ALIVE AND CLICKING

There is hope for democracy

Rudy van Belkom

bot uitgevers

‘Democracy is not dead, but it does deserve a thorough maintenance overhaul. In this inspiring book, Rudy van Belkom shows us that we can renew democracy and how. He hung the garlands for us; now we need to start the party!’

Jornt van Zuijlen, senior policy advisor citizen participation and local democracy innovation, Dutch Ministry for the Interior

‘Inspiring book for everyone who has doubts about the future of democracy. And an agenda for a renewed, digital and more inclusive democratic process.’

Fred Herrebout, strategist, T-Mobile

‘With Alive and Clicking, author Rudy van Belkom adds a future vision of democracy to his track record of democracy-promoting platforms and publications. The book can be seen as an encouragement for young people and those associating with them.’

Eefje Op den Buysch, strategic information advisor, Municipality of Eindhoven

‘This book shows that digitization not only puts pressure on our democracy , but also provides opportunities. The Netherlands need to explore the positive opportunities and use digitization in defence of democracy.’

Lola ‘t Hart, programme maker, De Balie

‘Rudy van Belkom has managed once again to make a complex subject tangible, explain it in contemporary terms and point our focus to the future.’

Carlijn Naber, strategic advisor

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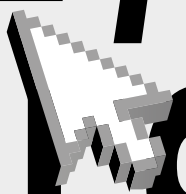
HOPE IS BEING ABLE TO SEE THAT THERE IS LIGHT DESPITE ALL OF THE DARKNESS.

Desmond Tutu (1931 - 2021)



Prologue

It is November 1947. Winston Churchill addresses the members of the British House of Commons as Leader of the Opposition (Churchill unexpectedly lost the 1945 election after Great Britain had won the Second World War under his leadership[1]). It is a little after half past three in the afternoon when Churchill starts his speech with a side note that him being there was advised against by his medical advisor. Churchill will celebrate his 73th birthday in a little over two weeks. But Churchill loves the debate. And the controversy. He takes the opportunity to address the House of Commons (in his unmistakable British accent) with great pleasure. His astute speech contains one of the most frequently quoted statements about democracy:

> *'It has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.'* [2]

Nowadays, people love using this quote to criticise democracy and hint that democracy would be at best the least bad form of Gov-

ernment we know. But that is not the message Churchill wanted to get across in his speech. The quote is incomplete. The statement is part of a plea in which Churchill actually defends democracy:

> *'No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time; but there is a broad feeling in our country that the people should rule, continuously rule, and that public opinion, expressed by all constitutional means, should shape, guide, and control the actions of Ministers who are their servants and not their masters.'*

According to Churchill, it is not Parliament that must govern, but it is the people who must govern through Parliament. So Churchill's criticism is not aimed at democracy, but at politicians who refuse to listen to the will of the people. This becomes even clearer when you read the rest of his speech and take the reason he made the speech into account. On that particular day in 1947, the House of Commons had come together to discuss a proposed bill limiting the powers of the House of Lords. The then Prime Minister Clement Attlee and his Labour government saw the House of Lords as a restriction on their government expansion. The Conservative opposition, led by Churchill, was adamantly against this constitutional change. Churchill even considered the proposed bill a violation of democracy:

> *'All this idea of a group of super men and super-planners, such as we see before us, "playing the angel," as the French call it, and making the masses of the people do what they think is good for them, without any check or correction, is a violation of democracy.'*

According to Churchill, no government in peace time had such arbitrary powers over the lives and actions of the British people. And no government failed so completely in meeting the daily needs of the people. Churchill blames the sitting government that it claimed too much power. An undemocratic development that, especially that shortly after the war, should have to be stopped:

> *'All this idea of a handful of men getting hold of the State machine, having the right to make the people do what suits the party and personal interests or doctrines, is completely contrary to every conception of surviving Western democracy.'*

In his speech, Churchill compares the government machine to a car. Each car needs a brake. A brake prevents accidents when the car is moving too fast. But a brake does not prevent accidents when the car is moving too slowly. That requires looking at a different part of the vehicle, namely the engine. And of course at the remaining fuel. To prevent democracy from moving too slowly, you need new impulses. According to Churchill, these new impulses are synonymous with the will of the people. New impulses create a powerful engine that, regulated from time to time by the brakes, is able to safeguard the steady progress of the nation and of society. Without fuel, the car will stall. Just like a government will stall without participation of the people.

It will not be the first or last time that a quote is misinterpreted. Just like with the metaphor of the car, people zoom out insufficiently and fail to look at the quote in its entirety. We focus on a detail and draw conclusions without taking in the bigger picture. It is a car mechanic turning off the lights in his garage and trying to fix a car using the light of a flashlight. When you look for the cause of a problem using a flashlight, you have insufficient insight into the whole and the interconnections. We have the same tendency when we look at the state of democracy. Like a car, democracy does not consist of one single part. This also suggests that,

when one part is ‘broken’, we must not throw away democracy as a whole. But instead, we need to fix that part.

To map the problem, we first need to turn on the light.

Introduction

In September 2020, I started my research into the possible influence of technology on the future of democracy on behalf of the Netherlands Study Centre for Technology Trends. I had 18 months to write this book. It was an interesting time to start this research. At the same time, Netflix launched *The Social Dilemma*, a documentary in which the developers of platforms like Facebook and Google expressed their regrets for the ‘monster’ they had created. In November of the same year, the American presidential elections were going to take place, with fears of the influence of Russian troll armies. And in March of 2021, the Dutch electorate was going to vote in the elections for the House of Representatives. The then Minister for the Interior had already sent the House of Representatives a letter about measures designed to counter disinformation in connection to the elections. So I had to do ‘something’ with the elections.

In the election manifestos of political parties, ‘the influence of digital technologies’ hardly appears as a theme. Although concepts like ‘disinformation’ and ‘digital inclusion’ are mentioned, a coherent vision for the future is often still lacking. In the Stem-

Wijzer, the most frequently used election compass in the Netherlands, not one of the 30 statements were about technology and digitisation. How do political parties want to increase our online privacy? And increase the digital resilience of our country? To map that, I developed a Technology Election Compass: the *Technologie Kieswijzer* on behalf of the Netherlands Study for Technology Trends. By answering seventeen technology-related questions, people could find out which political parties best champion their 'digital interests'. This voting tool was consulted by almost 30,000 citizens. It provided a lot of interesting insights. The analysis of the tool indicated that in particular disinformation is seen as a huge threat to our democracy. To limit digital interference during elections, countering the large-scale spread of disinformation is the most commonly selected answer.

Why this approach?

Inspired by the results of the *Technologie Kieswijzer*, I originally started writing a book with the working title *Clickbait Democracy:* 'Platform companies sell our attention to the highest bidder'. Increasingly, the highest bidders are governments and political organisations. One of the best examples is perhaps the *Cambridge Analytica* scandal, where countless personal data were used to influence the Brexit referendum. From an attention economy to an attention democracy. Anything for the clicks!' Sounds pretty exciting, if I do say so myself. But during my research, I could not ignore the fact that the influence of microtargeting (the use of highly targeted political ads) is not supported by scientific research. In fact, the influence of microtargeting turns out to be very limited. Just like various studies indicate that many people are resistant to disinformation and that people who get most of their news online actually have a varied news diet.

I began to wonder if other opinions about democracy perhaps also deserved a somewhat more nuanced approach. And indeed, even though it is often suggested that democracy is in crisis, different studies show that support for democracy in the digital age is as high as it has ever been. A similar insight applies to youngsters, who are often portrayed as apathetic and apolitical, but it would appear that they are actually more socially engaged in the digital age. Just look at the protest movements on the street and social media. So I had to revise my approach and decided to focus my research on potential misconceptions about democracy and hopeful signs for the future. These analyses also provide the structure of the first half of this book: Is democracy in crisis? (part 1). Is technology destroying democracy? (part 2). And are youngsters apathic and not interested in democracy? (part 3). It is not my aim to diminish these issues, but to approach existing problems from different angles. So with this book, I try to turn on the light to allow us to see the bigger picture. In some areas, the influence of, for instance, disinformation, is overestimated, while in other areas, it is underestimated. Too often, such problems are still examined with a flashlight, keeping us from spotting the signs of hope. This makes it hard to come up with good solutions.

That was why, after watching *The Social Dilemma*, I was left feeling somewhat dissatisfied. Yes, the documentary clearly shows it is two minutes to midnight and we need to act *now* if we are to limit the negative impact of technology on our democracy. And yes, it is a good thing that a wider audience is now in the know. But during the credits, I really wondered: *Now what?* We urgently need solutions. We must not forget that technology can also be used to do good. Technology itself is not good or bad; it is about how people use it. When we examine how we can use new technologies in such a way that they reinforce democracy in the future, the focus shifts from the undermining impact of technology towards the democratising effect of technology and the opportunities for citizen participation. This context reminded me of Churchill's words:

'...there is a broad feeling in our country that the people should rule, continuously rule, and that public opinion, expressed by all constitutional means, should shape, guide and control the actions of Ministers who are their servants and not their masters.'

It is possible for technology to play a role here. That is why, based on the analyses, in the second part of the book, I look for solutions. Solutions for a more democratic internet and more citizen participation. Are there opportunities for a digital democracy? (part 4). And what does the future of digital democracy look like? (part 5). There is certainly hope for the future.

Why this book?

When I presented the structure of this book to my sounding board, I was asked: 'Is there hope for democracy because you want there to be, or because there really is hope?' Hope is often confused with optimism, but there is an important distinction. Optimism is the conviction that the future will be positive, despite the current obstacles. Hope is the ability to strive for a positive future, despite current obstacles. Unlike optimism, hope is also a verb. Hope means looking for signs of light in the darkness. The darkness is not ignored, but the light is strengthened. I have tried to write a nuanced book. Both the concerns and the signs of hope are nuanced. This is not a book in which I try to convince people that democracy will be alright in the future. This is a book in which I try to motivate people to act on behalf of a positive future for democracy. Things will not be alright without people making an effort, which is why I often use 'we' in this book. Because we have to do it together.

A hopeful future starts with a new narrative. If we believe that democracy is doomed, democracy is doomed. We need to make sure that does not turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. When you google 'books on democracy', the first (paid) results that are shown are *Against Democracy* by Jason Brennan (2017) and *How Democracy Ends* by David Runciman (2018). Many authors argue passionately against elections, for instance David Van Reybrouck. And although I do not disagree by definition (we can give citizens a bigger say), it is important to realise that democracy is more than elections. In addition to free and fair elections, democracy also includes independent media and freedom of the press, separation of powers and the protection of civil liberties and rights. Each of them principles that can still count on a lot of support all across the world. I am writing this introduction a week after Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine. You will understand that I hesitated for a second whether I can publish a positive story about democracy in these troubled times. But if this situation teaches us anything, it is that we should never take democracy for granted. Democracy demands involvement and active citizenship. We cannot lean back and watch democracy get gutted. When you feel there is little use casting your vote, that's when you need to go and vote. If you feel you don't know enough about politics, that is when your opinion is valuable. Democracy is not about knowledge, but about needs. We can only be represented when we make our voices heard. And if people listen to us. If young people protest, but vote less, the problem not only lies with young people. It also lies with traditional institutions. That is why we need new structures and processes. Technology can play a facilitating role here. At the same time, I realise full well that digital democracy is not strong enough to stop authoritarian leaders. This book is not a cure for corruption and abuse of power, but it does provide tools to strengthen democracy from within. It is time for us to no longer stand with our backs to the future, but to imagine it. A future where we don't look for who's to blame, but who can make a difference. In which we explore new opportunities and stimulate diversity. With *and* without the help of technology.

Why am I the one writing this book?

This book brings my work and my hobby together. Since 2015, I am committed to *Het Nieuwe Kiezen (The New Vote)*, an initiative

for a new political electoral system. An initiative born of personal frustration. It had been years since I felt represented by political parties. Elections seemed to turn more and more into popularity contests than a moment when important choices are made for the future. I was unable to identify with one party, as became more and more obvious when consulting online election tools. My opinions matched those of any party for 60 percent at the most, which meant that, by definition, 40 percent of my vote would be wasted. This was followed by the formation process, in which promises were traded in against a seat at the table (an inevitable political split that I have no trouble imagining). Ultimately, not much was left of my vote. I had the feeling I paid a gym fee, but was never allowed in. Instead of letting my frustration get to me, I decided to develop a new concept for the electoral system: no longer voting for one party, but per subject. What started as an initiative for a new political electoral system has now grown into a platform in which I develop new democratic tools. For instance, I develop innovative electoral compasses and try to make the voting process more accessible to less literate people.

Since 2019, I have worked as a futures researcher at STT. I first researched the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on the future of decision-making. In the context of that research, I issued three publications (including *AI no longer has a plug*) and I developed an Ethical Design game for AI (*Ethics Inc.*). In the past, I always wore two different hats: either I was the the technological studies guy, or I was the democratic renewal guy. With this book, these two worlds come together. Democracy and technology.

Why is this book for you?

This book is for everyone who feels that democracy is lost; that technology is an ever-increasing threat and that the current generation of youngsters is unable to turn the tide. But this book is certainly also for everyone who has hope. Hope for a democracy in which the gap between citizens and politicians is smaller. Where technology can help increase citizen participation. And this book is for the professionals who are involved in digital democracy and the development of digital (participation) tools. In short, this book is for you.

All the greatest things are simple, and many things can be expressed in a single word: Freedom; Justice; Honour; Duty; Mercy; Hope.

Winston Churchill (1874 - 1965)

DEMOCRACY IS A SLOW PROCESS OF STUMBLING TO THE RIGHT DECISION INSTEAD OF GOING STRAIGHT FORWARD TO THE WRONG ONE.

Anonymous

Part 1

Is democracy in crisis?

1

The first time I seriously wondered whether democracy was in crisis was in 2016, when I was allowed to talk about my concept for an alternative voting system during a participation event in the Dutch municipality of Breda: The New VOTE. I was aware that I was venturing into the lion's den, so I came prepared. Armed with statistics and graphs, I was allowed to address the interested council members. In my presentation, I referred to the low turnout at municipal elections and the fact that there has been a downward trend for years. Any elected representative should take that on board. After my presentation, there was time for questions. The first question that was asked was the following: 'Is the low turnout at elections really such a problem?' Somewhat stunned, I responded: 'It is in a representative democracy'. The gap between representatives and the people appears to be growing. So it is not surprising that many people are unhappy about today's politics and politicians. However, this is insufficient proof to conclude that democracy is in crisis. The question is which democracy we are talking about exactly. 'Democracy' does not exist. Not only are there different forms of democracy, but there are also different criteria to be able to speak

of democracy. And the valuation for these criteria varies for different countries and regions. So a book about the future of democracy cannot start before the concept of 'democracy' has been properly addressed. For the sake of convenience, let us start at the beginning. In broad outlines, obviously.

Eastern origins

The term democracy is a combination of the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratein* (to rule), so it literally means 'rule by the people'. The Greeks are often praised for being the founders of democracy around 500 BCE (*Before Common Era*). And although they meant a lot for the development of democracy, the origins of this form of government go back much further. The first parliaments can be traced back to the ancient civilisations of Mesopotamia, around 2500 BCE. Mesopotamia is the core area of the current state of Iraq and the north-east of current Syria. So that means that democracy has Eastern origins, despite popular opinion that democracy reflects, above all, Western values.[1] Apart from that, the Athenian democracy was not all that democratic. Only free men from twenty years on with citizens' rights were allowed to vote in popular assemblies. Women, slaves and foreigners did not have a say.[2] This means that less than 20% of the population had an actual influence on political decisions.

In addition, the question is to what extent democracy in Athens really is a precursor of modern democracy.[3] There was a direct democracy, in which citizens had a direct impact on the legislative process, unlike indirect democracy, which includes most modern democracies. The indirect democracy (or representative democracy) is a form of government in which citizens transfer the legislative power to elected representatives. It is only in a number of municipalities and cantons in Switzerland that direct democracy in its purest form can still be found. In so-called *Landesgemeinden*, citizens come together periodically to meet and vote about proposed laws. It is more common for elements of direct democracy to be included in indirect democracy. For instance, by consulting citizens in the case of important decisions in a referendum. In countries like Italy, Liechtenstein and Taiwan, referendums have been enshrined in law and the people can request binding referendums (under certain conditions).[4]

Different systems

One of the features of a representative democracy is that, in addition to a parliamentary representation and fair elections, there is a separation between the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government (*trias politica*). This is also known as the rule of law, which means that everyone has to obey the law (citizens, organisations and the government). There are different ways to organise the legislative and executive branches. There are, for examples, parliamentary, presidential and semi-presidential systems.[5] The differences between these systems are so big (and significant in interpreting democracy) that we cannot avoid a bit of old-fashioned theory.

In a parliamentary system, a parliament, or legislative branch, is chosen via elections. Based on the election results, a government is formed; the executive branch. This requires a majority of seats in parliament. In some cases, one party has a majority, but parties often have to work together. The Prime Minister is the head of both the executive and the legislative branch. Parliament adopts laws and monitors the government. In addition, a president is appointed to play the symbolic role of head of state. Countries like Germany, Israel and India have a parliamentary system. There are also countries that have a parliamentary system as well as a constitutional monarchy, for example The Netherlands, Spain and Thailand. That means that the head of state is a king or queen, whose role is based on the constitution. As a result, the actual powers of the king or queen are limited. However, in practice, the monarch (often in coordination with the army and/or the judicial branch) sometimes blocks decisions and assumes more power, as is the case in Thailand. Also, the central government can have a relatively great deal of power, like in India.

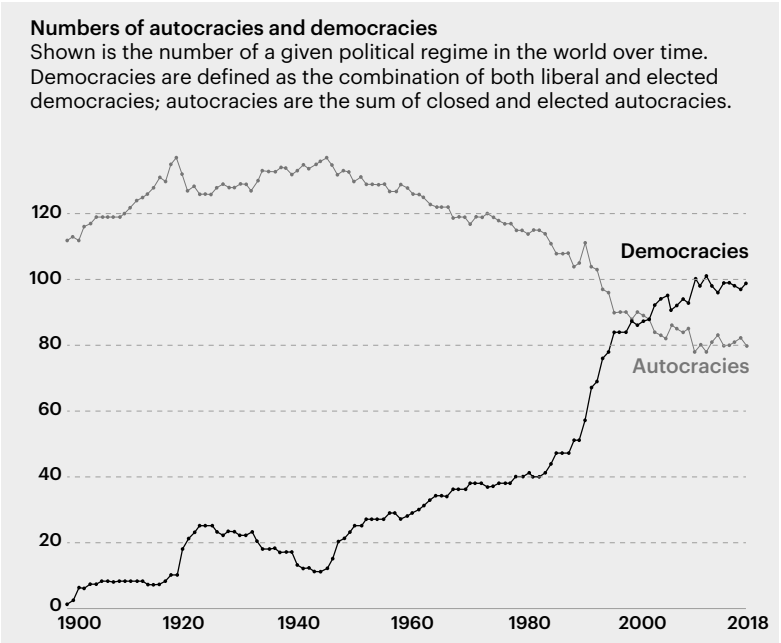
In a presidential system, separate elections are organised for the legislative and executive branches of government. That means that not only parliament is elected by the people, but the president as well. The president is head of the executive branch and is largely independent of the legislative branch. That allows the president to form a government that does not depend on having a majority in parliament. In addition, parliament cannot send the current government packing, the way it can in a parliamentary system. A majority in parliament is needed, however, to make important decisions, so they have to work together. Countries like Cyprus, Brazil and the United States all have a presidential system. It is not uncommon for democratically elected presidents to challenge the democratic institutions. In 2021, for instance, Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro repeatedly threatened the judges of the Supreme Court with violence. 'Only God will take me out of Brasilia,' he added to the threats (which he would later take back, incidentally).

And then there is also the semi-presidential system, which is a kind of 'democratic mix' of the systems described above. In this case, the executive branch not only includes a president, but also a prime minister. The government of the prime minister depends on the majority in parliament. In practice, the president and the prime minister can be from different parties. France, Surinam and Russia are examples of countries with a semi-presidential system. The question is, however, to what extent the countries mentioned above have a 'real' democracy. In the case of Russia, it is at best a 'guided democracy'. Although there are elections, the opposition parties do not stand a realistic chance. At the 2012 presidential elections, Putin received more than 100 percent of the votes in a polling station in Chechnya.[6] And in 2020, he had the constitution amended to safeguard his power at least up to 2036. With the help of a referendum, I might add.

No autocracy

To understand what a democracy means exactly, it is also useful to determine what it absolutely is not. A democracy is not an autocracy or dictatorship, where one person (whether or not on behalf of a party or the army) had absolute power. In addition to a concentration of power, there are huge restrictions of the freedom of the press and civil rights are largely ignored. In authoritarian regimes, power is taken over through other means than free and fair elections.[7] That is not always the case, however. Hungary's prime minister Viktor Orbán became the country's leader through democratic means. Twice, in fact. By now, he has dismantled the democratic institutions to such an extent and assumed so much power that, according to international standards, Hungary is no longer a democracy, but an 'electoral autocracy' (as the first member state of the European Union).[8]

A democracy is also not an aristocracy of oligarchy, in which a privileged class or group governs society. A democracy is even not a 'majority rule', if that means that the interests of the minorities are ignored completely. A democracy is, at least in theory, a government on behalf of 'the will' of the entire people, in which the rights and freedoms of minorities are protected. This is also known as a liberal democracy. Although democracy exists in a large part of the world, some 40 percent of all countries today are still ruled by a dictatorship. It is only since 2001 that worldwide (on paper) there have been more democracies than autocracies. The development of democracy took place in stages. Greek democracy 'only' lasted a few centuries, after which the mighty Roman emperors took over, absolute rulers of an enormous empire. The Roman model formed the basis for the later medieval forms of government. It was only after the First World War that the number of democracies started to grow somewhat. After a serious dip in the 1930s, the number started to grow again after the Second World War. It was the fall of the Iron Curtain, around 1989, that led to a more explosive increase in the number of democracies.[9]



Source: Varieties of Democracy Project (2019, version 9).

Material democracy

So far, we have only talked about democracy as a form of government for decision-making. But a democracy is much more than that. A distinction is made between a formal and material interpretation of democracy.[10] Within the formal interpretation of democracy, the main focus is on the political stage, where political parties compete with each other for the votes of the contumacious voters. Within the material interpretation of democracy, the main focus is on the fundamental values on which democracy is based, namely freedom and equality. Dutch researchers have mapped the associations people have with the term 'democracy'. During the National Voter Study (*Nationaal Kiezersonderzoek*) in 2012, more than 5,000 Dutch voters were asked the open-ended question: 'What is your first association with the word "democracy"?' Researchers of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (*Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau*) further analysed and coded these associations. It became clear that there are indeed two categories that can be distinguished. People who think of concepts like voting rights, elections, citizen participation and influence predominantly apply the formal interpretation, while people who think of concepts like freedom of speech, equality and solidarity, on the other hand, apply the material interpretation.[11] Of course there are also people who apply both interpretations. Be that as it may, democracy does not mean the same thing to everybody.

Different crises

There are not only different forms and interpretations of democracy; there are also different democratic crises. In honour of the International Day of Democracy 2021, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) organised a virtual discussion about the question 'Is democracy really in crisis?'[12] According to Jan-Werner Mueller, professor of social sciences at Princeton University, it is important to realise that democracy in principle equals conflict. In other words, democracy is a manageable conflict. There is a thin line between a healthy democratic conflict and a conflict that may threaten democracy. According to Mueller, politicians have to be able to control themselves not to cross the line. Things become dangerous when one side claims the other side is illegitimate, for instance when Donald Trump attempted to have the results of the 2020 elections nullified.[13] According to Mueller, there are three kinds of democratic crises and he emphasises that they cannot be compared. The first kind is when there are tanks in the streets and there is a coup, as there was in Myanmar's young democracy.[14] The second is the slow erosion of rights as a result of autocratic legislation, for instance in the case of the reforms implemented by the Polish government that seriously affected the independence of the media and the judicial branch.[15] This is also known as democratic erosion: although democratic institutions continue to exist, their quality deteriorates. The third kind even occurs in the most stable democracies, namely attacks on journalism and increasing

inequality, for instance the threats aimed at journalists in the US that are linked to the increasing popularity of conspiracy movement QAnon.[16]

It is tempting, based on these examples, to argue that democracy is indeed in crisis or, more precisely, that certain elements of democracy are in a state of crisis. According to Martin Chungong, secretary general of the IPU, it is important to distinguish between democratic institutions (like an independent judiciary) and their underlying ideals (like freedom and equality). According to Chungong, from the perspective of democratic principles, democracy is not in crisis. However, democratic institutions and people that have to promote and protect these democratic principles are in crisis. Democracy is no finite thing, it evolves all the time. But the fundamental principles remain intact, according to Chungong.

A decisive moment for democracy

Like democracy, a crisis is not an end state. The term 'crisis' comes from the Greek verb *krimonai* and means 'sifting, deciding, judging'. In other words, a crisis is a 'decisive moment'. A moment when important decisions have to be made about the future. That means that we still have options and can make choices. Every action provokes a reaction. So like a democracy, a crisis is always in motion. It is a wave, with high points and low points. No unexpected and impulsive movements, but steady and considered. So democratic innovation should not take place at great speed. A democracy is slow by design. An adversarial process. Checks and balances. Because when changes takes place overnight, you know you have woken up in a dictatorship.

Nowhere is democracy more desired than where it is denied.

U Aung Kyi Nyunt (Parliamentarian, Myanmar)

Chapter 1

1

People are mostly positive about representative democracy *Even though they do not feel represented*

It may be clear by now that there are different kinds of democracy. Direct and indirect democracies, parliamentary and presidential democracies, democracies that are also monarchies, etc. And then we didn't even talk about the difference between unitary democracies (like The Netherlands and France) and federal democracies (like Germany and the United States) as well as their different electoral systems (first past the post or proportional representation). And there are almost as many forms of democracies as there are democratic nations on the planet. No two systems are exactly the same and no single system can be viewed as a 'model' for democracy. And so there is no such thing as the ideal democracy. The need for participation and experienced freedoms are culturally dependent and closely related to the origins of democracy in a given country.

What we can say is that, when we talk about 'democracy', in most cases that refers to representative democracy, because a fully direct democracy is highly exceptional. In fact, as we shall see in the following sections, many people have no desire for unlimited participation. Most people do not mind being represented, but

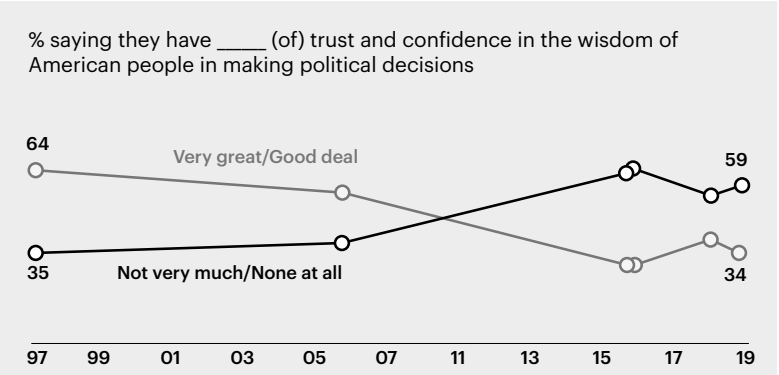
they are unhappy about the *way in which* they are being represented. All over the world, people feel that politicians are not listening to them, but act too much in their own interests. In other words, democracy is facing a crisis in terms of representation.

I. No trust in your neighbours

It is 10 January 2017. Barack Obama steps onto the stage full of self-confidence for his last speech as president of the United States. His Farewell Address takes place in the same location where he held his victory speech eight years ago, in his hometown of Chicago. Obama did not disappoint. With his famous one-liners and well-timed pauses, he addresses the elated crowd. In addition to his accomplishments, he spends quite a lot of time talking about the state of democracy, though not because he has to hand over the reins of power to his rival Donald Trump. Obama emphasises that democracy does not require uniformity and even the founders of America had their quarrels. They had their disagreements and ended up striking a compromise. But they knew that democracy demands a basic sense of solidarity. The idea that we are in the same boat, despite our differences, and that we fall and rise as one. And according to Obama, that is where things go wrong: democracy is threatened when one of us takes it for granted. He feels that, in a democracy, the most important office is the office of citizen. Everything depends on citizen participation. No matter where the power lies, each of us has to accept the responsibilities of citizenship, according to Obama. It is too easy to dismiss the entire system as inevitably corrupt. Or to lean back and blame the leaders we ourselves have elected, without examining our own role in it. According to Obama, we cannot allow the political dialogue to be undermined like that, for well-meaning people to give up and turn their backs on democracy. And to depict the people we disagree with as evil. Democracy only works when we are able to restore the sense of common purpose, despite our partisan preference or interests. To do justice to Obama's rhetoric, an excerpt of his speech:

> *'So, you see, that's what our democracy demands. It needs you. Not just when there's an election, not just when your own narrow interest is at stake, but over the full span of a lifetime. If you're tired of arguing with strangers on the internet, try talking with one of them in real life. If something needs fixing, then lace up your shoes and do some organizing. If you're disappointed by your elected officials, grab a clip board, get some signatures, and run for office yourself. Show up, dive in, stay at it. Sometimes you'll win, sometimes you'll lose.'*[17]

According to Obama, democracy is in the hands of the people. But that requires that there be trust in that people. Not only from politicians, but also trust from citizens in one another. Because if you are able to participate more, that also applies to your neighbours. At least in a democracy. However, when it comes to citizen participation, there is a paradox. Research shows that a majority of Americans are in favour of more citizen participation, but that an equally large majority agrees with the statement that 'people don't have enough time and knowledge to make political decisions'. Some even go so far as to question the intelligence of their fellow citizens.[18] So people want to have more of a say, but don't by definition have faith in the participation of others. In 2019, the Pew Research Center examined how much faith Americans have in the wisdom of the American people when it comes to making political decisions. It turns out that almost 60 percent of Americans have little to no faith in the political wisdom of other Americans.[19]



Source: Pew Research Center (2019). 'Don't know' answers not included.

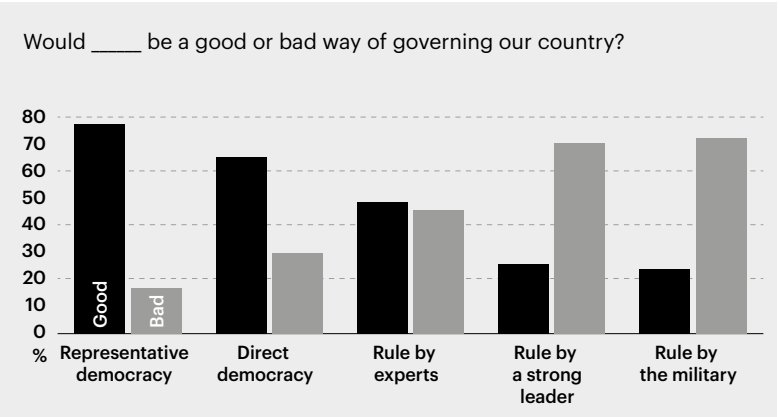
The lack of faith in our fellow human beings is not an exclusively American 'affliction', incidentally. With regard to the question whether or not people can be trusted in general, the United States falls somewhere in the middle. Countries in Central and South America (Mexico and Brazil), Southern Europe (France and Spain) and North Africa (Algeria and Morocco) show a considerably lower score. In Colombia, it is barely more than 4 percent. Countries in Northern Europe, on the other hand, have a much higher score. In The Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, the percentages is well above 60 percent. As it is in China, by the way.[20]

However, faith in our fellow human beings is not always a good indication of our faith in the political participation of others. For instance, when faith in our fellow human beings may be high in The Netherlands, faith in the 'political ability' of others is low. This is another instance of the so-called 'participation paradox'. In 2010, 48 percent of the Dutch people felt that people should have more direct influence on politics. At the same time, 45 percent felt that people often lack sufficient knowledge to form a well-informed opinion about political subjects. More than half of the people interviewed indicated that it is better to leave politics to elected politicians, instead of everyone getting involved.[21]

If, while reading this section, you have reached the conclusion that you also have more faith in your own political knowledge and skills than in those of other people, don't be too hard on yourself. Evolutionarily speaking, people tend to overestimate their own abilities compared to those of others. This is known as the *better-than-average* effect, one of the many cognitive biases to which our human nature is prone.[22] And incidentally, the claim that other people suffer from political apathy is as old as democracy itself. As early as 425 BCE, playwright Aristophanes ridiculed his fellow Athenians. In his view, people spent more time gossiping at the market than they did voting.[23]

II. Support for representative democracy

The limited faith in the political knowledge and skills of other people may well affect the long-term support for representative democracy. A global study by the Pew Research Center in 2017 indicated that 78 percent of the people see representative democracy as a good way to govern their country.[24] Although the level of support varies between the different countries and regions, in each of the countries included in the study, representative democracy can count on the support of the majority of the people.[25] So that support is by no means a 'Western' thing. In countries like the Philippines, South Korea and India, over three quarters of the population supports representative democracy. The same goes for countries in Africa. The *Afrobarometer* of 2019 shows that a large majority of Africans continues to support democracy and reject authoritarian alternatives. In fact, 68 percent of Africans say that democracy is the best form of government.[26]



Source: Pew Research Center (2017) 'Don't know' answers not included.

Direct democracy can also count on a relatively large amount of support worldwide, but that support is often accompanied by resistance relatively more often compared to representative democracy. This also shows in the large support for referendums. For instance, in Canada, 60 of the people are in favour of referendums about important and controversial subjects.[27] In Europe, there is also a lot of support for national referendums, in particular with regard to subjects in relation to the European Union.[28] Not entirely surprising, support for a more direct democracy is at an 'un-European' low level in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Probably because referendums have been organised there in the past, the results of which could not count on everyone's enthusiasm.[29]

The American research institute also looked at the support for political systems that deviate from the traditional interpretation of liberal democracy. For instance, when asked about a system in which experts (instead of elected representatives) make important political decisions, almost half of the worldwide population says that this would be a good way to govern their country. For an unlimited executive branch, in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from parliament, there is much less support. Only 26 percent would consider this system a good form of government. There is a similarly low level of support for a system where the army is in power. In countries where there is above-average support for a strong leader (like India) or a military rule (like Vietnam), these forms of government are still less popular than representative democracy.

The emergence of digital technologies has radically changed the way people can express themselves. One would expect that this would increase the need for a more direct democracy, but that is not the case. In the run-up to the national elections in 2021, I developed the *Technologie Kieswijzer* as part of my research. A special voting tool to map how political parties and people think about tech-related subjects like privacy, fake news and the power of Big Tech. Instead of a simple 'agree' and 'disagree', people could choose from five different solutions for each subject. In the end, almost 30,000 Dutch people used this voting tool. It provided a lot of interesting insights into the way people look at the digital future. One of the questions was about the future of democracy and the possible role technology could play. It turns out that people would not use the possibilities of digital technologies to have more of a say themselves, but to give the input from experts and scientists greater weight in political decisions. No fewer than 52 percent chose that option, as opposed to a mere 13 percent in favour of more direct citizen participation. Interestingly enough, citizen participation also gets a low score in other subjects. When asked how citizens can benefit the most from the use of new technologies, 48 percent of the participants indicate that it should primarily make life more efficient and easier (through shorter waiting times and lower costs). Only 6 percent are in favour of increasing citizen participation in government decisions (stimulating citizen participation). Again, people appear to have little faith in the political abilities of other citizens.

Representation crisis

Despite the continued support for representative democracy, there is a lot of dissatisfaction worldwide about the way democracy works in practice. Research from 2019 shows that 52 percent of the people worldwide are unhappy about the way democracy functions in their country.[30] However, opinions vary enormously within and between different regions. Take Europe, for example. In countries like The Netherlands, Poland and Germany, more than two-thirds of the people are happy with the way democracy works, while in countries like Spain, Bulgaria and Greece, an equally big majority is unhappy with the way democracy works where they live. A similar development takes place in Africa, where most Kenyans are happy about the functioning of democracy, while most South Africans and Nigerians feel the opposite. It is only in Latin America that there is some consensus. In Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, a majority of the people are dissatisfied.

Research shows that opinions about the functioning of democracy often relate to, among other things, people's opinions about the state of the country. People who say the economy is in bad shape are less happy about the way democracy works. However, the most commonly heard frustration of citizens is that they feel politicians are not listening to them. Worldwide, almost two-thirds of the population disagrees with the statement that 'most elected officials care about what people like me think.'[31] One could dismiss this frustration about politicians as 'a feeling'. The real question is, of course, if politicians in practice really have no idea what citizens find important. In 2021, a study in Belgium, Canada and Israel examined to what extent the priorities of citizens match the perception about them among politicians. As you probably suspect, politicians often misunderstand the needs of citizens. What is more, the perceptions of politicians are often prejudiced in favour of the preferences of male, theoretically educated and politically interested citizens.[32] As such, in many cases, the feeling many people have that politicians are not listening to them is completely justifiable. Political scandals and corruption also have a negative effect on people's satisfaction with the way democracy functions. Even in countries where you don't expect it. Swedes, for instance, are the happiest with the way democracy works (72 percent), but the Swedes who think that most politicians are corrupt are 32 percentage points less happy with the way democracy works.

We can conclude that people all over the world prefer a representative democracy, but that they are unhappy with the way politicians interpret it. In other words, people have no problems being represented, but they are unhappy with the *way in which* they are being represented. The British political scientist and sociologist Colin Crouch calls it the 'post-democracy', meaning that democracy as a system is by and large functioning (there are free elections, governments fall and there is freedom of speech), but that more and more people feel they are not being represented.[33] So it not democracy itself that is in crisis, but its political interpretation. As such, people's satisfaction with democracy is not a good indicator for the support for democracy. Insufficient distinction is made between the functioning of democratic institutions and the support for democratic principles. And yet, satisfaction with democracy is one of the most measured indications in studies into the support for democracy worldwide. Those types of studies focus above all on the formal interpretation of democracy (elections and representation) and much less on the material interpretation (freedom and equality). Democracy is not a one-dimensional concept and people may differ in the criteria that they expect from democracy.[34] In chapter 2, we will address the appreciation for and commitment to various democratic principles.

Democracy can use a little distrust

The increasing distrust in politics and the government is often seen as a threat to democracy. And although democracy does require trust, a healthy dose of distrust also helps grease the wheels of democracy. Distrust demands transparency and keeps politicians on

their toes. Democracy is dependent on active and vigilant citizens with a healthy dose of scepticism with regard to the government. After all, they need to exert their control over the government, if only by replacing the current government during elections.[35] Some political scientists compare political distrust to the 'canary in the coalmine'. In the past, miners used to take caged canaries down into the mine shafts. When toxic gases were released into the air, the canaries were the first to die, allowing the miners to make their escape. In a similar way, political distrust could be a warning for an impending democratic malaise, allowing the powers that be to respond, before losing the voter's confidence.[36]

Distrust also serves as a catalyst for collective action, for instance in the case of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, a social movement led by Martin Luther King in favour of equal rights for Black Americans. In his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, he responded in an open letter to the *Call for Unity*, in which King and his supporters were urged to cease any further demonstrations and to wait patiently until the courts would end racial segregation. King saw no other way but direct action:

> *'As in so many past experiences, our hopes had been blasted, and the shadow of deep disappointment settled upon us. We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community.*[37]

Political distrust not only causes the necessary civil disobedience, it can also lead to calls for the renewal of political systems. Research shows that the percentage of people who feel that the political system in their country does *not* need to change is very low. From about 6 percent in France to 12 percent in the United Kingdom. About two-thirds of eligible voters in the United Kingdom feel that their political system requires drastic changes or should even be reformed.[38] Again, it turns out that the suspicion of corruption among politicians plays a major role. Those who say that most politicians are corrupt much more often think that their political systems require serious reforms.

Democratic renewal

In recent decades, various alternative systems have been devised. For instance 'deliberative democracy', in which a diverse group of people is appointed to reach a political decision. Ideally, these citizens are representative of the population as a whole and are often selected through a draw. It is essential that citizens be sufficiently informed about the issues and are given enough time to come up with the best possible solution together. As such, this principle deviates from representative democracy, in which citizens delegate the decision-making process to elected politicians, and it is also different from direct democracy, in which voters have to make an individual assessment (for instance in the case of a referendum). In his book *Against Elections* (*Tegen Verkiezingen*), David Van Reybrouck describes the principle of the draw, comparing it to jury duty in the United States.[39] A well-known experiment with this form of government is the G1000. The idea is to have 1000 'ordinary' citizens talk with each other about the main political themes in their own town, village or municipality. The first G1000 took place in Brussels on 11 November 2011. By now, the project has grown into an international movement that encourages initiatives for citizen participation.[40]

And then there is the 'liquid democracy', which is a combination of representative and direct democracy. Citizens have the ability to vote directly on all kinds of policy issues (like in a direct democracy), but they can also delegate their vote to a representative, who will vote on their behalf (like in a representative democracy). This form of government is supported by, among others, the Pirate Party Movement. After the foundation of the *Piratpartiet* in Sweden in 2006, other Pirate Parties were founded elsewhere in Europe (and later worldwide).

