tweeting practices or political content sharing in the various social media platforms available on the Web and among citizens within the offline realm. This kind of micro-activism differs from traditional forms of engagement oriented towards the mobilization of citizens. The extensions of citizens' involvement and the goals of those initiatives are in some sense delimited and scattered on the ground (Marichal, 2013). Even for these specific features, however, social media engagement represents an important participatory dimension within the frame of a post-modern political community.

Towards a post-representative politics?

The topics discussed in the previous sections, such as the growth of anti-party political actors in modern liberal democracies, disaffection towards traditional mediators no longer legitimized by those represented, anti-political sentiment and, more specifically, anti-establishment orientation spread among citizens, foster direct, and *personalized* appeal by the representative to the electoral base with no mediation. All of these push citizens to embrace an *immediate* concept of democracy. The decline of the parties, which are the cornerstones of representation and mediation in politics, pushes scholars to re-think the fundamentals of representative politics (Tormey, 2015).

It is not politics in general that is being rejected by citizens. It is mainly the political actors of representative politics in its current formula that is criticized by the governed. In this context of spreading disenchantment, the category of the *post-representative* democracy could be very useful for understanding the political order of contemporary societies. Even though it sounds like a real oxymoron, this idea of democracy shows indeed how complex existing forms are. In fact, democracy itself is *de facto* conceived as representative in current western political culture.

Yet, this concept does not refer specifically to the crisis of the traditional parties and their ideological narratives, to the decline of deference attitudes towards the political class, to the weakening of the meaning of elections and the conventional forms of participation. It suggests that a change of paradigm is needed to observe political reality better. The coexistence of old and new political logics involving citizens in their political community must be considered within this new paradigm, where the former logic has been losing its (symbolic) attractiveness in favour of the latter. This means that non-bureaucratic formulas of mobilization agencies, individualized engagement, direct and tendentially leaderless action are becoming ever more attractive. They are also reticular and scattered in their shape. A low level of institutionalization characterizes micro-activism initiatives, which are emphatically far distant from the traditional actors of the political arena. Overall, those traits are becoming the modes that feature citizens' responsibility in postmodern society.

Variable geometry is the basis on which this kind of mobilization dynamically self-composes and re-composes. It develops within national borders and also goes beyond those of the nation-state. Global campaigns, national or local petitions, NGOs, web-bloggers, advocacy groups, and watchdog organizations are manifestations of this mode of political activism, and ICTs are a fundamental resource. ICTs are, in turn, interwoven with the change in the citizens' political culture. In this scenario, the ideas of the *monitoring* (Keane, 2009) or *surveillance* (Rosanvallon, 2008) democracy are fostered by the civic use of the Web and support the interpretation of a change of paradigm.

Thus, at the heart of this framework lies a particular model of citizenship – the *monitorial* one, which goes beyond the 'theoretical' (and unlikely) model of the *omni-competent* citizen as said above. Furthermore, this particular style of citizenship finds a place where citizens are only intermittently engaged. What emerges is an area for civic *surveillance* practices, based on attitudes of

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'democratic distrust', that further attention towards issues of public interest and of *common good* both locally and globally.

It is a citizen who activates only when s/he deems it necessary. That is, when s/he considers that his/her action is relevant, appealing, and it is worth taking action in a given social and political situation. The relevant turnout in the Italian Constitutional referendum of December 2016 was 68.5% – much higher than the two previous ones (2001: 34.1% and 2006: 53.8%), and very close to that of the 2018 General election (72.9%). These data offer some clues in this regard. Recent referendums held in Europe are a direct and apparently widely participated channel of expression that political party leaders had promoted in order to gain direct support from electors to legitimize their policies and to reinforce themselves. Sometimes, however, referendums have generated a *perverse effect* (*the heterogenesis of purposes*), creating an anti-establishment meaning against their original promoters. This is one interpretation of the success of *leave* – in the UK's June 2016 Brexit referendum. As well as the result, it should be also considered that the referendum turnout was higher than the previous General election. We can understand the significant participation in the two October 2017 Italian regional consultative referendums held along 'institutional' lines. They were promoted by the regional governors of Veneto and Lombardy, respectively, to ask for more autonomy from the central state, which is traditionally considered and identified as an expression of *the establishment*.

