

Democracy and Media in the Digital Era



Report of Conference 14 Nov 2019, Brussels

Acknowledgements

Digital Enlightenment Forum expresses its sincere gratitude to the speakers, whose engagement and efforts have made this conference such a worthwhile event, as shown in the report.

We thank the Delegation of Catalonia to the European Union for making the room available and their excellent logistical support. We also thank Facebook for their support and participation in one of the panel discussions.

Thanks to Mike Sharp for writing this clear report about the presentations and discussions held.

Finally, our thanks go to all participants, which led to a lively and deep discussion.

Introduction

Opening the meeting, **Prof. George Metakides (President of DigEnlight)** observed that Greece, his home country, was often referred to as the cradle of democracy. This refers, more specifically, to the Golden Age of Athens in the Fifth Century B.C., and the word ‘cradle’ evokes images of an infant that then grew to adulthood and thus implies a sort of continuous development. But it did not happen that way: there was turmoil and conflict and the infant’s growth was stunted. While Rome and Byzantium briefly showed sparks of democratic institutions, the infant from the Athenian cradle went into long hibernation. It was not until the 17th century in England and then, in the wake of the 18th century Enlightenment, in France, America and elsewhere that democracy was reborn.

Thus, democracy has existed for only a relatively short time, both in conception and practice. Even during its short lifespan democracy has continuously evolved and adjusted to changing societal and geopolitical realities. From this perspective, it is no surprise that threats to democracy are either generated or compounded by the advent of digital platforms and social media. At the same time, this historical perspective shows us how wrong it would be to take such threats lightly and leave them unchallenged in the belief that democracy will survive no matter what.

Today, we are witnessing a digitally-enabled avalanche of manipulation of information and people. Instead of a digital golden age of democracy with a digital Athenian agora, we are facing a gilded age where political systems are hostage to an industrial-scale monetization of personal data which creates not only great wealth but also the power to swing elections. We see global unrest practically everywhere, by people who feel disenfranchised, alienated and powerless to express their will within their current political system. There is also a deep distrust of the media.

Is this slide from an idealistic enlightened utopia to a dark dystopia that tears our civic fabric apart inexorable and irreversible? Or can we find innovative ways to harness the beneficent potential of digital technologies that can reverse this slide and bring people (and electorates) back together, with renewed trust to the institutions and each other? This is the challenge and was the focus of this DigEnlight conference. It was an opportunity to showcase innovative ideas, initiatives and proposals.

Keynote Presentations

Anna Asimakopoulou (Member of the European Parliament and Vice-Chair of the International Trade Committee (INTA)) observed that disinformation is an issue as old as democracy itself. Aristotle said that *“The least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousand fold.”* In the digital age, disinformation is a highly visible phenomenon. ‘Fake news’ was Collins Dictionary’s word of the year in 2016, since when we have seen the Cambridge Analytica scandal and concern at the role of disinformation in the US Presidential Election 2016, the UK Brexit Referendum, and general disinformation against the West emanating from Russia.

The EU defines disinformation as: *“verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause*

public harm". The European Parliament is taking an active role in the EU Action Plan Against Disinformation, developed in 2018. The main aims of this policy are: i) Improving detection, analysis and exposure; ii) Stronger cooperation and joint responses to threats; iii) Enhancing collaborations with online platforms and industry; and iv) Raising awareness and improving societal resilience.

The Parliament is increasingly pushing the issue of online disinformation to the top of its agenda and receives broad political support. The aim is for a coordinated European response to disinformation and third-party propaganda based on a mix of policy approaches: non-legislative resolutions and hearings; budgetary measures; and EP services and participatory actions. For example, the EP welcomed the Communication from the Commission "Tackling Online Disinformation" (COM(2018) 236), issued in April 2018, and passed amendments to the 2018 EU Budget to increase capacity for fact checking disinformation via the East StratCom Task Force. Most recently, the EP passed a Resolution (2019/2810(RSP)) on foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes, asking for the East StratCom Task Force to be upgraded to a permanent structure with higher financing. For the public, the European Parliament Research Service (EPRS) publishes briefings, studies, videos and infographics, including a publication on how to spot fake news.