As indicated earlier, since 2015, I have been an active support-

er of a 'modular democracy' on behalf of *Het Nieuwe Kiezen*. The reason for that is in line with the analysis of the British sociologist Colin Crouch, whom I mentioned earlier and who introduced the term 'Post-democracy'. According to Crouch, many people no longer feel represented because they can no longer identify with one party, the positions are closer and closer to each other, and elections are increasingly about people and less about the issues. Research by the University of Antwerp shows that people often vote for the wrong parties when we look at the issues, a phenomenon that is known as 'ideological disunity'.[41] There appears to be a huge difference between what people think about certain issues and what the party they vote for thinks of those issues. Because we primarily vote for people, political theatre is created, in which politicians engage in a popularity contest, instead of having an honest debate about issues and policies. The problem with elections is that people often do not agree entirely with one political party. However, in practice, we can only cast our vote for one party. *Het Nieuwe Kiezen* wants people to be able to vote for the party that best matches their views per theme. That means that they can vote for a different party on defence-related issues than they do on education-related issues. That way, parties actually have to compete on the issues (instead of using advertising slogans), and people have to focus on the issues (instead of their instinct).[42] Voting per theme also means government per theme. Instead of a broadly supported coalition agreement on all the themes, a broad coalition government can be formulated and a majority can be formed per individual issue. At the moment, initial experiments with this system are taking place at the level of municipalities.

III. The authoritarian temptation

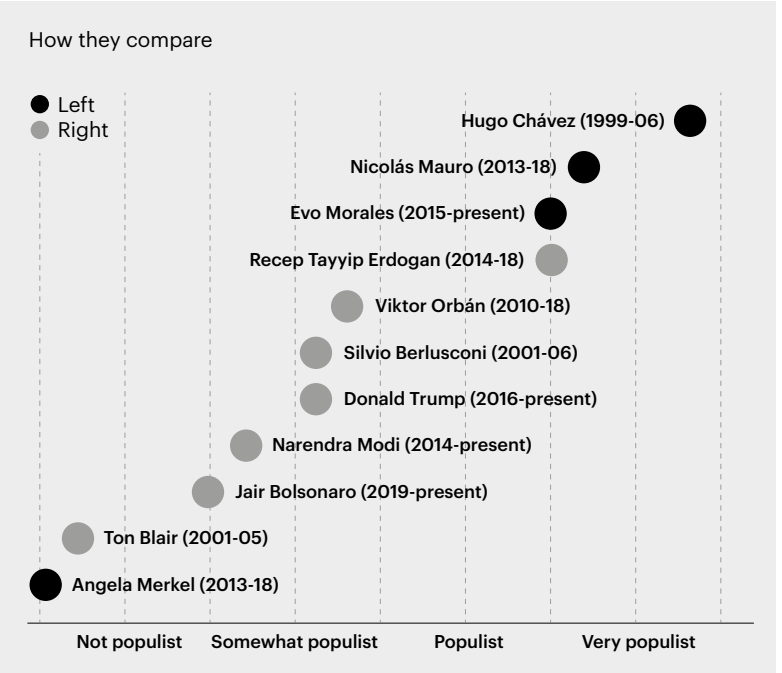
The increasing lack of trust in politicians is not only a driver of innovation. It can also open the doors to authoritarian leaders. According to *The Democracy Index*, compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), the number of 'complete democracies' worldwide has fallen in recent years.[43] In particular the number of 'hybrid regimes', which are characterised by election fraud, an oppressed opposition and low political participation, has increased in recent years. Such a hybrid regime is a precursor of a fully authoritarian regime. An example is Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who may been elected legitimately, but with the abolition of the separation of powers and the many state-controlled media, his regime very much resembles a dictatorship. Nevertheless, this type of leader can often count on the support of the population in their own country. Research shows that an unlimited executive branch, in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from parliament or the courts, is especially popular in countries where authoritarian leaders have expanded or consolidated their power in recent years, like in Turkey.[44] The same goes for the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte.

With the emergence of authoritarian leaders, we also see an emergence of populist leaders all over the world. In 2019, on average 58 percent of the global population believed that the political system was conquered by a corrupt elite.[45] Both authoritarian and populist leaders appear to flourish in times of crisis. A corresponding narrative is that a specific development, like automation or globalisation, leads to a widespread disruption and economic uncertainty, which is why they argue in favour of a strong leader who can guarantee a better future for the country. However, we should not confuse these types of leadership. Populists deliberately seek out the opposition between 'the people' and 'the elite', and clearly pick the side of the people. According to the populist, the current elite has become completely alienated from the people, making it necessary to translate the will of the people into policy as directly as possible. Unlike authoritarian leaders, who want to impose their own will on the people, often without trying to hide their 'illiberal ambitions'. The Hungarian president Orbán, during a national speech, declared that he is building a non-liberal state:

'Meaning that the Hungarian nation is not a simple sum of individuals, but a community that needs to be organised, strengthened and developed, and in this sense, the new state that we are building is an illiberal state, a non-liberal state.[46]

Populism, on the other hand, is somewhat less 'antidemocratic'. It is based on the majority principle and believes that politics should be an expression of the aforementioned 'will of the people'. So populists are of the opinion that political leaders should be elected by the people. 'The majority of the people' is often taken so literally, that the minority is overlooked. In fact, according to many populists, minorities are actually the cause of all problems. And that is very much a threat to liberal democracy, in which the liberties and rights of minorities need to be protected.

Despite popular belief, populism is not an exclusively right-wing affair. The narrative in which 'the people have been betrayed by the elite' is also found on the left side of the spectrum. Think, for instance, of Podemos in Spain and *Syriza* in Greece. Both in the case of right-wing and left-wing populism, it predominantly involves the extreme flanks (not to be confused with right-wing or left-wing extremism, which believes in the absolute will of the leader). However, the ideological differences between left-wing and right-wing populism are enormous. The populist message on the radical right often focuses on anti-immigration, while the left-wing message talks about the liberation from corruption and economic oppression. Left-wing populism is especially popular in Latin America. An analysis of public speeches of prime ministers, presidents and chancellors in 40 countries shows that the number of populist leaders has more than doubled between 2000 and 2018.[47] The study shows how politicians all over the world gradually started using more populist arguments, in which they viewed politics as a struggle between the will of ordinary people and the corrupt, selfish elites. Each leader was given an average populist score, based on the degree to which their speeches contained populist ideas. Researchers rated their speeches on a scale from 0-2, varying from not populist to very populist. It turns out that the most radical populists are located on the left-hand side of the spectrum. In addition, the overview also shows that a number of authoritarian leaders, like Erdoğan and Orbán, also have populist characteristics.



Source: The Guardian (2019)

So it would appear as though more and more authoritarian leaders assume populist positions to get the people behind them and increase their own power. That way, democratic institutions are gradually dismantled from within. Even though the essence of populist ideology is not antidemocratic as such, populist parties do have a negative impact on democracy. Research in Europe also shows that people who vote for populist parties are often less satisfied about the functioning of democracy in their country.[48] In

addition, they often are less convinced that the government does what is right for the country[49]. This makes for the ideal breeding ground for populist and authoritarian leaders.

I understand democracy as something that gives the weak the same chance as the strong.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 - 1948)

2

Chapter 2

People place great value on democratic principles

Even though their commitment isn't always very strong

As we saw in the previous chapter, there is a paradox with regard to citizen participation: people want to have a bigger say, but they do not always by definition trust the judgement of other people. So it is not surprising that people all over the world keep supporting representative democracy. And yet, many people are unhappy about the way democracy functions. A closer examination of the motives underlying their dissatisfaction indicates that people are above all unhappy about politicians, whom they feel don't listen enough to 'ordinary people' and instead act in their own interest. And although this is certainly cause for concern, it does not always tell us everything about the support for democracy.

By largely equating distrust in politicians with dissatisfaction about the functioning of democracy, the focus is too much on the institutions and people who need to promote and protect democratic principles, and not enough on the support for the democratic principles themselves, for instance freedom of speech, gender equality and freedom of the press. Democratic principles that we have perhaps started taking for granted a little bit in some parts of

the world. But what is self-evident for some, is a matter of life and death for others.

Taking to the streets for democracy

Imagine you're having a nice meal at the local restaurant on a warm Sunday afternoon in August. While your friends are trying to keep things light - do you think it's going to rain this afternoon? - you mentally prepare for the rest of the day. A long walk through the streets of the city. First go home to change and pick up your things. A yellow helmet, *check*, safety goggles, *check*, gloves, *check*. No, this is not an afternoon of shopping, but another day of demonstrations. It is the reality for Patrick Wong (pseudonym), a twenty-year-old student from Hong Kong. A reporter from *The Guardian* followed him during a big pro-democracy meeting that was banned by the police.[50] While he is changing in the apartment where he lives with his parents, he looks ahead. He is hoping it will be a peaceful march, the way the organisers and protesters have planned, but he prepares for the worst. 'We don't know what could happen.' Which is why he adds a bottle of sodium chloride to his demonstration kit, to rinse tear gas or pepper spray from his eyes. He was hit with both at earlier demonstrations. But he is not deterred. He sees it as his civic duty to defend the city. The protesters gather in Victoria Park, an oasis of green in a concrete city. On the train on the way to the demonstration, he opens his Instagram account and shows the reporter a famous quote by Jack London, the American novelist and activist: 'I would rather be ashes than dust'. The Brit Chris Patten, the former governor of Hong Kong, referred to the poem in his final speech before Hong Kong was transferred to Chinese rule in 1997. He was not afraid that China would take away Hong Kong' sliberties or autonomy, but that the people of Hong Kong would relinquish them. The quote gives hope and it encourages people to keep the faith, according to the young student. When he arrives at the park, more than 100,000 protesters have already gathered.

The protests in Hong Kong began in June 2019 as resistance to plans to allow the handover of potential criminals to mainland China. Opponents feared that this would undermine the independence of the judiciary. The proposed law would give China more influence over Hong Kong and could be used to neutralise activists and journalists. Until 1997, Hong Kong was governed as a colony by the United Kingdom, but it was then 'handed back' to China. Under the 'one country, two systems' arrangement, Hong Kong acquired a certain degree of autonomy (including its own judiciary and a government that was partially elected democratically), while its citizens acquired more rights (like the freedom of assembly and the freedom of speech). However, these freedoms expire in 2047 and it is not entirely clear what the status of Hong Kong will be then.

Hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets, primarily school pupils and students. They are a generation that was born around the time the United Kingdom relinquished control over its colony and hardly identifies with China. After weeks of protests, Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, announced that the proposed law would be suspended 'indefinitely'. But because the protesters feared that the proposed law would be pushed through at a later date, the demonstrations continued. Around that time, clashes between the Hong Kong police and protesters occurred more frequently and became more violent. Within a month, more than 700 people were arrested, 44 of whom were accused of rioting, a crime carrying a 10-year prison sentence. Nevertheless, the youngsters kept taking to the streets.

> *'I've tasted tear gas. I've been hit by a rubber bullet. I set roadblocks. No one taught me, I just saw people do it and I tried to help. I feel nervous. I can't be scared, though, because I stand in the front lines and people stand behind me. I need to protect them. Some of them are younger than me.' – Zita, 16 years old.*[51]

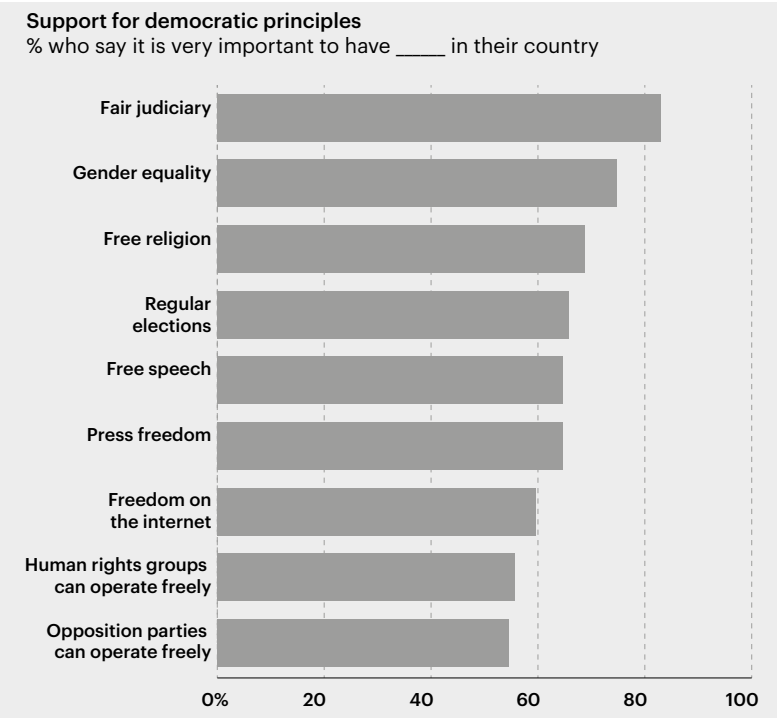
In September 2019, the proposed law was finally withdrawn, but according to the protesters, it was already too late. They now de-

mand full democracy and an inquiry into the police actions, under the motto: 'Five demands, not one less!' In addition to the implementation of full universal suffrage and an independent inquiry into alleged police brutality, the protesters demand that the protests not be characterised as 'a riot', and that amnesty is granted to the protesters who have been arrested. By now, the fifth demand, withdrawal of the proposed bill, has been met. It is unlikely that further concessions will be made. In 2020, a new national security law was passed that banned 'subversive activities' in Hong Kong. And yet, for many protesters, this is not the end. If everyone in the streets is arrested, the activities go underground, according to a nineteen-year-old student, making it impossible to predict when they will come back and strike again.

In Thailand, the call for democracy is also getting louder. Thousands of Thai citizens challenged the authorities in 2020 by demonstrating in the streets of Bangkok for more democracy and less power for the king. After years of military rule, protesters demanded changes to the constitution, new elections and an end to the intimidation of human rights activists and critics of the state. Again, it is primarily students who champion democracy with passion and, in doing so, risk their own future. 'Live free or die. Freedom is worth it', according to one of the slogans. One of the figureheads of the Thai protests is 21-year-old Panusaya Sithijirawattanakul. On a stage at the Thammasat University, one of the best universities of Thailand, she read aloud a manifesto with the demands in front of a cheering crowd. A monarchy that answers to the elected institutions of the country, that remains outside of politics and exerts no control over important army units would hardly be noteworthy in most countries. In Thailand, they are downright revolutionary.[52] In Thailand, offending the monarchy is against the law. Those who are found guilty of breaking that law risk a 15-year prison sentence. Critics say that this law is used above all to suppress freedom of speech.

Appreciation for democratic principles

Support for democratic principles worldwide remains high, as shown by research by the Pew Research Center from 2019.[53] Of the nine democratic principles they examined in 34 countries, a fair trial can count on the highest level of support, with gender quality in second place. Although this is one of the two most valued principles in most countries, it has the lowest priority in Nigeria. Freedom of religion also has a lot of support, in particular south of the Sahara. In South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya, it has the highest priority, and also in Turkey, Indonesia and India. However, it has the lowest priority in the more secular countries, especially in Europe, where in particular supporters of right-wing populist parties place little value on freedom of religion.[54] For people in France, Sweden, Spain and The Netherlands, it is at the bottom of the list, as it is in Japan, South Korea and Canada. Regular elections (with at least two political parties) is number four in the ranking. Interestingly enough, it can count on support in all the countries under examination, with the exception of Russia. The level of support in the various countries and regions varies, but for all democratic principles, the average of all the countries in the study is more than 50 percent. In other words, people have by no means turned their backs on democracy.



Source: Pew Research Center (2019).

In recent years, the appreciation for democratic principles has generally remained stable. However, there are a number of clear changes compared to 2015, when the research institute first studied the democratic principles. Especially support for various 'censorship-related principles' has increased in many countries in recent years. Many people value the right to say and share things without government interference. For instance, support for freedom of the press increased by 19 percent in France, the United Kingdom and Turkey. Support for freedom of speech even grew by 22 percent in Turkey. Support for internet freedom also increased in various countries. In the Netherlands, it was even the most valued censorship issue. There is a proviso, however. Of course it is good news for democracy that many Turks have come to value the principle of freedom of the press more highly in recent years, but that is undoubtedly related to the fact that organisations like Reporters Without Borders have signalled a deterioration in the country's freedom of the press. The same goes for Hungary, where there are relatively many people who describe all nine principles as very important. The fact that Orbán has sidelined various democratic institutions in recent years probably plays a major role in the high valuation for the different democratic principles.

In 2018, Pew Research Center also examined to what extent democratic principles are actually being protected around the world. Especially freedom of speech does well. A large majority is of the opinion that the right for people to express their opinion in public is well protected in their country.[55] A majority is also optimistic that most people have a good chance of improving their standard of living. Many citizens also feel relatively safe; in most of the countries under examination, only a small part of the population says that most people in their country live in areas where it is dangerous to walk around at night. Again, it becomes clear that citizens are above all critical of institutions and people that are supposed to promote and protect democratic principles. According to a majority, it makes no difference who wins the elections; they feel things won't change much anyway. People are also sceptical about their politicians. They believe that most politicians in their country are corrupt. There is also relatively much criticism of the courts. A majority does not agree with the statement that the legal system in their country treats everyone fairly.

However, this sceptical view of democratic institutions does not mean that people have given up on democracy. In 2016, the research institute examined the extent to which people believe that the average citizen is in a position to exert influence on the way the country is being governed. Of the nine countries in Africa, the Middle East, America and Europe that were investigated, the majority in eight countries indicate that ordinary citizens can have a lot of influence on the government.[56] It is only in Hungary that there is more pessimism, and a majority believes that citizens can

do little to influence the government. In all countries under examination, a large portion of the people indicates that they can be motivated to be politically involved in various issues. In particular poor healthcare, education and poverty could persuade them to take political action, for instance contacting an elected official or taking part in a protest.

Not everyone takes part

We have ascertained earlier that a well-functioning democracy needs active and vigilant citizens with a healthy dose of scepticism with regard to the government. The call for democratic renewal often assumes that increasing the options for citizens to participate automatically contributes to the quality of democracy. But that is not always the case, because politically active citizens in many cases are not a reflection of society. They are predominantly white, theoretically educated and male.[57] This group of overrepresented citizens is also known as the 'participation elite', a term that was coined by Evelien Tonkens, professor at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht. In the Netherlands, a relatively large amount of research is carried out into the characteristics and motives of politically active citizens. The *National Voter Study* (*Nationaal Kiezersonderzoek*) from 2017 shows that there are in particular large differences between highly-educated and less educated Dutch people (nowadays called theoretically and practically educated people. This participation gap is visible in virtually all political activities. Predominantly in options for participation outside of elections, where citizens can exert a much more direct influence. The study shows that theoretically educated people take part six times more often in consultation meetings, twice more often in demonstrations and are three times more politically active via the internet than less educated people.[58] According to the researchers, these insights are confirmed by numerous other studies: citizen panels, urban meetings and consultation meetings are the domain *par excellence* of the theoretically educated. The same goes for the more direct participation via interest groups, lobby clubs and activist organisations.[59] It also turns out that education has a direct effect on political participation. The *National Voter Study* shows that theoretically educated people consume more news, are more interested in political subjects and have more faith in politicians and government parties. And, not entirely unimportant, theoretically educated people have a higher opinion of their own political skills. All this makes them much more likely to become politically active.

The participation elite also is first in line when it comes to new ways to participate. Even at the aforementioned G1000 meetings, where attempts were made to realise more diversity by drawing lots. Researchers from three Dutch universities examined the experiences with these citizen summits. Research shows that the high expectations were not met.[60] Many people who have been selected end up deciding against taking part. Of the thousands of invitations that are sent out, often only a few hundred people show up, which is in essence a selection process that means predominantly theoretically educated, older people with a Dutch background show up. Many youngsters, people with a migration background and political cynics avoid citizen summits, which means their voice is not heard.

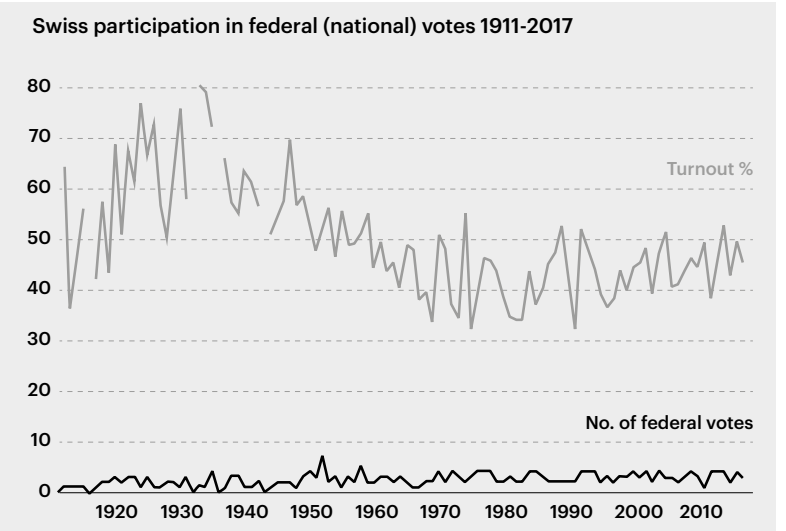
Because a specific group of citizens, who are not a reflection of society, make use of the options to participate more often, inequality grows. Researchers also call this the 'participation paradox'; the greater the number of channels for people to participate, the greater the chance of inequality in participation becomes. New forms of participation create new thresholds and inequalities. This growing inequality then seeps through into the political agenda, because the signals politicians receive from society are extremely one-sided. We saw earlier that the opinions of politicians are prejudiced in favour of the preferences of the male, theoretically educated and politically interested citizens. This is reinforced by the fact that politicians in most cases also match the profile of the participation elite. The needs and concerns of the already disadvantaged citizens end up on the political agenda even less often.

This becomes a vicious cycle. The feeling among many people that the state is not being governed for the benefit of the entire people, but only for a small elite, then turns out to be true.[61] That further increases the political dissatisfaction and will further reduce the willingness to participate. The result is that many people feel abandoned and unheard.

It is easy to say then that it is bad luck for these 'passive citizens', because they have had plenty of opportunities. Or that they show insufficient commitment and don't want to make an effort for democracy. By suggesting that everyone has equal opportunities, you also suggest that it's everyone's own responsibility, and that, if people are not heard, that is their own fault. However, this is unfair and undemocratic. Not everyone has the means to be able to participate. In today's democracy, participation is still too much a luxury. In this case, it is the democratic institutions that fail in their task to protect democratic principles like equality. This is also known as the 'democratic deficit'. Which is why it is time that we reverse it. If less advantaged citizens take part less often, we shouldn't try and change these citizens, but the opportunities to participate.

Voter fatigue

Offering people many opportunities to participate not only can increase inequality, it can also create a more general form of voter fatigue. In Switzerland, people can decide on a variety of national issues each year. From approval of the introduction of biometric passports to gay marriage. In spite of, or perhaps because of these opportunities to participate, Swiss election turnouts are among the lowest in the world. In the last 50 years, the national turnout was more than 50 percent on only six occasions, against a worldwide average turnout of 70 percent.[62]



Source: swissinfo.ch (2018).

Many researchers agree that the low turnout in Switzerland is not only caused by too high a frequency, but also by the complexity of the issues. Research from 2016 shows that 'complicated language' was the main factor for young people not to vote.[63] This complexity makes the voting cycle even more intense. Many voters quit as a result of voter fatigue. And yet, according to critics, that does not mean that this direct form of democracy is unsuitable. They argue that it would be a real problem if it were the same group of people voting every time. Research shows that that is not the case. Roughly a quarter of the Swiss people votes every time, and another quarter never votes. That means that half of the Swiss population consists of 'flexible voters' who decide whether or not to vote based on the subjects involved. We can conclude from this that three quarters of the population takes part with some regularity, a percentage roughly equal to the turnout in other European democracies with less frequent voting. If we look at the last 20 votes, more than 90 percent of the population voted at least once. So over a five-year period, only 10 percent did not vote even

once.[64] On the other hand, this calculation feels a bit contrived, because it does not diminish the fact that most votes are decided by a majority of the population. On multiple occasions, like in 2003 and 2012, the turnover percentage was even below 40 percent. Assuming that 25 percent of the Swiss always vote, most of this group of citizens is represented by the participation elite described above, the ones who are not discouraged by complex and frequent votes. So even in the idealised direct democracy of Switzerland, there is inequality and the 'participatory democracy' in its current form is not perfect.

Democracy is not the law of the majority, but the protection of the minority.

Albert Camus (1913 - 1960)

3

Chapter 3

People agree with each other more than we think *Even though the polarisation they experience is increasing*

In the previous chapter, we saw that support for democratic principles worldwide remains high. Principles like fair trials, gender equality and freedom of religion can count on a lot of support. A large portion of the people indicated that they could be motivated to get involved politically in such issues, for instance getting in touch with an elected official or taking part in a protest. And yet, in practice, only a small minority of citizens actually ends up taking action. Politically active citizens are not a reflection of society. They are predominantly white, theoretically educated and male. Paradoxically enough, increasing the number of ways people can participate appears to increase inequality, heightening the contrast between the *cans* and the *cannots*, those who can fend for themselves and are able to find their way to participation and those who cannot.

This participation gap seems a metaphor for the divided society. We increasingly think in extremes. Left and right, progressive and conservative, globalism and nationalism. In the public debate, there are often only two flavours: you are for or you are against. So it is not a big surprise that we cannot seem to agree on the best

way to deal with urgent themes like inequality, climate change and COVID. In fact, not everyone even believes that those problems exist in the first place. But without a shared reality, living together is quite tricky. In the current political system, the differences are only enhanced. In recent years, political opponents have started to see each other as a threat to society. The question is, however, if people really think so differently, or if these differences are used for political gain. In a world where everything revolves around attention, extremists have the advantage.

I. It depends on how you ask

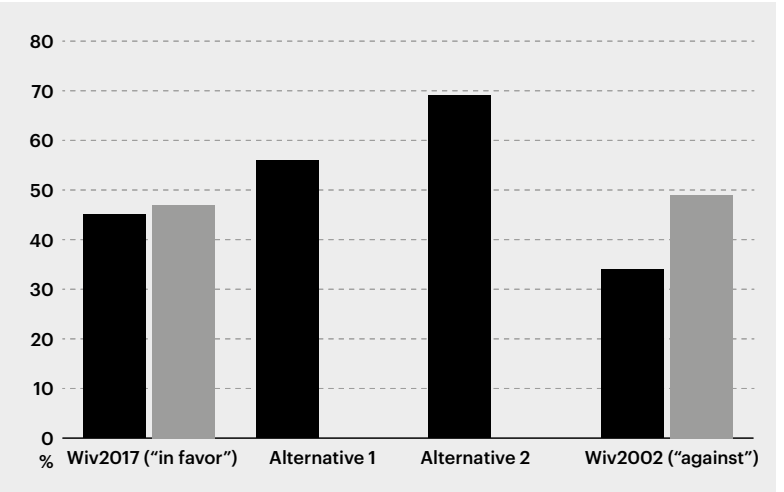
An authentic windmill. Cows grazing in the meadow. And a view reaching all the way to the horizon. It is a typically Dutch landscape, recorded numerous times in the paintings of the old masters. However, the authentic windmill has increasingly been replaced by modern wind turbines. And at 200 meters tall, they are hard to miss these days. And they are increasingly the cause of protests. Residents see them as landscape pollution and they are worried about the noise. Especially in the province of Limburg, there is a lot of resistance. For instance in Venlo, with more than 100,000 inhabitants the largest city in Noord-Limburg. In 2018, the provincial government devised a plan to erect nine 210-metre-high turbines in Venlo to provide about 28,000 households with clean energy. Limburg is lagging when it comes to realising its wind energy targets. But Venlo would have none of it. Via protest actions, neighbourhood councils and petitions, many of the inhabitants emphatically opposed the plans. Including Rinus van Lieshout, who lives in the rural area outside of Venlo. If the plans go ahead, there will be a wind turbine at 340 metres from his home. The fact that it will spoil his view is not even the biggest problem. The noise is. One could conclude that the people of Venlo don't care much for sustainability, but that would not be a fair analysis. When there are only two options (for or against the planning), you can't blame people for resisting, because they may end up with a wind turbine in their backyard. But what happens when you give people multiple options and ask them what the best location for the wind turbines would be?

I decide to find out and developed a new election compass in the run-up to the provincial elections of 2019.[65] The first tool without binary statements (for/against), but with five nuanced solutions, because a simple yes or no does not do justice to the nuanced reality. For instance, the question is not whether or not we should invest more in defence, for instance, but the question is what we should invest in (with an escape option for those who feel we should not invest more at all). Binary choices can be misleading. In traditional election compasses, political parties often indicate that they agree with something, and then explain in their reasoning that they actually disagree. We agree: but, if, unless, etc. This gives a very distorted image in the voting advice. To reach as many people as possible, I decided to work together with DPG Media (formerly the Persgroep), the largest media house of the Netherlands. In all, more than a million people used the election compass. When asked how best to determine where to locate wind turbines, almost half of the people of Limburg indicated that they should be placed in such a way that they do not have an adverse effect on the environment. Twenty percent indicates that it would be best to locate them together in large parks, while a similar percentage argues that they should be divided among the municipalities. Only 10 percent of the people of Limburg think they should not be built at all, while only 3 percent would like to see the existing windmills removed as well. This shows that people can give a nuanced answer, provided you ask them a nuanced question.

These insights are supported scientifically by the doctoral research of Charlotte Wagenaar of Tilburg University.[66] Like many election compasses, referendums also tend to present people with a binary choice: for or against a policy proposal. And here, too, the results tell us virtually nothing about the underlying reasons of the nay-sayers, or the preferred scenario of both

the people for and against. There will be people who have voted in favour, but who would prefer a different interpretation. Or people who voted against, but only because they have their doubts about some specific elements of the proposed policy. Or because it is hard to assess the consequences, as was the case with the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom. Fortunately, there is also an innovative alternative to the traditional referendum, namely the so-called 'multi-option referendum', where people are presented with three or more nuanced options. This construction was applied successfully in Sweden, New Zealand, Switzerland, and Liechtenstein.

To be able to analyse what the impact of a multi-option version is vis-à-vis the traditional binary approach, a shadow referendum was held in The Netherlands in 2018. In the week prior to the national referendum about the intelligence services (the Wiv referendum), people were presented with four options in a survey study, instead of two. In addition to 'for' and 'against', two more alternative scenarios were added. And as it turned out, one of the alternative scenarios gained the most support.[67] When voters were allowed to tick all the options that were acceptable to them, 69 percent supported a modified version of new legislation. Many fewer people voted against the proposed law than they did in the binary referendum. People voting against in a referendum cannot always be interpreted as resistance to the new legislation; it can also be caused by a lack of more nuanced and concrete alternatives. By offering people more concrete options, they can better assess the consequences of the alternatives, the likelihood of one of the alternatives matching their preferences increases, and politicians are better able to interpret the wining alternative.



Source: Charlotte Wagenaar (2019).

I was curious if this insight also translates to other countries. To that end, I developed an interactive voting experience in Design Museum Holon in Israel. In 2019, the country was so divided that they had to go vote more than three times within a year. Together with Merav Perez, a local designer, I made an interactive installation where people could use stickers to indicate their position on provocative themes like the status of Jerusalem and LGBT marriage. No binary choices, but nuanced answers. Again, we see that people have less extreme and more matching positions when allowed to be more nuanced. After all, nuance offers more room for overlap than contradiction does.

II. We are not so different

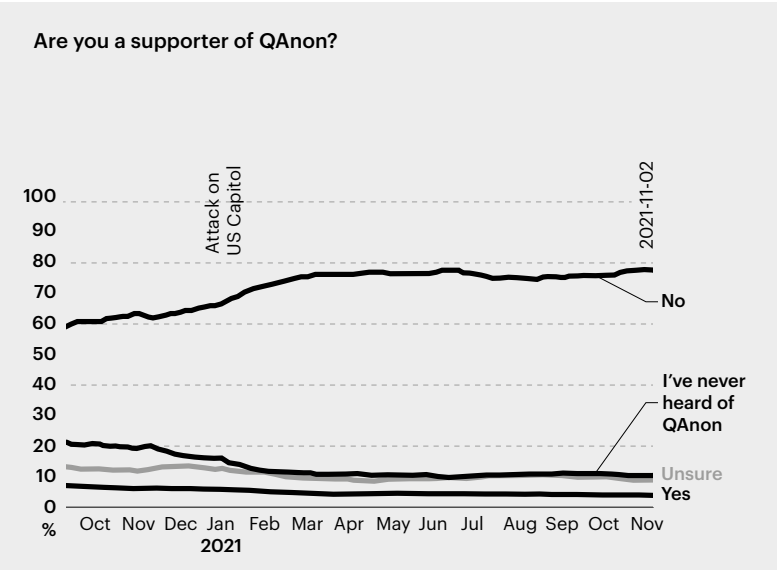
People often agree much more than we think. Even in the United States, one of the most polarised democracies in the world. Democrats and Republicans are often diametrically opposed. At least if you believe the headlines. And although there is indeed much division in the country (think of the gap between the educated and the uneducated, the poor and the rich, black and white), in

recent years, Americans have actually moved closer together. For instance, the percentage of people who feel that the work ethos and talent of immigrants is an added value for the country has doubled in the last twenty years.[68] An interesting detail is that this analysis was carried out in the year after Trump used the antiimmigrant slogan 'build the wall' at his election rallies. There is a similar movement when we look at the right for people of the same sex to be allowed to marry. The percentage of people who expressed negative opinions about that was halved between 2003 and 2017. And when it comes to climate, perhaps the one of the most polarised issues in the country, there is a high degree of consensus among Americans. Only 8 percent argues that the government spends too much money on combatting climate change. A large majority, on the other hand, feels that the government isn't spending enough money. That percentage has remained stable in recent decades, despite Trump's many denials. In multiple speeches, he claimed that climate change is a hoax; that the concept was thought up by the Chinese to make the American production process less competitive. It turns out that many American citizens are very much able to think for themselves and don't believe everything the former president claimed (primarily on Twitter). It may be hard to imagine for a lot of people, but there are rational Trump voters. People who do not agree with his extreme statements, but have voted for Trump for other, less emotional arguments.[69] For instance entrepreneurs, who saw in Trump the salvation of the economy.

When Republicans and Democrats are asked about the most important priorities to improve the quality of life for future generations, both camps want high-quality care to be affordable for everyone and feel that more money needs to be spent on quality education.[70] Although this has a higher priority for Democrats (for whom accessible care comes in first place), many Republicans also agree. For them, accessible care comes in fourth place.

And that is not all that Republicans and Democrats have in common. A recent study about political polarisation shows that politically polarised brains share an intolerance for uncertainty.[71] Scientists from Brown University used fMRI technology to measure the brain activity of dedicated liberals and conservatives while they were watching political debates and news broadcasts. The researchers discovered that a polarised perception is often the strongest in people who generally have a low tolerance for uncertainty. This shows that part of the hostility and misunderstanding we see in society is not due to irreconcilable differences in political opinions, but is caused by uncertainties that people experience in their everyday lives. Uncertainties that could be solved.

In addition, the research shows that liberals and conservatives are equally susceptible to fake news.[72] That goes against popular opinion that people on the right-hand side of the spectrum are more likely to assume that fake news is true. At least, that is the popular opinion in my own bubble. The researchers discovered that people on both sides of the spectrum have the same tendency to believe news that is in accordance with their own ideology, and perceive news that does not match their beliefs as fake in equal measure. Here, too, there are underlying neurological principles. The tendency to select (and remember) information that matches our own opinions and expectations is called confirmation bias. The good news is that the study also shows that the group that is susceptible to disinformation is relatively small. For instance, only 4 percent of Americans believe the conspiracy theories of QAnon.[73] And of that percentage, only a relatively small portion believe in the most extreme theories, like the conspiracy theory that claims that Democratic politicians and Hollywood stars are part of a global network that abuses children in satanic rituals.[74] The storming of the Capitol even caused a reduction in the number of people supporting the conspiracy theories of QAnon. It turns out that most people are able to distinguish true stories from made-up or twisted tales. More about this in part two.



Source: Civiqs (2021).

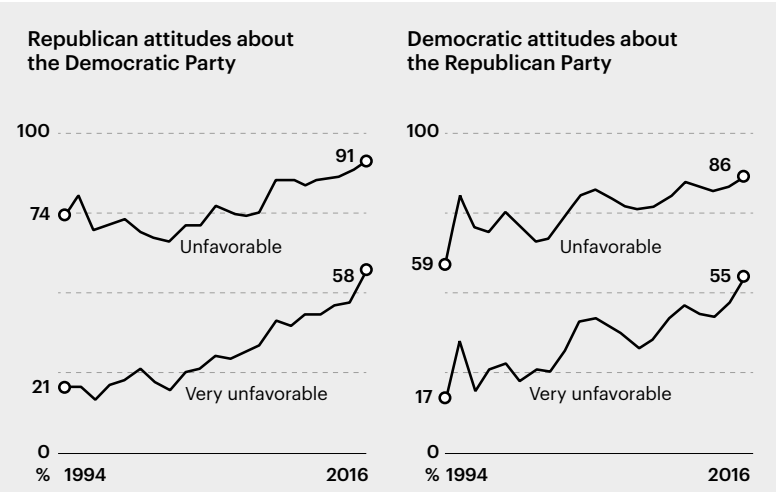
III. Concerns about polarisation

Based on the insights presented above, it seems safe to conclude that people are often much less divided than we are told. When you offer people alternative options, they almost automatically also become more nuanced in their opinions. Between the extremes, there is no huge gap, but a space where there is often a lot of (unnoticed) consensus. And yet, people all over the world feel that polarisation in their country has increased. Republicans and Democrats are united in their opinion that America will be more politically divided in the next thirty years.[75] One could argue that that makes some sense, because Americans can essentially only vote for one of two parties. But similar sentiments are also found in countries with multi-party systems, like The Netherlands. Recent research by the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (SCP) shows that 75 percent of Dutch people are worried about polarisation and think that difference of opinion about social issues is on the increase in The Netherlands.[76] What is more, people with different political preferences are judged a lot more negatively than people with a different religion, education level or ethnicity.[77] Although Dutch people feel that differences of opinion are increasing, the SCP study shows that, in practice, 'agreement in public opinion' is not diminishing at all. Based on population surveys, the researchers argue that there is little reason for concern about growing differences of opinion and hardening. But how do we explain that people have the feeling there is increasing polarisation, when there are no practical grounds to support that? The answer is actually quite simple: because polarisation works. It is to a large extent artificially maintained by politicians and the media.

According to the *Edelman Trust Barometer* of 2017, more than half the British people who were in favour of Brexit voted out of fear. As opposed to only 27 percent of Brits who preferred to remain in the EU.[78] Americans who voted for Trump also were more frightened than those who voted for Clinton. The study by Brown University already showed that people who have a low tolerance for uncertainty are more susceptible to polarised information. Many politicians are more than willing to feed that uncertainty and fear. Party political programmes are filled with claims that the country is doing badly, that globalisation and immigration are a threat and that we should all be worried about what is to come. Largely unjustified. These emotions are often not supported by statistics at all. Research by IPSOS in 40 countries shows, for example, that people structurally overestimate the percentage of Muslims in their country.[79] In The Netherlands, for instance, people estimated the percentage of Muslims at 19 percent, when in fact, it is 4.9 percent. Instead of hope for the future, a deliberate nostalgia for the past is created. The pro-Brexit slogan was 'Let's take back control', while Trump's campaign's was 'Make America great again'. These days, campaigning is about making your opponent look as bad as possible. And that is not just a problem of the 'right'. In 2020, Joe Biden launched a Twitter ad against Trump, referring to the way he handled COVID.

'Nearly 100,000 lives have been lost, and tens of millions are out of work, meanwhile, the president spent his day golfing.'[80]

For their book *Democracies Divided*, Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue examined the worldwide emergence of polarisation. In almost all the countries they examined (from Brazil and India, to Poland and Turkey), it turned out that political leaders deliberately used division and exploited it for their own gain.[81] In the process, the prospects of a democratic consensus and productive government were openly undermined. One would expect that citizens don't accept these affronts to democracy. However, research from *Yale* shows that only a small number of American voters are willing to sacrifice their partisan interests in order to defend democratic principles.[82] Both Republicans and Democrats are so partisan that they prefer to overlook undemocratic behaviour to moving to the other camp. Researchers have dubbed this partisanship 'negative partisanship'.[83] The loyalty to one's own party is fed primarily by hatred for the other party. In that sense, politics in recent decades has more and more come to resemble the bitter rivalry between football supporters. So people don't so much vote for their own party, but above all against the other party. Research shows that 55 percent of Republicans vote Republican because they think Democrat policies are bad for the country. Only 19 percent of Republican voters indicates they vote Republican because they have a lot in common with their own party. Similar statistics apply to Democrat voters. In fact, the share of Democrats with a very negative opinion of the Republican Party even tripled between 1999 and 2016. Republican sentiments vis-à-vis Democrats shows a similar development.[84]



Source: Pew Research Center (2016).

And it gets worse. Of the people who have a very negative opinion of the other party, the vast majority says that the policies of the other party pose a threat to the well-being of the nation, making it a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. If people *believe* that society is divided, it de facto *is* divided. The storming of the Capitol in 2021 made that painfully clear.