Differently than the (former) Northern League, Italian parties that have never had an autonomist political culture or request also embraced those referendums. This is the case of the 5-star Movement, which, however, has made *direct* contact with *the people* a central point of its conception of democracy.

The constitutional referendum and successive ones demanding a higher degree of autonomy were seen as two opportunities for *direct* participation methods that offered citizens themselves a chance and an institutional tool to channel critical sentiment towards the political elite.

Conclusions

The above scenario sets out an increasingly complex framework marked by even softer lines of demarcation, where citizens practice new modes of participation and overcome the apathy behind which they seemed to have hidden.

Citizens have often been depicted as a passive audience. Now they have experienced the opportunity to embrace a participatory approach that is different from the traditional role. This new role is characterized by intermittent, and at times individualized, dis-intermediate or, even better, neo-intermediate, mobilization initiatives.

Sometimes, these initiatives have been realized by means of new post-bureaucratic political entrepreneurs following the path of *democratic innovation* based on digital platforms (Sorice, 2019), online, and granular networks of active citizens' groups devoted to petitions, local to global campaigns, flash mobs, checking *open-data*, (discursive) political consumerism and so on.

Those engaged citizens remain emotionally far distant from traditional political actors, as the declining membership of political parties and trade unions, and even electoral volatility, demonstrate. Casting a vote in an election, which is the fundamental ritual of representative politics, is practised less and less in modern democratic systems. This kind of citizen has embraced *liquid* forms of responsibility-taking, different from the *solid* ones of the past that were connected to institutionalized and traditional mediatory bodies. Approaches towards this kind of *post-modern* participation are partly fostered by information often accidentally found on the Internet, as well as by the continuous flow of notifications coming from the Web. All of this 'hybridizes' the information transmitted by mainstream media and creates a sort of new medial ecosystem in which diverse generations are differently involved.

Furthermore, this kind of citizen makes the symbiotic exchange between online and offline realms the factual place of his/her style of engagement, which is by definition *hybrid*.

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Monitoring rulers from the time they were candidates running in campaigns when electoral promises were communicated is a way to control them regarding their mandate. This could improve the system's *responsiveness* and *accountability*. In fact, the problem of the control of the elected is a fundamental question in the debate about representation, as stated by Bernard Manin,

'[r]epresentative systems do not authorize (indeed explicitly prohibit) two practices that would deprive representatives of any kind of independence: imperative mandates and discretionary revocability of representatives (recall)' (Manin, 1997: 163).

It seems that in this state of affairs, *monitoring* – from the local to the global level – could be a possible option for collective engagement in postmodern society, where the role of the Internet can be understood as a *political form* through which *counter-democracy* can self-structure.

In this condition, the Internet – e-participation and e-democracy – has great potential. It could strengthen and offer support for representative democracy. Representation could become more 'direct' and even closer to citizens. Deliberative arenas could become more distributed on the ground and practised by citizens themselves.

There is also a dark side to this story. *Counter-democracy* and particularly counter-powers are ambiguous entities that can also contradict democracy itself (Rosanvallon, 2008: 24). The current populist wave uses the digital media ecosystem as a resource to strengthen its role in society. In order to highlight the inherent ambiguity of the Net, the Internet itself is a multifaced reality that could both disrupt a democracy or destabilize a dictatorship.

Finally, in the broad world of the Internet and in the complex and ambivalent intertwining of online engagement, it is possible to see this function as a *safety-net* to curb the progressive decline of the representative politics. All this is taking place within the frame of a political culture that has already dramatically changed and is moving towards further alteration. At the same time, there is no doubt that the Web alone is not able to cushion the fall of modern (representative) democracy.

Beyond this there must always first be the active role of the (good) citizen, with his/her attitudes, his/her creativity and his/her public ethics. It depends on how they see their own world, how media systems and political leaders 'construct' his/her own world. After all, citizens' behaviour is shaped by the way they understand their *lifeworld*.

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