But the best defence is offence. During the recent European Parliament election the EP organised a campaign, urging citizens to participate in the Euro-elections and disseminated information on social media and online platforms on how to vote (using the #thistimeimvoting hashtag). It contributed to the highest turnout in European Elections for 20 years, with more than half (50.66%) of EU citizens eligible to vote participating. It was the first time since 1979 that turnout had increased (by 8.06%), with turnout especially strong among the younger generation (under 40s). Given that global trends are in the opposite direction, the correlation between EP campaigning and youth participation becomes evident.

There are many examples of participatory democracy in action. In 2014, Krakow withdrew from being a candidate city for the 2022 Winter Olympic Games after a referendum where a majority of citizens rejected the city's involvement in the event. In Madrid, the citizens' proposal for "single ticket for the public transport" from 2015 was approved by a majority of the City Council. Helsinki has successfully used local citizen initiatives to get support for a proposal for maintenance of the city airport, and another for the construction of bicycle lanes, both garnering more than 10,000 supporters.

But the battle is never ending. As Winston Churchill said: "*A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has the chance to put its pants on.*", so we all have to be vigilant.

Asked whether Europe was being sufficiently pro-active in combatting disinformation, Ms Asimakopoulou agreed that defensive initiatives such as fact-checking could only go so far. Should Europe take a page from the populist's copybook, a questioner asked, by using humour more? There is a fine line between humour and insult and that line has to be walked very carefully. Asked about the value of digital initiatives, Ms Asimakopoulou agreed that digital literacy is the most important skill for living in the modern economy and society, and a prerequisite to be able to deal with the threats we see. Finally, Ms Asimakopoulou emphasized the critical role of so-called third pillar actions – involving cities, regions and networks – in creating innovative entities for participation by citizens.

Andrew Keen (entrepreneur, author and blogger) presented a critique of the Internet in modern society, about which he has written extensively. A common theme in the disinformation debate is the opposition of opinion versus fact and the presumption that fact should win out. The Eighteenth Century Enlightenment is often misrepresented: it was not proto-democratic or some golden age of reason. Thinkers then had the same concerns as today: fear of ignorance and 'the mob'. Rousseau, a leading critic of the Enlightenment, championed direct democracy on the streets. Arguably, the real issue facing

us today is the relationship between ‘us experts’ and ‘the mob’. How, in the 21st century, can we reconcile the will of the people with the knowledge of experts? How can we marry expertise and democracy, while avoiding a technocracy (rule of experts), of which some would see the EU as a prime example?

The Internet was meant to bring answers to these questions, but it has not. Winner-take-all capitalism has brought new monopolies and created trillion-dollar companies. We all sit in our own filter bubble where we use the technology not to educate ourselves but to confirm our views and prejudices. And we see a digital narcissism – the Look-At-Me culture – of which Donald Trump is the epitome. Research shows that rather than bringing us together, digital technologies have made us lonelier and more isolated.

Developments around the world are of grave concern. In the West, traditional political parties are in decline, while an online cacophony perpetuates an ignorant view of the world. In Western democracies we have lost the ability to listen. In Russia, meanwhile, we see a regime routed in disinformation that is prepared to do away with the very notion of truth: the void is filled by mass confusion and extreme relativism. And in China we see an Orwellian dystopia emerging, based on mass surveillance of individuals both online and offline.

All of this makes it even more important that we, in Europe, find a way to fix our democracy. But the approach followed over the last 25 years, which sees digitalism as the solution, has not and will not work. Digital technologies are not building blocks of community and will not be so as the attention economy makes society even more fragmented.

So how can democracy be fixed? Mr Keen saw three key pillars. Firstly, we have to bring people together in face-to-face debate. Citizens’ assemblies, which were covered in detail by other speakers, are one important means. They teach us to listen and to value the contributions of experts. Secondly, we have to value leadership. Representative democracy requires leaders: people who are prepared to take risks, to say unpopular things and not be held hostage by the mob. Thirdly, we have to stop people hiding behind anonymity online. Individuals have to be held accountable for their actions: when they are more accountable they will behave more responsibly. Extreme anonymity is counter to our democratic values. Unless we begin to radically rethink anonymity and privacy for the digital age, our democracy could be lost.