Here too, our brain plays a role. Evolutionarily speaking, people tend to favour their own group over others. This is also known as *ingroup-outgroup bias*. In each of us, there is a tiny xenophobe. We all have some fear or distrust of strangers and tend to see the behaviour of others as hostile.[85] Research by the University of Chicago shows that even the perception of the skin colour of a politician depends on a person's political preference. In particular in many Western cultures, 'white' and 'lightness' have positive connotations. Researchers showed three different photographs of Barack Obama to a group of 21 students. Unbeknownst to the students, the photographs had been altered in Photoshop: one to give Obama a lighter skin colour, another to give him a darker skin colour. The students were then asked which of the three photographs

best typified the former president. Supporters of Obama chose the photo with the lighter skin colour more often, while Republicans chose the darker one more often.[86] During the American elections of 2018, Hillary Clinton's campaign was accused of deliberately making Barack Obama's skin darker.[87]

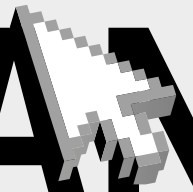
Not only politicians do all they can to use division for their own gain. (Social) media platforms have also discovered that polarised content scores better than nuanced messages. Facebook's algorithm, for instance, deliberately shows content that makes people angry because those messages generate the highest engagement and thus ad revenues for Facebook, as became clear from the accusations form former employee and whistle blower Frances Haugen.[88] She refers to a study carried out by Facebook itself, which shows that, if they were to change the algorithm to make it safer, people would spend less time on the platform and therefore click on fewer advertisements. In this context, people also talk about 'surveillance capitalism', a term that was coined by Harvard Business School professor Shoshana Zuboff.[89] It is a new form of capitalism that is focused on collecting and selling behavioural data. According to the whistle blower, the company consistently places profits above everything else. Not only above the increasing divisiveness in society, but also above the well-being of children. In particular the content on Instagram, which Facebook owns, is detrimental to the self-image of girls and young women and pushes them towards eating disorders. Again, Haugen refers to a study that was conducted by Facebook itself, which was subsequently dismissed. In her testimony to the American Senate, she says that CEO Mark Zuckerberg is personally responsible for placing profits above the mental well-being of children.[90] From 2019 onwards, Haugen worked at Facebook's co-called 'Civic Integrity Unit', which was responsible for combatting political disinformation. But after the 2020 American presidential elections, the unit was suddenly discontinued because Facebook had made it through the elections in one piece. A few months later, the Capitol was stormed. According to Haugen, Facebook also contributes to divisiveness, for instance by advising political parties to use polarising ads, which Facebook argued was the only way to engage users of the platform.

All this poses the question to what extent technology is destroying democracy. Or, as Frances Haugen put it, to what extent Big Tech is betraying democracy:

> *'And as soon as the election was over, they turned them back off or they changed the settings back to what they were before to prioritize growth over safety. And that really feels like a betrayal of democracy to me.'*[91]

THOSE WHO CAN MAKE YOU BELIEVE ABSURDITIES, CAN MAKE YOU COMMIT ATROCITIES.

Voltaire (1694 - 1778)



Part 2

Is technology destroying democracy?

On 12 March 2017, the world wide web celebrated its 28th birthday. On the same day, the inventor of the web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, wrote an open letter in which he voiced concerns about the platform. According to Berners-Lee, the web was originally developed as an open platform that allowed anyone at any time to exchange information, have access to opportunities and work together across geographical and cultural boundaries.[1] At the time, the British physicist was at CERN (of the particle accelerator, that one), working on a way to share documents with other scientists. His idea was to make these documents available via the internet, a network of connected computers that had already been used by the American army. When he also developed the standard protocol (HTTP) and the script language (HTML) in the two years that followed, the first website ever in the world could be launched in 1991: info.cern.ch. If you are wondering, that website is still online.

Cause for concern

Although the web has fulfilled its promise in various ways, Berners-Lee believes there is genuine cause for concern. In his view, we have lost control of our personal data. Documentaries like *The Social Dilemma* show that the technology that connects us, also controls, manipulates and polarises us. Every search, like and check-in says something about our behaviour and makes that behaviour predictable. That means we can be influenced. The longer we are glued to our screen, the more income that generates. Platform companies sell our attention to the highest bidder, which increasingly means governments and political organisations. One of the most notorious examples is perhaps the Cambridge Analytica scandal, where millions of personal data were used to influence the Brexit referendum. 'Big Brother is watching you' has become a reality. The big difference is that, in many cases, people give away their data willingly, without understanding the consequences. It goes beyond privacy. In Orwell's *1984*, governments deliberately used information to exert power and create an alternative reality. Next to the far-reaching impact on our privacy, the data collection frenzy of organisations, according to Berners-Lee, creates a situation in which we are intentionally presented with information that addresses our prejudices, in which disinformation spreads at an extreme pace and hyperpersonal political ads mislead voters all over the world. And he openly wonders how democratic it all is.

His concerns are shared by experts from all over the world. Research among almost 1,000 experts worldwide shows that half of them think that the use of technology will weaken the core aspects of democracy and democratic representation in the next ten years. Only a third believes that it will strengthen democracy. A much smaller group expects that technology will not bring about significant change in this area.[2] The concerns of the experts to a large extent match those expressed by the spiritual father of the web. In their views, technology can, for example, increase division in society, cause information wars, distort reality and generate confusion. As a result, vulnerable population groups can come under attack, elections can be manipulated and trust in democratic institutions can keep eroding.

Post-truth

Circumstances in which public opinion is shaped more by emotions than by objective facts are also known as 'post-truth', a term that was even named word of the year by the *Oxford Dictionary*. Compared to a year earlier, its use had increased by a staggering 2,000 percent, which, according to the editors, was closely related to the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and Trump's election victory in the United States.[3] Unlike previous years, the British and American branches of the publisher selected the same word in 2016. A year later, Collins dictionaries named 'fake news' the term of the year. According to Collins' definition, fake news is information that is false and sensationalist, but that is presented as news. It is important to distinguish between misinformation and disinformation. Although these two concepts are often lumped together under the header 'fake news', there is certainly a difference.[4] In the case of misinformation, the information may be misleading, but it is not distributed with bad intent. In the case of disinformation, on the other hand, the misleading message is distributed intentionally for commercial or political gain. The distributor of the message knows full well that the information is wrong, but uses it deliberately to make money (in the case of provocative and misleading headlines of clickbait) or to harm political opponents.

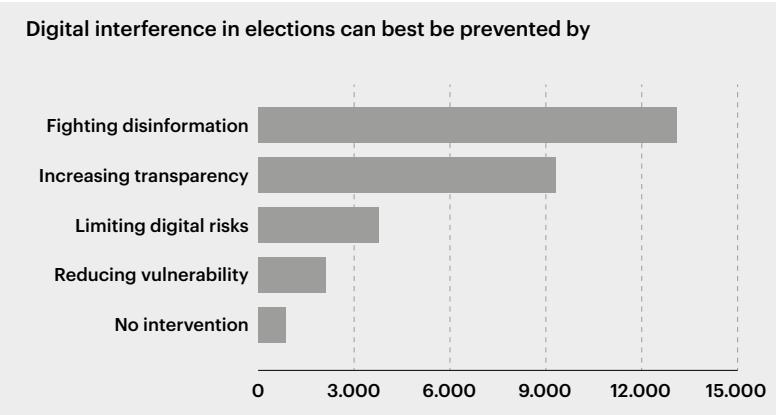
Think, for instance, of the inauguration of former President Trump. According to his spokesperson, Sean Spicer, it was the biggest crowd at an inauguration ever. The photographer who took the official photographs of the event later admitted that he had been asked by Trump's people to doctor the photographs, to make it look as though the crowd was bigger[5], because apparently Trump was not amused at the original pictures, which clearly showed fewer people attended his inauguration than Obama's in 2009. But it is not always innocent. One of the most famous examples where things went wrong was 'Pizzagate' in 2016. There were

persistent rumours online that Hillary Clinton ran a child sex network from a pizzeria in Washington DC, the capital of the United States. A 28-year-old man from North Carolina decided to see for himself if the rumours were true and went to check it out. After a 400-mile drive, he entered the pizzeria with a loaded gun, which he aimed at a staff member, who was able to duck in time. Fortunately, the police were able to apprehend the man quickly, so nobody was hurt. According to witnesses, he was looking for tunnels underneath the restaurant, where the abuse was said to take place. The police never found any proof of these claims. Nevertheless, the owner of the pizzeria received various death threats and the suspicion evolved into a national movement called QAnon. As such, Pizzagate can be seen as a precursor to the storming of the Capitol.[6]

Concerns about fake news

More and more people are worried about the increasing spread of fake news. The *Digital News Report* of 2021 shows that most of the people worldwide are concerned about the spread of fake news. The concerns are the biggest in Africa (74 percent), followed by Latin America (65 percent), North America (63 percent) and Asia (59 percent). Europeans are the least worried, although a majority of the online news consumers are concerned there as well (65 percent).[7] According to the respondents, the most misleading information can be found on Facebook, which, interestingly, also happens to be the platform where most people get their online news.

Combatting the large-scale distribution of disinformation is seen as the most important solution to fight digital interference in elections, according to an analysis of the aforementioned *Technologie Kieswijzer*, which was filled in by almost 30,000 people in the Netherlands.[8] Many prefer this option over increasing transparency surrounding political campaigns and advertisements. Many fewer people think that the emphasis should be on limiting the risks of digital systems in the election process (like the software used to count the votes). Or in reducing the vulnerability of political parties to digital incidents (like cyber-espionage and cyber-sabotage). Doing nothing does not appear to be an option. Most of the uses of the election compass believe that the impact of digital interference in elections has been proven.



Source: Technologie Kieswijzer (2021).

Many people are worried that the spread of fake news will increase divisions in society. For instance, 70 percent of people in the Netherlands feel that social media magnifies the contradictions between people.[9] The key question is, of course, if these concerns are justified.

Determinism dominates

Let's make it clear that digital technologies can have a major influence on our society. People who claim that they 'don't care about technology', clearly underestimate its effect on our daily lives. Technology is not neutral and contains prejudices (at least the data we use as input does). For instance, people with a darker skin colour are less easily recognised by the facial recognition soft-

ware of self-driving cars and there are examples of women being systematically disadvantaged by algorithms in the job application process. That way, the existing inequality in society is reinforced. Garbage in, garbage out. One could argue that technology shapes our lives. But we should not forget that people themselves also shape technology.

Technological development is often seen as a kind of law of nature, for instance in the case of Artificial Intelligence (AI). It would appear sometimes as though we use AI primarily because we think we have no other option. Many organisations are convinced that they 'need to do something' with AI, even though they do not have their data sets and the necessary infrastructure in order and there is often insufficient information within the organisation to implement AI successfully.[10] The question whether AI is actually the best solution to the problem, is asked far less often. Many people seem to overlook that the use of technology is a choice. That, if we want, we can also to decide not to use technology any longer. Or to limit its use through regulation.

In technology philosophy, these different perspectives are often referred to as the difference between 'technological determinism' and 'social constructivism'.[11] According to deterministis, technology most determines the direction of societal developments. Technology brings us wealth and progress, even though it is sometimes accompanied by growing pains. According to constructivism, on the other hand, people themselves play the main role in determining the direction of social development. Technology is a product and it is people who determine whether and how they want to use that product. Constructivists do believe that technology can provide progress, but only if it is used consciously and deliberately. According to their philosophy, technology does not shape culture: it is culture that shapes technology. For instance in the case of the printing press. Determinists will argue that that technology radically changed society, while constructivists will claim that it was the changing society that produced the printing press.

In reality, as is so often the case, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. Technology and culture have a mutual relationship and shape each other. Nevertheless, determinism often appears to have to upper hand in reporting about technology. In many news articles and books about this subject, we read that algorithms will continue to further divide us and pit us against each other. That the ongoing information war will make it impossible to distinguish fact from fiction. And our data will be used against us to deliberately mislead and manipulate us. In short, that the ongoing digitisation of our society will mean the end of democracy. In this popular narrative (which is fed by documentaries and Hollywood movies), we appear to assume that we are hopeless victims of technological developments. That we all live in our own bubble, that we believe fake news on a massive scale and that it is extremely simple to influence our political preferences.

In the following chapters, we will examine how big that influence actually is. Not to diminish the influence of technology (we are very much being influenced), but to see which concerns about democracy are justified and which are not. We may well find that the influence in some areas is much smaller than is often thought, but much greater in others.

Until you passionately make arguments for both sides, you don't understand the issue.

Sharon McMahon (former teacher)

4

Chapter 4

The filter bubble is about to burst *Even though the echo chamber poses a real threat*

One of the concerns of the godfather of the world wide web is that we are deliberately exposed to information that plays on our prejudices. In that context, Berners-Lee refers to the aforementioned confirmation bias, among other things. Online, we primarily look for information that matches our own opinions. For instance, if you believe there is a connection between 5G and COVID, you won't have to google long before having that connection confirmed. And if you have liked that kind of message on Facebook, the algorithm will ensure you get to see more similar content. After all, our attention is worth a lot of money.

Because more and more people get their news online via a handful of social media platforms and search engines, experts warn that people are hardly exposed anymore to information that contradicts their own viewpoints, the result being that people become more and more isolated in their own 'bubble'. The question is, however, if that line of reasoning is entirely correct. Even though we are mostly exposed online to information that confirms our opinions, in the comments, we are continuously confronted by people with different opinions. And that is the main difference with traditional

media. For instance, an article about the benefits of vaccinations is accompanied above all by comments from vaccine sceptics. And vice versa. The more you scroll through these reactions, the angrier you become. This way, the internet does contribute to a division, but the question is where the problem lies exactly.

The story of the filter bubble

For the story of the filter bubble, at the moment of writing, we need to go ten years back in time. In terms of technological developments, a light year. At least according to the determinist view. It is February 2011. The American author, activist and entrepreneur Eli Pariser steps onto the famous red dot in Long Beach California.[12] He opens his *Ted talk* with a quote from Mark Zuckerberg:

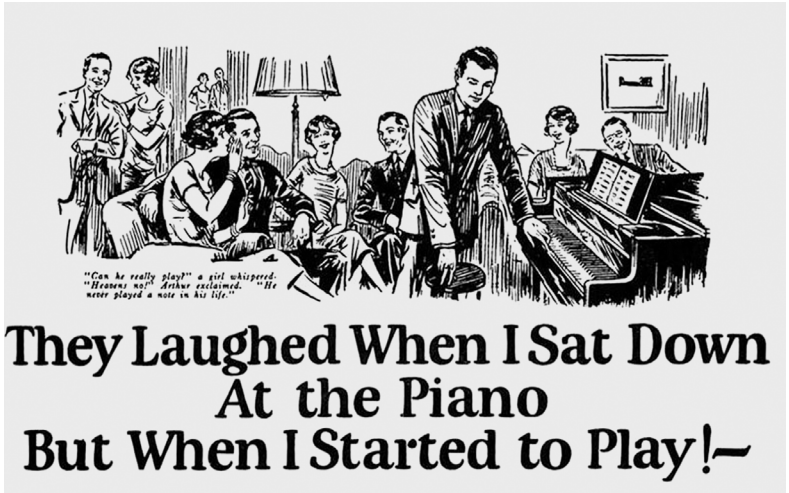
> *'A squirrel dying in your front yard may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa.'*

Apart from the fact that (shockingly enough) he might well be right about this, according to Pariser, it is much more worrying that social media platforms and search engines are deliberately designed on the basis of that idea. For Pariser, who grew up a long way from the big city, the internet meant something else completely. For him, it was a connection to the world and he was convinced that it would be a good development for democracy. He often consciously looked for the opinions of people with different ideas. But little by little, those different opinions disappeared from his timeline, because the Facebook algorithm learned that he predominantly clicked on the links of people with similar opinions, which is why the algorithm decided to no longer show him the other content, driven by the goal to keep people on the platform as long as possible. Without consultation or explanation. According to Pariser, Facebook is not the only one with this problem, and search engines like Google also have it. Allegedly, the search engine giant uses 57 characteristics to personalise searches. Which computer you use, where you are and, of course, your previous searches and your clicking behaviour all help determine the content being presented. As a test, he asked friends to google the word 'Egypt'. While one of them was primarily presented with a list of protests that at the time were going on in Egypt, another one got all kinds of travelling information about Egypt as a holiday destination. In his view, that means we have entered a world in which the internet shows us what it thinks we want to see, but not what we ought to see for a balanced view.

When you combine the various filters, you get what Pariser calls a 'filter bubble'. A filter bubble is your own, personal, unique universe of information in which you live online. The problem is not online that you get more and more isolated as a result, but that you no longer have any control over what comes in. So you have no idea what does and does not get filtered out. He compares it to a diet. A good diet is varied and balanced. It's not that you should never eat a snack or dessert, but it is important to have enough vitamins and minerals as well. He argues that the same applies to the consumption of information. Of course, the occasional 'information snack' is not unhealthy at all. But we should be exposed to a sufficiently varied and reliable amount of information. However, algorithms primarily learn what we click on first. And because we are focused on the short term above all, we will tend to go for the snack.[13] So these filters upset the balance of our information diet and cause us to only be presented with information junk food.

In his talk, Pariser refers to 1915, a time when he thinks we were in a similar situation. Due to an explosive increase in the number of competitors, newspapers focused mostly on getting noticed. Instead of distinguishing themselves through excellent investigative journalism, articles and headlines became increasingly sensationalist. Each headline even more provocative than the next. Critics at the time said that journalists had lost sight of the public duty and had ended up in a feverish competition focused entirely on advertising revenues.[14] The first example of clickbait is from 1927. 'They laughed when I sat down at the piano, but when I started to play!' With this provocative headline, John Caples, a New York

ad man, wanted to recruit students to the US School of Music. According to the ad, you could learn to play an instrument with the available course material. Without a teacher. The ad turned out to be a great success.



© *Ran (1927).*

According to Pariser, everything turned out alright with the newspapers, because they started to realise they had a social responsibility. That a properly functioning democracy required well-informed citizens. That generated a new form of journalistic ethics. It was by no means perfect, but it did help us through the last century, according to Pariser. Nowadays, it is not journalists, but algorithms that curate our information and decide what we see, which Pariser feels brings us back to 1915. To escape from that situation, Pariser believes we need algorithms that are transparent, so that we can see on the basis of which rules it is determined what information we get to see and what has been filtered out. That gives the user more control about what comes in and what is left out. In short, according to Pariser, we need to make sure that we not only see the most relevant content that matches our profile, but also information that is uncomfortable, challenging and

important. Because it is only when we come into contact with new ideas and new people that we can leave our bubble.

A standing ovation and a somewhat uncomfortable-looking Pariser came next. By now, the talk has been watched almost 6 million times and it is often referred to even now. For instance to interpret the Brexit referendum and the election of Donald Trump.[15] And although he did open our eyes (at the time, we were less aware of the effect of information being filtered by algorithms), the question remains to what extent we are indeed caught inside an online bubble. Time to see what scientific research has to say about this.

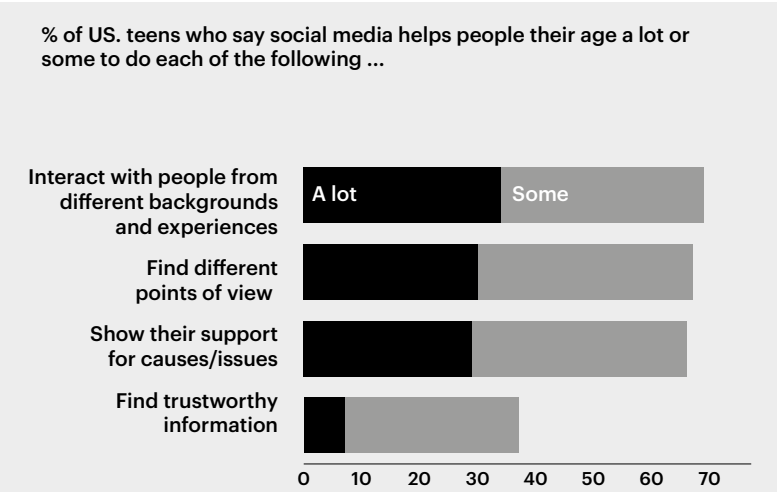
How the bubble burst

In practice, it turns out to be quite difficult to stay inside a bubble. According to researchers from Oxford University, the nature of social media actually exposes people to a large diversity of information. It is true that people are exposed more often to polarised content via social media. But unlike the concept of the filter bubble, the research shows that these users also visit sites offering opposite points of view more often.[16] So generally speaking, their media diet is in fact more varied. Other researchers arrive at a similar conclusion. People who consume polarised information more than average, also consume a more than average amount of mainstream media.[17] So people do not get stuck in the dungeons of the internet. Even though news increasingly moved online, it is still the mainstream providers that attract the largest number of people.[18] In the United Kingdom, for instance, BBC Online is by far the most visited news website. In the United States, we see a similar trend, with CCN.com topping the list. Search engines also make a positive contribution to this diversity. Research shows that algorithmic curation actually leads to a form of serendipity. People who use search engines in their search for news, on average consult more news sources than people who do not. And, perhaps more importantly, they more often consult sources on both sides of the political spectrum.[19] In particular people who go straight to a news source turn out to leave their bubble less often. The same

goes for people who consume most of their news offline. They keep returning to the same newspapers and stations. Social media and search engines by nature expose to more varied sources, which stimulates the diversity of news consumption.

Besides, most people don't even *want* to be stuck in a bubble. In addition to the fact that algorithms *by design* provide a more varied media diet, more and more people actively look for information that presents them with various opinions, that doesn't necessarily confirm their prejudices. Research shows that a majority of adult Brits proactively look for information outside of their political comfort zone.[20] Only 8 percent of the respondents had such a low score in terms of media diversity that they run the risk of getting stuck in their bubble. They consistently visit only one or two news services that do not offer alternative views. According to the researchers, we must not neglect those 8 percent, but the percentage is a lot lower than many experts expected. Especially in a period after Brexit. So many people are very much aware of the opinions and thoughts of people with a different position on the political spectrum.

The same goes for young people and even teenagers. Somewhat against my expectations, I have to admit. I mostly see my nieces imitating dance moves on TikTok. But there is much more than you'd at first expect. Research shows that a majority of American teenagers believe that social media will help broaden their perspective.[21] More than two-thirds of teenagers believe that these platforms may help them get in touch with people with different backgrounds, to find more diverse opinions and express their support for social issues. Many fewer teenagers believe that social media are a source of reliable news. So it turns out that youngsters are much more socially involved and much more critical vis-à-vis new technologies than is often thought. In part 3, we take a closer look at this.



Source: Pew Center Research (2019).

But we mustn't celebrate too soon. There may be arguments that go against the notion of the filter bubble, but that are still bad news. One would expect people who are primarily presented with one-sided content to become more polarised. And, in line with this reasoning, one would expect people with a more varied news diet to become less polarised. But the opposite appears to be true. Research from Duke University, for instance, shows that Americans who are confronted with news 'from the other side' become more polarised. Researchers recruited hundreds of Democrats and Republicans who are active on Twitter and paid them to follow a Twitter bot that would retweet content from the other party. After a month of being exposed to opposite views, it turned out that the participants were even more convinced of their own opinions. In particular Republicans appeared to be susceptible to this experiment. Not because their filter bubble filtered out other opinions than their own, but precisely because they were exposed to other views.

If we look at human nature, that is not really all that strange. After all, we don't like being confronted with contradictory opinions.

Psychology calls that unpleasant feeling 'cognitive dissonance'. People have a tendency to ignore information that doesn't match their opinions. Or to twist it in such a way that it does match what they believe. This creates persistent misconceptions. For instance, most people tend to overestimate the percentage of people born in another country.[22] When they are then confronted with the correct information, it turns out they do not adjust their misperceptions. In fact, the correct information reinforces this misperception. The more often we are confronted with contradictory information, the more strongly we start to believe in our own opinions. This is backed by research by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). When people are corrected by somebody else on Twitter for sharing misleading information, that always has a negative effect on their later tweets, which turn out to be of an even lower quality and to be even more toxic and polarising.[23] And that is more grist to the mill of platform companies like Facebook because, as we saw earlier, 'angry people' spend more time on the platform and click on links and advertisements more often.

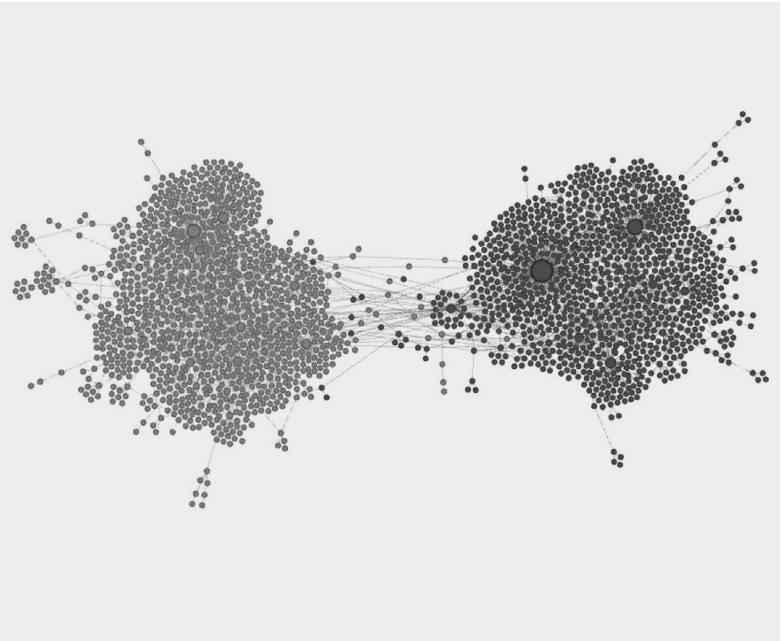
There are different ways to interpret these results. An obvious argument is that participants responded primarily to the messages they were shown on Twitter. A study by Brown University that we mentioned earlier shows that polarised brains not only share an intolerance to uncertainty, but that they also above all are triggered by information that is presented to them in a polarised way. It turned out that participants did not respond in a polarised manner to provocative subjects that were presented in a neutral way (like abortion, one of the more polarised subjects in America[24]). This suggests that, if we find a different way to communicate about polarised subjects, it is very much possible to bring political opponents closer together. The starting point is, however, that it is primarily about the message, and not the sender. But in chapter 3, we already saw that Americans not so much vote for their own party, but against the other party. In recent decades, the rivalry between the supporters of different political parties has more and more started to resemble that between football supporters. The loyalty for one's own party is primarily fed by a hatred for the other party. That does not only apply to Americans. As we saw in chapter 3, in The Netherlands, people with a different political preference are treated much more negatively than people with a different religion, education level or ethnicity.

Whether it is primarily about the message or about the sender, if we want to understand the polarising effect of the internet, we also need to look outside the filter bubble. For instance, it is not true that people who believe that the Earth is flat never heard that the Earth could also have a different shape. They are undoubtedly aware that the generally accepted view is that the Earth is round. In fact, they openly opposed that view. When scientists share articles or videos about space online, it is often the most fanatic supporters who go on the offensive and express their indignation in the comments. Often in capital letters and using a wealth of punctuation marks. It is the confrontation with people with a different opinion that creates fanaticism. In addition to the design (and the revenue model) of social platforms and search engines, there also have to be other, more social constructs that explain the rising emotions.

The reverberation of the echo chamber

In his book *Why We're Polarized*, Ezra Klein describes that America was already polarised before the rise of Facebook and Google. He argues that technology was at the most an accelerator, instead of a root cause.[25] Instead of changing our human nature, technology responds to it and magnifies it. With the arrival of social media, according to Klein, people were faced with a new form of public pressure. Namely the pressure to have a consistent identity. Social media platforms suddenly turned us into a persona. We were given a profile with an enormous reach *and* a traceable history. To be consistent in this new parallel world, we had to go looking for clues about what our environment considered to be consistent. We had no choice but to look at other members in our community. By the overarching virtual profiles, our various offline identities

were as it were stacked on top of each other. All under the heading 'political preference'. According to Klein, our preferences are more and more transferred to a 'mega-identity' that has given us a fixed location on the political spectrum. Left or right. Progressive or conservative. When we are confronted with people with different opinions, we quickly return to our own safe community, to share our frustration with likeminded people. These communities are not closed off by a bubble, but function as a so-called 'echo chamber'. A place where we are confirmed in our convictions and where people who disagree with us are demonised. According to Klein, it is very hard to give people a strong sense of 'who we are' without defining 'who we are not'.



Source: Kumar & Shah (2018).

Despite the open structure of an echo chamber, 'closed' networks do emerge. In these networks, one's own opinions are praised and those of other people with different opinions are ridiculed. Opinions echo round in the 'chamber', making it seem like one's own group is vast and enormously vocal. But in reality they are highly concentrated groups that, in terms of their size, make up a mere fraction of the population. Researchers mapped the 'echo chamber' on Twitter and looked at the retweeting behaviour of people surrounding the controversial beefban discussion in 2015. When it was announced that eating beef would be banned by law in the Indian state of Maharashtra, emotions on Twitter ran high. Soon, two camps emerged: supporters and opponents of the ban. As the visual shows, in terms of retweet, there is virtually no cross-pollination between the two camps.[26] Supporters primarily shared messages from fellow supporters, while opponents tended to share messages from fellow opponents. The resulting division was not the work of a polarising algorithm, but the result of human choices.

So the problem of an echo chamber is not that people no longer come into contact with people with different opinions, but that they no longer trust those other people. At the same time, trust in people with the same opinion has ample room to grow. In that sense, the echo chamber resembles a cult.[27] Echo chambers do not isolate their members by severing communication lines with the outside world, but by influencing who and what they trust. Especially in times of great uncertainty, when people feel as though they are losing control, a narrative that explains their feelings and offers a safe community comes as a huge relief. Part of that narrative is often the shared enemy who is the cause of all these problems, like the government or the media. As such, crises are breeding ground for conspiracy theories, like the emergence of the QAnon movement during the COVID pandemic.

On social media, it is much easier to surround yourself with likeminded people than it is in real life. And ideas also spread more rapidly, of course. Especially more radical ideas. We know that people with a low tolerance for uncertainty are more susceptible to polarised information. Convictions that simmer below the surface in society for a while, in an online environment can quickly go main-

stream. Researchers call this the transition from 'spiral of silence' to 'spiral of noise'.[28] Think, for instance, of the antivaxxer movement. If you had told friends or relatives at the start of the pandemic that you had your doubts about vaccines, in many circles, you were likely to meet with resistance. You could soon feel like an outcast, unseen and misunderstood. And then there appear to be entire online communities sharing your opinion. 'You see? I'm not crazy. Those other people are crazy!' Before you know it, your opinion becomes newsworthy and antivaxxers appear in popular talk shows on television, allowing them to address a wider audience and the idea has become mainstream. This does not always have to be a negative development. After all, in a democracy, minorities also deserve to be heard. It becomes dangerous when people become increasingly radicalised and even start embracing more extremist ideas.

Belonging

In particular social exclusion appears to fan the flames. Researchers of the American Purdue University showed that social exclusion can make people more susceptible to extreme opinions and activities.[29] In a social experiment, test subjects were asked to take part in a digital ballgame, called 'Cyberball'. The computer game is often used in research into interpersonal exclusion and acceptance. In the game, players have to throw the ball to one another. They think they are playing the game with two or three other participants, but in reality the other players are controlled by the researcher. Participants are deliberately excluded, by not or hardly ever being thrown the ball . The excluded participants in hindsight not only experienced a lower degree of self-respect than the people that were not excluded, but they also appeared to be more open to extreme activities. One of the experiments showed that 'banished participants' were more open to becoming a member of a street gang. So the impact of social exclusion on people's susceptibility to extremism already shows during a 'simple ballgame'. Think what could happen if people are being excluded because of their religion, culture, or the way they look. They can fall prey to radical and even extremist groups. Social exclusion affects one's self-image and self-worth. It gives people the idea that they don't matter. When extremist groups cater to people's need to belong, even the most well-adjusted citizens can radicalise within a short time-frame. The accessibility and speed of the internet provide a huge catalyst for that process, the way radio provided a catalyst in the run-up to the Second World War.[30]

The need to belong is a very powerful mechanism. In chapter 3, we already discussed that, evolutionarily speaking, we tend to favour our own group over others, also known as *ingroup-outgroup bias*. This psychological motivation these days still causes us to spread information mobilising the *ingroup* against the *outgroup*, simplifies the coordination of attention within the group, and transfers the commitment of group members to other group members.[31] Think, for instance, of the violent protests of the Proud Boys movement in America. The Proud Boys are an extreme right-wing movement that describes itself as 'a pro-Western and fraternal organisation'. They are against immigration and pro-gun, and do not hesitate to use violence to make their political positions known. The dubious honour of mobilising this *ingroup* goes to Trump. When Trump was asked during the televised presidential debate in 2020 if he was willing to denounce this violent moment, his response was:

'Stand back and stand by.'[32]

In other words, 'step back now and be prepared'. For the Proud Boys, this was a historic statement, which they interpreted as 'a tacit approval of their violent actions'.[33] In particular on Telegram and Parler, at the time the most widely used social media platforms of the group, the statement spread like wildfire and was received with enormous enthusiasm. The president of the movement, Enrique Tarrio, on Parler announced that he was fully committed to Trump's statement: 'Standing by sir'. Although the group has been banned from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube since 2018, they manage to coordinate and mobilise easily via alternative channels.

Incidentally, such extreme movements are not only found on the right side of the spectrum. The extreme left-wing opposite of the Proud Boys is the Antifa movement, short for ‘anti-fascist’. The movement seemed to have disappeared completely, but became active again when Trump won the 2016 election.

Not all echo chambers lead to violent behaviour. And the subjects vary enormously. There are echo chambers in areas like parenthood, nutrition and yoga. In line with the analysis by Ezra Klein, these groups do tend to become increasingly politicised. It turned out that, during the parliamentary election of 2021, right-wing parties received a remarkably large amount of support from people interested in spirituality and meditation. People who normally voted for left-wing parties, based on values like freedom and solidarity, made a huge move to the right, again in large part due to a crisis. Some right-wing parties in the Netherlands are openly against the government’s measures to combat COVID. They are against vaccination and taking away people’s personal freedoms. Opinions that strongly resonate among the spiritual movement. The fact that these right-wing parties are also against immigration and are worried about the ‘decline of Western population’ (which they feel is being replaced by people from elsewhere) is something that the *new* age group seems to consider an unavoidable by-product. The result is that spiritual activists protest against the government’s COVID measures side by side with support of a radical right-wing ideology. My enemy’s enemy is my friend.

The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge.

Stephen Hawking (1942 - 2018)

5

Chapter 5

Most people are immune to fake news *Even though it contributes to radicalisation in the margins*

We have seen that the need to belong is an enormously powerful mechanism. So powerful in fact that people who are being excluded are much more open to extreme ideas and activities. Lost souls find comfort in online echo chambers. A place where not only the faith in one's own opinions is reinforced, but also where people are mobilised against a common enemy. Research shows that people who hate their political opponent have the strongest tendency to share political fake news in an attempt to discredit their opponents.[34] Experts argue that the enormous deluge of fake news causes an impending information war, in which reality is distorted and democratic institutions are increasingly distrusted. All over the world, more and more people are worried about the spread of fake news. As we know, fighting the large-scale distribution of disinformation is considered to the main solution to combat digital interference in elections, by the 30,000 users of the *Technologie Kieswijzer*.

The question is to what extent these concerns are fully justified. Let us start by saying that fake news is very much being used as a political 'weapon' to generate confusion in society. But to un-

derstand its actual influence on democracy, we first need to know more about how it works exactly. In the various doomsday scenarios, people are portrayed as irrational creatures who believe everything they are told. With or without substantiation. However, faith in science all over the world is as high as it has ever been.[35] Even in a digital age rife with conspiracy theories.

I. Fake news in antiquity

Fake news is often seen as a modern phenomenon. A by-product of the digital age. But misleading information has been used for political gain since time immemorial. For one of the first ever fake news scandals, we need to go back to the year 44 BCE, a year that marks the transition from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire. After almost a century of civil war, chaos and political assassinations, Rome's government was teetering above the abyss. The spread of fake news played a crucial part in the demise of the republic (with its elected consuls, Senate and popular assembly) and the rise of the absolute rulers.

It all started with the assassination the popular general and politician Julius Caesar, who had appointed himself dictator and thus neutralised the aristocratic elite of the Roman Senate, after which a group of senators decided to kill Caesar. The aim of the murders was to reverse Caesar's reforms and restore the republic (and the associated powers of the Senate). That is when the protagonist of the story makes his appearance: Gaius Octavius, Octavianus for short. What the Senators had overlooked, was that Caesar had appointed the 19-year-old Octavianus as his heir. The young man would be merciless in revenging the death of his adoptive father. Together with Marc Anthony, Caesar's general, he crushed the opposition and hunted down Caesar's killers. With success. All the senators who had been involved were killed.

Octavianus and Marc Anthony decided to divide the Roman empire between themselves. Octavianus would rule the western part of the empire (including Rome) and Marc Anthony would rule the eastern part (including Egypt). However, the alliance did not last long. In 32 BCE, Marc Anthony left his wife Octavia (sister of Octavianus) for the famous Egyptian queen Cleopatra. Rumour had it that the new lovers intended to recognise Caesarion (the son of Cleopatra and Julius Caesar) as Caesar's legitimate heir, implying that Octavianus should not have succeeded his adoptive father. This made Octavianus so angry that he decided to start a campaign to get rid of Marc Anthony for good. Octavianus claimed that he was in possession of Marc Anthony's will, which he claimed contained such controversial statements that he felt that every Roman had a right to be informed. To that end, he read the will out loud in the Senate and made sure that messengers spread the news all over the empire. The will did indeed confirm the rumour that they wanted to recognise Caesarion's legitimacy. In addition, the will stated that Marc Anthony intended to leave large areas of Roman territory to his and Cleopatra's children. And what was perhaps even worse, that he wanted to be buried in Alexandria instead of Rome. Rome was deeply offended and turned against Marc Anthony. He was seen as a traitor and people felt he had lost his head to a far too powerful oriental woman. The Senate declared war on Egypt. And Octavianus got what he wanted. In 31 BCE, there was naval battle at Actium in Greece. Marc Anthony lost the battle and fled back to Egypt. When Octavianus appeared off the coast of Alexandria with his army a few months later, Marc Anthory and Cleopatra committed suicide.

Because history is written by the victors, this has become the official version. The story of a man seduced and corrupted by an exotic oriental queen has a powerful attraction in the West.[36] There are serious doubts, however, if the will was indeed drawn up by Marc Anthory.[37] If we look at the remainder of Octavianus's rule, it very much looks like it was part of a clever disinformation campaign.

After his victory, Octavianus returns home. He had reached his goal; he was the most powerful man of the Roman Empire. But he was also worried that history would repeat itself. Although, formally speaking, Octavianus was still a consul, he had the same dic-

tatorial powers as Caesar. And his adoptive father had paid for his powerful position with his life. That is why he came up with an ingenious plan to mislead Rome again. On the outside, it should appear as though he had restored the republic, but behind the scenes, he would claim all the power for himself. Together with a group of senators who all owed their position to Octavianus, he hatched a conspiracy.

During a Senate meeting on 13 January27 BCE, Octavianus announced his abdication and returned how powers to the Senate: the army, the laws and the provinces. There was a deadly silence. But then, several senators stood up to beg Octavianus to stay and continue his work. After all, he had brought them prosperity and peace. With a good sense of theatre, he turned down their request. But after a number of senators insisted, he gave in. Not only was he still a consul, he was also given power over the provinces where at that moment most of the army was located (like Spain and Egypt). The grateful senators gave him the title Augustus, 'the exalted'. As ruler of Egypt, he was also the richest man of Rome, which allowed him to personally pay the soldiers' salaries. A when the treasury was unable to buy grain for the poor, Augustus offered to pay for it himself, which made him immensely popular with the Roman proletariat, allowing him to assume the powers of the Senate, the civil service and the law without any resistance.

In the eye of the people, he was still an 'ordinary' servant of the republic, but in reality, he had completely gutted the republic and assumed all its powers himself. He did everything he could to maintain the alternative reality he had created. He never flaunted his wealth and he and his wife Livia lived in a modest house. In addition, he cultivated the image of himself and his family as the cornerstone of society. To reinforce that, he introduced severe punishments for adultery. In reality, however, his modest lifestyle and strict morals were only a diversion. On an island near Naples, he had his own luxury villa, where he went with his friends to enjoy life. And his young mistresses.

Alternative facts

It is a story that would have impressed even George Orwell. In addition to being a prophecy about the surveillance state, *1984* is above all about manipulating reality. In the science fiction novel from 1949, the ruling totalitarian Party tries to manipulate the truth by allowing only one version of the truth.[38] Even having thoughts that contradict the Party's wishes is seen as a crime ('thoughtcrime'). The story's protagonist, Winston Smith, works at the 'Ministry of Truth'. His work consists of rewriting texts to make sure the message is in line with the opinions of the Party, allowing the government to create an alternative reality, making truth into a fluid concept of which you prescribe an alternative version. Just like Augustus did in the Roman Empire. And just like Trump with his aforementioned inauguration. According to Sean Spicer, Trump's spokesperson, it was the inauguration with the biggest crowd ever. But as we know by now, the photographer had doctored the photos on behalf of Trump, making the crowds look bigger. When Trump's former advisor Kellyanne Conway was confronted with Spicer's statement, she went on the defensive:

> *'You're saying it's a falsehood and Sean Spicer, our press secretary, gave alternative facts to that.'*[39]

According to Conway, numbers are really hard to prove. She argues that there is no way to quantify the number of visitors. When you compare the doctored photos to the originals, however, you don't have to count the number of individual visitors. It is immediately clear that the crowds at Obama's inauguration were much bigger.

II. Check your facts about fake news

The concerns about the increasing spread of fake news don't come out of the blue. Research by MIT shows that fake news spreads faster online than verified news.[40] Researchers collected 126,000 news messages that were tweeted 4.5 million times between 2006 and 2017. They classified the messages as 'true' or 'false', based

on six independent fact check organisations. Not only does fake news turn out to spread more quickly online, it also reaches further than verified information. In particular political fake news adds fuel to the fire. It spreads faster, for example, than fake news about terrorism, natural disasters or financial subjects. The researchers think that especially the experienced emotions are the cause of that. Fake news evokes more intense emotions among internet users than 'real' news does. For instance fear and disgust. Contrary to popular opinion, the research shows that algorithms do not have a preference for fake news. Algorithms accelerate the spread of fake news and verified news at the same pace. The fact that fake news spreads more quickly is because people, not algorithms, have a greater tendency to share it.