Some participants questioned the characterisation of ‘experts versus the mob’. Today we have more education than ever before and the electorate is increasingly sophisticated. Mr Keen emphasized that elites are a reality. But they need to reinvent themselves and to be more responsible. Meritocracies are under threat. The only way societies can work is with respect between the people and those who govern. Asked about the implications for street activism, such as Extinction Rebellion, Mr Keen said the challenge was how to channel the energy of online into real-world political movements and organisations. The world won’t change through Facebook ‘likes’. Digital has enabled deep political engagement but, as the Arab Spring shows us, this is not enough.

Dirk Helbing (ETH, Zürich, CH) looked at opportunities for digital empowerment of citizens. As other speakers had noted, China is already trying to invent the digital totalitarian state and its social credit project has worrying implications. But a power grab by digital means is happening in the West as well. The neo-liberal model whereby capitalism was subject to democratic constraints is being replaced by a ‘digital feudalism’ (or what some observers have called surveillance capitalism). With developments such as the internet of things, big data and AI, all our data is up for grabs and we are at risk of the protected space of privacy disappearing.

With sustainability issues also coming to the fore, we have to find new approaches based on collective intelligence and collective action to empower local and regional economies. One example is the Climate City Cup, a competition for finding the most useful means in fighting climate change and spurring social collaboration on the city level. It aims to enable citizens to take on fast actions, get engaged and activated without waiting for national or international regulatory pressure.¹

Or we reach sustainability through so-called Finance 4.0 (or Fin+). The aim of this platform is to create an open source distributed system for communities willing to incentivise sustainable actions. Sustainability as well as privacy and individual freedom are key to the platform. Therefore, Finance 4.0 will incorporate self-sovereign ID and distributed governance on multiple levels.

Panel 1 – Democracy Organisation

Chair: Jacques Bus (Secretary-General, DigEnlight). Speakers: Marc Esteve Del Valle (Center for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, NL); Clodagh Harris (University College Cork, IRL); Cato Léonard (Glassroots, BE); Erika Widegren (CEO, Re-Imagine Europe).

In various places activities have been undertaken or are ongoing to analyse and strengthen involvement of citizens in political decision making. This session examined some examples and looked at the lessons learned.

The Rise of Platform Politics

Modern political parties are being transformed in multiple ways. Across the developed world we see traditional ideological attachments becoming weaker; formal membership of political parties falling; and electorates that are increasingly volatile. In Spain, for example, the two general elections held in 2019 saw a large increase in support for the far-right Vox party.

Party responses are part organisational, in particular offering greater decentralisation, and part technological, through the development of internal computer-mediated communication networks.² Together these have given rise to ‘Platform Politics’, defined as: *“The Introduction of digital intermediaries (e.g. software applications, websites, social networking services) into the structure of political parties, to facilitate internal communication, engage in political decision-making, organize political action, and transform the overall experience of participation in political parties”*.

Recent work has developed a theoretical model of the interplay between political parties and networked platforms. As has been identified in other contexts, platforms exhibit varying degrees of openness, depending on factors such as who owns the technology and how the platform is operated and governed. This approach has been used to define a new model of party-based platform politics, specified in terms of ‘party organisational structure’ (hierarchy-stratarchy-federation) along one axis and ‘type of platform’ (closed-hybrid-open) on the other. The model has been used to characterise various real-world political parties.

At present, there is a lack of internet proficiency among political parties; limited participation of the membership base in online votes; centralisation of voting processes; and technological challenges.

¹ See <http://climatecitycup.org>

² See Eldersveld, S. (1964). *Political Parties: A Behavioural Analysis*. Chicago, IL: Rand McNally; and Margetts, H. (2001). *Cyber Parties*. Paper prepared for ECPR Joint Sessions of Workshops, April 6–11, Grenoble, France.

Questions for future research include: are online platform users different from ‘traditional’ activists?; and are parties’ efforts to adopt platform politics rewarded with electoral success?