Despite its large reach, the influence of fake news appears to be limited. American political scientists analysed the browser history of thousands of Americans in the run-up to the 2016 presidential election. The reach of fake news was indeed large, but also superficial.[41] Although almost half of the participants visited unreliable websites in that period, the consumption of fake news made up only 6 percent of their overall news diet. Even the most fanatical fake news readers (which turned out to be ultra-conservative supporters of Trump) relatively speaking consumed more news from verified channels. In chapter 4, we saw that CNN.com is by far the most commonly visited website in the US when it comes to obtaining news. It turns out that the consumption of fake news is enormously concentrated. Only 20 percent of the most conservative Americans are responsible for more than 60 percent of all visits to unreliable websites. The researchers emphasise that, despite all the hype about fake news, it is important to acknowledge that it only reaches a portion of Americans. And the most partisan portion at that. In addition, the consumers of fake news turn out to be far less loyal than people who consume their news above all via the established channels.[42] Fake news consumers return to the same websites less often.

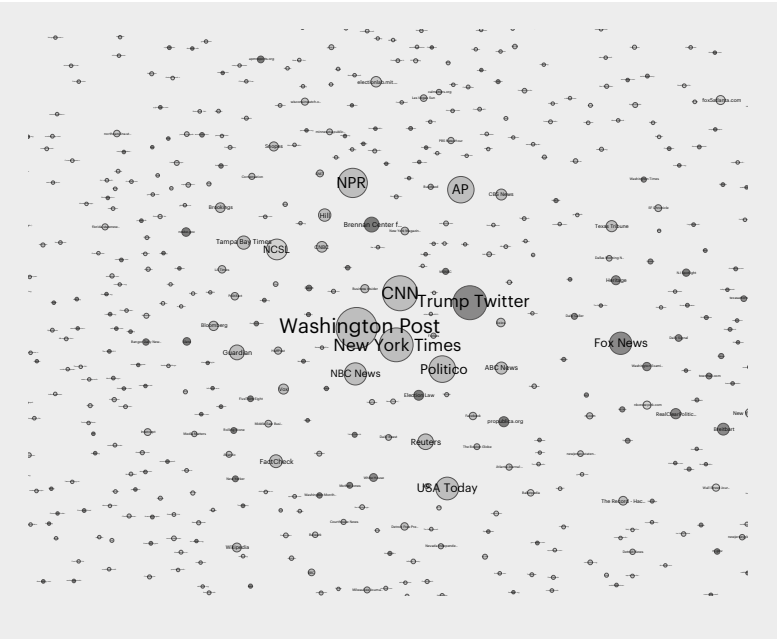
Furthermore, the question is how large the role of social media actually is in the spread of fake news. One of the most successful disinformation campaigns of 2020 was the allegation that voting by mail is a threat to the legitimate results of the presential elections in America. Trump spoke of voter fraud and announced that he was not going to accept the election results, should he lose. He accused the Democrats of trying to 'steal' the elections and that millions of ballots had been printed in other countries to dethrone Trump. Months ahead of the election, he made all kinds of accusations via press conferences, TV interviews and Twitter. Even while the votes were being counted:

> *@realDonaldTrump: We are up BIG, but they are trying to STEAL the Election. We will never let them do it. Votes cannot be cast after the Polls are closed!*

His claim resonated among a large group of his supporters and people used the slogan 'Stop the Steal' on social media and during protests to share their concerns. Opinion polls showed that half of the Republicans believed Trump's claim. Despite the fact that years of scientific research have shown that voter fraud is extremely rare and that it is highly unlikely that it can affect the election results. Trump deliberately spread disinformation to create confusion and manipulate the outcome of the election. And he did not do it alone. His messages were shared repeatedly and consistently by the Republican National Committee (RNC) and Trump's campaign staff at the same time. This indicates there is an institutionalised disinformation campaign, instead of a spontaneous action. They are no longer separate messages, but a well-orchestrated information flow that together forms a conspiracy theory.

Researchers from Harvard University mapped the flow of messages to determine how and via which channels the claims spread. They analysed more than 55,000 online news articles, 5 million tweets and 75,000 messages on public Facebook pages, together representing millions of interactions. The analysis shows that the disinformation campaign was predominantly driven by main-

stream media (like CNN and New York Times). Social media merely played a secondary and supporting role.[43] According to the researchers, the efforts of Fox News and Trump's own campaign were much more influential in spreading false ideas than Russian trolls or clickbait websites.



Source: Berkman Klein Center (2020).

Of course this has to do with the position of Trump. At that moment, he was the incumbent president. Established platforms like CNN and the New York Times want to avoid the appearance of bias. For such news outlets, it is difficult to label Trump's claims 'fake news'. According to the researchers, many journalists wrongly confuse balanced reporting with fair reporting. Many journalists copied Trump's tweets without criticising their content under the header 'neutral reporting'. So it was especially the mainstream media that amplified the disinformation emanating from the White House. As such, the researchers did not argue in favour of more fact checking on platforms like Facebook, but for a better news policy at traditional media channels to better handle disinformation and propaganda. Even when it concerns an incumbent president.

Accuracy

In the discussion surrounding fake news, we must not forget that sharing a news item does not necessarily mean that people believe that the content of the item is reliable. Research shows that people especially share information that is in line with their convictions, regardless of whether that information is true.[43] Researchers presented people with different headlines. One group was asked to indicate how accurate they considered the headlines to be. The other group was asked to indicate how likely they were to share the information. It turned out that truthfulness in particular played a role in assessing the accuracy, while it was less relevant with regard to the likelihood of people sharing the information. Headlines that were truthful were considered to be accurate more often than those that were less truthful, while people shared about the same number of truthful as untruthful items. One of the headlines used was the following:

> *'Over 500 'Migrant Caravaners' Arrested With Suicide Vests'*

According to the headlines, large numbers of migrants were arrested with suicide vests in their possession. Less than 16 percent of the Republican participants believed that this headline was accurate. However, more than half of them would consider sharing this headline. According to the researchers, this discrepancy can be explained by partisanship, and we also see the aforementioned confirmation bias at work. The study shows that people share fake information that is in line with what they believe twice as often as when they consider this information to be accurate.

Remarkably enough, the same research indicates that people

place enormous value on sharing accurate information. When they are asked which factor is decisive in sharing a message on social media, only a small percentage indicates that the information has to be in line with what they believe. According to the researchers, this is caused by the fact that people's attention is drawn away from accuracy and focused on other factors, for instance a desire to attract more followers, to humour people or to make it clear that you belong to a certain group. There is a reason most social media platforms use emoticons. The researchers therefore decided to set up another experiment. Again, people were shown headlines and asked how willing they would be to share them. However, one group was asked to determine the accuracy of the headline first. It turned out that the group that was asked to first determine the accuracy of headlines, was less likely to share disinformation than people who were not alerted to the level of accuracy. The researchers concluded that, if people's attention is drawn towards accuracy through small interventions, they are less likely to share disinformation. Interventions that it would be easy for social media platforms to implement to counter online disinformation.

III. More radical through fake news

Even though fake news only reaches a relatively small portion of the population and many people have a fairly varied news diet, we cannot ignore its influence completely. Because there is something going on. With the increase in the number of misleading conspiracy theories, threats to journalists are also on the rise.[44] For instance in the Netherlands, a country known for his consultation culture, with a focus on compromises and consensus. In 2020, due to increasing aggression, Dutch broadcaster NOS decided to remove its company logo from its vans. At COVID protests and on other occasions, journalists were threatened, spat at and called liars. On highways, people would hit the brakes while driving immediately in front of the vans. The National Anti-terrorism and Security Coordinator (NCTV) in its latest threat report confirms that journalists in the Netherlands are increasingly the target of intimidation.[45] Beneath a moderate, more diverse activist upper layer, according to the coordinator, there is a radical undertow of extremist behaviour. A voter survey indicates that 15 percent of Dutch people have lost *all* faith in the government.[46] This group has dropped out completely and continues to radicalise. What is new, according to the researchers, is that there are feelings of real hatred among this group. In addition to the intimidation of journalists, worldwide, intimidation of politicians, scientists and police officers is on the rise.

In itself, this phenomenon is now new. Unlike what people often think, the belief in conspiracy theories has existed throughout history. Far-reaching and fast-paced social changes that question the established power structures have encouraged the belief in conspiracy theories since time immemorial.[47] But with the arrival of the internet, nowadays, conspiracy theories spread more quickly and more easily, while the echo chambers discussed earlier amplify contradictions and negative emotions between groups. The signals for increased threats can often be traced back to online channels. Facebook, for instance, measures potential threats on the platform by analysing hashtags and search terms. In the week that votes were counted in the 2020 presidential election, it turned out that the percentage for the so-called 'violence and instigation trends' had increased exponentially.[48] In particular conspiracy theory-related hashtags and items increased at an above average speed. A Facebook employee warned his colleagues about this on an internal bulletin board. And although the fast-growing Facebook group 'Stop the Steal' was blocked a few hours later, otherwise, it was mostly business as usual. Two months later, people stormed the Capitol.

So it is not enough only to act on the basis of percentages. Because even if the group that radicalises is relatively small, the damage they leave behind is considerable. The misapprehension, however, is that people are the victims of disinformation. That good-natured citizens are led astray and that the government, the media and science have lied to them and deceived them all this

time. But in many cases, the opposite turns out to be true. Disinformation and conspiracy theories are for many people a welcome confirmation of the suspicions they have had for a long time. It offers them an excuse to voice and express their suspicions. Especially people who were not seen before and who feel misunderstood flourish in a time of crisis.

So the claim that protesters stormed the Capitol because they *believed* Trump's disinformation does not seem to hold. It is much more likely that the protesters accepted Trump's disinformation because they *wanted* to storm the Capitol. This theory is backed by research from the University of Aarhus. According to the Danish study, mass mobilisation is not the direct result of manipulation by false information or wild conspiracy theories. These theories are essential tools for coordinating people who are already susceptible to conflicts.[49] That does not mean, incidentally, that people do not believe in propaganda, but it suggests that such a belief can be a consequence, rather than a cause, of the deep need for action. Well-timed disinformation campaigns, like Trump's, can help coordinate groups of likeminded people in such a way that they are pushed across the threshold of mass mobilisation, generating a transition of a loose group of likeminded individuals to a potentially violent mob. In the run-up to the storming of the Capitol, a trail of 'information crumbs' was deliberately left all over the internet, which protesters followed willingly, so these violent demonstrations did not happen out of the blue. Extremist pro-Trump supporters talked in various Facebook groups for months about how they could 'take down' the government. The date, January 6, was also set in advance. As early as December, invitations were going round under the header 'Operation Occupy The Capitol'[50]

The head of intelligence of the American Capitol police, John Donohue, warned the House of Representatives in July 2020 about 'revolutionary extremists':

> *'I am pleased to testify before your subcommittee today to discuss the significant public safety concerns and, specifically, challenges to law enforcement raised by the growing phenomenon of cyber-social militia extremism and the power of on-line movements to influence violent action domestically.*[51]

He emphasised that domestic insurgents have become a risk of unknown quantity to the constitutional rights in the United States. In spite of the efforts of social media companies to minimise the availability of extremist messages, they continue to circulate. According to Donohue, social platforms are unable to identify those who will mobilise violence, and recommends creating a monitoring system that is able to quickly map emerging threats, before they get out of hands.

Contrary to popular opinion, these are not just less educated people, 'conspiracy nuts', or folks in tinfoil hats. Research by the University of Carolina shows that conservative Americans from the higher middle classes voted for Trump, but not because they were tricked by fake news.[52] On the contrary. They consumed a lot of information and found inconsistencies. Not in Trump's words, but in the way the regular media 'twisted his words', creating a story they did not agree with. So people who did thorough research, apply critical thought and weigh arguments, only from a completely different perspective of reality. Often motivated by a sense of injustice and discomfort. Without a shared reality, coexisting is often very difficult. It is not about a simple adjustment to the algorithm of social media platforms. We shape these platforms as much as they shape us. Technology is culture. And culture is technology.

Boundaries blur

Unfortunately, the storming of the Capitol is 'just' an example. In part thanks to the internet, there appears to be a growing sense of 'justified vigilantism', where people take the law into their own hands, without legal procedure or judge, for instance in the case

of ‘doxing’, where personal data (documents; ‘docs’) of people are collected and put online.[53] Usually with the purpose of starting a witch hunt. Citizens increasingly take the law into their own hands in tracking and hunting alleged child abusers. The so-called ‘pedo hunters’ pose as children and try to seduce alleged child abusers and meet them, in an attempt to gather proof of paedophilia. But instead of going to the police, they post the information online, to expose these people. People also commit punishable offences online more often without realising. For politicians, getting (online) death threats is no longer the exception. Especially female politicians and politicians of colour appear to be the victim of online intimidation more often.[54]

Ideas and expressions that until now were considered to be radical in a society can become acceptable very quickly. This shift can be explained by the so-called Overton window. According to the American political scientists Joseph P. Overton, there is a ‘window’ within which political ideas can be viable.[55] When ideas fall outside of that window, they are rejected by society. That window can both shift and expand, allowing the unthinkable to become radical, and the radical acceptable. When acceptable is seen as sensible, it can become a popular opinion and be carried out in political policies. Although the internet can accelerate this process, the window does not shift from one day to the next. It is an evolution of social values and norms, in which the public debate is shaped by, among others, politicians, citizens, scientists and the media. In some cases, politicians can ‘pull’ on the window by making extreme statements and supporting policies that the public considers to be radical. Although they may at first be ridiculed, these statements can make other political statements appear much milder. For instance, we seem to have become used to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson saying that ‘Islam is the problem’ and comparing Muslim women to ‘letterboxes and bank robbers’.[56] Even though we do not believe everything we read and hear, misleading information is certainly a tool that can be used for political gain by changing what we find acceptable as a society.

‘In a time of universal deceit - twlling the truth is a revolutionary act.’

George Orwell (1903 - 1950)

6

Chapter 6

The impact of political ads is limited *Although profiling in other domains is damaging*

As we have seen, the spread of misleading information has a long history. Think of the fake news scandal described in chapter 5. At the time, political leaders didn't have new technologies at their disposal with which they could spread information and mobilise likeminded people extremely quickly. At the same, it was less easy to contradict fake news or identify its source. What they also did not have back then was in-depth knowledge about the needs and motives of their supporters. With all the data that people leave online these days, it is possible to build accurate profiles. Based on these profiles, hyperpersonal ads can be used to influence people, in what is also known as 'microtargeting'. According to research, it is possible to determine with an 88 percent likelihood what a person's sexual orientation is based on just 68 Facebook likes.[57]

Cambridge Analytica was such an organisation that sold these kinds of profiles for a lot of money. Not to persuade people to buy stuff, but to persuade them to vote for a political party or take a certain position in a referendum. Often, the election of Trump and the outcome of the Brexit referendum are linked directly to Cambridge Analytica. The assumption is that people's voting behav-

iour is fairly easy to influence. The question is if that is really the case. To answer that question, we need to look not only at the influence of technology on tangible aspects, like people's voting behaviour during elections, but we also need to map the less tangible culture, for instance with regard to self-censorship. If you know you are being watched, that may affect your behaviour.

I. The Cambridge Analytica scandal

A tailored suit, matching designer glasses and an unmistakably British accent. On 3 March 2017, Alexander Nix, then still CEO of Cambridge Analytica, walks onto a stage in Hamburg to give a keynote speech for the *Online Marketing Rockstars* festival. He is going to talk about the revolution that he thinks is taking place in marketing and communication: 'From Mad Men to Math Men'.[58] Nix argues that, in the past, advertisements were created by brilliant minds developing the most creative campaigns. Hence the reference to the American TV show *Mad Men*, which depicts the work and lives of ad men in 1950s and 1960s New York. At the time, ad companies used a top-down approach: everyone was shown the same message, in the hope that it would catch on. But nowadays, we can use big data to determine with a high degree of accuracy which message a certain group needs to be shown, long before the creative process even gets under way. According to Nix, big data is the aggregation of as many data points you can get your hands on as possible. It quickly becomes clear that he is not here to discuss the ethics of collecting personal data.

According to Nix, dividing target groups only on the basis of demographics like gender, age and ethnicity, is completely obsolete and pointless. Ultimately, it is all about character traits, or psychography. It is your personality that determines which products you buy and what party you vote for. To map your personality traits, the so-called 'OCEAN five factor model' is used. It is an acronym for 'openness' (the degree to which you are open to new experiences), 'conscientiousness' (the extent to which you need order, regularity and planning), 'extraversion' (how social you are), 'agreeableness' (the extent to which you place your own needs above those of others) and 'neuroticism' (the extent to which you worry). When you combine these personality traits with demographics and behavioural data (which car people drive, which magazine they read, which church they attend, etc.), the result is a rich database, in which you can develop complex, yet powerful models that make it possible to target people with increasing precision. According to Nix, that is important, to prevent sending the same message to people with an entirely different world view. Nix argues that traditional marketing is dead. Our children will never understand the concept of mass communication. Nix is candid about the way his organisation acquires so much data. In addition to using online questionnaires and Facebook data, almost all data is for sale. Like data from land registries, supermarkets and magazines. Worldwide, there are several data brokers dealing in data. These data allow them to profile every adult in the United States: no fewer than 220 million people.

Without the slightest trace of embarrassment, he talks about the work that Cambridge Analytica has done for the Trump campaign. They began in July 2016, when according to Nix, the campaign employed just 30 people fulltime. In contrast to Hillary Clinton's campaign, which at the time employed no fewer than 800 people. According to Nix, Cambridge Analytica had a strong proposition, because they already had worked on the campaign of the previous Republican candidate, Ted Cruz, collecting huge amounts of voter data and creating a technological infrastructure that they could hand over to Trump's team. A small but important side note is that laws surrounding the collection of data are much less strict in America than they are in Europe. In America, they have what is known as an opt-out, where data can be made available unless people object. In Europe, they have an opt-in, which means people need to give permission for their data to be used. Nix and his team started their research by placing 1500 online polls in all American states each week, totalling 400,000 polls a month. With all these insights, predictive models could be deployed, to make informed

choices about the allocation of resources, i.e. more than $100 million on digital ads and tens of millions on TV ads.

According to Nix, these 'insights' also came in handy when certain 'incidents' took place. With a straight face, he refers to a *hot mic* incident, in which the 'locker room talk' of Trump was broadcast nationally. NBC got their hands on a sexist fragment of Trump from 2005. Together with one of the presenters of the American entertainment programme *Access Hollywood*, Trump was on a bus on his way to the recording studio. He wasn't aware that the microphone he wore on his clothes was open. In the fragment, Trump brags about how, being the star that he is, he can do to women what he wants. And that women let him do it. Warning: the next fragment may offend some people:

> *'I'm automatically attracted to beautiful women. I just start kissing them, it's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy.*[59]

The clever 'Math Men' of Cambridge Analytica could see how much Trump's approval ratings took a dive in some states, but increased in certain other states. That enabled the campaign to target the available resources with great precision, and allowed them to limited the damage of the 'incident' and even put a positive spin on it.

Without any emotions, Nix quickly moves on to listing examples where the use of microtargeting has helped the Trump campaign. He shows a heat map of undecided voters who haven't made up their minds yet in favour of one candidate or the other. A good example is Wisconsin, a state that traditionally votes Democrat. In fact, the Democrats were so sure they were going to win Wisconsin, that Clinton didn't visit the state at all during the entire campaign. But Nix's data showed that there was a large group of undecided voters in Wisconsin. Voters that could be influenced to vote for Trump. Based on that intel, Trump held no fewer than five rallies in Wisconsin, bringing him into contact with about 70,000 voters. And when you realise that the Wisconsin vote was won by Trump with a margin of 50,000, according to Nix, that gives you an idea of how powerful this data-driven approach is. That should also be clear from an 'anti-Hillary' video clip they sent online to 150,000 profiled voters. According to analyses by Google, as a result of that action, the intention to vote for Trump among the people in this group rose by more than 8 percent. Nix concludes his presentation by remarking that *data science* is not miracle cure. You cannot turn a bad presidential candidate into a good one. But these technologies can certainly make a difference. Especially in a time when elections are won by very narrow margins.

While Nix finishes his speech to applause from the audience, I try to organise my thoughts. What strikes me in particular is the lack of emotion with which he tells his story. Using data to influence people is one thing, but using data to neutralise the sexist talk of a presidential candidate seems like a different thing altogether. Especially when you include that as a success story in a room filled with marketing professionals. As though he is talking about ironing out a wrinkle in a shirt, using the appropriate tools. He seems to be completely unaware that he may be on thin ice here, morally speaking. Just when I wonder if he will get away with it, it is time for questions from the panel. One of the panellists rightly wants to know if there are clients that Cambridge Analytica would turn down. Like a skilled politician, Nix gives an ambivalent answer:

> *'I'm sure there are, but we try not to get ourselves in a position where we have to say no.'*

To there are undoubtedly organisations he would not want to work with, but they try not to place themselves in a position where they end up having to say no. It turns out he is also insensitive to arguments that he helped a misogynist get elected to the most powerful office in the world. He argues that Trump was elected in a free and fair election. Who are we to question the will of the American

people?, he retorts. Questions about the sexist comments made by Trump also don't make a dent: this has been discussed at length in the media and he has heard both sides of the argument. End of story.

The audience clearly loves the discussion, but the most interesting question is about the way Cambridge Analytica has obtained the data. You can argue about his moral compass, but whether or not it is all legal is an entirely different matter. According to Nix, millions of Americans have freely provided this information by filling in social media surveys. These insights were combined with other data points that Cambridge Analytica had with regard to these users, with which the predictive models could be trained. Using these models, the broader target group could then be profiled and targeted. But why would people be willing in the first place to provide all this valuable information free and without compensation? According to Nix, people are by nature interested in their own psyche and they want to know what their personality type is. The panellists, like myself, seem not entirely convinced. Nix again emphasises that people have freely parted with their information, fully aware what would be done with it. He concludes by stating that there is nothing Machiavellian or inappropriate about it. Then everyone went home and Cambridge Analytica continued exploiting its very profitable revenue model.

Game over

Exactly a year later, hell breaks loose. It turned out that Nix had not been entirely truthful when he argued that people had provided their information willingly. According to a former Cambridge Analytica employee, Christopher Wylie, the company misused Facebook to collect the profiles of millions of people. According to Wylie, that actually provided the foundation on which Cambridge Analytica was built. He called the company a 'full service propaganda machine'. Facebook is also partly to blame. Although the company is said to have known since 2015 that information was being collected on an unprecedented scale, it then took limited steps to restore and secure the personal data. Initially, it was thought that about 50 million profiles were involved, but Facebook estimates that it concerns 87 million profiles.[60]

The information was collected via an application called *thisisyourdigitallife*. Hundreds of thousands of users were paid to take a personality test and agreed to have their data collected for scientific research (which clearly does not include the microtargeting of American citizens). However, the application also collected information of the test subjects' Facebook friends. According to Facebook's platform policy, at the time only data from friends could be collected to improve the user experience of the app itself, but not be copied and used outside the platform. When Facebook found out, Cambridge had to promise that they would remove the data. Pinkie swear. But Facebook never checked whether or not that actually happened and simply took Nix at his word. By now, thanks to Canadian whistle blower Wylie, we know that Cambridge Analytica never removed the data and used it to support Trump in his election campaign. A year later, in 2019, the Netflix documentary *The Great Hack* is released, in which we see that Cambridge Analytica has targeted voters in many more countries to influence election results. The documentary feels a lot like an episode of *Black Mirror*. This award-winning TV series shows us how the unbridled development of technology has created a dystopian world. But instead of science fiction, *The Great Hack* is about reality.

This makes Alexander Nix increasingly look like a Bond villain come to life. He reminds me personally of Le Chiffre, from the 2006 movie *Casino Royale*. Le Chiffre is a mathematical genius who is always dressed impeccably in his tailored suit. His skills allow him to win huge sums of money gambling. In the movie, he is suspected of financing international terrorism. Obviously, Nix was not involved in that, but influencing elections cannot be considered a minor issue. Remarkably enough, Nix was very open and candid about his unethical business operations, but it only became a scandal when it became clear that the data were obtained illegally.

II. The micro-effect of targeting

In 2020, Mark Zuckerberg announced that Facebook would not place political ads in the week before the American presidential elections.[61] Probably motivated in part by public pressure. Since the Cambridge Analytica scandal, people all over the world are worried that hyperpersonal ads can manipulate voters and thus have a major influence on the results of elections. These concerns are not new, incidentally. As early as the 1950s, long before cookies started tracking our online behaviour, political parties sent their campaign staffers to specific addresses where undecided voters lived to persuade them to vote for their candidate. Imagine what Cambridge Analytica could accomplish with the combination of big data, psychological profiles and social networks. According to *The Great Hack*, Alexander Nix singlehandedly made sure Trump was elected president, and that this digital interference stood in the way of a fair election process and gutted democracy from within.

The question is to what extent these targeted political ads really influenced voter behaviour. Research by the University of California shows that political campaigns have a small effect on people's voting behaviour anyway.[62] In 2018, researchers analysed no fewer than 49 field experiments and concluded that political campaigns and ads have virtually no impact on the choice of candidate of American voters, and that the effect only occurred in two extremely rare situations. First of all, when candidates espouse highly unusual and unpopular positions and campaigns invest an inordinate amount in identifying undecided voters (sounds familiar). And secondly, when campaign teams contact voters long before election day and measure the effects immediately after. As the elections come closer, the effect appears to diminish. So Cambridge Analytica's strategy of targeting undecided voters does make sense. And the provocative statements made by Trump can be used to influence a group of undecided voters. The question is, however, if that group is big enough to win an election. Because influencing campaigns can also have the opposite effect. A field experiment with 56,000 voters in Wisconsin shows that influencing campaigns can cause a backlash.[63] Among a large portion of the voters, influencing tactics reduced their support for a candidate. These insights are supported by research from Yale University. Researchers wondered if voters actually prefer personalised and specific messages to more general messages involving broad subjects.[64] When people are being 'mistargeted', the negative impact turns out to be many times greater than the positive effect of targeting. Voters are much more sensitive to general messages and collective benefits, according to the researchers.

The entire approach of Cambridge Analytica is based on the idea that people with matching psychographic profiles have a similar worldview and can therefore be persuaded with the same arguments to vote for a specific candidate. But that underestimates the complexity of the human psyche. You could suppose that a person watching the American reality soap *Jersey Shore* has certain personality traits. But people watch that show for a variety of reasons. From genuine fans to 'disaster tourists' looking for a train wreck. Even if a profile can be generated based on other data points, the question remains how to develop an ad that matches those specific personality traits. And even if you manage to do so, it has to appear in somebody's timeline at exactly the right time. Namely at a time when the person involved is actually susceptible to such messages.

Distrust

However, we cannot simply disregard the influence of microtargeting. Many of the examples and studies mentioned above are American. In a binary system, it seems a tall order to pull people from one side of the spectrum to the other using political ads. When you have been voting Democrat for many years, you won't just switch to voting Republican. That makes it interesting to see how microtargeting works in countries with a multi-party system. The University of Amsterdam examined the impact of this form of influencing in The Netherlands.[65] The researchers asked the

participants in the experiment to post messages on a social medium they had developed. Using text analysis programmes, the researchers were able to map the personality traits of the participants. The algorithm then divided the test subjects into groups. Literature research shows that introvert people are more susceptible to messages in which their fears are addressed and that more extravert people are more sensitive to messages with an enthusiastic tone. In one of the experiments, two fake ads were made for VVD, who claim to be a right-wing liberal party. The participants were presented with one message with a scary undertone: 'The security of our country is at stake. Vote VVD, because the security of our country is in the balance more than ever.' And one with an enthusiastic tone: 'the security of our country is better than ever. Vote VVD and we will make sure you are completely protected.' Introverts indeed responded better to the first message and extraverts responded better to the second one. Messages you post on social media can be used to assess your personality. And that assessment can indeed be used to influence you. However, it was not enough to convince people to vote for a different party. Research shows that people became more positive about the party in question, but that they were ultimately not more likely to vote for that party.

A similar insight applies to the influence of deep fakes. Artificial intelligence can be used to create fake videos that are virtually indistinguishable from real videos. Deepfake videos can make political leaders say things, for instance, that they would normally never say out loud. Synthetic media are increasingly seen as a threat to democracy. Many studies focus on detecting these videos. Researchers of the University of Amsterdam looked at the influence of deepfakes on political preferences and specifically at the reinforcing role of microtargeting.[66] The study shows that deepfakes may worsen people's attitudes towards the politician being depicted, but that that does not affect people's attitude towards the political party of that politician. Microtargeting can reinforce the effect, but appears to affect only a very small group.

We may be looking in the wrong direction. The real danger may not be that microtargeting is used to persuade people to vote for a party, but that they start doubting the legitimacy of the election itself. This involves not so much the opinions of new voters, but the mobilisation of the existing support, as we saw earlier in chapter 5 when we discussed Trump's disinformation campaign designed to question the election results. When people who are demonstrably open to such opinions can be targeted very effectively, that can certainly have disastrous consequences, as the storming of the Capitol made abundantly clear. Technology itself can also lead to distrust in democratic institutions. The aforementioned study by the University of Amsterdam shows that the Dutch people have a very negative opinion about microtargeting and are more worried about privacy. People who are more worried about privacy also appear to have a more negative opinion about microtargeting. Now that the European Union has announced new legislation that states that it has to be transparent who the sender of targeted political ads is and how much these ads cost, people are becoming more aware of the use of influencing techniques.[67] This downward spiral can damage trust in democracy. A result of the use of influencing techniques, disinformation and deepfakes may be not that people don't believe everything they are shown, but that there comes a time they no longer believe anything. Including reality. By that time, foreign interference in elections is no longer needed; the mere suggestion that it is happening may be enough to create unrest. And politicians can create confusion by claiming that real images are deepfake. Fiction and reality become blurred, which can lead to distrust in democratic institutions.

III. Stuck in the wrong box

Even if microtargeting turns out to be completely useless, it can still be dangerous, because there is a chance that the collected data are also sold to other organisations and used for different purposes, for instance to determine the costs of your health insurance. For instance, it is not unthinkable that it will become more expen-

sive if you haven't been to the gym in a period of time, or when it turns out that you buy mostly unhealthy food at the supermarket. In fact, insurers are already testing with those kinds of data-driven applications.[68] Datasets will be linked more and more, which means that, without justification and unbeknownst to us, we can end up in boxes that it will be very hard to get out of. China, for instance, is rolling out a 'social credit system' step by step. Based on their behavioural data, Chinese citizens are given a certain score, on the basis of which they can be blacklisted and lose certain kinds of rights and privileges, for example the possibility to borrow money or travel abroad. In 2018, 23 million Chinese people were not allowed to buy a train or plane ticket.[69]

This does not only happen in countries where a communist party is in power. More and more governments use data-driven systems, especially to detect fraud, for instance the Risk Indication System (SyRI) used by the Dutch government to combat fraud involving benefits and taxes. Based on data about, among other things, work, income, pensions and debt, the system calculated who might commit fraud. Especially in low-income neighbourhoods. A major objection to the use of such a system is that the data of all the people in a neighbourhood can be analysed, even if they are innocent. Various civil rights and privacy organisations felt that the system was unacceptable and sued the State of The Netherlands.[70] Successfully. In 2020, the courts ruled that the legislation involving the use of SyRI is in violation of article 8 of the European Human Rights Treaty, in particular the right to a private life. This stipulation demands a fair balance between the social interest of the legislation and the extent to which it violates people's private lives. The courts ruled that preventing and combatting fraud insufficiently warranted the violation of people private lives.

However, the State Secretary in question was not impressed.

> *'It is clear that this is not the way to do it. The judge did clearly rule that technology can play a role in fraud prevention. We will continue to look at news ways to tackle fraud and will take a closer look at the balance between fraud detection and privacy in relation to new systems.'*[71]

However, this ignores the discriminatory effect of the use of these types of algorithms, as became clear once more with the benefits scandal, where one of the selection criteria for the automated risk selection system was a double nationality. People applying for benefits who had a double nationality were more likely to be suspected of fraud by the algorithm. This is not so much about privacy, but about the far-reaching consequences of choices that are based on unreliable data. And politicians do not appear to learn from their mistakes. The recently passed new 'Data processing through collaborations' bill (WSG) has the potential for creating a new scandal in the future. The new bill allows public and private organisations to work together to share each other's data. Again allegedly to prevent fraud. And again without much resistance. Ironically enough, the House of Representatives passed the bill when the report about the previous scandal was published. In the new bill, which at the time of writing is being discussed by the Senate, the so-called 'purpose limitation principle' is reversed. The purpose limitation principle stipulates that personal data being collected for a specific purpose, cannot simply be used for different purposes. The new bill changes the 'no, unless' to 'yes, provided that'. In 2018, Virginia Eubanks wrote an acclaimed book called *Automating Inequality*[72], in which she writes about how automated systems, instead of people, determine which neighbourhoods are monitored, which families receive benefits and who will be investigated for fraud. These systems disadvantage above all people with fewer resources and opportunities.

This approach can create negative feedback loops. People who fall behind get into more trouble, not only maintaining the unjust treatment, but magnifying it. In America, for example, soft-

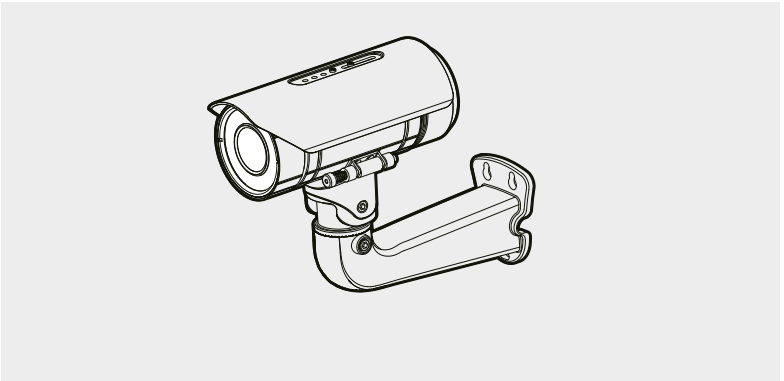
ware has often been used to predict the likelihood that a convict will relapse. Research shows that this software is skewed against people with a darker skin colour.[73] When the data show, for instance, that Black men are more likely to end up in prison again, the algorithm will determine that Black men are less likely to be released on parole. Which then in turn affects the follow-up figures: Black men indeed spend longer in jail, which in turn affects the algorithm, etc. This does not take into account the fact that the figures may be biased as a result of human police work and thus of profiling. So biases of algorithms are primarily caused by biases of people.

Of course, we all want people to be treated fairly with the use of data-driven systems and we don't want them to be disadvantaged on the basis of their gender or background. Fairness is a frequently used principle in ethical guidelines. However, it is not easy to determine what exactly is 'fair'. It is something that has kept philosophers busy for hundreds of years. There is no unambiguous idea of what society would look like if there were no unfairness. Is a society where everyone is treated equally fair anyway? The arrival of big data and algorithms has given this issue a new dimension, because the concept of fairness has to be expressed in mathematical terms, for instance in the case of what is known as predictive policing, where criminal behaviour is predicted using large-scale monitoring and data analyses. However, there is always a chance that people with the applicable criteria have a positive score (false positives) and that people who do meet the criteria in question show a negative score (false negative). What is fair in that case? Do you risk putting potentially innocent people in jail or risk them committing a crime?

Without clear agreements on the matter, police services try to gather as much data as is legally allowed, increasingly from internet services like Facebook and Google. If you have ever read the privacy conditions, you will have come across a section explaining how your data can be shared with law enforcement. Although most people are not aware of this (after all, who reads all those

conditions?), many of the people who stormed the Capitol are now finding out, as cases are being built against them with evidence from social media platforms. Although they posted the data there themselves, not all of it is publicly available. The FBI was also given internal data from social networks, phone companies and security cameras. As a result, privacy and security are increasingly at odds with each other. In 2016, for instance, Apple was sued by the FBI, because the FBI wanted access to the iPhone of the American terrorist Syed Farook, who, together with his wife, shot fourteen people in California. Apple was asked to create a 'backdoor' in the software that would give the FBI access to the data on the smartphone. Apple refused, because creating such a backdoor would make all iPhones in the world vulnerable. A verdict was never reached, because the FBI gained access to the data in a different way.[74]

Incidentally, you do not have to be an alleged insurgent or terrorist to be monitored. Police services increasingly use surveillance techniques that can monitor everybody, in the hope of catching a suspect, for instance in the case of facial recognition software. In 2018, IBM worked together with the New York Police Department on facial recognition software that made it possible to search on the basis of hair and skin colour, for example. The software was trained using camera footage from thousands of police officers, who participated without their knowledge. It is not unthinkable that your face was used to train such software. Think of the commotion surrounding the company Clearview AI, which 'scraped' photos from Facebook and millions of other websites and offered their services to various investigate services.[75] To find specific perpetrators (microtargeting), huge amounts of data are collected about as many people as possible (mass surveillance).



Chilling effects

The downside of all this surveillance is that people may start to behave differently and as such are hindered in what they can do. When you know you are being watched, you can decide, for instance, not to post certain messages on social media (or in a modified form), or not to take part in a protest. These forms of self-censorship are called chilling effects. To explain how it works, people often refer to the 'Panopticon'; a round prison with a high tower in the middle, from where a guard can see all the prisoners. Each cell has a glass window with a view of the tower. Because the prisoners know they can always be watched, they are constantly aware of their own behaviour. The reasoning is that that will make them display desirable behaviour. That disciplining effect is also seen as a chilling effect. Knowing that large amounts of data are being stored and analysed all the time can also have a disciplining effect on people. Even if they are not suspected of anything.

Some political leaders appear to be responding deliberately to these chilling effects. The Russian President Putin, for instance in 2019 signed a controversial bill making it illegal to 'despise' the state and spread 'fake news' online. Each message about the incumbent government that you post online can potentially be illegal. In 2020, new changes to the law were introduced that also make it illegal to 'deliberately spread incorrect information' during emergency situations. For instance during epidemics, accidents and natural disasters. In addition to a fine, this can lead to community service and even a maximum jail sentence of three years. These changes to the law put freedom of speech under pressure and make it virtually impossible to criticise the authorities. Needless to say, because the definition of 'fake news' is very much open to interpretation, the authorities can use it to their own advantage.

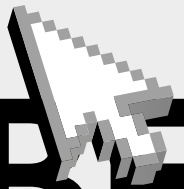
The age-old principle of democracy clashes more and more often with new technologies that have only been around for a few decades. We are beginning to map their actual impact in small steps. To look ahead at the future, it is useful to see how the younger generations deal with the principles of democracy and technology. After all, they grew up with both the opportunities and the threats of digital technologies. Nevertheless, young people are often dismissed as being apathic and indifferent. To what extent is that justifiable?

If everybody always lies to you, the consequence is not that you believe the lies, but rather that nobody believes anything any longer.

Hannah Arendt (1906 - 1975)

ONE OF THE PENALTIES FOR REFUSING TO PARTICIPATE IN POLITICS IS THAT YOU END UP BEING GOVERNED BY YOUR INFERIORS.

Plato (427 BCE - 347 BCE)



3

Part 3

Are young people apathic and uninterested in democracy?

Today's youngest are spoiled, ill-informed, addicted to their phones and obsessed by selfies. And above all, they are egocentric and indifferent. At least, that is the impression some adults have of Generation Z. A generation that was born after 1996 and, at the time of writing, not older than 25 years. Now that the first 'Zoomers' enter the workplace, many managers don't know what to do with this generation, which has never known a life without digital technologies. The accusation is that these so-called digital natives have the attention span of a goldfish and don't know what hard work is. If this generation is to produce the leaders of the future, the argument goes, democracy is doomed. But are these assumptions correct?

Of all times

The complaint that youngsters are indifferent and selfish is anything but new.[1] As early as 350 BCE, Aristotle complained that young people are quite full of themselves:

> *'They think they know everything, and are always quite sure about it.'*[2]

He attributed the exaggerated self-confidence of youngsters to the fact that they have not yet been humbled by life. That they have yet to experience impactful events. In the Middle Ages, people also had a negative image of youths. People often complained that they had no respect for their elders and even didn't fear the magistrate. At the time, people were also concerned about the language youngsters used and about the resulting corruption and hardening of language. The same fears persist now that ink and paper have been replaced by digital screens. As early as 2004, researchers concluded that the frequent use of e-mail and text messages affected people's spelling and grammar.[3]

The negative effects of the excess use of technology is a recurring cause for concern. I was born in 1984 myself, making me part of Generation Y in the commonly used division. That means I am a 'Millennial'. A term that by now has almost become a swear word and is synonymous for naive idealists who have been pampered by their parents and as a result are now unable to handle the adversities of life. For me, the 'Y' represents the coming together of two worlds, the physical and the digital. As a kid, I grew up playing outside and building tree houses, while in my teenage years, I found my way on the world wide web just in time. I am also of the generation that grew up with game computers. In my case the Super Nintendo. I clearly recall asking the quite violent game (let's be honest) *Mortal Combat* for my birthday. Apparently, my parents were unaware of the brutality of the videogame and they granted my wish. On the news, I saw concerned parents, scientists and politicians trying to get the game removed from the shelves, claiming it encouraged aggression and would produce a violent generation. In 1994, there were even hearings in front of the American Congress, which led to the Entertainment Software Rating Board. Despite all the concerns, most scientists agree that there is no direct relationship between playing videogames and violent behaviour.[4] In my case, it gave me an eversion to violence. After a few nightmares, I was done with it and started saving enough money for the more cheerful adventures of Mario and Luigi.