Putting Deliberative Democracy into Action

Deliberative democracy represents a new approach for citizens to express themselves, alongside more traditional means such as elections, opinion polls and referenda. The shortcomings of the latter are well known. Stanford Professor James Fishkin has noted that: *“In a poll, we ask people what they think when they don’t think. It would be more interesting to ask what they think after they had a chance to think.”*

Citizens’ assemblies (CAs) are deliberative bodies that emphasize learning, discussion and decision-making. People from diverse backgrounds and with differing opinions are brought together within an organised setting and with the support of external experts to debate specific issues. Participants are randomly selected to reflect gender, age, education, and socio-economic status. The aim is to achieve consensus through debate and the resulting recommendations are sent to policy-makers to implement.

In Ireland, an academic initiative launched in 2011 (‘We The Citizens’) led to the government establishing two Citizens’ Assemblies to discuss important issues. The first of these, the Constitutional Convention of 2012-14 involved 66 citizens and 33 political representatives. They met over a period of 14 months and were tasked with looking at 8 topics, such as electoral reform and minimum voting age. In 2015, the Convention’s recommendation regarding equal marriage was put to a national referendum, which passed. A second CA between 2016-18 looked at a further five topics; it led to the 2018 referendum on abortion, as well as the setting up of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Climate Action and the introduction of the All Government Climate Action Plan.

Belgium, too, has used CAs as a means for organised, systematic discussion and debate. The G-1000 initiative was launched in 2011 and brought together over 1000 citizens in face-to-face meetings, online and at home to discuss issues of importance to the future of the country. It has been followed up by the Ostbelgien Model, in which the German speaking region of Belgium has added a permanent citizens’ assembly to its existing parliamentary structure.

The Irish and Belgian experiences with CAs have had a number of positive outcomes: referenda on important policy and constitutional issues; enhanced democratic decision-making; increased legitimacy of democratic processes; and wider public knowledge and acceptance of the CA process. A number of messages also emerged. These include: **avoiding bias** and ensuring that participation in CAs reflects wider society. Younger generations, the less well-off and women can be particularly difficult to engage. Organisers may need to work with community or representative groups in order to reach specific communities. Paying honoraria and providing childcare facilities can also help (with young women, for example).

Operation of the CA should be transparent, with **clear communication on the process and the results**, as well as how outcomes will be measured. Moderation is an essential part of the process: healthy debate requires **good moderators** whose role is to facilitate inclusive and respectful deliberation. Citizens and stakeholders should decide on the subjects to be discussed, with a **broad range of experts** available to provide accessible and balanced information, as well as technical support. Digital tools are excellent to inform, prioritize and vote, but they cannot yet replace the face-to-face discussion.

Having citizens involved in democratic processes empowers politicians to do their job and narrows the gap between citizens and democracy. Under the Ostbelgien Model, **organisational innovations** have

been introduced to integrate the CA into the existing governance structure. These include a Citizens' Council that is responsible for setting the CA's agenda and following up the CA's recommendations with parliament.

The Need for New Ideas

With today's digital technologies, the pace of change is ever faster and the technological ecosystem is central to how society is organised. Yet digital media tend to value opinions more than truth. The best way to go viral online is to pick a fight with a perceived 'opponent'. Populists know this and exploit the tactic ruthlessly. For example, around 80% of social media coverage of Greta Thunberg is critical and even hateful. The whole incentive system online is built on making a divisive society.

The neoliberal capitalist narrative is no longer universally accepted and its critics play on emotions. Liberals have been reluctant to use media to 'manipulate' the public, but if they are to retain influence then they must have a stronger voice. Around the world populist parties are trying to change social norms and values. In Brazil's recent presidential election a misogynist tweet about women who vote for the left being unattractive was credited with a big increase in the female vote for Jair Bolsonaro. If we build a system that gives advantages to people who pick fights we should not be surprised by the results. Europe must find new approaches to deal with these problems.

At present, the EU is trying to fix the symptoms of disinformation rather than tackling it head on. There is scope for new ideas and systemic change.

Panel 2 – Media and Democracy

Chair: Jo Pierson (VUB, BE). Speakers: Ania Helseth (Facebook); Stefania Milan (University of Amsterdam); Mikko Salo (Faktabaari); Ulrik Trolle Smed (European Commission); Wout van Wijk (News Media Europe).

The media are necessary for a good functioning democracy. At the same time, the media and certainly also social media with their massive data collection and use for behaviour predictability, can have negative effects on the democratic processes. This session discussed these aspects and the issues that arise.

European Policy Against Disinformation

The policy agenda relating to disinformation is moving rapidly. Over the last two years the EU and Member States have put in place a robust strategy to combat disinformation and protect citizens. The High Level Group on Fake News reported in January 2018 and its work fed into the Strategy on Disinformation published in April 2018. This was followed by the Action Plan Against Disinformation, which aims to build a code of practice with self-regulatory and other commitments from platforms, and to close down spaces where disinformation can flourish. Member States have a rapid alert system on disinformation and run campaigns on how to respond better. The third pillar is the Elections Package designed to ensure better scrutiny for political advertisements and their sources of financing, especially online. As reported by Anna Asimakopoulou, the system has been at least partially successful in mitigating disinformation campaigns.

Much still remains to be done and future strategy will be informed by a series of reviews which are due to report this autumn. Policy will continue to be based around five pillars: i) disruption of

advertising by disinformation actors; ii) increasing the transparency of politically-based advertising; iii) policies to ensure integrity of services; iv) empowering consumers through appropriate tools; and v) empowering the research community, for example through access to political ad libraries.

The EU is encouraging platforms to buck the bad actors and get ahead of the game. Platforms need fact-checkers in all EU languages and the situation has improved significantly over the last year. Facebook, for example, works with 23 partner organisations that do fact checking in 14 European languages. New tools are being introduced to help users track ads and why they are being targeted. Platforms are not legislators but they can inform the regulatory process, for example by allowing meaningful access to data.

The Role of the Media in Fighting Disinformation

The press plays an important role in holding politicians to account, so when the press falters democracy suffers as a result. Journalism is not just any business; it facilitates democratic debate and when critics such as Donald Trump refer to #fakenewsmedia a publisher dies. The industry is already facing major challenges in moving businesses online. Worldwide, trust in news media is declining by varying extents. Trust in news via social media is very low but private networks, such as Whatsapp, are increasingly being used for sharing.

A well-funded news media ecosystem is one of the remedies to disinformation: we have to ensure that journalists have the time and resources to do proper research. Professional content is expensive to produce. Traditional business models based on classifieds, subscriptions, and street sales are all under pressure or gone completely. Arguably, Spotify and Netflix are seeding the willingness of consumers to pay for content, but in news these models are still far behind. At the same time, tensions are emerging between publishers' attempts to stake out new models (e.g. using big data) and regulation of consumer data. The world is looking at Europe as the frontrunner and hence it is important that we get it right.

Social media increasingly functions as a pathway to news, including at election time. Around 55% of US adults say they get news from social media at least some of the time. Europe is likely to show a similar picture, although equivalent data is not currently available. The younger generation in particular does not relate to conventional news media.

Social media platforms have stepped up efforts to block and remove fake accounts in order to limit the spread of disinformation. Facebook's automated systems prevent around one million fake accounts being registered each day. Last quarter (Quarter 3, 2019) around 2 billion fake accounts were removed from the platform. But in some jurisdictions it is not legal to remove such accounts.

Facebook also supports media literacy education and outreach to enable people to understand what they are reading, again working with external partners. In addition, it works with the research community, for example the Social Science 1 Programme which provides researchers with access to data. These are all part of Facebook's efforts to increase transparency and break the bubble environment.

Taming the Algorithms

A key differentiator for social media compared to traditional media is the opportunity for personalisation. Algorithms – software codes – on websites are able to tailor news feeds to users' own interests and preferences. This can be useful in some contexts, but can adversely skew the information landscape and affect democratic processes. Algorithms are cash generators and therefore the aim is to hold the user's attention and engagement for as long as possible. It is not in the interests of the model to show users alternatives.