As the twig is bent

Similar concerns were voiced earlier when TV was introduced and later with the arrival of the social media platforms, which were considered poison to the minds of vulnerable youths. What is overlooked is that young people are often much more aware of the effect and influence of new technologies than people think. Certainly much more aware than many older people. Research shows that, during the 2016 American presidential elections, people over 65 shared almost seven times as many fake news messages on Facebook as the youngest age groups.[5] Young people grow up with fake news and seem to be more aware of the fact that not all news that they see online is reliable. They understand that it is important to ascertain the source of the news and appreciate its value. Many adults think, on the other hand, that platforms like Facebook, Google News and Apple News do their own reporting. Only 31 percent of adult Americans correctly indicates that Google News does not create the news that it shares. The rest thinks that Google News has its own reporters, or isn't sure.[6] Adults erroneously project their own experiences with digital technologies onto young people.

Need for security

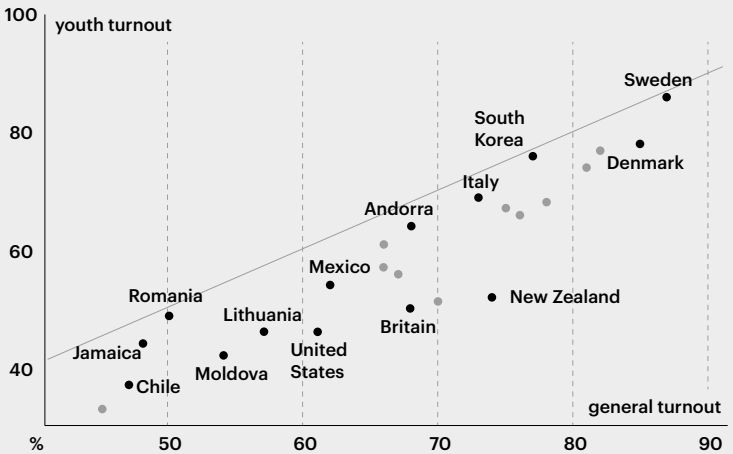
Against expectations, the current generation of youngsters is actually looking for stability and security. They're not 'hipsters' hanging around all day in coffeeshops (that's the 'Millennials'), but focused pragmatics who worry about their future. They grew up during the 2008 economic crisis, when many of their parents lost their jobs or savings (or both). Research shows that 88 percent of young American graduates chose their major with a specific job in mind.[7] Job security or stability was the second most important career goal (balance between work and private life was the first), followed by the feeling of being dedicated to a cause or feeling good about serving the greater good.

In addition to the economic crisis, they are also witnesses to an ecological crisis. More than other generations, they are aware of the role of humans in climate change and its impact on the en-

vironment. Figures of the World Economic Forum show that seven in ten youngsters worldwide strongly agree with the statement that science has proven that people are responsible for climate change.[8] In 2019, there were climate protests in more than 120 countries and young people in particular took to the streets to voice their concerns. According to them, the fight against climate change is not naive idealism, but a response to hard facts. They are determined not to make the same mistakes as the people who came before them.

Antiquated institutions

Despite this social involvement, it is still hard to get young people to the ballot box. Although the share of youngsters who vote appears to be growing (during the 2020 American presidential elections, 50 percent of youngsters voted: 11 percent more than in 2016), the turnout among youths is not more than the average turnout in any country in the world.[9]



Source: National election commissions and research agencies - by The New York Times (2020).

As a result of the lower turnout among youngsters, the wishes and needs of the older generations have a bigger impact on the election outcome. That was especially clear during the British EU referendum in 2016. A whopping 75 percent of Britain's youths between 18 and 24 voted remain, unlike the over-65s, 66 percent of whom voted leave.[10] But because voter turnout was 83 percent among the latter group, compared to only 36 percent among youngsters, the votes of the older generation proved decisive and the Brits had to prepare to leave the EU. Later, researchers argue that the turnover among youngsters was much higher, and even exceeded 60 percent.[11] But the turnout among the older generation according to these figures was also higher, namely 90 percent. Also considerably higher.

Many political scientists blame the low turnout among youngsters on lack of interest. They argue that youngsters have few responsibilities (no home or family) and hardly pay any taxes, and expect things will change once they get their first job or buy their first home. Voting will suddenly become relevant then, according to the political scientists. But that analysis is very much at odds with the social commitment among young people that we discussed earlier. The millions of youngsters taking to the streets to voice their concerns about the climate can hardly be called apolitical. The same goes for the protests in Asia, where hundreds of thousands of youngsters even risked their lives for a better future. How is it that young people take to the streets to put political subjects on the agenda, but don't seem to be able to find their way to the ballot box?

Perhaps it has to do with the fact that young people do not recognise social and political subjects as such. Democracy and politics are very abstract concepts. Research by the University of Amsterdam shows that 35 percent of Dutch youths between 12 and 14 doesn't know they are living in a democracy or think that they are not.[12] Many first-graders even confuse the words 'politician' and 'police'. Of course, lessons on citizenship are important to close this knowledge gap. But let's not just point the finger at young

people. It is too easy to blame a low turnout among youngsters on lack of interest. It also means that democratic institutions are unable to reach young people sufficiently. That is why we need to explore ways to make antiquated institutions more accessible and adapt them to the spirit of our age. What can we learn from the younger generations in this regard?

No one is born a good citizen, no nation is born a democracy. Rather, both are processes that continue to evolve over a lifetime. Young people must be included from birth.

Kofi Annan (1938 - 2018)

Chapter 7

Young people are very much politically engaged

Even though they are not involved with political parties

7

At the start of 2012, the global population crossed the seven billion mark. At that moment, more than half the people in the planet were under thirty.[12] Although we in the West are in particular concerned about the ageing population, there is an opposite development in other parts of the world. In Africa, for example, a whopping 40 percent of the population is younger than 15 years, while only 4 percent is older than 65.[13] Despite the fact that a large portion of the population is young, youngsters are not at the centre of political decision-making. According to data from the United Nations, the average age of parliamentarians worldwide is 53. Less than 6 percent is younger than 35, and a mere 2 percent is younger than 30.[14] Although I can imagine that political ambitions develop over time, it would appear that young people are hardly ever consulted in the political decision-making processes. But hey, what do young people know about the world? They're unable to see the big picture and have insufficient life experience to put developments into perspective, right?

I won't be the first to argue the opposite. Just like putting down youngsters is something that happens all the time, glorifying them

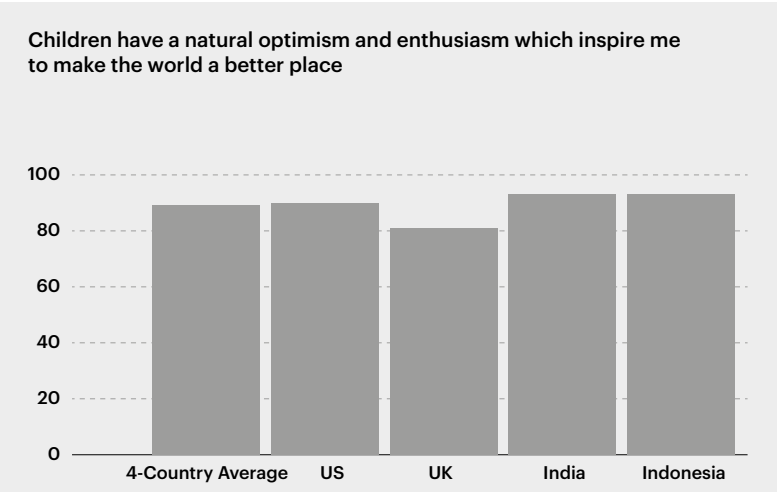
doubtlessly is as well. And yet, this generation has a unique characteristic, in that it does not know a world without digital technologies. Within a few nanoseconds, they know what happens on the other side of the world, in real-time. They grow up fully understanding that mankind is destroying its own living environment. In 2019, the global climate protests, in which millions of people took part, were led by a 16-year-old girl. And although Greta Thunberg may be an exception, her followers are not. And even though they may be glued to their phones, they aren't all busy watching cat videos. Behind those screen, there is a world of which many adults have no idea.

I. Bram (five years old) doesn't want to eat meat anymore

I remember sitting at the breakfast table as a kid. Late eighties. Milk was called 'the white engine', and before being allowed to put something sweet on my sandwiches, I first had to eat some cheese or meat. Because meat and dairy are good for you. We knew at the time that we needed to protect the environment, but I would never have linked eating meat or drinking milk to carbon emissions, let alone global warming. Nobody point out to me that the production of a kilo of steak required an average of 25 kilos of fodder and more than 15,000 litres of water.[15] I didn't even know that not eating meat was an option and that there were vegetarian alternatives. People simply didn't talk about it. Not at home, not in school and not on children's TV. But hey, what did we know? It was a time when, during parties, people put cigarettes on the table.

A lot has changed in a relatively short time. In particular, awareness among young people has grown considerably. Even the very youngest. A former colleague told me that her son, five-year-old Bram, had decided on his own not to eat meat anymore. One day, at the breakfast table, he asked where all that meat came from. And how it is made exactly. And when his parents told him about all that is needed to produce meat and that it involved killing animals, he decided that enough was enough. Of course, you can blame it on the phase in which kids are concerned with 'cuddly animals', but it looks like it is here to stay. By now, Bram has also made his parents think about their behaviour, because they do still eat meat from time to time. And while Bram enjoys his vegetable sausage, he wonders out loud how his parents can still eat meat, knowing that animals had to suffer for it. A nice conscience teaser to start the day with.

The fact that kids inspire their parents to better their lives is less and less the exception. Research shows that the natural optimism of children inspires parents to do more for a better world.[16] Almost 90 percent of parents in the United States, the United Kingdom, India and Indonesia agreed when asked about it. The fact that kids are optimistic is perhaps not so surprising. What is remarkable is that they stay optimistic, despite being fully aware of the worldwide problems, like climate change, food waste and famines. Research shows that more than 70 percent of children between eight and twelve years old are worried about the impact of mankind on the environment and on the climate. So it goes way beyond animal suffering. Nevertheless, nine in ten kids stay optimistic about their own future, while seven in ten are optimistic about the future of the environment. Many parents are surprised to learn how aware their kids are about global problems and the extent to which they are concerned about the environment. The natural optimism of kids allows them to see opportunities better than their parents can. Seven in ten parents agree that, where kids see the opportunities for a better future, adults focus above all on the problems. According to the parents, it may help adults to see the world through the eyes of a child, to see opportunities before barriers. A whopping 90 percent of parents agrees that kids 'help you see things differently than you normally do'.



Source: Unilever (2013).

We need to be realistic, of course. The increased awareness doesn't directly lead to a reduction of, for instance, global meat production. Even though fewer and fewer people see themselves as 'meat eater' and more and more households intend to eat more vegetarian food, it is expected that meat consumption will continue to increase in the coming years.[17] Especially in Africa and the Middle East, meat consumption will go up, because the improving living standards and income levels will allow more people to include meat in their regular diet. In many countries, meat is seen as a luxury product and it is more expensive than, for instance, grain, beans and fruit. It is expected is that people who couldn't afford meat will start eating it in the future.

Role model

But there is reason for hope. Especially when the meat consumption of younger people is compared to that of their parents, for instance in The Netherlands, where traditionally a lot of meat is produced and consumed. Research shows that kids decide more often than older people to quit eating meat. The share of vegetarians and vegans in 18 to 34-year-olds is twice as high as it is among the over 50s.[18] Young people more often stop eating meat for environmental reasons, for instance the impact meat has on the climate, which is mentioned in particular among young people under thirty. The study also shows that education plays a big part in people's choice whether or not to eat meat. Youngsters of 15 or 16 years old who don't eat meat often do so because the negative impact of meat production on the environment is discussed in school (during class or with their fellow students).

More than ever, this generation has role models with which they can identify. After the summer vacation of 2018, a 15-year-old Swedish school pupil decided to go on strike in front of the parliament building each school day, to demand a more ambitious climate policy. The only thing she brought was a cardboard sign saying *Skolstrejk för klimatet* (school strike for the climate) and her determination. What started as an individual action of a lone truant, within a short time grew into a global movement. More and more youngsters joined the movement and when the media and a few celebrities also became involved, Greta Thunberg in no time was a speaker at international climate conferences. For instance the climate conference of Katowic 2018, where it quickly became clear the young activist does not mince words:

> *'You only speak of green eternal economic growth because you are too scared of being unpopular. You only talk about moving forward with the same bad ideas that got us into this mess, even when the only sensible thing to do is pull the emergency brake. You are not mature enough to tell it like it is. Even that burden you leave to us children.'*[19]

After the election, she kept protesting each Friday. Inspired by the actions of the Swedish youngster, there were also mass climate protests in Australia in 2018. Despite (or because of) a call from the Australian prime minister, who said that 'young people should spend more time studying and less time protesting'. From

the start of 2019 onwards, climate protests took place in more and more other countries as well, like Belgium, Germany and Switzerland. All led by young school pupils under eighteen. Later in 2019, the first global climate school strike took place in 2052 locations in 123 countries. The fierce and emotional speeches by Thunberg had made her as many friends as enemies. The Brazilian president Bolsonaro even called her a 'spoiled brat'. And when TIME Magazine chose her as its 'person of the year', Trump went on Twitter to voice his displeasure:

> *@realDonaldTrump: So ridiculous. Greta must work on her Anger Management problem, then go to a good old fashioned movie with a friend! Chill Greta, Chill!*

Either way, she has shown young people all over the world that you are never too young to make a difference. That it is important to defend your ideals and that you are not alone. A perfect example of the butterfly effect; even the smallest changes can have a huge impact.

II. The new protest generation

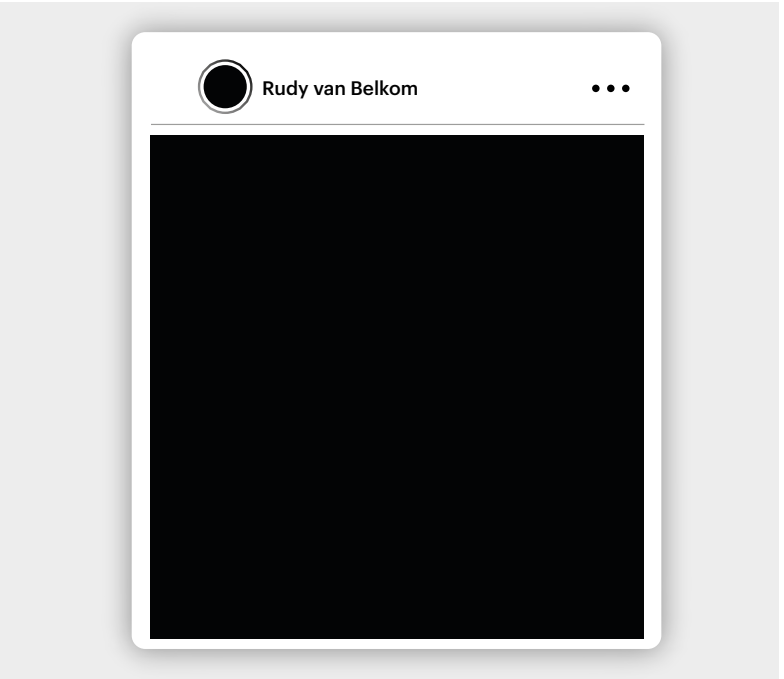
When we talk about the political participation of young people, we need to look beyond election turnout figures. Research by the European Youth Forum shows that young people are hugely interested in political issues and societal challenges.[20] Instead of using traditional institutions, like elections, more and more youngsters try to generate pressure from the outside. Research shows that young people sign petitions more often than older people and that they take part in protest movements twice as often.[21] So it is not so much that younger people are less involved, but that their participation patterns are changing.

This generation of youngsters more than ever believe in their individual strength to create change. With their actions, they try to make it clear that governments and businesses need to do more to help realise their vision of a better future. Figures by Deloitte show that a third of all Zoomers have at some point taken part in a demonstration or protest (compared to a quarter of all Millennials).[22] Furthermore, it appears that they volunteer more often for charities or non-profit organisations and more often use ethical considerations when choosing an employer or job. They also try to make an impact as consumers. More and more young people are willing to boycott or 'buycott' a brand based on the position of the organisation on social or political issues, although that does not apply only to young people. Research indicates that almost two-thirds of all consumers worldwide feel the same way.[23] Boycotts are increasingly linked to protest movements. For instance, in 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement launched 'The Anti-Black List', with which they encouraged supporters to boycott companies that have engaged in racist expressions, are insufficiently committed to diversity or simply fail to take a stand. The aim is to call out companies publicly on their behaviour and to convince them to act in an ethically responsible way.

The role models of this generation are not in parliament or in congress. They are in the streets, leading the way in protest. No superstars, but simple young people they can identify with. The way protests are organised has changed enormously in recent decades. In the past, there was often an organisation, like a trade union, driving the demonstration top-down. Often, they would have already tried to get politicians to agree to better conditions, and when that was in vain, they would take to the streets. These days, things are completely different. Communities of likeminded people are created via digital networks. When likeminded people find each other, it is relatively easy for them to mobilise. So there is a much more bottom-up approach, causing a shift from collective to connective action. Protest also don't have to take on the form of physical demonstrations. Social media platforms offer a range of low-threshold possibilities to take part in protests. For instance 'Blackout Tuesday', when millions of people shared a black square on Instagram and Titter to draw attention to ongoing police brutality and institutional racism. What started as an initiative of the

American music industry to commemorate the death of George Floyd, within a short time grew into a global action that included international celebrities and companies.

Whereas trade unions often fought for higher wages and better working conditions for a specific group of professionals, youngsters these days increasingly protest to draw attention to more global problems, like climate change, institutional racism and the oppression of democratic liberties and rights. They want their future back and hold above all the government responsible. Much more than other generations, Generation Z wants an 'activist government' that does what it can to solve the problems.[24] And young people are increasingly willing to address these subjects personally via social media. Research shows that young people between 18 and 34 share their thoughts on political and social issues online much more often than people over 50.[25] This is true in Europe and America, as well as in Africa and India. There are similar trends when it comes to signing petitions or encouraging others online to take action on political issues. Young people indicate that creating social media content helps them feel better informed, represented and heard. This goes beyond funny internet memes. For instance, within the Black Lives Matter movement, young people gave each other advice on where they could donate, which petitions they could sign and how they could confront police brutality. Even in rural Pakistan, young people are very much politically involved thanks to social media, which proves to be an important stepping stone to offline participation. Research shows that Pakistani youths who are politically active online are more politically aware and thus are more often politically active offline as well.[26]



In 2020, millions of people shared a black square on social media to protest against racism and police brutality.

Seven generations

A frequently heard frustration is that politicians don't focus enough on long-term goals (a frustration that is not unique among youngsters, incidentally). Complex problems like climate change require a long-term vision and approach. However, after the election, many politicians focus above all on the immediate problems at hand. After all, they only have four years to prove themselves, so they focus on making a good impression in the short term, rather than on the influence they have in the long term. In his book *The Good Ancestor*, Philosopher Roman Krznaric explains the hope among the younger generation.[27] He argues that, in particular from the industrial revolution onwards, we have been focusing too much on the short term. We live in a world of deadlines and

instant gratification; life is short and we need to take what we can get. Yesterday rather than today. That is remarkable, because we are one of the few species with the ability to think ahead and plan. According to Krznaric, the future is seen as a kind of dump for ecological damage and technological risks, in which economic interests prevail. As a result, future generations are taken into account insufficiently in political decision-making.

According to the philosopher, we need to learn to think in terms of centuries, instead of years. He mentions the example of medieval cathedrals. The architects knew in advance that they would not witness the completion of the construction, which, for people in this day and age, would be almost unbearable. We want to be able to share our success stories on LinkedIn as soon as possible, and will worry about the long term when the time comes. We are stuck in an economic system that is addicted to growth. But if nature teaches us one thing, it is that nothing grows forever. According to Krznaric, we need to learn to be a good ancestor for the generations that will come after us. He refers to the 'seven generation principle' of the Iroquois in North-America for inspiration.[28]

When they have to make important decisions, they think seven generations ahead, which is roughly 200 years. The indigenous Americans believe that we have the Earth on loan. If we fail to take care of Mother Nature, she won't take care of us.

According to Krznaric, it's the younger generation's turn. But they cannot do it on their own. Research shows that many youngsters believe that the people around them are insufficiently worried about global problems like climate change.[29] Even children as young as eleven believe that their concerns are not shared by their parents and relatives. Many youngsters see the lack of concern as a lack of commitment, which can make them feel isolated. At a later age, that can have a negative impact on their political involvement and give them the impression that voting is pointless, because nobody will listen to them. The same research shows that their impression that those around them do not share their concerns is largely erroneous. Many parents use 'shielding techniques' to protect their children from the reality of global crises, which actually turns out to have an adverse effect on youngsters.

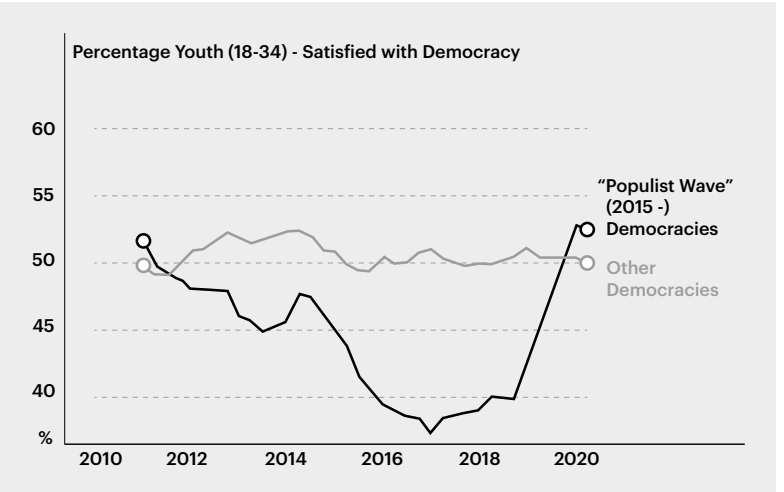
That's why it is high time that we start treating young people differently. We need to stop pretending they are naive and immature, and give them a serious voice in the political debate. They are much more aware of what is going on than we think. If election turnout among young people is relatively low, we mustn't paint them as disinterested, but ask ourselves why they don't use the systems and structures we have once come up with. There is certainly a problem with youth participation, but the problem is not so much the youngsters themselves, but the outdated traditional institutions. Many politicians treat the older generations as the voters that need to be served, while treating young people as voters that need to be managed. But many youngsters don't let themselves be managed. They don't feel represented and choose their own tools and resources to exert political pressure. And let's not forget that active resistance against traditional institutions in itself is a form of participation. But if we want to narrow the gap between young people and the current system, we need to start thinking how we can give their protest mentality a place in the political system. Before they disconnect completely and may become apathetic and disinterested in the future.

III. The authoritarian temptation 2.0

As long as political dissatisfaction among youngsters results in action and peaceful protests, democracy is working just fine. But when dissatisfaction turns into aversion, we need to start worrying. According to research by Harvard University, American youths blame especially politicians and corruption for the problems in their country.[30] In the previous section, we saw that young people have high expectations of the government. They expect an 'activist government' that isn't afraid to make the necessary choices for a better future. When the establishment is unable to make good on its promises, they will look for alternatives. Research shows that

more young people than old people agree with the statement that the army can take over control when the government is incompetent or fails to do what it is supposed to do.[31] The same research also shows that, in different countries, including The Netherlands, Sweden, Australia and the United States, the percentage of young people indicating it is essential to them to live in a democracy is lower than it is among older people.

These developments open the door to populists and authoritarian leaders. Research by the University of Cambridge shows that young people are more satisfied about democracy from the moment a populist leader has seized power in a country.[32] Remarkably enough, it doesn't matter whether it is a right-wing or a left-wing populist leader. Think of the election of Duterte in the Philippines (2016), Bolsonaro in Brazil (2018) and *Podemos* in Spain (2019). Researchers also refer to this as the populist wave of 2015. Both the style of these vocal leaders and the issues involved appeal to a large group of youngsters who have lost faith in regular politics. In particular the rigorous approach involving social injustice and unemployment can count on a lot of support among young people. An example is the 'workfare' programme in Hungary, better known as Orbanomics. Emerging populists can also count on a lot of support in countries that are plagued by corruption scandals involving the ruling 'political elite', as was the case, for instance, with the election of Bolsonaro in Brazil, who appealed to plenty of Brazilian youngsters with his promise to topple the establishment.



Source: University of Cambridge (2020).

However, the 'populism effect' at some point wears off. The study by the British top university shows that populist leaders start to lose the trust of many young people after they have been in office for more than two terms. In fact, after the second term, young people become seriously disenchanted with the populist leaders, whose true nature and agenda have become clear by then, for instance the effects of economic mismanagement, scandals involving abuse of office or attempts to curtail the democratic competition to stay in power. Attempts by Erdoğan and Orbán to silence the opposition and bypass the judicial branch are good examples.

The question is how faith in democracy can be restored in a time of disenchantment and emerging populism. According to the researchers, we first need to stop seeing the rise of populists as a threat to democracy, but instead see it as a signal from the people. A signal that makes it clear that the existing structures have failed to address the existing dissatisfaction in society, for instance the dissatisfaction about the failure to adequately tackle problems like inequality, economic uncertainty or climate change. Or the dissat-

isfaction that people feel insufficiently heard or seen by the current politicians, who only think of themselves. When democratic institutions are motivated by this to take action and stem the tide, instead of trying to whitewash the reputation of the 'politics of the past', the populist wave can still lead to a renaissance of democracy, instead of its demise.

The revolution has always been in the hands of the young. The young always inherit the revolution.

Huey Newton (1942 - 1989)

Chapter 8

Young people are critical about information technology *Even though they are glued to their screens*

Young people are often accused of being glued to their screens. And statistics show that American teenagers spend an average of seven hours a day behind a digital screen.[33] Not including the time they spend doing something for school. Most of that time is spent watching videos, playing games and using social media. A whopping 95 percent of teenagers has access to a smartphone. The share of young people with access to a computer is not only lower, but is also determined much more by their parents' income. Between 2014 and 2018, the percentage of youngsters indicating that they are 'almost always online' has almost doubled.[34] So parents are really concerned. Almost two-thirds of all American parents indicate they are worried about the screen time of their teenage kids.[35] They are especially worried that their kids share too much of their lives online and lose the ability to communicate with other people in real life.

The question is to what extent these concerns are justified. We have a tendency to count the number of hours that young people spend online, but forget to examine why teenagers immerse themselves in the digital world and what we can learn from that.

Research from Duke University shows that the online lives of teenagers have a lot in common with the experiences, connections and challenges of the offline world.[36] To the extent that the researchers argues that it is nonsense to separate what is happening online from 'the real lives' of the youngsters. Nor can we maintain that they don't have meaningful interactions online. We saw earlier that young people use social media platforms to connect with people from various backgrounds and find more diverse opinions. Much more than older people, young people are prepared to express themselves on social media about social issues and are less likely to share fake news. It is often said that we need to teach young people to be critical about information technology, but perhaps we can learn more from them in that regard.

I. Fool the algorithm

In a room in Washington D.C., father and daughter are getting ready to address the visitors of *ShmooCon 2020*[37], a three-day hacker conference on the East coast of America. It is an ambiance that you would expect from a hacker conference. Fluorescent light compensates for the absence of natural daylight and a simple lectern with ample wiring graces the stage. The host also lives up to the stereotype; a grown man with a t-shirt over his long-sleeved shirt and a key cord around his neck. Samantha Mosley introduces herself as a High School Junior who is active in her school community and teaches girls to programme. There is a loud applause accompanied by cheering. As Chief Information Security Officer with more than twenty years of experience in providing security for digital information structures, her father Russell may have the necessary experience, but it is clear that his daughter is the star of the show.

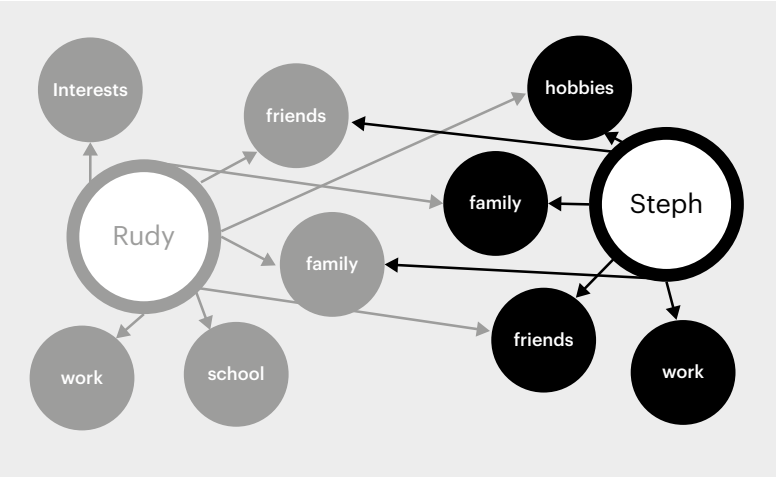
From an early age, Russell has tried to teach his daughter about good 'cyber hygiene'. Never share your password with other people, don't accept friendship requests from people you have never met, tape off the camera on your laptop computer and be as strict as possible about your privacy settings. 'The internet is forever'. So think about what you post and who you share it with. After all, universities and potential employers are also watching and include the online profiles and activities of possible candidates in their decisions. When Samantha takes over from her dad, she immediately makes it clear that young people have a somewhat different perspective. They have grown up with new technologies and are very aware, for instance, of the existence of metadata and know that it is not just about the immediate data that you leave online, like a photo or text message, but also the indirect data, in other words the information about the information. For instance, your location, what browser you are using, how long you stay on a platform, the search terms you use, who you interact with, etc. Especially Facebook is known for conducting all kinds of dubious queries behind the scenes. They store each post that has more than five characters and isn't posted within ten minutes. That means that even the messages that you don't post are being analysed. Using these metadata and analyses, internet platforms are able to identify people very accurately. And, as we know, these profiles are worth a lot of money to companies. Samantha has found a way to fool the Instagram algorithms, making it harder to identify her and her friends.

As it has been clearly pointed out to her that many adults may not be familiar with the terms she is using in her story, she starts her speech with a brief introduction of the various kinds of Instagram profiles that young people use. That makes the audience laugh, along with Samantha herself. First, there is the 'Rinsta' profile, or Real Instagram, where pictures are shared that are meant for your employer and your granny. Pictures of your prom, your dog, the cookies that you bake, etc. Pretty and decent pictures. Unlike the photos that you share on your 'Finsta', or Fake Instagram, the less charming pictures of parties and nights out with your friends. Because you can set the profile to 'private', the pictures are only visible to the people that you give access and are shielded from the outside world. This profile is also harder to find, giving you more control over who follows the profile.

When your granny googles, she will find your Rinsta, but not your Finsta. And finally, there are group profiles, which are managed by multiple people. And it is the use of these group profiles that helped Samantha to discover that there is a way to fool the algorithm.

A few years earlier, Samantha and a group of her classmates took part in the FIRST LEGO League games, an international competition in which pupils between 9 and 15 years old can take part. During these competitions, the participating teams need to design, programme and build a fully autonomous robot from LEGO. To share their experiences, she set up an Instagram account, which was managed by multiple team members. When Samantha then checked the 'explore' tab, a function on Instagram should show you different messages based on your clicking behaviour, she saw all kinds of messages in which she had never shown an interest. And each time she checked the tab, it looked different. From basketball players, to cooking recipes and animal videos. As an experiment, Samantha shared the account with her cousin, who lived in a different state. This affected the results even more. It was then that she and her friends realised that the shared account could be used to confuse the tracking algorithms of Instagram.

Since then, these teenagers have been working together in an advanced network of trusted Instagram users to place content from different devices and locations. Audibly nervous yet determined, she explains the steps involved. First, create several Instagram accounts for yourself, for instance an account especially for you and your friends, a different account for your hobby and a third for your relatives and employer. Give someone you trust access to one of these accounts, preferably one with a low risk. Then request a reset of your password and send that link to the trusted person. Resetting your password does not end the session, so both you and the second person have access to the same account at the same time, without actually having shared the password. When that person requests to place an photo on your account, Instagram collects the metadata from a new and 'fresh' device. You can repeat that process with a network of, say, ten users in ten different locations using ten different devices, thus providing Instagram with a pretty confusing cocktail of data. This is not the same as having a Finsta account, which may offer privacy in relation to other people, but not from Instagram itself.



Source: Alfred Ng / CNET - based on the original image by Samantha Mosley.

You can decide, for example, for yourself to be the only person with access to your 'school' account, but share your hobby account with multiple people. At the same time, you yourself are part of one or more accounts of other members in the network. For such a network of trust to be able to succeed, you need basic rules, Samantha explains. You may only post content when the account owner requests it, including the caption that goes with it. And you may not accept followers if the account is set to private. In addition, it has to be agreed in advance which kinds of posts may or may not be liked. People who violate the rules are removed from the network forthwith. Samantha's network has become so big that it includes members from nine different countries, with about five people from each of those countries. The

reason that this works so well is because the trust is mutual. You won't mess up someone else's account if you know that the same could happen to your account. The network is also constantly looking for new ways to confuse the algorithm. Successfully. The 'explore' overview is all over the place, proof that the algorithm is no longer able to outline a clear profile. Samantha is reassured knowing that Instagram is now far less capable of tracking her movements.

Her visibly proud father, who did some research prior to the presentation, adds that the principle that Samantha and her friends have discovered in itself is not new. It's called 'obfuscating'.[38] There are networks whose members periodically exchange bonus cards, preventing the supermarket from generating a clear customer profile. There are examples where a father found out his daughter was pregnant before she knew that herself. Informed by the girl's purchasing behaviour, supermarket chain Walmart was able to predict at an early stage that she was pregnant, and they began sending her all kinds of discount coupons for baby products. The father initially thought that Walmart was encouraging teenagers to become pregnant, until it turned out that she actually was pregnant. Even criminals use it, by exchanging Sim cards every time they meet, to be less traceable. The reason that these tactics are often not embraced on a larger scale is that, as a user, you also miss out on the benefits of this kind of targeting and risk receiving all kinds of discount offers for products that you never buy. The same principle applies to Google. For instance, if you are looking for a hairdresser, the results are not aligned with your profile, which means you need to be much more specific in your searches. For many people, that is a bridge too far.

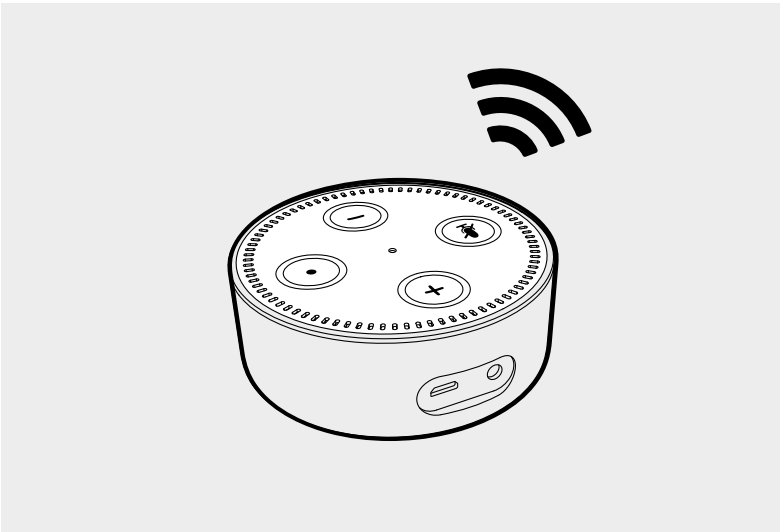
We also see a creative form of obfuscating in the fight against the rise of mass surveillance. We saw earlier that knowing that enormous amounts of data are constantly being stored and analysed can have a 'chilling effect' on people. Inspired by these developments (and by Orwell's *1984*), an Australian clothing brand in 2014 launched a special clothing line that makes your telephone disappear from the radar.[39] The most important feature of the 1984 clothing line is the so-called 'UnPocket', a canvas pouch woven with metal fabric that blocks WiFi and GPS signals, among other things. There are also creative solutions available when it comes to camera surveillance. The Dutch designer Sanne Weekers, for instance, as a student developed a scarf that makes you unrecognisable to cameras with facial recognition software.[40] The images on the scarf confuse the facial recognition software to such an extent that your face becomes unrecognisable. The same goes for graphic prints on clothing, stylised face masks and even special make-up. Thus, we see that, fortunately, every movement generates a countermovement, and young people take matters into their own hands to protect their democratic values.

II. Hey Siri, do unicorns exist?

One day, Judith Danovitch, brain scientist at the University of Louisville, heard her four-year-old son ask all kinds of questions from the kitchen. How do turtles get their shield? Do eagles really eat snakes? Why do things die? And perhaps the most important one: is butt-face a bad word? When she walked into the kitchen, it turned out that the questions were not aimed at her, but at Siri, Apple's virtual assistant. Her son was sitting at the kitchen table, testing the boundaries of Siri's knowledge using the family iPad. Research shows that this kind of behaviour is perfectly normal at that age, when kids are still working out how reliable technology is. Researchers exposed children to a new voice-activated virtual assistant (comparable to Siri).[41] In many cases, children asked questions to which they already knew the answers, just to see what the device would say. In addition, they often asked personal questions, such as 'what is my name?' or 'how many brothers and sisters do I have?' Children have their doubts as to whether the device can actually answer their questions. Similar research shows that children are very creative in their attempts to test the reliability of such gadgets.[42] Especially fantasy creatures

are a popular tool for kids. ‘Hey Siri, do unicorns exist?’ But also Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy were frequently encountered in the research. Virtual assistants are often programmed to answer these questions with ‘I don’t know’, making them look less reliable to children.

Research by Danovitch herself also shows that children approach new technologies with a certain amount of suspicion. Together with two Chinese colleagues, she gave different groups of five- to eight-year-old children a number of questions and scientific and historical facts.[43] For example, how many bones are there in a human hand? And how many days does it take Mars to orbit around the Sun? The researchers then presented the children with two contrasting answers. According to the internet, one orbit takes 600 days, while their teacher said it was 700 days. The study shows that children have more faith in the answer their teacher gave. After all, they know their teacher well and have established a strong bond together. And technology first has to prove itself. So the enormous availability of information has not caused the children to question the knowledge their teacher has. The right answer is 687 days, incidentally.



The research by Danovitch shows that adults have the opposite response. With regard to scientific and historical facts, adults actually tend to trust the internet more than they do other people. And I must confess that that is something I recognise in myself. Imagine you are playing Trivial Pursuit and you can you can ask either a good friend or Alexa, Amazon’s virtual assistant, for support, which would you choose? When it comes to number of bones in a human hand, my choice would be Alexa. Unless that good friend is a doctor, and even then. For instance, when I enter into a discussion with friends about the year a specific even took place, it won’t be long before one of us googles it for evidence. The innate tendency to trust the knowledge of people apparently disappears as we get older. The same goes for our innate distrust of technology. As we get older, we become better at coming to terms with the contradictory characteristics of digital technologies. On the one hand, we become aware that computers are vulnerable to ‘stupid mistakes’ (like people), while on the other hand we increasingly believe in the supernatural powers of technology: extremely accurate, unprejudiced and morally neutral. When we have known for a long time that that’s simply not true.

Other studies also show that young children tend to trust traditional sources of information more. Researchers of the University of Louisville asked children between four and six to identify a number of commonly used objects.[44] For instance a computer, a tablet, a smartphone and a book. Almost all the children recognised the objects and were able to indicate that the computer, tablet and smartphone could be used for gaming, watching movies and taking pictures. When they were then asked to indicate which object they would use to learn more about dogs, most children chose the book, whereas adults taking part in the same study overwhelmingly chose the computer.

The various studies show that children are much more critical about information technology than we think. Technology is not something they trust implicitly. They do not believe every answer they are given and don’t trust digital technologies blindly. That is

encouraging news for the future, since deep fakes and other synthetic media are developing rapidly. So one could argue that we should be more worried about the current generations of adults, who share much more fake news than the younger generations and are easier to aggravate by all kinds of conspiracy theories. However, we must not forget that the studies discussed above are above all about *trust*, rather than *truth*. Research by Danovitch shows that children have more trust in their teachers, even when their teachers give the wrong answers. They even trust the judgement of their peers over technology. In other words, it is relatively easy to mislead children with information if they trust the source. That also explains the success of influencers. Many influencers are young people that look and sound the same as their followers. Via social media, they share their entire lives, creating a personal and emotional bond with their followers, as a result of which they are increasingly seen as a trusted source of information, even though they have no demonstrable expertise in a given area. Research shows that 60 percent of American teenagers who use YouTube to follow current events consult the channel of an influencer instead of a news organisation that is also active on the platform.[45] The opinions of influencers are increasingly elevated to facts, while experts and scientists find it hard to connect to this target group.

Identifying fake news

There is reason to remain hopeful, however. The same study shows that teenagers who do get their news straight from news organisations indicate more often that it has helped them better understand current events. That goes to a lesser extent for teenagers who got their news from YouTube and social media channels. Research also shows that teenagers are open to news from sources that represent different opinions from the ones they themselves have. Only 14 percent indicate that they never get news from sources with a different opinion. And only 19 percent say never to discuss politics with people with opposite opinions. Young people indicate en masse that they find it important to stay informed of current event, even when they not yet have the right to vote. And they are critical of the way things are reported. Research shows, for example, that European youngsters are much more critical than adults when it comes to the way a subject like immigration is being reported.[46] They are also more concerned than adults about the spread of disinformation and indicate that they want to learn more about identifying disinformation. Research by the World Economic Forum shows that young people actually consider the spread of disinformation to be the worst drawback of the use of social media[47], even more than the breach of privacy and distribution of hate. It would appear that this growing awareness about young people contributes to a critical attitude with regard to information.