The problem is that in many cases we do not know – or have lost sight of – how the algorithms work. They are self-learning systems, often proprietary, and hence get little scrutiny from citizens and regulators. The Algorithms Exposed project at the University of Amsterdam is encouraging people to think about and reflect on their ‘information diet’.³ It aims to unmask the functioning of personalisation algorithms on social media platforms, taking Facebook as a test case. It is ‘data activism’ in practice, as it uses publicly available data for awareness raising and citizen empowerment.

Promoting Media Pluralism

Today, sharing is largely confined to just a handful of media channels. As big brands grow online it is becoming increasingly difficult for local media to survive, yet they play a crucial role in holding local democracy to account. Local and regional media address small audiences and are often not well equipped, but they play an important role in facilitating democratic debate at local level. There has to be room for these smaller actors and start-ups, not just the big media players and platforms. We need greater media pluralism, which in turn requires business models built on trust.

While it is easy to criticise digital literacy initiatives, we should at least accept that they are part of the solution. Radical solutions are needed, but in the meantime digital literacy is a useful tool. Youth is the biggest user of social media and tend to be more open minded. We should empower teachers to create the necessary dialogue around social media within schools.

The Internet is broken and we have to bring ethics and transparency into building a new Internet. A roadmap for true digital democracy is likely to become much clearer following the policy reviews currently underway.

Panel 3: ITC for Democracy

Chair: Stefan Klauser (ETH, Zürich, CH). Speakers: Dirk Helbing (ETH, Zürich, CH); Mike Kalomeni (Elementus); Ugo Pagallo (Chair SC AI4People, Univ Turin, IT); Ismael Peña-Lopez (DG Citizen’s Participation and Electoral Processes, Administration of Catalonia, ES).

Digitisation presents challenges, as well as opportunities, for democratic societies. The development of AI, IoT and the collection of behavioural data puts unprecedented power in the hands of private companies. The session looked at whether digitisation can also be used to strengthen self-organisation and democratic processes.

The New Democracy Ecosystem

Democracy is experiencing profound change. In various ways, we are seeing shifts in meaning, in norms and in power which have far-reaching implications. Deliberation is becoming the new democracy standard, with openness as a pre-requisite. Accountability and legislative footprint are necessary to achieve legitimacy. And participation aids greater pluralism and stronger social capital. There is a lesser role of intermediation and traditional institutions, while at the same time a greater role for informed deliberation. The balance between institutions, experts/leaders and individual citizens is shifting in a new ecosystem of actors, roles and relationships: networks and communities with liquid and reconfiguring affiliation.

³ See <https://asca.uva.nl/content/research-groups/algorithms-exposed/algorithms-exposed.html>

The more complex the issues become, the more top-down approaches fall short and we have to pay greater attention to grassroots approaches with coordination mechanisms. As the citizens assembly examples have shown, we need not just new technologies but also new governance models.

Technology and Democracy

eDemocracy means more than just eVoting; it covers the whole democratic process from policy appraisal, through legislation to implementation. We need a compelling vision for digital democracy in the 21st century. Taiwan, where the government has invested heavily in crowdsourcing of new policies, provides an example. Such approaches bring radical transparency and increase public participation, debunking the idea that direct participation only belongs in places with a long tradition in democratic approaches. Just because digital democracy has not worked in the past, does not mean that it won't in the future. But we lack the political will and funds for innovative projects in this area.

Advocates argue that Blockchain could help to preserve democracy worldwide by giving sovereignty back to citizens. A blockchain is a ledger that can store any type of information. Storing financial transactions is currently the main use case. Blockchain could have major impact on digital money, taking power away from central banks, financial institutions, governments and private parties. By allowing people to opt out of the fiat system, cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin could lead to a more immutable monetary policy that is fair to all. However, this option comes with its own risk as cryptocurrencies are new assets based on young technology and changing regulatory environment.