As far as identifying fake news is concerned, it turns out that young people do much better than their parents. A BBC reporter visited a middle school in South Wales, where he played the BBC game *iReporter* with fourteen- and fifteen-year-old pupils, a game in which aspiring journalists are faced with an exclusive story.[48] The story line is as follows: a major internet failure has disabled a number of large social media platforms and news about it reaches the newsroom via different channels. The young reporters have to make decisions as to what they want to publish about it and they have to carefully weigh the sense of urgency and impact against the reliability and accuracy. Was it a cyberattack or did a satellite fall from the sky? Did the blackout also disable other systems, like payment systems and air traffic, causing angry citizens to take to the streets? And is the rumour correct that the blackout caused smartphones of a certain brand to burst into flames? Via e-mails and telephone calls, they receive a variety of documents and pictures. The pupils remained very calm during this emergency situation and examined all the information very carefully. When the CEO of a social media network gave evasive answers, they kept asking questions until he snapped and admitted that it was indeed a major cyberattack. They traced the locations, looked for the orig-

inal source of the pictures and examined whether certain claims could be officially confirmed by the parties involved. Even a peer who claimed that he was a programmer who stopped the cyberattack was treated with some suspicion.

After the game was over, the outcome was discussed. It turned out that the pupils had scored well on speed, impact and accuracy. During the evaluation, they indicated that they had learned a lot, but also that they could rely on the skills they had. Many of the teenagers during the assessments indicated that they often felt they were educating their parents in how to use the internet, rather than the other way around. Many parents ask their children to check whether something they saw on Facebook is reliable or not.

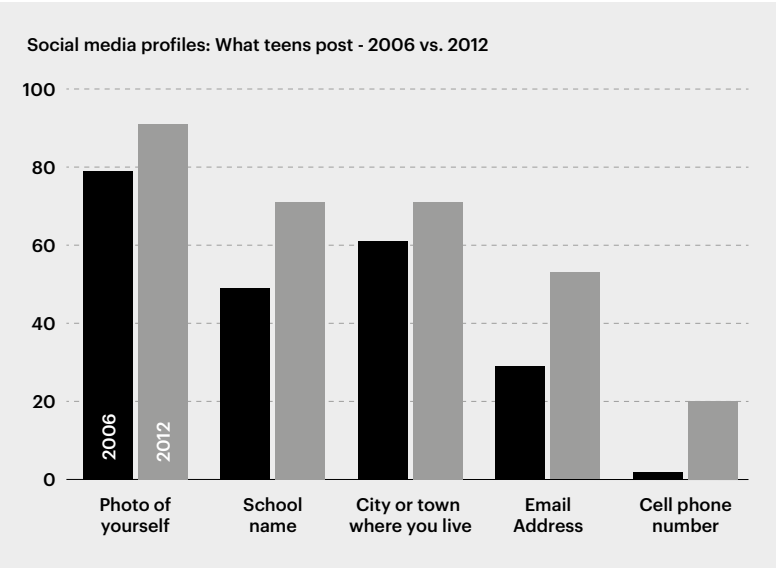
III. The privacy paradox

As critical as young people are about information technologies, as indifferent they are when it comes to their online privacy. At least if the headlines are to be believed. There are more and more articles with headlines like 'Millennials don't worry about online privacy'.[49] And indeed, research shows that Americans under 35 indicate less often that nobody should ever have access to their personal information or internet behaviour.[50] And more Americans under 35 agree with the statement that 'they are okay with trading some of their personal data in exchange for more relevant ads'. But the differences are nowhere near large enough to claim that privacy is dead and that Millennials have accepted this 'new reality'. The research shows that, in fact, 70 percent of the Millennials want nobody ever to have access to their personal information or internet behaviour, which is only 7 percent less than among the group over 35. And the percentage that is okay with sharing personal information in exchange for more relevant ads is only 6 percent higher among Millennials (at 25 percent). So a vast majority of young people is very much aware of privacy issues and is critical when it comes to collecting personal data.

This also shows in an opinion poll among the American people with regard to leaking classified information about the large-scale surveillance programme of the American intelligence services by Edward Snowden in 2013. The whistle blower and former CIA employee was hired as a system controller by the National Security Agency (NSA). Secret documents that Snowden shared with the media showed that the intelligence service collected and analysed internet and telephone records on a massive scale about virtually every American citizen, without informing these citizens and without having to answer to anybody. According to the NSA, these surveillance practices were necessary in the fight against domestic terrorism. Shortly after Snowden blew the whistle, the FBI announced that Snowden would be arrested for leaking state secrets. Snowden fled to Russia and asked for asylum. The poll showed that young people between 18 and 29 years old were the only age group in which a clear majority indicated that the fact that Snowden leaked the information was in the interest of society.[51] More young people than old people feel that Snowden should not be prosecuted for it. And they are also more critical when it comes to the government collecting internet and telephone data in the fight against terrorism. A majority of young people disapproves of that, while older age groups in fact approve those practices. In addition, young people believe that collecting information on a large scale does not have the desired effect. A majority indicates that it did not help prevent terrorist attacks. Seven years after the information was leaked, Snowden was finally proven right. According to the Federal Court of Appeal in San Francisco, the large-scale surveillance programme of the American intelligence services is illegal. The court argued that the surveillance programme was in violation of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act and may as such be unconstitutional.[52] Snowden's response was euphoric, but he still resides in Russia, which by now has granted him permanent asylum, because the verdict does not indicate to what extent it was legal to leak the documents.

Snowden: 'Seven years ago, as the news declared I was being charged as a criminal for speaking the truth, I never imagined that I would live to see our courts condemn the NSA's activities as unlawful and in the same ruling credit me for exposing them. And yet that day has arrived.'[53]

Although young people are critical about the large-scale collection of information by the government, their own actions do not always reflect that. Research indicates that, in recent years, teenagers share more and more information about themselves online.[54] For instance personal information, like name, date of birth, residence, school name, relationship status and even e-mail address. A whopping 97 percent of American youngsters between 18 and 34 years old accepts the general conditions when installing updates of mobile applications without reading them (even among adults, this is still an alarmingly high 91 percent).[55] The same goes for the registration of free WiFi spots and logging into online streaming services. Understandably, the language being used in these conditions is often too complex. And because there is no real alternative, many people don't see it as a direct obstacle when installing and activating digital technologies. As a result, many youngsters don't really know which parties collect information about them and for what purpose.



Source: Pew Research Center (2013)

The fact that many young people are aware of the importance of privacy, but don't always act accordingly, is also known as the 'privacy paradox', which can possibly be explained by the fact that teenagers in particular have a different interpretation of privacy. It isn't that they are completely unaware of the risk of data collection by third parties, but there are risks that teenagers are even more concerned about. Namely the risk that parents, teachers and (potential) employers see things on social media that may get them into trouble. So it is much more about social privacy, the ability to control a social situation rather than controlling information. They are more worried about their mother seeing a certain picture on Instagram, than about government agencies and advertisers using the information. That does not mean they are not concerned about their privacy or don't value it. In fact, they use all kinds of inventive strategies to secure their profiles. For instance, not only does a majority of teenagers set their Facebook profiles to private, a quarter of them also turns out to share false information about

their name, age or location. We saw earlier that many teenagers use Finsta accounts to mislead people. Some strategies are even more subtle. More than half of all teenagers occasionally share cryptic information, that they know only their friends will understand. So even if other people have access to the content, they still don't have access to its meaning.

Teenagers are in their formative years and they experiment with different identities. Teenagers have always done that, only now they do it online. Because it is a much more public process nowadays, many teenagers are actually very aware of it. More than adults, they curate their online profiles, remove posts and tags and make themselves harder to trace. That also explains the popularity of platforms like Snapchat, where you can indicate how long posts remain visible and it is easier to form small communities. They know that adults are watching and as a result, they are aware of their privacy from an early age.

It's all that the young can do for the old, to shock them and keep them up to date.

George Bernard Shaw (1856 - 1950)

Chapter 9

Young people cultivate the internet in a different way *Even though adults think social media are poison*

We have seen that young people deal with information technology in a much more conscious way than people often think. Instead of hiding in their shell and looking at the world around them with indifference, they use social media networks to get in touch with people with different ideas, express themselves about social subjects and take part in protests. The create trust networks to fool algorithms and come up with inventive strategies to secure their profiles. In addition, it turns out they are much better at recognising fake news than their parents and don't blindly accept everything they hear or read. Social media are not just for fun. Democracy is much more alive online than we think. There is fact-checking and minorities are given a voice. Instead of counting the hours they spend online, we should examine the way they use the internet more closely.

Of course we mustn't close our eyes to the adverse effects. For some young people, the use of social media can lead to psychological problems, like a reduced self-image. A leaked internal study shows that Facebook was aware that the use of its subsidiary Instagram can have a toxic effect on the mental well-being of teenag-

ers.[56] According to the Facebook researchers, the use of Instagram makes young female users who are insecure about their bodies end up feeling even worse. We can learn a lot from these insights. Because change is possible. Obviously, Facebook is enormously powerful, but its existence is not a law of nature. Between 2005 and 2009, MySpace was the largest social media network around, it was visited even more often than Google. Back then, we couldn't imagine a future without that platform. Nowadays, hardly anybody talks about it. TikTok is gaining ground rapidly and YouTube dominates the online video domain. The use of Facebook among young people has been falling for years.

I. What adults don't understand about the internet

She is only seventeen years old, but Taylor Fang writes with the wisdom of an experienced woman. She is one of the 376 essayists from 28 countries to respond in 2019 to a call from MIT Technology Review. 'What don't grown-ups know about my generation and technology?' The only condition for taking part is that you have to be 18 or younger. Many of the contributions had an angry or dejected tone. According to the jury, the winning essay by Taylor gives a nuanced and moving image of how technology can be used to enrich your lives.[57] I have tried to summarise her essay and reflect on the most important passages. But the best way to do justice to the essay is by including it in its entirety, with Taylor's permission, of course:

> "Screen. To conceal, protect, shelter. The word signifies invisibility. I hid behind the screen. No one could see through the screen. The screen conceals itself: sensors and sheet glass and a faint glow at the edges; light, bluer than a summer day.
>
> The screen also conceals those who use it. Our phones are like extensions of our bodies, always tempting us. Algorithms spoon-feed us pictures. We tap. We scroll. We click. We ingest. We follow. We update. We gather at traditional community hangouts only to sit at the margins, browsing Instagram. We can't enjoy a sunset without posting the view on Snapchat. Don't even mention no-phone policies at dinner.
>
> Generation Z is entitled, depressed, aimless, addicted, and apathetic. Or at least that's what adults say about us.
>
> But teens don't use social media just for the social connections and networks. It goes deeper. Social-media platforms are among our only chances to create and shape our sense of self. Social media makes us feel seen. In our Instagram "biographies," we curate a line of emojis that feature our passions: skiing, art, debate, racing. We post our greatest achievements and celebrations. We create fake "finsta" accounts to share our daily moments and vulnerabilities with close friends. We find our niche communities of YouTubers.
>
> It's true that social media's constant stream of idealized images takes its toll: on our mental health, our self-image, and our social lives. After all, our relationships to technology are multidimensional—they validate us just as much as they make us feel insecure.
>
> But if adults are worried about social media, they should start by including teenagers in conversations about technology. They should listen to teenagers' ideas and visions for positive changes in the digital space. They should point to alternative ways for teenagers to express their voices.
>
> I've seen this from my own experience. When I got my first social-media account in middle school, about a year later than many of my classmates, I was primarily looking to fit in. Yet I soon discovered the sugar rush of likes and comments on my pictures. My life mattered! My captions mattered! My filters! My stories! My followers! I was looking not only for validation, but also for a way to represent myself. Who do I want to be seen as? On the internet I wasn't screaming into the void—for the first time, I felt acutely visible.

Yet by high school, this cycle of presenting polished versions of myself grew tiring. I was tired of feeling like I was missing out. I was tired of adhering to hyper-visible social codes and tokens. By 10th grade, I was using social media only sporadically. Many of my friends were going through the same shifts and changes in their ideas about social media.

For me, the largest reason was that I had found another path of self-representation: creative writing. I began writing poetry, following poets on Twitter (with poems replacing pictures and news in my feed), and spending the majority of my free time scribbling in a journal outdoors. I didn't feel I needed Facebook as much. If I did use social media, it was more for entertaining memes.

This isn't to say that every teenager should begin creating art. Or that art would solve all of social media's problems. But approaching technology through a creative lens is more effective than merely "raising awareness." Rather than reducing teenagers to statistics, we should make sure teenagers have the chance to tell their own experiences in creative ways.

Take the example of "selfies." Selfies, as many adults see them, are nothing more than narcissistic pictures to be broadcast to the world at large. But even the selfie representing a mere "I was here" has an element of truth. Just as Frida Kahlo painted self-portraits, our selfies construct a small part of who we are. Our selfies, even as they are one-dimensional, are important to us.

At this critical moment in teenagers' and children's lives, we all need to feel less alone and to feel as if we matter. Teenagers are disparaged for not being "present." Yet we find visibility in technology. Our selfies aren't just pictures; they represent our ideas of self. Only through "reimagining" the selfie as a meaningful mode of self-representation can adults understand how and why teenagers use social media. To "reimagine" is the first step toward beginning to listen to teenagers' voices.

Meaning—scary as it sounds—we have to start actually listening to the scruffy video-game-hoarding teenage boys stuck in their basements. Because our search for creative self isn't so different from previous generations'. To grow up with technology, as my generation has, is to constantly question the self, to split into multiplicities, to try to contain our own contradictions. In "Song of Myself," Walt Whitman famously said that he contradicted himself. The self, he said, is large, and contains multitudes. But what is contemporary technology if not a mechanism for the containment of multitudes?

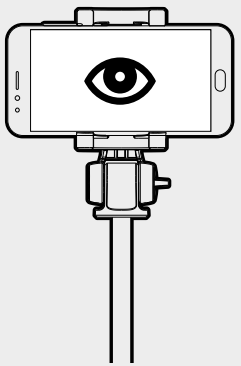
So don't tell us technology has ruined our inner lives. Tell us to write a poem. Or make a sketch. Or sew fabric together. Or talk about how social media helps us make sense of the world and those around us. Perhaps social-media selfies aren't the fullest representations of ourselves. But we're trying to create an integrated identity. We're striving not only to be seen, but to see with our own eyes."

It is impressive to read how this seventeen-year-old student manages to explain the current shift from one-dimensional profiles to multiple online identities by quoting a Walt Whitman poem from 1855.

'Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
I am large, I contain multitudes.'[58]

This passage appears more and more often in the digital age. It is used to describe the brief evolution of our digital selves. In the last decade (when Facebook reached the milestone of 500 million users), internet users were above all busy creating their personal 'brand'. We carefully compiled our social media biographies

and carefully curated our pictures to create a unified impression. Completely in line with the analysis by Ezra Klein described earlier, in which he talks about the emergence of online 'mega-identities' that have given us a fixed place on the political spectrum. By now, more and more people discover that these one-dimensional identities that we have created of ourselves are turning against us. In a way, we are trapped in our own profiles and look for ways to escape them. Without denying ourselves and our peers. As the internet is growing up, so are its users. Digital technologies can help us further develop our diversity and layered existence as human beings.



Taylor Fang found her escape in poetry. Of course, Taylor does not represent the average teenager. By now, she has been admitted to Harvard University and won various poetry prizes. But Taylor does speak on behalf of a generation. The first generation to grow up completely with digital technologies. So she speaks from first-hand experience. The following passage in particular stuck with me:

> *'But approaching technology through a creative lens is more effective than merely 'raising awareness'. Rather than reducing teenagers to statistics, we should make sure teenagers have the chance to tell their own experiences in creative ways.'*

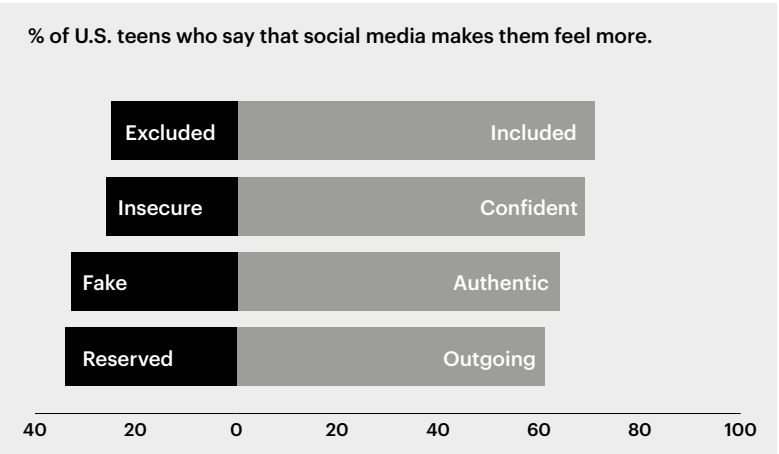
So it is time for us to involve young people in the conversations about the future of the digital space. We mustn't only warn them about it, we must also reconsider the use of technology and the new social standards it creates. Reinvent. Reimagine. We can organise the digital space differently, more democratically and more inclusively. And young people have the expertise to help us do that.

II. Social media aren't just for fun

As Taylor Fang describes so poetically in her winning essay, young people don't use social media only for existing connections and networks. It goes deeper. It is a tool in the formation and construction of a layered identity. Thanks to the internet, cultures and subcultures are less bound to a physical location. Young people living in places with little diversity now have direct access to communities all over the world. Without moving physically, they can travel outside the boundaries of where they live to create and define their own identity. Young people who used to be marginalised, for instance because of their ethnicity of sexuality, experience online that they are not alone. That other people have had similar experiences when growing up in an environment that tried to demonise their culture, their way of life or their identity. These shared experiences can make young people more self-ware and confident. Research shows that they feel more accepted and confident through the use of social media than that it makes them feel excluded and insecure.[59] It is interesting that demographic differences have hardly any impact on the results of the study, which shows that both boys and girls in different age groups share the same feelings.

The study also shows that teenagers feel more authentic than

fake because of social media. In cultures where the expressive freedom in the offline world is limited, the internet can be an important release valve. For instance in Iran. According to Iranian law, women have to wear a headscarf in public and cover their arms and legs with loose clothing. In the digital space of Instagram you see more and more teenagers daring to post selfies without headscarf. After the ban on Twitter, Facebook and Telegram, Instagram is (for the time being) the last public social network in Iran and, as such, offers a unique look into the lives of young Iranians. They dress up for Instagram and showcase themselves and their lives. In line with the sense of authenticity, Iranian teenagers indicate that the person they are on Instagram is closer to reality than the person they are when walking along the street.[60] However, chances are that, in countries like Iran, the repression on the street will move online as well.



Source: Pew Research Center (2018): 'Don't know' answers are not included.

Teenagers are also exposed to new ideas and insights online, which makes them 'grow up' more quickly in cultural terms. For instance, I myself was already an adult when I discovered that 'Hanky Panky Shanghai' is extremely racist and not really a Chinese birthday song. In primary school, when it was one of the kids' birthdays, we would all sing 'Hanky Panky Shanghai' while using our fingers to give our eyes an 'oriental' look. I am still ashamed when I think about it. Online, people will point out that kind of unacceptable behaviour much more quickly. We saw earlier that teenagers are convinced that social media will help them expand their horizon. That it is a way for them to come into contact with people of different backgrounds, find more diverse points of view and express their support for social issues. As a result, the conversations and networks on social media platforms are becoming increasingly political. Young people trade in platforms like Facebook for networks that their parents don't use, like TikTok, where they can share videos with a maximum length of one minute with the outside world (even though most clips are shorter). In that sense, TikTok combines the best of YouTube, Instagram and Twitter. Visual and creative, yet brief and powerful. The algorithm makes it possible for content to go viral, even though the person posting it does not have many followers.

Politically charged

Funny internet memes often contain deeply rooted political opinions. While millions of acres of forest were lost to wildfires in Australia between September 2019 and January 2020, Australian youngsters turned to TikTok. They were unhappy about the way the prime minister handled the crisis situation and angry about the fact that these forest fires received so little media attention. Young people made creative videos to show the hypocrisy of the lack of media coverage by comparing it to the enormous attention and financial support after the fire at Notre Dame in Paris. The videos were as funny as they were witty and were viewed hundreds of thousands of times.

Interestingly, these short clips may have had a much greater impact than the long informational articles posted by the prime minister, a person young people say they cannot identify with at all. They indicate that these online platforms are both a coping mechanism and a way to share their views and ideas with people to

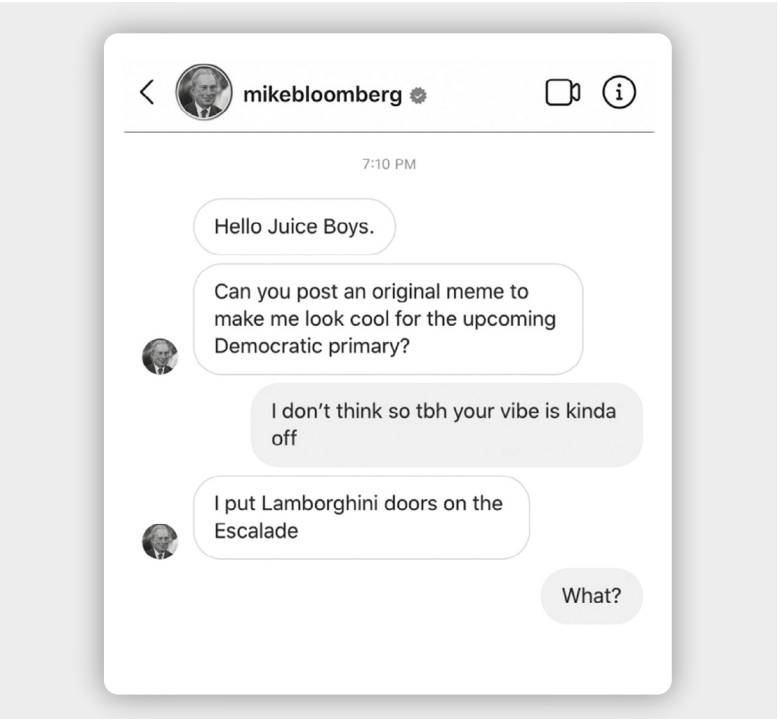
whom they feel connected in a place where everyone is equal.[61]

During the 2020 American presidential elections it also became clear how politically charged the use of TikTok by young people is. American teenagers, many of them too young to vote, formed political coalitions on TikTok to campaign for their favourite candidate. Not only by sharing news updates and providing presidential debates with real-time commentary, but also by fact-checking content from political opponents. These political coalitions are also known as hype houses and have hundreds of thousands of followers. In addition to conservative and liberal 'houses', there are also undecided houses, for those who have not yet made up their minds, and dual houses for those who enjoy political debate. In a sense, these teens are building alternative TV networks, each with their own 'talking heads'. Young people themselves call it 'cable news for young people'. CNN and Fox are the established names, but these channels are not aimed at young people who are used to getting information and inspiration from short creative videos.[62]

The time that influencers are apolitical is gone. In recent years, we see the rise of so-called 'genuinfluencers'.[63] They don't want to sell anything, but have 'genuine influence' on subjects they find important. Traditional influencers often have many followers, because of how they look and because they provide inspiration for people's wardrobes. The new batch of influencers collects followers by what they have to say about social issues. As we saw in chapter 8, there are also disadvantages. The authority that influencers have is not always based on their experience. But influencers increasingly try to persuade their followers to 'do the right thing'. The American influencer Olivia Rodrigo, for example, was hired by the White House to persuade her millions of followers to get vaccinated. Although this remains arbitrary, it does represent a shift towards a more common goal. Genuinfluencers do not use the platforms of brands and organisations to recommend their products, but to share advice and information. For a price, of course.

As such, influencers are increasingly a blind spot for Big Tech companies like Facebook, Twitter and TikTok. Since the 2016 American presidential election, various platforms have tightened their political ads policy, after it was discovered that the Russians targeted American voters using paid ads. Twitter, TikTok and others decided to ban political ads from their platforms altogether. Facebook imposed a temporary pause for political ads in the week prior to the election. However, those kinds of measures have hardly any effect on influencers, because they operate in a grey area between advertising and organic content. Especially in a time when more and more influencers express political opinions, it is hard to ascertain whether a post was made in collaboration with a political campaign or fully reflects the influencer's own opinions. Under the rules of the US Federal Election Commission, it is mandatory to place a disclaimer with paid content. Besides the fact that this does not always happen, defining a 'paid partnership' is not that simple. Influencers are not always paid in money, but also in products and other services. Researchers from the University of Texasmapped the different ways in which political organisations turn to influencers as part of their campaigns.[64] In addition to the mega-influencers (with more than a million followers), so-called 'nano-influencers' are used increasingly. These accounts are a lot smaller (fewer than 10,000 followers), but because they have a much closer connection with their supporters, the involvement rate of these profiles is twice as high as with the mega accounts.

This authentic connection is not only valuable for fashion brands, but for political organisations as well. Democratic presidential candidate Michael Bloomberg made headlines in 2020 when he sponsored meme accounts and hired hundreds of young creators to post messages about his campaign on social media during the presidential primaries. In some cases, the plan backfired. Creative makers took the money, but created a meme in which they make fun of the presidential candidate.[65] Young people are a political force to be reckoned with.



Source: Instagram (2020).

III. Facebook isn't forever, right?

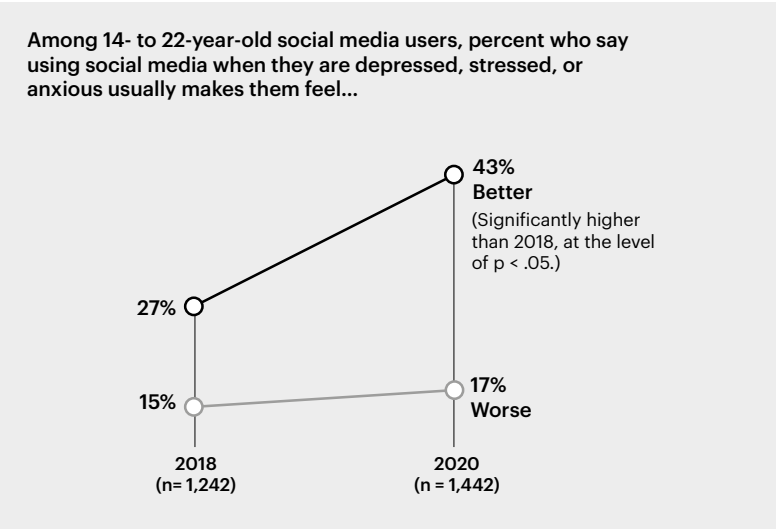
Obviously, social media are not all fun and games. As described earlier, the use of social media can lead to mental problems among some young people. Especially the self-image of young female users can be affected. A leaked internal report from Facebook shows that one in three teenage girls who has a poor self-image puts the blame on Instagram.[66] The constant stream of doctored images of super fit bodies let teenage girls believe that that is the standard they need to live up to. The American Senate thinks it is distressing that Facebook was aware of that for some time, yet failed to act on it. Senator Richard Blumenthal openly wonders how we can ever trust Facebook again:

> *'We know it chooses the growth of its products over the wellbeing of our children. It is failing to hold itself accountable and the question that haunts me is how can we or parents or anyone trust Facebook.'*[67]

Facebook itself indicates that the report was misinterpreted. In an open letter, Mark Zuckerberg writes in response to the accusations that, if we want to have an informed debate about the effects of social media on young people, it is important to start with a complete picture.[68] He adds that Facebook is determined to do more research and make more research publicly available. The same argument was used by Facebook's Global Head of Safety during the Senate hearing, claiming that Facebook conducts the research to make the platform better; by minimising 'the bad' and optimising 'the good'. Nevertheless, the company announced shortly after that it was going to halt the development of Instagram Kids, for users under thirteen years old, for the time being.

I have to admit that I am usually rather sceptical about the actions of Facebook and statements made by Mark Zuckerberg. But it is important to weigh the set-up and context of the research in one's judgement. The Facebook research is based mainly on self-reporting, which means that the teenagers filled in the questionnaires themselves, so it was they who indicate to what extent Instagram affects their self-image and mental health. Needless to say, these opinions are hardly objective. Teenagers have been hearing for years from their parents and teachers that social media are bad for their psychological well-being. Similar research does show that, if you ask teenagers whether they are addicted to their phone and get depressed through the use of social media, the vast majority indicate that that is the case. But when you compare these insights to objective measures, there is hardly any connection.[69] As in the case of video games, various studies show that there is little evidence that access to and the use of digital technologies has a negative effect on teenagers' well-being. The Facebook survey is not representative and the percentages are based on very small

numbers. The question whether Instagram has a negative effect on self-image was only asked if the participants had previously indicated that they have problems with their self-image. These were a mere 150 participants out of a few thousand Instagram users being surveyed, so anything but a random sample. It's the same as when you ask obese teens who occasionally eat a Big Mac whether McDonald's is to blame for them being obese. A majority of these teenagers will indicate that the fast food chain is to blame for their obesity. But of course we all know that it is not just because of McDonald's. It involves their entire lifestyle, where they often eat unhealthy food at home and at school and do not exercise enough. In Senate hearings, Facebook is often compared to the tobacco industry. Although this appeals enormously to the imagination, this comparison does not quite hold in my opinion. Unless, in addition to negative effects, cigarettes also have demonstrable benefits. Using a representative sample and a recognised scale to measure depression, researchers found that 43 percent of American adolescents typically feel better after using social media when they are depressed, stressed or anxious.[70] For 40 percent of adolescents, it has no demonstrable effect on their mental state. Only 17 indicates that the use of social media makes them feel worse. Of course, we should not and cannot ignore that percentage, but rather than just focusing on the negative consequences, we had better think about the solutions. Companies like Facebook can use their resources to examine how they can design positive interventions. Digital technologies will continue to play an important role in the lives of young people in the future. After all, they also see the benefits. In addition to staying in touch with friends and relatives, young people indicate that social media give them access to information, contribute to their self-expression and make them feel they are supported by others.



Source: Common Sense & Hopelab (2021).

The law of transience

We must not forget that the existence of Facebook (and even of the internet as we know it) in the future is not a given. Most futures scenarios assume that Facebook will maintain its dominant position, but there is no law of nature that says that Facebook will continue to grow bigger. For years, Facebook's users have been getting older. Teenagers are abandoning the platform in large numbers.[71] TikTok is now on the rise. A survey shows that TikTok was the most downloaded social media application worldwide in 2020.[72] The reason is simple: Facebook is overrun by their parents and teachers, making it boring, pointless and a bit embarrassing to have a Facebook profile. If there is a 'law' regarding digital platforms, it is the law of transience. It is a cyclical process: while the current generation of youngsters has embraced Snapchat and TikTok to get away from their parents, their children will in turn embrace new technologies to do the same thing. Social media platforms age in dog years. What is hip and happening today, can be obsolete tomorrow. With two billion registered users, Facebook will not yet

be overly worried, they also have Instagram and WhatsApp, but the tide can turn quickly. We once thought that MySpace was forever. For five years, MySpace was the most widely used social platform in the world.[73] Until it was knocked off its throne in 2009 by Facebook, after which it went rapidly downhill. Platforms come and go. Or they evolve. MySpace didn't disappear completely. It no longer operates as a social media platform, but as a music and entertainment website with neatly curated content.

The question is to what extent young people themselves still need the social platforms as we know them. Research indicates that young people under 30 are more and more turning against mass networks.[74] No fewer than 43 percent of youngsters say that 'there are too many people' on existing social media platforms. More than half of them indicate that it used to be important to them to be seen and have many friends, but that they are less concerned about that now. That is why they are looking for more close-knit micro-communities where they can share their interests and experiences with likeminded people. That explains, among other things, the success of platforms like Twitch, where the gaming community can get together in a secure and meaningful way. Platforms like Facebook are still used in the margins, but only as a messenger service. Young people also no longer come to Facebook to share interests or find inspiration, making them largely impervious to advertising. It is expected that young people in the years to come will increasingly move to smaller, tailor-made platforms, where they will be able to make richer connections with people who share their passion. That does not mean they will be stuck in a bubble. They will join different communities for different interests.

However, the question remains to what extent young people will be able to escape the influence of Facebook. By now, Facebook has so many financial resources that they can easily buy any emerging platform, like they did with Instagram and WhatsApp. In addition, the platform is even now working on the 'sequel' to the internet, the metaverse, a network of interconnected 3D environments where users can interact with each other and with the environment through their 'digital clones'. It means a shift from the 'flat' two-dimensional internet towards a spatially three-dimensional form. Think, for example, of the virtual worlds of Minecraft or Fortnite, but then interconnected, creating an almost endless parallel digital world in which games, social media, entertainment and web shops, among other things, come together. An example is the concert by rapper Travis Scott in Fortnite that was 'attended' by 12 million gamers. Instead of information, the focus is on experiences. For now, it is still just a vision. The term 'metaverse' comes from a science fiction novel by Neal Stephenson from 1992, *Snow Crash*, in which characters are able to enter a virtual computer world using a virtual reality suit. But with the resources Facebook has at its disposal, a virtual universe is certainly not unthinkable. In October 2021, Mark Zuckerberg announced that mother organisation Facebook will continue under the name Meta.[75] Although the new name may have been inspired by all the bad publicity the company has been getting, the name change and the focus on a three-dimensional world do not come out of the blue. In 2014, Facebook bought virtual reality company Oculus VR for 2 billion dollar, and in 2021, it started a test with digital wallet Novi, as part of the plan to issue a global digital currency. This allows Facebook to increasingly create its own world, where people hardly have to leave.

Time will tell, of course, if the internet will move in that direction. And whether young people are even interested in that kind of parallel universe. While Zuckerberg is above all looking for mass, young people prefer smaller, shielded communities. In addition to connection, the digital space offers young people a place to express themselves. A place where they are heard. Social media are increasingly used to speak up about social issues and take part in protests, with communities finding each other and utilising their joint strength. Online, democracy is much more lively than we often think. In parts four and five, we will discover how we can put the lessons we learned into practice, because there are opportu-

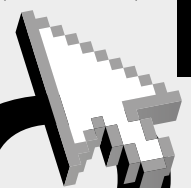
nities for a digital democracy, where people have more influence and a democratic internet does not work against us, but for us. A place where democratic values like freedom of speech and the right to privacy are guaranteed.

Young people are fitter to invent than to judge; fitter for execution than for counsel; and more fit for new projects than for settled business.

Francis Bacon (1562 - 1626)

EDUCATION LIKE DEMOCRACY, IS ALWAYS IN THE MAKING, FOREVER INCOMPLETE, FOUNDED IN POSSIBILITIES.

Maxine Greene (1917 - 2014)



4

Part 4

Are there opportunities for a digital democracy?

The relationship between technology and democracy is one with paradoxical qualities. An example is the 'Arab Spring' that was unleashed in 2010 with a series of mass protests against authoritarian regimes in countries like Tunisia and Egypt. On the one hand, social media platforms served as a huge catalyst for mobilising people and sharing events with the outside world (there was even talk of a 'Twitter revolution'). On the other hand, social media were used a means of control by the regime and platforms like Facebook and Twitter were blocked.[1] This severely limited the freedom of speech. The internet giveth and the internet taketh away, meaning that the internet can be used to secure freedoms, but also to take them away, and the democratising effect of the internet can be accompanied by the erosion of democratic principles. Experts disagree about whether digital technologies are a blessing or a curse for the future of democracy.

Technology and democracy

It turns out that the verdict of the experts very much depends on the question. In the summer of 2019, Pew Research Center asked

almost a thousand technology experts about the future of the internet. From developers and researchers to managers and activists. One of the questions they were asked was the following:

> *'In what way will the use of technology by citizens, social organisations and governments affect the core aspects of democracy and democratic representation between now and 2030?'*[2]

As we saw in part two, about half of the experts predict that the use of technology will weaken democracy in the next ten years. The main arguments given for this are the speed and scale of the distortion of reality, the deterioration of journalism and the impact of surveillance capitalism. Only a third of the experts expects that the use of technology will strengthen democracy, because digital literacy in society will continue to increase and reformers will find ways to fight back against, for instance, disinformation and the chaos that has been created. The remaining 18 percent of the experts expects no significant change in the coming decade. What is striking is that the experts involved look in particular at aspects like disinformation and privacy when it comes to the influence of technology on democracy. And that they are mostly pessimistic. When the question is formulated in a more positive way, the experts give a different verdict.

> *'Will the use of technology by people lead to significant social and societal innovation between now and 2030?'*[3]

More than two-thirds of the experts expect that the use of digital technology will indeed contribute to necessary social and societal innovations in the next ten years. They expect that democratic institutions will be more open to citizen involvement and that public activism will increase. Technological innovations can connect people and bring them together for a common goal. Political decision-making will become more transparent through the use of technology and voters can use online tools to express their concerns more directly. As a result, policy changes will increasingly be driven by digital citizen involvement. From this perspective, experts predict an increase in digital innovation aimed at solving problems in democratic institutions and representation. If we can counter threats to democracy, like the spread of disinformation (and with it the mobilisation of people wanting to undermine democracy) in the right way, the experts believe that digital technologies offer plenty of opportunities to reinforce democracy. Especially by facilitating digital citizen involvement.

Digital democracy

The use of digital technology to support democratic decision-making processes is also known as 'digital democracy'. Examples include online petition platforms, internet consultations and participatory budget tools. This primarily concerns the participation of citizens in policy proposals and to a lesser extent elections. Although these forms of political participation by citizens are to be applauded, we need to be careful about their implementation. As we saw in chapter two, politically active citizens in many cases are not a reflection of society, creating the participation paradox we discussed earlier: the higher the number of channels for citizens to participate, the greater the chance that there is no equal participation. This also applies to online participation opportunities. Furthermore, participation tools are often not employed until the end of the decision-making process, giving citizens a say only in the margins.

For example government budgets, where citizens can have a say in the way public funds are allocated on a local level. In addition to commenting on the proposals by the government, citizens can also submit proposals of their own, followed by a vote. Porto Alegre, a city in the south of Brazil, has known a so-called 'participatory budget' since 1989.[4] Citizens can determine how part of the public funds are spent. With success: by now, more people have access to clean drinking water and there have been

considerable investments in schools. Increasingly, part of the process takes place online. For instance in Paris. In 2016, Parisians could have a digital say about no less than 100 million euros.[5] That sounds fantastic, of course (and in a way, it is), but that amount does have to be put in the right context. Although 100 million is an enormous amount, it represents less than 45 euros per citizen, and covers a mere 5 percent of the annual government budget of Paris. Citizens can submit ideas via a special website, but those ideas first have to pass a feasibility study of the city council before being eligible for a vote.[6] In 2016, almost 100,000 Parisians voted on the ideas, which is a little more than 4 percent of the city's total population. No matter how sympathetic the programme may be, it still represents a relatively small amount, with a relatively small number of citizens taking part. In addition, the ideas hardly affect fundamental problems. Most projects that have been realised involve cycle paths, urban gardens or neighbourhood landscaping.

Conditions

This participation in the margins is a far cry from the protest mentality described earlier, whereby digital technologies are used to draw attention to social issues and to organise protests. This mentality is certainly not restricted to young people. We increasingly see forms of digital activism, whereby digital tools are used to influence fundamental societal problems, like climate change and institutional racism. If we take digital democracy seriously, we need to examine how we can integrate this protest mentality into existing political institutions. But before we can design that integration, we need to zoom in on the opportunities and challenges of digital activism. It is important to assess the value of this form of social activism and see it as a form of political participation.

For a meaningful digital democracy, we not only need a different perspective on political participation, but we also need a different internet. A democratic internet, where not only the voice of the strongest is heard, but minorities are also heard. A place where our data isn't up for grabs, but where we control who has access to our information and what they can do with it. Where big tech companies don't have the power to circumvent governments and governments don't have the power to circumvent citizens. To stimulate active citizenship in the digital domain, freedoms and rights need to be protected. That requires digital literacy. Citizens have to know what their rights are and how they can deploy them. The need to learn to be critical about information technologies. But we cannot put the responsibility on citizens alone. We also need digitally literate politicians. They need to be able to withstand mighty tech companies and guarantee a safe internet. They have to understand what the implications are of data-driven applications in society and both shield users from the dangers and let them reap the benefits.

After we have mapped these conditions, we can imagine the future of digital democracy in part five and start building it. Because a hopeful future for digital democracy is within reach.

Democracy is not a spectator sport, it's a participatory event. If we don't participate, it ceases to be a democracy.

Michael Moore (documentary maker)

10

Chapter 10

We can give people much more influence

Even though many people aren't crazy about traditional participation

In the development of digital participation tools, the traditional interpretation of political participation is often translated into an online environment. People need to actively take part in thinking and talking about policy proposals and, in an online environment, that is a lot more accessible (and measurable). Citizens no longer need to come to city hall for a consultation meeting; city hall is brought to them. Although that idea is understandable, it reaches the same participation elite as the existing participation options. Although the average age in the case of online participation may be somewhat lower, in most cases, there is no insight into diversity in education and background.[7] Despite the fact that citizens can often also submit proposals themselves, the concept remains fairly top-down. The government determines where, when and how participation can take place. And it is especially civil servants who determine the frameworks, budgets and timelines. Citizens can offer their interpretation at the end of the cycle and in the margins. Digital technologies are used here above all to facilitate participation, and hardly take into account the changing mentality that digital technologies have brought about in society. More and more

citizens use digital technologies to voice their opinions about social issues and take part in protests, like the climate marches and Black Lives Matter movement discussed earlier. As we saw in chapter five, more and more people lose trust in democratic institutions and try to apply pressure using other channels. Everyone needs to be able to participate about these fundamental themes, including people who are less literate or digitally able. Without inclusion, no empowerment. However, we need to make sure that the people with the loudest voices don't by definition have the most influence.

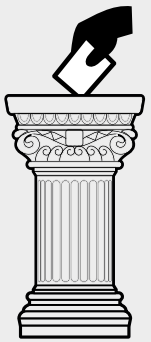
I. The story of the polis

One of the most praised digital participation tools of the moment is *Pol.is*, an open-source platform for collecting and analysing the opinions of large groups of people.[8] Unlike many other participation platforms, *Pol.is* focuses on consensus. The platform uses algorithms to show the opinions on which most people agree. Participants can submit opinions and comments that are presented (semi-randomly) to other participants. Using voting buttons, participants can then indicate whether they agree or disagree, or whether they want to be presented with another opinion. Users can determine themselves how many opinions they want to evaluate or whether they want to apply nuances. On the basis of the votes, the algorithm divides the participants into opinion groups, recording the different opinions on which people disagree or have a consensus. Opinions that gain support from different groups emerge, while opinions that create division sink to the bottom. This way, thousands of participants can evaluate hundreds of opinions at the same time, without people drowning each other out. It is still possible, of course, that no consensus emerges and opinions are divided evenly between the supporters and opponents, but in practice, that hardly happens. At the moment this digital participation tool is used all over the world. From the United States to Taiwan.

It is easy to understand the appeal of this tool, because it is reminiscent of elements from the classical direct democracy of the Greeks. As we know, in the early democracies, citizens had much more direct influence on the decision-making processes. In modern representative democracies, institutionalised citizen participation is largely limited to the voting booths. It seems unthinkable to come together with millions of people on a hill and discuss social issues, but thanks to digital technologies, principles from the early democracies can again be integrated into modern democracy, because the internet makes it possible to facilitate the participation of large groups of people, without requiring them to come together physically. The set-up of *Pol.is* is not only very much reminiscent of the classical Greek democracy, the platform even derives its name from its predecessor. Time to take a closer look at the story of the original polis.

The Athenian polis

Circa 500 BCE, Greece was divided into hundreds of small units known as *poleis*. Each *polis* had its own government and could decide independently about a large number of political issues. The average polis consisted of about 3,500 inhabitants, divided over the city centre and the surrounding countryside. The largest polis was Athens, which included the entire region of Attica. This polis consisted of no fewer than 250,000 to 300,000 people, most of whom, incidentally, lived in the area surrounding Athens, which had about 50,000 inhabitants (nowadays, it has about 750,000). It is said that ancient Athens was the only Greek polis where ordinary citizens had the power in a direct democracy.[9] In other poleis, the wealthy aristocrats and monarchs were still very much in control. The population of the polis roughly consisted of two groups: citizens and non-citizens. Citizens were adult, free men: the *politai*. They possessed civil rights and were allowed to take part in politics, or the *politeia*. Unlike the non-citizens: slaves, women, migrants and young men under twenty who did not have those rights and were not a part of the 'community of citizens', or the *demos*. This community contained less than 20 percent of the total population of Athens, while no less than 30 percent of the population consisted of slaves.



The central organ of the Athenian polis was the popular assembly, in which 'all' citizens were allowed to take part. However, in practice, many citizens didn't show up. On average, the assemblies were attended by about 5,000 men. The rest served in the army or worked to support their families.[10] The location where the assemblies took place only had room for 6,000 people anyway, so it was just as well in that regard. Over time, the number of meetings increased to about thirty or forty per year. From about 400 BCE, the attendees were given an attendance fee, so that more people were able to take the time to take part in governing the polis. The popular assembly made decisions on matters concerning war and peace and about alliances with other poleis and potentates, among other things. It also passed laws. Citizens could vote by raising their hands. The meetings of the popular assemblies were prepared by the Council of Five Hundred (the *Boulè*), who set the agenda and also had a number of executive authorities. The members of the council were selected by drawing lots: fifty men from each of the districts of Attica. These districts consisted of an even division of people from the city, the interior and the coast. That was done deliberately to undermine the traditional social bonds of the aristocratic elite. To be allowed to join the council, one had to be at least thirty years old and have full civil rights. Each citizen could be selected twice in his lifetime, each time for a period of one year and never in consecutive years. The council met daily and the meetings were public. For local matters, there was also the *deme*. Each deme had its own popular assembly of citizens. The demes not only had a local function, they also played a role in carrying out tasks that had been decided on a higher level.

Athenian democracy had no clear separation of powers. The judicial power was carried out by jury trial. In all, there were 6,000 jurors, who were selected by drawing lots for a period of one year. Again, the minimum age was thirty years and only men with full civil rights were eligible to apply. The jurors did not gather in plenary, but in smaller groups (depending on the case). The initiative for a case did not come from a government body, but from the citizens themselves. Decisions made by the popular assembly could also be contested via the jury. Apart from the civic jury, there were no separate judges.

To facilitate the functioning of these institutions, about 700 civil servants were appointed. Different positions were filled by drawing lots among those submitting their candidacy for a certain position. But many positions were not decided by drawing lots; for positions that required special skills, elections took place in the popular assembly.

Although the political structure of the Athenian polis certainly contained interesting elements, this direct democracy was anything but inclusive. The tragedy is that *Pol.is* was named after a 'city state' where less than 20 percent of the population had a say and 30 percent of the population consisted of slaves. The equality principles applied only to a privileged group of men. To play an important role in the popular assembly of the Council of Five Hundred, citizens had to invest a lot of time and many of them could not afford that. In addition, by no means all citizens were able to address the assembly publicly. As a result, politics in practice re-

mained the domain of the wealthy. Unfortunately, the same applies to *Pol.is*. To use the tool, you have to be pretty literate, because everything revolves around the formulation, interpretation and prioritising of texts, which largely excludes less literate people. Even in a rich country like The Netherlands, low literacy levels are a problem, with 2.5 million people of sixteen years and older having trouble with reading, writing and arithmetic.[11] No less than 18 percent of the population. These people often also have limited digital skills and find it difficult to interpret information in digital environments.

Obviously, these problems don't apply to *Pol.is* alone. Many online participation tools in essence revolve around language processing and comprehension, for instance in the case of internet consultations for new legislations and regulations. The draft regulations and explanations are often so extensive and complex that the average citizen can't make heads or tails of them. So it's not that strange that above all the participation elite is involved; as discussed earlier, theoretically educated people have a far more optimistic view of their political skills. Many young people, citizens with a migration background and politically cynical citizens are not interested in opportunities for political participation, which means their voices aren't heard. Research indicates that, in addition, most digital participation initiatives aren't formally embedded in political decision-making.[12] As a result, many participation initiatives have no follow-up, leaving people disappointed.

II. Digital activism is flourishing

In chapter two, we concluded that, in today's democracy, participation is still too much of a luxury. Unfortunately, we have to conclude that that also goes for digital participation. Traditional forms of participation are often translated rather literally into a digital version, which means that it is the same people who are participating. 'Thinking along' merely shifts from physical meetings to online panels. In the case of 'co-deciding', the budgeting process is digitised. And citizens who want to 'take part' find each other in WhatsApp groups for neighbourhood prevention. Make no mistake, these initiatives are valuable and we need to continue developing them. But often they are unable to stimulate diversity or involve less politically active citizens. In 2015, researcher at the Rathenau Instituut collected a large number of international examples of digital citizen involvement.[13] Their analyses indeed show that representativity is limited in most initiatives. Theoretically trained people are in most cases highly overrepresented.

The development of participation tools is largely determined by the perception and the definitions and opinions of participation being used. What we mean by participation has hardly changed with the arrival of digital technologies. And wrongly so. According to internet pioneer Marleen Stikker, for too long we have seen participation as involving citizens in the decision-making process of the government.[14] In her view, this rarely leads to a good dialogue or serious involvement. According to Stikker, the question is how we can make sure that the government participates adequately in the initiative of society.

There is enough initiative. And I am not talking about community gardens, but about the use of digital technologies to draw attention to social issues and organise protests. Not only participation in the margins, but also influence on fundamental social issues. So not only have a say in, for instance, a new roundabout in the neighbourhood, but also creating a movement to deal with climate change. As we saw in chapter seven, young people are at the vanguard in this respect. Instead of using traditional institutions, like elections, more and more young people try to create pressure from the outside. With their actions they want to make it clear that governments and businesses need to do more to help realise their vision of a better future. And they inspire adults to take part. We have not lost hope yet. Research shows that people all over the world believe that ordinary citizens are able to influence the government.[15] Increasingly, less traditional forms of political participation are being used, like signing online petitions and posting political comments online (with the aim of encouraging others to engage in politics). In the United States, more people indicate that they have been politi-

cally active online, than have attended a campaign event or political speech. More and more citizens exert their democratic rights by taking part in social movements that emerge ad hoc and are coordinated online. So it's not that there is less political involvement, but there are changing patterns of participation.

In the current discourse about digital democracy, societal involvement and political participation are separated when they shouldn't be. Before the digital age, that may have been justifiable. If you were discussing social issues with your friends in your living room, that hardly affected the political debate. But thanks to the connectivity and speed of the internet, signs of dissatisfaction can grow into global protest movements online. For instance the global #MeToo movement against sexual harassment. It is time, therefore, to redefine digital democracy. After all, Taylor Fang taught us that 'reimagining' is the first step. Digital democracy is more than a government using digital participation tools to let citizens help create support for new policy proposals. Digital democracy is also the attempt by citizens to use digital resources to put issues on the political agenda and activate governments. Instead of trying to close the gap between increasing societal involvement and the traditional institutions by developing even more traditional participation tools, we need to ask ourselves:

> *How can we give the flourishing activism a place in the political system?*

To do so, we need to start by opening the discussion about the added value of digital activism. According to some experts, supporting a political goal via social media or online petitions is not a form of activism.[16] Those actions cost almost no effort and many people primarily take part to raise their own status. 'Look at me doing good'. But then, there is no follow-up. This is also known as 'slacktivism' or 'activism for lazy people'. In addition to posting political content and signing internet petitions, this also includes sharing certain hashtags or changing a profile picture to show solidarity. Even

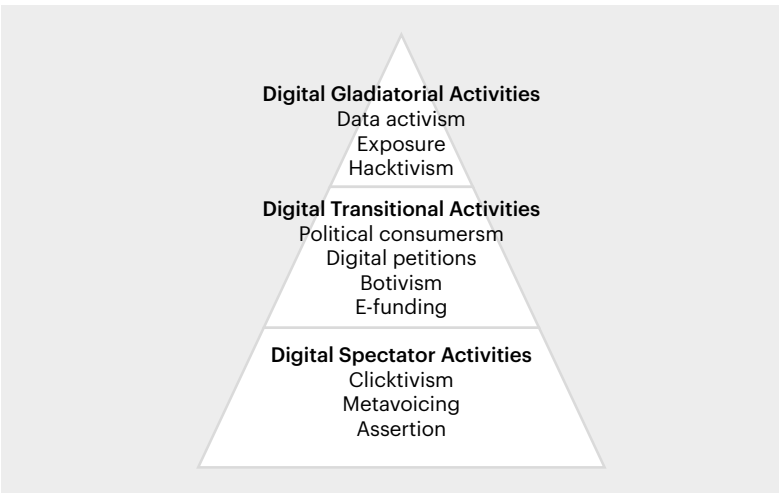
Barack Obama took part in the discussion. According to the former president, activism on social media is not a replacement for protests in the physical world.[17] People think they can create change on social media by judging other people and expose their unintentional mistakes. He refers to the *woke* culture, where people are hyper alert for signs of racial or social discrimination and injustice. According to Obama, things are often taken out of context to forcibly make a point. People then lean back and are proud that they challenged someone. This kind of activism is also regarded with some suspicion within activist communities. Some activists think that sharing a black square on social media to express sympathy for the Black Lives Matter movement is 'too easy'. They wonder what other things people have done, besides sharing the message.

The question is if that criticism is entirely justified. Research shows that 'clicktivism' (a somewhat more friendly name for the phenomenon) can be very effective in the spread of political opinions and fanning social movements.[18] Although one tweet or post will not change the world, thousands of them can. Occupy Wallstreet, Black Lives Matter and MeToo were all propelled by online support. And even if it's just a like or retweet, that is still part of a larger whole and as such of immense value. From collective action to connective action. Many of these incidental supporters would not have done anything at all otherwise. It opens new avenues for a broader form of political participation. Many critics criticise the individual activity, but fail to see what connectivity can bring about. Behind many movements, there are well-organised online networks. This connectivity is not just used to create awareness about social issues, but also to put pressure on organisations to get them to adjust their behaviour or policies. This approach is anything but new. Think, for instance, of the Have a Break commercial by Greenpeace in 2010. Online communities picked up on this alternative KitKat commercial, forcing manufacturer Nestlé to switch palm oil suppliers. Of course, it didn't solve the problem of deforestation, but it was a first step. Transitions take time, after all. They require change on multiple levels, initiated both offline

and online. As such, it is a mistake to think that online activism is in any way a substitute for offline activism. It serves above all as a catalyst. Research shows that people who are highly engaged in politics online, are more likely to become active offline as well. It appears that sharing and tweeting political content on social media is connected to attending political meetings, donating to campaigns and other forms of citizen involvement, and many young people who are involved in digital participation politics are more likely to engage in institutional politics, like voting in elections.[19]

A new hierarchy

Clicktivism is 'just' one level of digital activism, like a political bumper sticker in the traditional political participation hierarchy. Political participation is not just one act, it is a process. A continuum along which different levels of participation are connected and together can create change.[20] To be able to look at political participation with different eyes, we need a different framework. Researchers from Baylor University translated the three levels of the traditional political participation hierarchy into a new hierarchy for digital activism.[21]



Source: Geroge & Leidner (2019): Hierarchy of digital activism.

At the bottom layer of the pyramid, we find the 'digital spectator activities', which include clicktivism. Like wearing a badge or starting a political discussion in the traditional hierarchy, these are the activities with the lowest thresholds. This is the level at which most people are active. Two-thirds of social media users have at one time or another been politically active. In addition to liking and following activist messages and communities, that also includes retweeting and responding to messages (metavoicing) and creating social media content (assertion). Creating content can involve activist blogs, images and videos. As discussed earlier, internet memes often represent deeply rooted political opinions.

One level up, we find the 'digital transition activities', which require a little more involvement and commitment. In addition to signing online petitions and buying (or boycotting) products and services for political considerations, these activities also include using technology to generate funding for a social or political goal (e-funding) and using bots to realise political objectives (botivism). A good example of e-funding is the crowdfunding platform Kickstarter, where people can raise money for projects and innovations without the involvement and funding of, for instance, banks. People who support the ideas can easily make a contribution or invest. According to the platform, it has already raised over 6 billion dollars from more than 20 million users for more than 200,000 projects. In recent years, these platforms have increasingly become politically charged. From art projects that draw attention to human rights to board games that teach people how to start their own political movement.[22] In the case of botivism, things become a little more technical. A bot is a computer programme that can autonomously carry out tasks on the internet. Google uses bots, for instance, for their search engines to analyse and index webpages. In 2021, artists have used similar bots to increase the online visibility of climate change.[23] It requires some knowledge of programming languages, but the structure is relatively simple: various bots scan the internet for news about climate change. An army of 100 bots then visits the articles and clicks on each ad, giving the article

more value and improving its position in Google's search results. The bots visited more than 2 million articles and clicked on over 6 million ads.

At the top level of digital activism, we find the so-called 'digital gladiatorial activities', which involve direct action and influencing. Where the traditional gladiators primarily focus on a political party or candidate, the digital version does not target parties. It is based more on broad social change. Self-formed networks that take action and support political themes that they consider important. Gladiatorial activities can be divided into data-activism, exposure and hacktivism. Data-activism is about using data to do good, for instance by 'donating' data and knowledge to NGOs, enabling them to make a positive contribution to society, like in the fight against climate change and inequality. Attempts to make government data available also fall under data-activism. In the case of exposure, activists take things a step further. It involves the deliberate leaking of sensitive information to expose the shady practices of organisations and governments. Examples are *WikiLeaks* or the leaking of classified information about the American intelligence community by Edward Snowden discussed earlier. The most radical form of digital activism, and with it also the most controversial, is what is known as hacktivism, where the websites or computer systems of organisations and governments are hacked to realise political objectives, for example Anonymous, an international hacker collective that has carried out a number of cyber-attacks on the websites and systems of politically sensitive organisations and activities. Their first large-scale operation was disabling the website of the Swedish Public Prosecution in 2010, in retaliation for the arrest of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. Later, websites of paedophile associations and extreme right-wing organisations were disabled. After the Paris attacks in 2015, the collective declared war on Islamic State (IS).[24] For instance, by exposing the social media profiles of jihadists and replacing an IS propaganda website that was used to recruit new supporters with a web shop for antidepressants. Although the hacker collective can count on a lot of sympathy, there are also critics, who emphasise that the way the hacker collective takes action does not belong in a democratic state where the rule of law applies. Also, their activities are said to hinder investigations by the intelligence services. And sometimes, things go wrong. At one point, the collective shared a list with personal information of extremists, but it turned out that the list also contained the data of innocent people.

Digital activists not only push the boundaries of the democratic rule of law; they also explore uncharted waters. In recent years, law enforcement agencies have used facial recognition technologies to identify criminals, using photographs from government databases or via companies that scrape the photos off the internet, like in the Clearview AI case discussed earlier. Such technologies are now used increasingly to identify protesters. But now, activists reverse that process and develop tools to expose law enforcement officers who misbehave, for instance by using excessive force against protesters. This is called inverse surveillance and helps make surveillance more democratic.[25] New legislation regarding facial recognition software does not apply to individuals, however, which begs the question whether and how such initiatives must be regulated. Instead of fighting digital activism, it is also possible to work together and use the force of innovation to create an ethical framework together. In recent years, for instance, we see an increase in the number of ethnical hackers, who look for vulnerabilities in websites and computer systems, to give businesses and governments a chance to get their affairs in order. It is important not to dismiss these new forms of political activism as meaningless or disturbing, but to embrace them. That can be done by giving the different levels of digital activism a place in the existing political system. Without taking over control or meddling. People who use social media to draw attention to climate change are as much politically active as those who attend participation meetings. Political participation should not just be about making decisions, but also about putting things on the political agenda. Expressions of dissatisfaction are a sign of involvement.

III. The flip side of influence

It is important to realise that the enormous reach that we have online is a form of power. What we share online can have major consequences. Both intended and unintended and both positive and negative. Just like the wings of a butterfly in Brazil can create a tornado months later in Texas, according to the butterfly effect. Trump had a very good understanding of this effect. From a seemingly innocent quote ('stand back and stand by') to the violent storming of the Capitol. Some experts are afraid that the arrival of the internet will make the dreaded principle of mob rule a reality, which often works by intimidating legitimate authorities. Although, in the past, the 'mob' represented large groups, minorities can also use the internet to disrupt democracy, like it happened at the Capitol.[26] We must not forget that power brings with it responsibility. But because of the way we have developed digital technologies, we disconnected power and responsibility to a large extent, not only with regard to Big Tech (they can decide which content to remove and so far are not responsible for what their users post on their platforms), but the users as well. Influencers with millions of followers can say negative things about vaccines, for instance, without being responsible for the possible consequences. The policy used by governments, to give people who have been vaccinated certain 'privileges' is harshly criticised online, often by comparing it to the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War and Apartheid in South Africa. People invoke their freedom of speech, without realising that there are legal limits to that freedom. Publicly inciting hatred, violence or segregation is punishable by law, which includes posting that type of content in a Facebook group.

According to technology ethicist Tristan Harris (who made the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* among other things), we need to make a clear distinction between freedom of speech and the freedom to reach.[27] Although we do have the freedom to express ourselves, that does not mean that by definition we also have the freedom to share our opinions with millions of people without being responsible. According to Harris, we live in an age when a fifteen-year-old influencer can reach as many people as a large newspaper, without having the same responsibility as the editor of that newspaper. That is why, like in the case of freedom of speech, there have to be legal limits to freedom to reach.

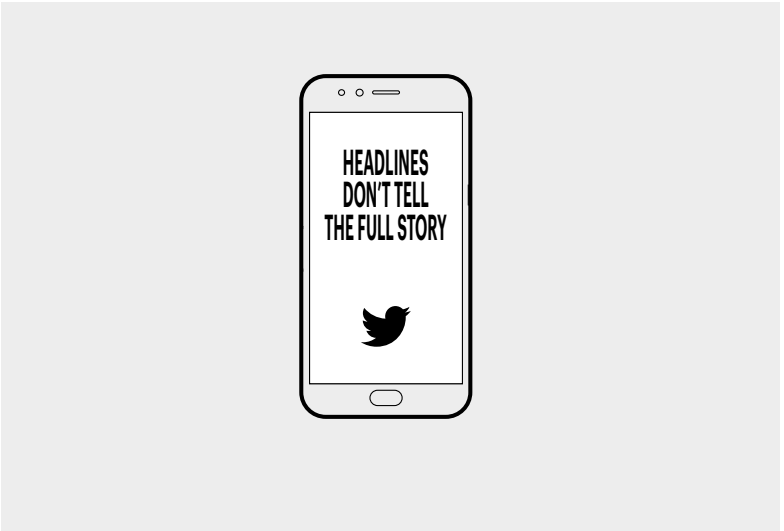
It turns out that information spreads online in a way similar to that of an infectious disease. That comparison not only is valid as a metaphor ('the message goes viral'), but in mathematical terms, the parallels are also enormous. The British epidemiologist Adam Kucharski looks for patterns that can predict the spread of a virus. He made an existing formula with which the spread of a virus can be mapped accessible to a wide audience by writing it down in a way that is easier for people to understand and remember: the DOTS formula.[28] The aim is to learn how to contain the spread of a virus. According to Kucharski, the formula can also be applied to the online distribution of conspiracy theories and fake news: R = D x O x T x S, where R represents the reproduction rate, how many people are infected by one contaminated person. In other words, how many other people a person manages to persuade to share a message. The reproduction rate is determined by four factors, namely 'duration', 'opportunity', 'transmission' and 'susceptibility'. The duration of the contagious period is the time frame within which the message is shared. The opportunity for the virus particle to be transmitted refers to the availability of the network structure that makes it possible to reach large groups of people. The actual transmission that takes place reflects the likelihood that an interaction will actually lead to the propagation of the message. And finally, the susceptibility of the recipient involves the willingness on the part of others to share a message.

In 2014, Facebook examined the viral activity on the platform surrounding the popular Ice Bucket Challenge, which involved people emptying a bucket with ice water on themselves to collect money for the disease ALS.[29] Because celebrities like Cristiano Ronaldo, Oprah Winfrey and Justin Bieber took part, the

clips were watched a whopping 10 billion times. This led to 28 million interactions. The available figures show that the average reproduction rate was 2, comparable to that of COVID-19. Despite the extremely fast spread (which is much higher for online messages than it is for biological infectious diseases), people didn't turn out to be extremely willing to forward the messages, probably because that meant they ran the risk of having to douse themselves in ice as well. Unfortunately, the internet is not used to collect money for good causes alone. We know by now that disinformation campaigns are used to pit people against each other for political gain. For many people, disinformation and conspiracy theories are a welcome confirmation of the distrust they have been experiencing for much longer. To counter the spread of misleading messages, it is important to reduce multiple elements of the DOTS. For now, the control is above all in the hands of the platform companies.

Just like infected people can be quarantined in the case of a virus, platform companies can also 'quarantine' contagious accounts, or even remove them completely, like Twitter did in 2021 with the account of super-spreader Donald Trump (with 88 million followers), after a temporary suspension. The reason was the storming of the Capitol, after Trump posted a video during the riots indicating that he loved the protesters and that he was the real winner of the presidential elections. It was only later that he encouraged the protesters to go home. According to Twitter, there was a continuous risk of incitement to violence and the platform therefore decided to remove Trump's account indefinitely.[30] To reduce the likelihood of a viral particle being transmitted, people are warned to have as little contact with others as possible. I wrote most of this book in the winter lockdown of 2021. During the Christmas holidays, Dutch people were only allowed to invite four people into their homes. In a similar way, platform companies can adjust their network structure, so that messages can be forwarded to fewer people. For instance, since 2019, WhatsApp messages can only be forwarded to five groups, instead of twenty,[31] in an attempt to slow down the spread of misleading information. Often, it is Facebook and Twitter that are the focus of attention, but during the 2018 election in Brazil, it was WhatsApp that was used on a massive scale to send people political disinformation.[32]

And if there is contact, there are ways to reduce the likelihood of infection, for instance by wearing face masks. Although experts don't fully agree on how effective they are, facemasks also have an indirect effect. They help remind people to keep their distance. Although this analogy does not apply entirely to disinformation, there are ways to warn people of 'contagious information'. In the run-up to the 2020 election, for instance, Facebook labelled no fewer than 180 million messages as 'incorrect' or 'partially incorrect', with the help of an external fact checker. Facebook argues that this should help people decide for themselves what they want to read, trust and share with other people.[33] In the case of viruses, it is also possible to vaccinate people, making them less susceptible to the virus. Although people will never be completely immune to disinformation, we can reduce their susceptibility by increasing their knowledge. If people have a better understanding of the way they are being misled online, they will be better able to withstand the temptation. In 2020, for instance, Twitter rolled out an experiment whereby users were being notified when they were about to retweet an article, without actually having clicked on the link.[34] According to Twitter, headlines often don't tell the full story and they can even be deliberately misleading. The platform company wants to encourage people to at least read an article before sharing it, in an attempt to make its users more media-savvy and contribute to informed discussions.



Effectiveness

The question now is how effective these attempts by platform companies really are. Internal data from Facebook shows that labelling information as 'incorrect' or 'partially incorrect' has little effect. The messages posted by former president Trump were only shared 8 percent less often after having been labelled.[35] We saw earlier that, in the case of disinformation, it is not so much about whether people actually believe the information, but whether it suits them to share the information. For instance to discredit their political opponents or have an excuse to rise up. Removing accounts or groups also turns out not to be very effective. In 2020, Facebook announced that it would remove all pages, groups and accounts that represent the conspiracy theories of QAnon, even if they didn't contain any violent content.[36] But QAnon supporters had already anticipated that move by Facebook; there had been rumours for some time, so they quietly moved to other platforms, like Telegram. Next, followers were told by 'Q Headquarters' to 'camouflage' themselves online and remove all references to Q or QAnon, to prevent those keywords from being found. In addition, there are all kinds of blind spots in the moderation of online content. For instance, during the 2020 American presidential elections, attempts to counter misleading information focuses especially on messages in English. But in the United States, there are a huge number of Spanish-speaking people and their posts hardly appeared on the radar. In addition, while scanning and analysing texts and images that have already been posted on the platform is to a certain extent doable (even though the moderation of many platforms turns out to be hugely inconsistent), what about livestreams, like live videos and podcasts? Social media platforms are being used increasingly as live broadcasting channels, and it turns out those are almost impossible to moderate. Furthermore, platform companies often have to rely on human moderators, because AI technologies are unable to factor in the context and nuance and make a lot of mistakes. This affects the scale on which messages can be analysed.

A more important question is perhaps how these companies decide what is and isn't permissible. And who exactly makes these choices. At the moment, commercial companies, primarily driven by advertising revenues, are the ones guarding our social values and watch in the shadows over our democratic principles like freedom of speech. As a result, they increasingly take on a public task, without bearing legal responsibility. According to the law, platform companies, like telecom providers, merely pass on information. The main law that protects the American platform companies (for the time being), is section 230 of the Communications Decency Act from 1996:

> *'No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider.'*[37]

Just like telecom providers cannot be prosecuted when a terrorist plans an attack over the phone, Facebook cannot be prosecuted

if the platform is being used to coordinate violent riots. But since platforms can moderate content and remove accounts as they see fit, it is hard to maintain that they are merely a conduit for information. And yet, experts disagree on whether or not section 230 needs to be modified. When legal protection is lifted, platform companies will censor more expressions than they should, strictly speaking, for fear of hefty fines. This puts freedom of speech in jeopardy. International reactions to Trump being blocked on Twitter were also mixed. There was jubilation, but also criticism. Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, stated that freedom of speech can only be limited by the legislator, not by a private company.[38]

If we really want to tackle the incendiary and radicalising effect of disinformation and conspiracy theories, it is important to no longer consider these expressions as separate disinformation incidents, but as thoughtful and coordinated conspiracy theories, with an increasingly comprehensive reach. QAnon, for example, is a broad movement from which all kinds of different interconnected ideas are being promoted. In these coordinated campaigns, different platforms play different roles. While platforms like Twitter are being used to spread ideas, messenger apps and groups are used to coordinate ideas. Such groups have clear hierarchies and deliberately apply information warfare tactics to realise their objectives.[39] And even if QAnon-related accounts and groups are removed, they have had at least three years to set up extensive networks. That is why we need to look again at the entire information ecosystem, which means that, in addition to regulation, we also need to look at the structure of the internet and the knowledge of its users.

The main problem of participatory democracy is not how to run it, but how to reach it.

C.B. Macpherson (1911 - 1987)

Chapter 11

A democratic internet is possible *Although there is a lot of work to be done*

11

If we want to use the empowerment and democratisation of the internet to the fullest, we need a more democratic internet. A place where people can have influence, without threatening their democratic rights and freedoms (or those of others), for instance the right to privacy and freedom of speech. If we want an inclusive digital democracy in the future, everyone needs to have the same opportunities and be able to participate. But it is not that simple to realise a democratic Iiternet, because the question is where we need to focus our attention. The enormous power of Big Tech and the limited competition? The data-robbing and polarising design of the platform as a result of the perverse revenue models? Or the limited knowledge and skills of users who allow themselves to be misled and tempted all too easily?

Increasingly, there are voices that state that we can fix the problems by regarding the internet as public space. Less market, more public funding and more ownership for users. But what does that look like exactly? Will the parent companies of Google (Alphabet) and Facebook (Meta) be nationalised? Will users be able to manage their own data? And is it possible to switch to a different social me-

dia platform without losing your contacts? It is not unthinkable. Look at the telecom sector. It doesn't matter which provider you have; we can all call each other without problems. A crucial difference is, of course, that telecom providers are in theory neutral. They do not influence the conversations we have with one another and do not have the information we exchange. It is not the advertisers who are their main customers, but the users. We have to make the correct comparison. When we talk about the future of 'the internet', in most cases we mean the future of the world wide web. The internet is a network of computer systems that we access using the web. The web is only one of the services that can be used via the internet. Other services include e-mail and IP telephone, like Skype. The question is, however, if we will still be using web browsers to go online in the future.

I. The internet in 2050

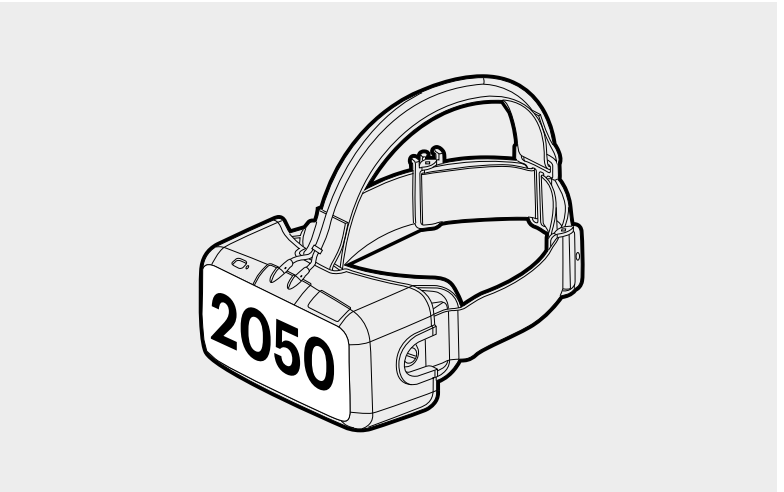
Imagine sitting in a public park with a number of friends, just chatting and enjoying the environment. In the distance, you hear the sound of an ice cream van. You fancy an ice cream and decide to treat yourself and your friends. There's plenty of choice. You make your choice and pay the ice cream man, who wishes you a pleasant day and you go back to your friends, who are eagerly awaiting you. During this transaction, the ice creams and the money are the only things that are exchanged between you and the ice cream man (barring some pleasantries). The ice cream man doesn't automatically know your name, whether or not you are from around there, who your friends are or what you will do after you leave the park. Obviously, the cookie in your ice cream doesn't contain a chip that would allow the ice cream man to track you and know what else you buy that day. That would be something.

And yet, that has become quite normal on the world wide web. The platforms we use watch our every move. With our permission. Even though we all know that the information will be sold to the highest bidder and used to profile us (with everything that that entails). We are not the customers of these platforms; we are the products that are being sold. At the moment, the internet is being dominated by a handful of giant tech companies. They are the gatekeepers that have turned the internet into a huge surveillance tool. Within this system, these companies each operate within their own walled gardens,[40] which most of the time do not work together. In fact, companies try to make their walls ever higher, so that competition becomes virtually impossible. In addition, these tech giants create their own ecosystems. Apple, for instance, controls the hardware (iPhone), the operating system (iOS) and the additional software people can install (AppStore). That way, Apple's competitors cannot set up an app store on the iPhone. As a result, governments are also dependent on these platforms. If they want to offer an app to make interaction with citizens easier, there are only two app stores they can use: Google Play and Apple App Store.

A large part of our community life now takes place in digital spaces that have a public feel, but aren't actually public. What we are missing is the public part where we can come together anonymously. Where we can choose whether or not to enter a commercial space. That does not mean that commercial companies should be banned from the internet. Just like a rich offline life existence requires cafes and bookstores, we need commercial companies in the digital space as well. But no society or community consists of private companies alone. In addition to book stores, we also need libraries. A bookstore can never serve the same community need as a library. Nor can we expect private companies to serve all our needs. We need is a digital public infrastructure, with public parks, squares and libraries. Imagine, the internet as a public space. Publicly funded, without perverse revenue models. A collective virtual shared space, that we maintain together. Governments, citizens, businesses, knowledge institutions and civil society (trade unions, associations, interest groups, etc.). No focus on growth, but on public values. Open and decentralised. Equal and inclusive. A space where we can stay anonymously and have the right not to be tracked. Where data

is anonymised and can only be used for our health and safety. We accept the digital world like the real world, so let's not accept things we would not allow in the physical world.

What if the park we just described were to be the blueprint for the organisation of the internet of the future? And what if the metaverse (or any imaginable version of it) can make that happen? From the 'flat' two-dimensional internet of information and profiles, to a spatial three-dimensional form of experience and expression. No personalised environment, but a space that we design together. We shouldn't leave the development of that space to companies like Meta. Facebook is welcome to set up its own 'store', but the entire ecosystem and infrastructure must remain decentralised and be free of gatekeepers. No walled gardens with their own rules and profiles, but a continuous digital universe in which everything works together. Where the shopping street does not belong to Google or Apple, but is an open street that has been organised on democratic principles. No enormous database, but a shared space where everyone has equal rights and opportunities. Where we can meet each other across geographical and cultural boundaries, can learn from each other and discover the future together. Were we can use immersive technologies to gain experiences and skills in our physical lives. Not a copy or replacement, no Second Life where we completely organise our lives, but an addition. What if the metaverse were to be built on the basis of this vision, instead of Mark Zuckerberg's vision?[41] What could the internet look like in 2050? I will make a start. Not to define the utopia (which can feel like a dystopia to some), but to explore potential opportunities. Opportunities regarding openness, accessibility and democratisation.



A day in the future

"I leave the virtual meeting room and say goodbye to my Japanese colleagues. My workday is over. Cool to be able to walk through the hydrogen park and see with our own eyes that production is now fully sustainable. Before taking off my VR-visor, I decide to pay my tailor a visit, because I want to have a suit made for the wedding of two good friends, which will be a month from now. It's good to be able to see all the options, without having to try on twenty different suits. I choose a local tailor, so I can pick up the suit on my bike after it has been printed. Before I enter the virtual store, the tailor asks to be given access to my measurements. I agree, knowing that these anonymised data won't leave my account and cannot be stored by others. Thanks to the new 'data visiting' legislation, organisations are no longer allowed to collect user data, but they can get temporary access after approval, with exclusive exceptions for the research organisations serving the common good, like hospitals, charities and universities. Recently, I donated my anonymised heart rate data to an academic hospital for research into cardiac arrhythmia. In the meantime, I have made my choice;

a nice, light brown suit for my digital wardrobe. When I leave the store, I see a large crowd in a community centre down the road. I go over, curious to find out what is going on. It is a sit-in to draw attention to climate goals, which once again have not been realised. I decide to join in the silent protest and find a place to sit down.

I strike up a conversation with a boy from Brazil, who tells me about the Climate Lab. Thanks to the integration of new translation technologies, we can communicate in our own language. The Climate Lab is a place where people can actually experience the consequences of global warming. When I ask him not to take too negative an approach (if it is two minutes to midnight, there's nothing I can do about it anyway), he indicates that you can also experience positive scenarios and discover sustainable innovations. I decide to relinquish my place in the sit-in and visit the Climate Lab. After signing the climate manifesto, I ask my son to join me. I expect it will make him enthusiastic as well. I meet him at the Climate Lab and turn off my virtual location data and avatar, so that my contacts can't see me or talk to me. An additional advantage is that style and status have no influence and that all people in the lab are equal.

One of the climate scientists involved tells us that we will be presented with different immersive experiences. She indicates that it can be a shocking experience, but that we can always step out. First, we will experience the consequences of rising sea levels and extreme rainfall. Suddenly, we are up to our knees in water. Around us, we see the water enter houses and the current becomes stronger and stronger. As the water rises, we see cars and trees being dragged along by the current. We climb on the roof of a house to bring ourselves to safety. Then, the environment changes. Heat and drought take over. We see a farmer looking at his barren soil in disbelief. The ground is cracked. The harvest failed again. We get down from the roof to walk towards the famer, but end up in a procession of people carrying what few belongings they have. They can no longer live on their land. Children are crying. We see the panic in their eyes. Then we reach the border. Everything around us turns green. We can breathe again. We see how sustainable choices and innovations can contribute to improving the biodiversity and liveability of the planet. A possible future. Somewhat taken aback, but hopeful, we leave the Climate Lab. I will contact them to see if our hydrogen innovations could also be part of the lab. After switching my avatar back on, I see a message from the academic hospital, thanking me for my data contribution and informing me about the status of the research and the new insights they have gained.

In the past, I would have shared my contribution to the heart research directly via my social media profiles. But now that the walls of the digital world have been broken down and I can move through this world with my avatar, it seems as meaningless to walk around carrying a sign boasting about my achievements and experiences as leaving my photo album or CV out in the street. In this digital universe people don't visit each other's profiles, they share experiences. No matter which device they use, making this new digital world not a showcase of their lives, but an extension. There's no longer a public timeline, but a personal account in which you collect experiences for yourself. A world without likes and comments that will follow you forever and determine who you are. Where today's newspaper will once again be used to wrap up tomorrow's fish. The content is temporary, but the experiences are forever. If I remove my visor, I don't have to get used to 'reality'. Although the physical and virtual worlds connect seamlessly and together make up my reality, the boundaries are clear. And even though the virtual world may seem real at times, I know damn well it is artificial. For instance, I know for certain that the avatars I see in fashion shows have been modified. This obvious fakeness is sometimes a relief in a physical world where real and fake are often far more difficult to tell apart."

II. Conditions for a more democratic internet

This vision of the future is very similar to the way the internet was originally intended. Open, accessible and decentralised. And although the internet in theory is still one of the largest decentral-

ised systems, in practice, it is dominated by a handful of giant tech companies and internet providers. They are gatekeepers that manage and control the access to and use of the internet. Google is responsible for 90 percent of all searches worldwide, Amazon manages 45 percent of all cloud storage and Meta owns four of the six most commonly used social media platforms in the world.[42] The core of platform capitalism is to gather as much data as possible. Platform companies do everything they can to reinforce their data monopoly. One of the ways is to keep as many users as possible on the platform and make them dependent on it. Facebook, for instance, is a master at using all kinds of influencing techniques and its messenger service only communicates with users who are also on the platform. This makes it hard to move elsewhere. Another way is to enter new markets where data can be collected. Google's parent company has entered the 'Internet of Things' (Google Home), self-driving cars (Waymo) and virtual reality (Daydream). In addition, platform companies can buy other emerging platforms. As we saw earlier, Meta not only owns Facebook, but also Instagram, WhatsApp and Oculus. Rumour has it that Meta even developed a tool that warns it when a start-up is becoming popular and may pose a threat.

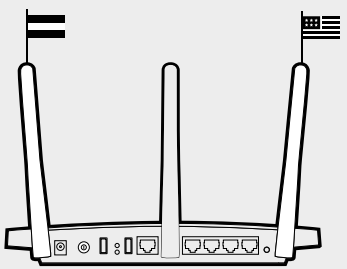
As such, the current situation seems to be miles away from the digital open infrastructure I outlined in my future scenario. These companies won't simply break down their walls and changes won't take place from one day to the next. Realising such a future scenario involves a number of intermediate steps. We will have to start working on the upgrade of the existing internet right now. To make this possible, we have to carefully balance a number of conditions.