The Challenge of Artificial Intelligence

Democracy also faces challenges from developments in artificial intelligence (AI). At present, the EU legal framework has dozens of regulations regarding AI from a Single Market perspective, but none relating to the democratic implications. AI4People is a European forum on the social impacts of artificial intelligence.⁴ Rather than defining new regulations for AI, it set out to draft ethical guidelines aimed at facilitating the design of policies favourable to the development of a “good AI society”. The resulting guidelines, the *AI4People's Ethical Framework for a Good AI Society: Opportunities, Risks, Principles, and Recommendations*, were presented at the European Parliament in November 2018, and the project's work in this field continues.

Conclusions: Challenges and Solutions

The Workshop addressed a wide range of issues relating to the interplay between democracy and the media in the digital era. The challenges and solutions were discussed in the Final Panel session chaired by Paul Timmers (University of Oxford, UK).

The Current Situation

Although democracy has only existed for a relatively short period, experience to date has shown that it has been able to continually evolve and adapt in response to social and economic change. Such adaptability in the face of current and emerging threats cannot be taken for granted, however.

In politics, as elsewhere, digital technologies are transforming our institutions and disrupting the existing order. Across the developed world, a new Platform Politics is emerging, with online platforms

⁴ See www.eismd.eu/ai4people

becoming the main conduit for communication with both supporters/activists and the wider electorate. The balance between institutions, experts/leaders and individual citizens is shifting in a new ecosystem of actors, roles and relationships. Such an environment opens up space for disinformation, which is now an established feature across the political landscape. More generally, the eclipsing of traditional media channels by social media has led to filter bubbles, where our existing views are reinforced, contrary voices are expunged and the boundaries between opinion and fact are increasingly blurred. Meanwhile, developments in Russia, a regime where disinformation has been appropriated by the state, and China, which is inventing the digital totalitarian state, give cause for grave concern.

European policy in this area has evolved rapidly. Over the last two years, from more or less a standing start, the EU and Member States have put in place a robust strategy to combat disinformation and protect citizens based on a mix of policy approaches. Current initiatives include fact-checking, codes of practice for platform operators, cooperation between Member States, and digital literacy initiatives for citizens. European policy continues to evolve in the light of experience and emerging risks and threats.

Potential Solutions

The discussions stressed the need for new ideas, systemic change and for offensive as well as defensive strategies. We need **a new ecosystem for democracy**, one that embraces not just new technologies but also new governance models. Areas for potential action include:

- **Continue efforts in digital literacy:** Although a defensive strategy, efforts to promote digital literacy for citizens, so as to enable them to be informed consumers of news and information and able to spot fake news, have a key role to play. Current efforts should continue and be intensified, including around the use of social media.
- **Mainstream experiences in deliberative democracy:** Informed deliberation is essential in bringing back our ability and willingness to listen to our fellow citizens. Citizens' assemblies are the pre-eminent example of this. At present, the approach is embryonic and there are still many sceptics. These efforts and experiences need to be mainstreamed across Europe, demonstrating their applicability in a very wide range of cultures, communities and institutions. This should include organisational innovations designed to coordinate and integrate participative democracy with existing democratic structures.
- **Build the Third Pillar:** Cities, regions and networks have a critical role to play in creating innovative entities for participation by citizens. Such collective actions and collective intelligence will be necessary not just to broaden democracy but also to build grassroots support around issues such as sustainability, climate change and society-friendly AI.
- **Promote media pluralism:** A well-funded news media ecosystem is a major weapon in the war against disinformation. With traditional business models extinguished or under threat, we have to find ways to make professional content pay. In Europe's case, this means reconciling the continuing tensions between new data-based business models and the regulation of consumer data. Such an ecosystem should include a clear role for smaller players and start-ups.
- **Roll back on anonymity online:** Anonymity is at the heart of many online activities and many users would consider it an inalienable right. However, in some respects it can also be seen as being counter to our democratic values. Although a controversial idea, we have to ask whether the time has come to roll back on 'extreme anonymity'. In democratic societies, individuals should be held accountable for their actions and if anonymity online prevents this then where

should the line be drawn? In the digital age, where do we set the boundaries between anonymity and privacy?

The Workshop demonstrated the need for a compelling vision for digital democracy in the 21st century based on principles of transparency and openness. The world is looking at Europe as the frontrunner and it is important that we get it right.