One of the main conditions may be changing the cash flows. As long as the internet is primarily funded through the trade in data, we will keep experiencing the negative consequences of surveillance capitalism, our privacy will remain under pressure in the future, extreme content will beat nuance and vulnerable groups will keep being wrongly disadvantaged. A small number of powerful companies (and their algorithms) will continue to determine who does and doesn't get access and what is true or false. The internet will more closely resemble an authoritarian regime than a democracy. A frequently heard suggestion is therefore to break up these powerful companies, for instance splitting up Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. Not only would this alter the balance of power and give competitors more room, it would also make it harder to link all the data. No fewer than two-thirds of Americans would favour breaking up tech companies by reversing recent mergers.[43] However, breaking up doesn't seem to be enough. Even if the tech giants are split up, individual companies are still gigantic. Breaking them up doesn't change their revenue models and as such does little to tackle the underlying problems and concerns that people have, like infringement of privacy. If competitors are given opportunities after a possible break-up of big tech companies, it won't be long before they adopt the same revenue model. Those platforms only work if they reach a critical mass. Not only because otherwise they do not generate enough data to claim being able to influence people's behaviour, but also because they won't be useful to users. A social media platform only has a function if it has many users. The same applies to platforms like Uber. If you open the app and there are hardly any drivers in your vicinity, it has little added value. Once a platform has reached critical mass, it is hard for competitors to enter the market. People won't switch platforms, even when they are frustrated about privacy scandals or the way employees are treated. Breaking up these companies will only result in the walls being moved and more walls being built in the space that has become available. There are various ways to fight this principle.

Breaking through the walls

The most extreme remedy is to bring the big tech companies under public ownership and democratic control. According to some experts, the products and services of these tech giants have become so important to society that we need to designate them utility companies.[44] Like the companies that provide us with water and electricity. They will keep their monopoly, but are subject to

strict rules and controls. Because they are largely publicly funded, they no longer have the perverse incentive to make a profit at the expense of their users and they actually have a responsibility to use their technologies for the general good. Users are no longer the products being sold, but citizens who also have online rights. The government can make sure that the products and services are accessible to everyone and that democratic principles are protected. Like the physical space, the digital space has to be maintained, so there will have to be investments in 'digital parks services'. The problem is, however, that such companies will have to be nationalised, which would mean that the United States will get a majority share in Amazon, Alphabet, Meta and other companies. Including all the data. This will create a new balance of power that only moves the problem around. As we know by now, the attempts by governments to use data to track down potential fraudsters aren't always just. State-run national social networks, as proposed by the British thinktank Common Wealth and others, also have their limitations.[45] Without an international user base, these social networks wouldn't be feasible alternatives for existing options. What could be managed as a public utility is the physical infrastructure of the internet. That would make it possible to divide access to and the quality of the internet more fairly. But that would have little impact on the revenue model of the companies developing the applications. In short, nationalising big tech companies would leave the walls intact, but change the ownership.



Another way to break through the walls of the tech giants is by applying the principle of interoperability. Systems are interoperable if they can work together without limitations, among other things allowing users of different services to communicate with each other, as is possible, for instance, with e-mail. Hotmail users can exchange e-mails with Gmail users without problems. But WhatsApp users can't send messages to Signal users. And if I want to move to a different social media platform, I can't take all my Facebook contacts with me. This creates a significant threshold. It has often taken people years to build their network, so it is not something they will just leave behind. But when these walls are torn down, there is room for a more diverse internet. Competitors are given a fair chance and the thresholds for moving to another platform are lowered. So you could switch to Signal for privacy reasons, while your friends stay on WhatsApp. As a result, reaching critical mass is less decisive for platforms and smaller communities can focus on more specific user needs. Interoperability could also make the content moderation more diverse. At the moment, millions of people worldwide are moderated by the same select group of moderators, whereas norms and values could be completely different in different cultures. Interoperability could also be applied to app stores. It would already make a difference if you could download Google Play apps on your iPhone. But it would be even better if competitors could also start an app store (or if there was a public app store that works on all systems). At the moment, the European Commission is in the process of developing legislation to promote fair competition and create a safer environment for users. For example the Digital Markets Act (DMA), which may make interoperability and open standards mandatory in the future.[46] One option is, for example, to expand the data portability from the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). European citizens already have the right to demand organisations to provide them insight into their own personal data and transfer it to another provider of a similar service. However, it has not been stipulated that those provid-

ers also have to be able to apply the data. Interoperability would allow people to actually switch providers and it could make re-using data in the entire digital ecosystem possible.

Although this would partly break down the walls, it does not by definition remove the focus from the large-scale collection of data. The fact that it is easier to switch and take your data with you, does not mean that platform companies do nothing with your data. It is even thinkable that they will chase your data even more intensively, because you could be on the platform for a shorter period of time. If companies lose their monopoly position, we shouldn't be surprised if they look for other ways to stay ahead of the competition and lure advertisers to their platforms. That is why, for years, there has been a lobby to increase data ownership for users. One of the advocates is the aforementioned godfather of the world wide web, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, who argues that data has to be the property of individual users and not of companies, advertisers and analysts.[47] One way to make that possible is by using so-called data vaults, with which personal data can be stored securely and people themselves can design different layers of access, and indicate which data can be accessed by which organisations. The question is, however, if this responsibility can be left to individual users. Many people are simply not thinking about this. Cookie legislation also allows us to determine which data we leave when visiting a website, but three-quarters of the users of mobile applications accepts all cookies anyway. More than 90 percent of the users of mobile applications accepts the conditions without actually reading them. Chances are that we will end up outsourcing the responsibility for that to external storage centres anyway. And although those centres are, in theory, on the side of the user, it does erect new walls. Platforms like Facebook aren't all that interested in your personal data in the first place. They want to know which articles you like, which groups you follow and which search terms you use. These metadata, which were mentioned earlier, are probably not the data you would store in your vault, but they can be used to profile you. As such, it will not prevent microtargeting.

The pieces that remain will therefore continue to be a stumbling block for a democratic internet.

Consequently, we will need a combination of the measures discussed above to be able to create a more democratic internet in the future. We shouldn't only look at restrictions, but at innovation as well, for instance the possibilities of blockchain technologies. Because data is stored in a chain of 'data blocks' that cannot be altered, blockchain offers new solutions, for instance against fraud and censorship. We can also look at new revenue models. In the case of Dutch start-up Quodari, users don't pay with their data, but with their wallets.[48] That means that users can share pictures and other content without having to deal with trackers and advertisements. The data remain the property of the users and are not traded. Users pay for the storage space. For a democratic internet, we need to look at an international approach anyway. We could establish an international standard that designates the central protocols of the internet as a 'neutral zone'.[49] With equal opportunities for everyone. Maybe we shouldn't see the internet so much as a public domain, but as commons that are used as well as managed jointly. Where the various stakeholders set the rules and agreements together. Like in a fish pond. If we let everyone do what they wanted, the pond would be empty in no time. But if we agree on certain rules, it can be an endless supply of food.

III. Regulating is something that can be learned

At the moment, the internet is no commons. It is dominated by private organisations. For decades, they have been able to build their companies into the enormous giants they are today in relative freedom. As in multiple other sectors, legislation and regulations are lagging behind everyday reality. But that has been changing in recent years. All over the world, large tech companies are faced with new laws and rules. For instance, the European Commission wants to introduce far-reaching legislation to limit AI technologies, and in the United States there are various anti-trust cases designed to limit the power of Big Tech. Even in Chi-

na, a law was passed that was designed to protect the privacy of online users.[50] Although one may wonder about the underlying reasons for that. Under the guise of privacy, the Chinese authorities can impose high fines and blacklist companies. What is perhaps even more striking, is that tech companies themselves now are also asking for more government regulation. For instance, Tim Cook, Apple's CEO openly admits that there are serious problems with technology:

> *'We all have to be intellectually honest and admit that what we're doing isn't working, and that technology needs to be regulated.'51*

Again, we can wonder about the motive. We mustn't forget that a company like Apple has a quarterly turnover of 100 billion dollar. Despite Cook's undoubtedly good intentions , Apple's first priority is to keep its shareholders happy. And it can only do that if customers keep buying its products and services. In that order. The increasing focus of Apple on privacy in that sense appears to be above all a strategy to distinguish itself from the competition. 'If our users demand privacy, we will give them privacy'. During the Consumer Electronics Show (CES) of 2019, Apple placed an enormous billboard in the streets of Las Vegas: 'What happens on your iPhone, stays on your iPhone', referring to the famous slogan 'What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas'. And although they were not actually present at the CES, they were very much there in spirit. It seems to be hardly a coincidence that tech companies ask for regulation when they face growing criticism and governments are already announcing new regulations. A classic example of taking the wind out of someone's sails. In addition, regulation especially benefits large companies because regulation is enormously complex and it takes sufficient legal knowledge and experience to deal with it. Next to interpreting the rules, you also need to be able to integrate them into your products and services. All that takes an enormous amount of time and money, which means that regulation often creates entry barriers. Furthermore, the increase in regulation creates an increase in the lobbying practices of large companies, which means that smaller companies have no voice in the development of new rules.

New vocabulary

The current regulations are in many cases a market-driven response, for instance in case of the break-up of large tech companies designed to counter their monopoly position discussed earlier. It is an attempt to fight fire with fire. But that approach does little to address the underlying problems of surveillance. In addition, the tools that are used are often outdated. To start court cases, classic economic principles are used, like 'monopoly'. In the case of a monopoly, a product or service is provided by only one market party and the price is not determined by market forces, which means that the provider can increase the price and make huge profits. Social platforms and online search engines are not part of traditional goods or services markets, however. Because platforms like Facebook are free to use, it is very hard to determine the market share. It becomes even more difficult if you want to determine the market share of parent company Meta, because the question is to what extent Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp are comparable services. For that reason, an American court in 2021 rejected complaints about a monopoly position of Meta.[52] The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the American market watchdog, wanted to start various antitrust cases aimed at splitting up Meta. According to the federal court, the FTC was unable to indicate which measures or methods are used to determine Meta's market share. The judge considered their claim that Meta owns a market share of 'more than 60 percent' to be vague and speculative. Such court cases are not always useless, however. In the same year, the British competition watchdog ruled that Meta needs to sell the popular search engine for GIFs, Giphy.[53] Meta bought the search engine in 2020 for 400 million dollar. According to the Competition and Markets Authority, the deal reduced competition between social media plat-

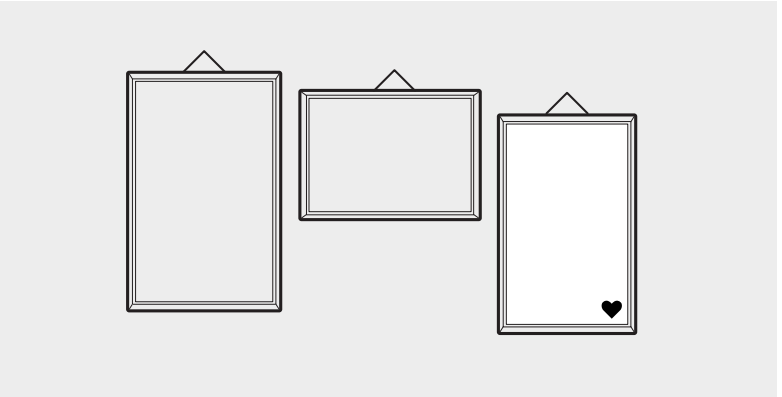
forms and as such it could potentially damage both the users of social media and British advertisers. Meta says it does not agree with the ruling and is considering an appeal.

These new times demand a new vocabulary. It is important that we be able to define and categorise these online services. Language is important in that respect. We have a tendency to refer to social media networks and companies as 'platforms' and 'platform companies'. I have done so myself in this book. But a platform suggests neutrality. We know by now that we cannot call these applications and companies neutral, because they are free to moderate content as they see fit (with or without using algorithms). At the same time, they are not full-fledged publishers who edit and repeatedly factcheck all content.

A possible solution is to give these social media companies an intermediate status: less responsibility than a publisher, but more than a neutral platform. To begin with, we can start using different terms to refer to these companies and applications. My initial suggestion:

> *Call the companies 'social media curators' and the platforms 'social media salons'.*

Like in the art sector, a curator is responsible for curating the items that will be displayed. The curator did not create the art objects, but makes a selection at their own discretion. A curator is never completely objective. It makes a huge difference which museum's curator arranges the exhibition and it is virtually impossible to exclude the curator's own value judgement. Visitors can then decide for themselves to what extent the curator's value judgement matches their own and whether or not they will visit the museum again. The same could be done with online services. The platforms are not neutral networks or information conduits, but curated social media salons. A salon is not only used as a synonym for an exposition of exhibition, but also for a room where people get together. A room where meetings are organised, where artists are invited to display or recite something. That would turn social media platforms into a kind of modern salons and content creators would be the new artists. Obviously, changing the terms doesn't change the actual activities, but it does make it emphatically clear to the users that the information they are about to see is not neutral and is being curated. It is important to make it transparent on the basis of which criteria the information is compiled. And interoperability is a condition; users need to be able to switch if they are dissatisfied.



That is why it is important not to adopt a binary approach to the discussion addressed earlier regarding section 230, which would protect the social media curators. The question is not so much whether we need to keep or discard legislation. It is also possible to make alternative proposals. Variations in which tech companies do have some responsibility for the content being published in their salons. When social media curators are partly responsible for the content, that can also give a boost to innovation. There is already a market for third-party moderation software. Irish start-up CalibreAI had developed a system, for instance, for marking discriminatory and aggressive messages. Imagine that: companies are getting rich by making the internet less poisonous. We do have to determine for which content they are and are not responsible. As indicated earlier, we need to avoid a situation whereby

tech companies censor more expressions than necessary, for fear of facing hefty fines.

However, the current politicians seem to focus especially on saving their own hides. Shortly before the 2020 American presidential election, the CEOs of Twitter, Alphabet and Meta had to appear before Congress to testify about section 230. However, most of the senators' questions were not about the legislation and the liability for user content, but about the censorship that the tech companies had applied to messages from their party.[54] Republican senators accused the tech companies of deliberately censoring conservative content, citing examples where information was labelled misleading, which they believed was based on facts, while Democrat senators asked the tech companies what they were going to do about the disinformation campaigns that were undermining the trust in elections. Former president Trump was not present at the hearings, but while they were going on, he posted a tweet in favour of abolishing section 230. He probably anticipated the moment his accounts would be blocked.

The Web as I envisaged it, we have not seen it yet. The future is still so much bigger than the past.

Tim Berners-Lee (inventor world wide web)

12

Chapter 12

Digital literacy can make the difference *Although it requires a different approach*

To take part in the digital democracy, everyone who wants, needs to have access to and knowledge about digital technologies. In addition to accessible tools and a more democratic internet, that also requires digitally literate users. Users who know how they can use digital tools to participate politically and deal with that in a critical way. This starts with collecting and interpreting information. As we know by now, disinformation campaigns are used deliberately to pit people against each other and increase distrust in democratic institutions. We can never make people completely immune to disinformation, but we can reduce their susceptibility to it by investing in, among other things, media awareness. If people better understand the way they are being seduced online, they will be better able to withstand the temptation. However, the current approach is often targeted at young people, when we know by now that older people are much more susceptible to disinformation. In addition, the focus is especially on skills and not enough on the role our human nature plays in the acceptance of fake news. That is why we must examine a new approach to digital literacy.

We cannot place the responsibility for this solely on the citizens.

We also need digitally literate politicians and civil servants who take care of the digital space and protect people's freedoms and rights online. This involves both the factual knowledge about the functioning and implications of digital technologies, and the associated moral compass. For instance, politicians must not abuse their position to track people unnecessarily with surveillance technologies. That means that they have to set an example in the development and use of ethically responsible technologies. Governments should not blindly use the tools of Big Tech, but invest in open source tools and use non-commercial alternatives based on public values.

I. No trust in your neighbours 2.0

At the beginning of this book, we saw that people want to have a bigger say, but that they don't necessarily trust the participation of others. We saw that almost 60 percent of Americans has little to no trust in the political wisdom of their fellow countrymen. Research shows that similar insights apply when it comes to media wisdom. No fewer than 60 percent of Americans believe that they are able to distinguish fake news from real news, while only 19 percent believe that other people are able to tell the difference. This is in line with the global average. Worldwide, people have more faith in their own ability to see the difference between 'real' and 'fake' than in the ability of their fellow citizens.[55]

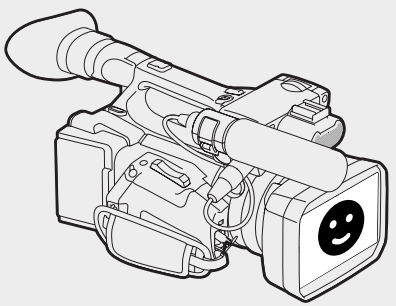
The question is to what extent that faith is justified. More than 8,000 Americans volunteered in a study about fake news by the University of Utah.[56] The participants were shown different headlines similar to the way they would in the Facebook timeline. They were then asked to distinguish true and false statements about current events, using their own judgement to determine the level of truth of news items. The study shows that three in four Americans overestimate their ability to recognise fake headlines. In addition, the more the participants overestimate their own ability, the more likely they are to visit untrustworthy websites and the more likely they are to like fake news articles or share them on social media. Predominantly if the information matches their political opinions.

That is why we need to continue to realise that sharing a news item isn't automatically the same as believing the item. As we concluded in chapter five, sharing fake news is not only attributable to ignorance. Often it is also obstinacy, even though that isn't always a fully conscious process.

Both the reason why we are not always able (or willing) to recognise fake news, and the reason we overestimate ourselves in this regard can be traced back to our brain. In this book, we discussed a number of cognitive biases. These structural and universal 'fallacies' in our information processing cause us to overestimate our own capacities vis-à-vis those of others (better-than-average effect) and to select information that matches our own opinions and expectations (confirmation bias). Even if there is no causal relationship between different events, people still have a tendency to see one. So it is not so surprising that the belief in conspiracy theories was common throughout human history and that disinformation for many people is a welcome confirmation of the distrust of democratic institutions that they have held for much longer. We do everything to maintain our integrity and identity towards the outside world. That is why we shun contradictions in our opinions and persist in maintaining the current situation and earlier (behavioural) choices.[57] As a result, for many people, it is hard to admit that there is something they don't know.

In this context, I was reminded of the hilarious *Lie Witness News* by American TV presenter and comedian Jimmy Kimmel. As part of his talk show on ABC, people in the streets are confronted with made-up news items. An absolute classic is the recording they made in 2013 at Coachella, one of the biggest multiple-day music festivals of the United States. In addition to big names like Blur and the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, they also feature less well-known and upcoming acts. And that is what many music lovers are there for. Discovering gems before they break through to a bigger audience. They love being in the know about bands nobody has ever heard of. That is why the reporters went to Coachella for a small experiment: could these music lovers also be aware of bands that

didn't exist at all? They made up a number of fictitious names and asked visitors what they thought of these made-up bands. Bands so obscure, they didn't exist.[58] The reactions are hilarious, but also a bit embarrassing. The cheerfully dressed festival goers are completely on board with the questions of the reporters. The Obesity Epidemic? 'Yeah, that band is amazing, their style and genre are unique'. And what about Get The Fuck Out Of My Pool? 'I actually heard a lot about them. They're a band I don't want to miss'. Like the Chelsea Clintons. 'They give so much energy on stage, it's unreal!' The fact that Chelsea Clinton is Hillary and Bill Clinton's daughter seems to have conveniently slipped their minds. As real music connoisseurs, they are obviously aware of everything that is new and upcoming. Admitting that they never heard of them is not an option. Of course, the fact that a camera is pointed at them also plays a role and the reports select just the right people, but I have to admit that I have also displayed similar behaviour. If someone asks me if I know a renowned researcher who has written a lot about the future of democracy, I have sometimes said 'yes' before I realised it. Even though their name doesn't ring any bells.



Furthermore, under the right circumstances, many people are enormously gullible. On 7 September 2016, Apple announced the launch of the iPhone 7. Despite the fact that new telephones won't be available in the stores for another two weeks, people believe that they will in fact be available on the day of the launch. Jimmy Kimmel's team decided to use that momentum and went out into the streets to let people test the 'new' iPhone 7.[59] What people didn't know, thanks to a clever trick, is that they were handed their own telephone. The trick goes as follows: people with an iPhone are approached on the street and asked if they want to test the new iPhone 7. One of the features is that you're able to wirelessly transfer all the data from your phone to the new iPhone. That way, the iPhone can be used within seconds as your own phone (which isn't actually the case). Without hesitation, people hand over their current phone to an assistant. While they are kept talking, their old phone is fitted out with a new sleeve and the screen is cleaned with a piece of cloth. When they are handed their 'new' phone, people are asked what they think of it. 'Wow, this phone is a lot lighter and thinner'. And the features? 'Everything works faster and more smoothly, amazing!' People even agree to pay 50 dollar to buy their alleged new telephone (and basically buy back their own existing telephone). A few years later, the team pulls a comparable stunt with the launch of the iPhone X. But this time, instead of their own phone, people are handed a much older iPhone 4. Again, people fully embraced the notion that they were holding the very latest iPhone. 'Cool, this one is a lot smaller and more compact. Revolutionary!' Of course, the fact that people are asked questions with a camera pointed at them is a factor. But the ease with which people can be fooled also seems to tell us something about the people's willingness e to believe in the innovative power of the tech companies from Silicon Valley. That may also explain why Big Tech remains so popular, despite the various scandals and court cases. Research shows that Americans have more faith in Apple and Amazon than in scientific research, the traditional media, and the American government.[60]

If we want to increase digital literacy in society, we not only need to inform people about the way digital technologies work and how these can be used critically. It is not enough to make people more resilient against disinformation by offering them all kinds of tools to recognise it better. We also need to make people aware of the information processing in their own brains by providing them more insight into the shortcuts that are made in their brains and the resulting fallacies that occur. Not by seeing it as something bad, but as something natural, because we all have biases and we all have our blind spots. Digital technologies don't so much change human nature, they reinforce it. If we learn how our brain sometimes fools us and how that can lead to certain biases and forms of shortsightedness, we get more grip on our own behaviour and become less vulnerable to deception and manipulation.

II. Digibetocracy

Attempts to improve digital literacy at the moment are focused on the more vulnerable groups in society. Like young people. Research from the American National Cyber Security Alliance shows that parents are above all worried that their kids are spreading disinformation.[61] The fact that parents themselves need to learn more about recognising fake news is hardly acknowledged. This is striking, since we know by now that teenagers are much better at spotting fake news than their parents are. Young people grew up in the digital age and seem to be more aware of the fact that not all information they see online is reliable. As a result, teenagers indicate a lot more often that they want to learn about identifying disinformation. Analyses by the World Economic Forum indicate that young people themselves see the spread of disinformation as the main drawback of social media, ahead of privacy and mental health. [62] When asked how the digital space can best be managed, young people respond that the focus should above all be on improving digital literacy, so that people are better able to recognise online fake news and scams.

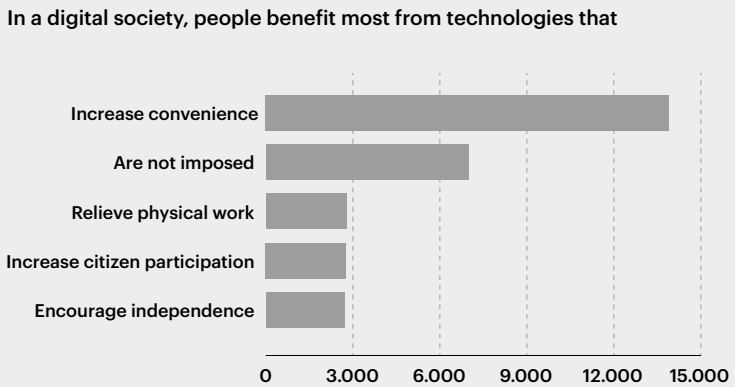
Hopeful sounds. This also means that we need to somewhat adjust our approach to digital literacy. It's not so much that we need to make young people critical; we need to keep them critical. We saw earlier that the innate scepticism we have toward technology as a kid fades away as we get older. It's especially adults who believe that they are extremely good at spotting fake news. They are much more likely to discard information that does not match their opinions and are often the most convinced that they are right. Especially when being corrected. As such, they run the biggest risk of being controlled and coordinated by politicians and other political actors. That is why we need to rethink our approach to digital literacy. Young people don't need to be taught by adults, but the other way around.

It wouldn't be a crazy idea to start this 'Media Savviness Campaign' at the parliament buildings. The way we will use digital technology in the future is in many cases a political decision. Despite the far-reaching consequences of the often ill-considered use of digital technologies, like online privacy violations and news manipulation, digitisation is strikingly low on the political agenda and the vision of political parties on this subject is often unclear. It receives hardly any attention during election debates and subjects like online privacy and disinformation are hardly mentioned in most party programmes. The terms are mentioned here and there, but most political parties don't have any concrete plans. Politicians seem to know preciously little about digital technologies in the first place. An example of that is the time when Mark Zuckerberg was questioned by the American Congress in 2018 about the privacy leak at Facebook. Senators asked him questions that made it clear that they had no idea what it is that Facebook does. Senator Orin Hatch's question took the cake in that regard. He wondered how Facebook was able to maintain a revenue model when its users don't have to pay for the service. A stunned Mark Zuckerberg answered: 'Senator, we run ads'.[63] This form of digital illiteracy makes it hard to manage complex technologies. Dutch comedian Arjen Lubach used the word 'digibetocracy' in this context, to indicate that the country is governed by digital illiterates.[64] How is it possi-

ble that such an important subject is so low on the political agenda?

It undoubtedly has to do with the limited demand from society. After all, emotions don't run as high around the impact of technology as they do around subjects like climate change and immigration. The impact of technology is something we just seem to accept. Like we accept the general conditions of mobile applications without actually reading them. Tech giants are constantly being sued and scandals come to light on an almost daily basis. And yet, we don't easily switch providers. This is not only due to the thresholds that tech giants have developed. Most discussions about technology in society are even accompanied by a certain level of indifference.

Users of the *Technologie Kieswijzer* indicate that people in a digital society benefit the most from technologies that make their lives easier and more efficient. Like shorter waiting periods and lower costs. A majority of users even chooses this option *above* lightening physically heavy work (like in hospitals and nursing homes) and increasing participation in government decisions. This shows a kind of technology push: let's use technology above all to make our own lives easier. Grist to the mill of large tech companies, in other words.



Source: Technologie Kieswijzer (2021).

Consequently, there seems to be little appeal for parties to formulate a clear position on this subject. However, we should not underestimate politicians. Is it true that politicians know too little about things like the impact of reducing encryption on privacy? Or do they possess enough knowledge but make a conscious choice in favour of other interests, like security and control? In many cases, I would wager the latter. So it isn't just about what they know, but also about what they do with that available knowledge. That is why ethics need to be higher on the agenda.

Big cleaning

Interestingly enough, the first hopeful signs are coming from the technology sector. We see more and more employees of companies like Google and Amazon opposing the policies of the tech giants. They demand more ethical considerations in the development of their products and services. In 2018, for instance, Google employees wrote an open letter to management to convince them to stop Project Dragonfly. Google was working for the Chinese government on a search engine that blocks results that are considered undesirable by the Chinese government. In doing so, the employees joined the call by Amnesty International to cancel the project. The censored search engine would threaten the right to free speech and the privacy of millions of Chinese.

> *'Our opposition to Dragonfly is not about China: we object to technologies that aid the powerful in oppressing the vulnerable, wherever that may be'.*[65]

In 2019, Google introduced the Advance Technology External Advisory Council (ATEAC), an external ethical board designed to ensure that the company would adhere to its own guidelines for ethically responsible AI applications.[66] The ethical board was discontinued after only a week. Immediately after the composition of the board was announced, there were fierce discussions, in particular about the appointment of Kay Cole James. The president of

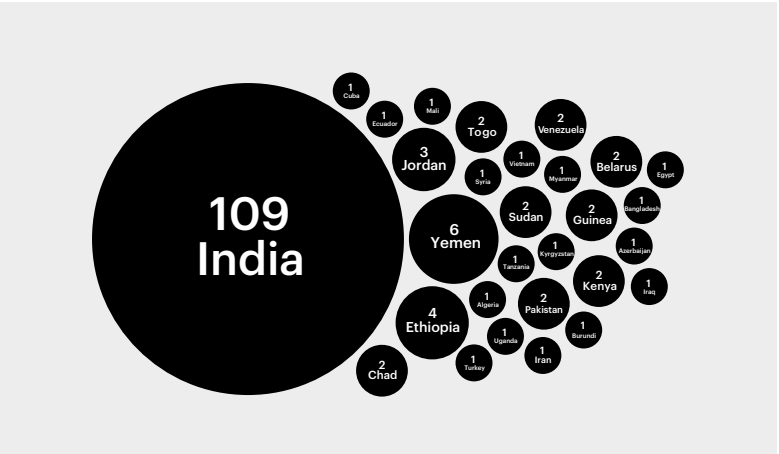
the Heritage Foundation is known for her conservative opinions about LHBTI rights among other things. Almost a thousand Google employees, academic researchers and other key figures from the tech industry signed a letter protesting the composition of the board. Diversity continues to be a tricky subject in the development of technology. Researchers, programmers and moderators are often not a representative reflection of society. Minorities that are disadvantaged by technology are not involved enough in the debate about the future of new technologies.

There is also hope among public organisations. At the moment, they largely depend on the tools of Big Tech for their communication. The Dutch initiative PublicSpaces is trying to change that. Public organisations, like broadcasters, cultural organisations and educational institutions have united in this coalition, with the aim of using alternatives to reach their audiences.[67] The goal of the coalition is to make the web 'more hygienic' by way of a gradual clean-up. They try to use more and more digital instruments that are based on public values. Public organisations argue that their huge reach allows them to take the initiative in the attempt to familiarise a broad public with ethical instruments and thus help reinforce the public field in the online domain.

III, Digital inclusion is not yet all that inclusive

In the promotion of digital literacy in society, the focus is above all on people who have no access to digital technologies (have-nots) and the people who have insufficient skills to use them (cannots). Although this is fully justifiable, researcher Eefje Op den Buysch, in her book *Herstelplan Zelfredzaamheid* ('Recovery plan Self-reliance'), argues that we shouldn't forget that there are also people who, in theory, have the necessary access and skills, but who are for one reason or another excluded (may-nots). Or who don't want to take part in the digital society in the first place (want-nots).[68] It is therefore important for us to carefully map the interests of the various 'nots'.

When we are talking about the digital have-nots, we often refer to people who have no access to the internet, zooming in especially on poorer and less developed countries that lack the necessary infrastructure, for example limited (public) WiFi access or minimal coverage of mobile internet. According to the figures of the International Telecommunications Union, in 2021, about 63 percent of the worldwide population had access to the internet.[69] Although this percentage has increased enormously in recent years, internet access is still divided extremely unevenly in the world. While 87 percent of Europeans has access to the internet, that applies to only 33 percent of Africans. And the further you zoom in, the bigger the differences become. In 2019, 97 percent of all Dutch people had daily access to the internet in their own homes, while only 1.2 percent of the people of Eritrea had 'occasionally' been online in a three-month period. Worldwide, two-thirds of all school children have no internet at home. During the global COVID-19 pandemic, that creates an even bigger inequality, because 'remote education' is hardly possible without an internet connection. However, lack of internet access does not always have a financial cause. Increasingly, people are denied internet access for political reasons. More and more often, internet shutdowns are used to control and silence the masses. For instance during protests or elections. Research shows that, in 2020, internet access was deliberately blocked no fewer than 155 times in 29 countries.[70] That means that hundreds of millions of people lost their access to information about health, education and employment during the COVID pandemic. By far the highest number of shutdowns took place in India, where the internet was disabled a whopping 109 times in a year. According to the World Economic Forum, digital inequality is in the top 5 of most worrying short-time global threats.[71]



Source: Access Now (2021).

In the case of the cannots, it is about the modern skills that are needed to use digital technologies. In addition to basic IT skills, we also need to look at the knowledge about information technologies. Research by the Pew Research Center shows that the knowledge about tech-related subjects varies enormously among Americans.[72] Only three in ten questions were answered correctly by a majority of adults, indicating correctly, for instance, that phishing can take place via multiple channels, that cookies are text files that allow websites to track site visits and activities of users and that advertising is the biggest source of income for most social media curators. Other subjects turned out to be trickier. Less than a third of Americans knew, for instance, that the information that is posted on websites of which the URL starts with 'https://' is encrypted, or that browsing in 'incognito mode' only hides online activities for other people using the same computer (and not the websites or internet provider). Also, only a small portion was able to recognise, for instance, two-factor authentication, which, according to experts, is one of the most important ways of protecting information. In addition, we saw earlier that many people don't know that, for instance, Facebook does not conduct its own news reporting. A lack of knowledge about these subjects makes it a lot more difficult to deal with digital technologies in a responsible manner.

In the case of the may-nots, something else is involved. In their case, both the digital infrastructure and the knowledge and skills are there, but they are excluded from using digital technologies for other reasons. In various cases, the design of the technology poses a threshold, because digital technologies are not always inclusive. People with a darker skin colour, for example, are less easily recognised by facial recognition software.[73] Access via facial recognition is on the rise in more and more countries. An example is Apple's *Face ID*, which is used to access one's phone, or the *ExamSoft* software used to gain access to exams. During the COIVD-19 lockdowns, law students in various American cities had to take their law exams online. To gain access to the exam, their faces were scanned using facial recognition software. However, a number of students got the following error:

> *'Due to poor lighting, we were unable to identify you. Please ensure there is adequate lighting.'*[74]

Especially students with a darker skin colour received this message. In some cases even after they moved to the bathroom with fluorescent lighting. A similar development occurs in voice-controlled virtual assistants like Siri. Users with certain accents are not recognised by the software, making it impossible to use the application, which is a problem for people with visual or mobile impairments who depend on voice-controlled tools. For instance speech to text applications. Research shows that in particular users with a darker skin colour are disadvantaged.[75] Researchers examined five applications of leading tech companies and found that the spoken texts of people with a darker skin colour were twice as likely to be transcribed incorrectly than those of people with a lighter skin colour. In many cases, people with a lighter skin colour are the norm. Not only physically, but linguistically as well, it turns out.

That is why technology companies have to make sure that their training data is more diverse and their products are tested among more diverse target groups. It is also important to have programmers and developers with more diverse backgrounds, so that all the different perspectives are included in the design. In addition, like with the have-nots, in the case of the may-nots, there may be political reasons involved. In 2018, for instance, a law was passed in Uganda that states that citizens have to pay taxes for the use of social media salons. People who use Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp, for example, have to pay a daily fee. Because these companies are not publicly funded, it is clear that there is another reason for the measure. Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni had insisted on the changes, with the argument that social media encourage 'gossip'.[76] In this way, governments try to control the information flow and silence any negative expressions about the policies. As we saw in chapter six, Putin took things a step further. A controversial law in Russia now makes it illegal to have 'contempt' for the state and to spread 'fake news' online. Every online post about the current government can therefore be potentially illegal. In this context, perhaps the term dare-nots is more accurate. As a result of these kinds of measures, people are afraid to use these technologies.

Inclusive approach

So far, we have assumed that everybody actually wants to use digital technologies. The use of these technologies has become the norm in society. Without an e-mail address and internet access, it is hard to take part in society. Paper alternatives are being faded out more and more. However, the people who are critical about these developments are hardly taken into account. The want-nots, who would rather not go along in the digitisation of their identity. People who worry about their privacy or are afraid of identity fraud. People who live in fear because fraud detection systems have erroneously marked them as fraudulent and end up in a debt restructuring programme. Or people who fear that physical contact is becoming less common and don't want us to be alienated from each other. As such, the current approach to digital literacy appears to be focused more on integration than on inclusion. There is a fundamental difference.

In the case of inclusion, the responsibility for adaptation does not lie with the 'disadvantaged group', like it does in the case of integration. It is society that adapts and sees diversity as an added value. The approach to digital diversity does not appear to embrace diversity. The norm remains that everyone has to be able to use digital technologies and therefore has to improve their digital skills, more or less regardless of the group of people who would rather not use digital applications. If there is one thing we can learn from this group of people, it is that digitisation is not always the best solution. We need to start asking ourselves for what purpose we want to use technology, instead of seeing it as a goal in itself. How can we use technology to create a better world? And what exactly is a better world? If we want an inclusive digital society, we need an inclusive approach. An approach where everyone is given a voice *and* is heard. Not only to determine how we can improve the digital skills of people with poorer digital skills, but also to examine how we can teach people with more advanced digital skills to stop seeing the use of digital technologies as the norm. Inclusion requires reciprocity. Because is the norm is determined by people who are the norm, the norm will always stay the norm. And people will still be excluded in the future.

So when we further design the future of digital democracy, we need to make sure that the use of participation tools doesn't become the norm, but that it is an addition for people who *want* to use them. And that everyone who wants to use them, can indeed use them and *will* be heard, regardless of background or education. To that end, we not only need to look at the opportunities, but also weigh the risks. For instance, privacy must never become a luxury product, whereby only people with sufficient financial resources are able to escape surveillance technologies. For that, we

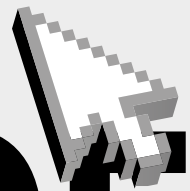
not only need new tools, but a new culture as well. In part five, I discuss these possible visions of the future and offer tools with which you can get started yourself.

It is not our differences that divide us. It is our ability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.

Audre Lorde (1934 - 1992)

THE ONLY WAY TO PRACTICE DEMOCRACY, IS TO PRACTICE DEMOCRACY.

Hu Shih (1891 - 1962)



5

Part 5

What does the future of digital democracy look like?

I began part four with a promise. The promise that, after mapping the conditions for a meaningful digital democracy, in this final part, we will imagine the future of digital democracy and actually start building it. I will happily make good on that promise. It is important, however, to realise that there is not just one future. In the previous part, we saw that there are different conditions, which means that, depending on how these conditions are organised exactly, there are various possible future scenarios, so let's begin with a short reminder of the conditions we discussed.

Making choices

One of the conditions is that we start building a more democratic internet to allow us to benefit fully from the empowerment and democratisation. What the internet will look like in the future depends on the choices that we make today. Will we break up or nationalise Big Tech companies? Will social media remain neutral platforms or will they become curators that are (partially) responsible for the content? And will we store data in our own data vaults or should users not bear that responsibility? Another condition is

that everyone who wants access to the internet should have it. Regardless of background or education. That means we need digitally literate users as well as politicians. How will we ensure that we will develop inclusive digital tools? This isn't just about the actual choices we make, but also about the mindset that we adopt in society in regard to digital democracy and the processes that we organise on its behalf. That means we have to start looking at digital democracy in a different way.

At the moment, social involvement and political participation are wrongly seen as being separate from each other. But digital democracy is more than a government using digital participation tools to elicit the help of citizens and generate support for new policy proposals. Digital democracy is also the attempt by citizens to use digital tools to get issues onto the political agenda and thus activate governments. Instead of closing the gap between the increasing social involvement and traditional institutions, we need to start asking ourselves in what way we want to give the emerging activism a place in the political system.

Balancing

The gap between the renewed protest mentality and traditional political institutions cannot be attributed solely to those institutions. There is an increasing tension between the expressed opinions of citizens on the one hand, and the necessary room for political deliberations and decision-making on the other. Armed with the internet, we are more empowered than ever. So empowered, in fact that when people aren't humoured in their opinions, they take action, more and more often literally, as the storming of the Capitol has made painfully clear. The internet is providing citizens with more and more tools to represent themselves, which seems to justify the feeling that we actually have the right to be heard. But in a democracy, the will of the individual is not law. Just like an opinion isn't by definition a fact. The speed of the internet clashes with the slowness of the political decision-making process. The challenge is to better balance the two.

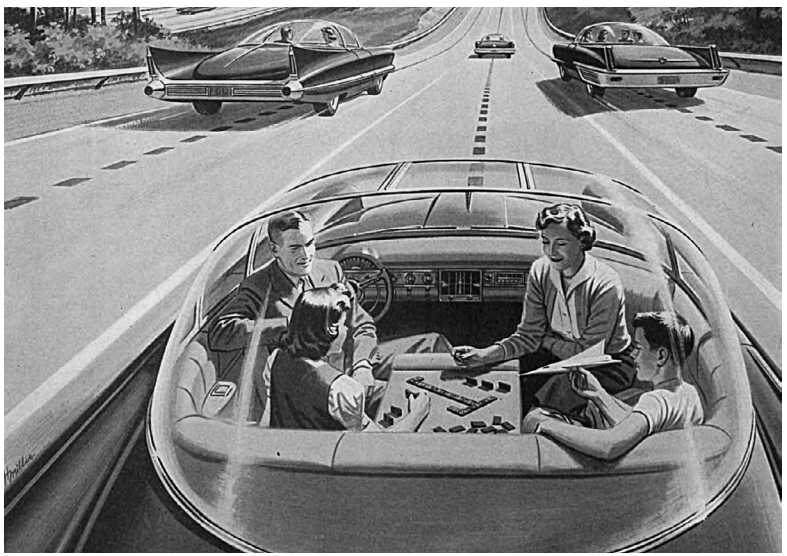
To that end, it is important not to discard new forms of political activism as meaningless or disruptive, but to embrace them. After all, expressions of dissatisfaction are a sign of involvement. Instead of rejecting that involvement (and in doing so adding fuel to the fire), we need to ensure that it is given a place in the current political system by designing new tools and processes, without taking control or patronising citizens. Here, too, there are various conditions that we need to take into account. One of the most important conditions is that the new participation tools need to be formally embedded in the political decision-making. That means that they require follow-up and can't be free of consequences. Not for governments, but not for citizens either. We mustn't view political participation as a single act, but as a process. Different levels of participation are interconnected and together can bring about change. These processes have to be transparent, so that citizens can see why certain aspects require time. Everything depends on expectation management.

Scenario planning

Looking at the different conditions, it is clear that the future of digital democracy is above all about the changing relationships between the government, the market, and citizens (not only individual citizens, but also civil society as a whole). Who will have a say in what? And what is the role of technology in this? Ultimately, this question is about power and the trust we place in that power. The question now is where power will reside in the future and how it will be used. When we map the various resulting uncertainties against two axes, we are left with four scenarios. Scenario planning is a commonly used method within futures research.[1] It is a method that makes it possible to explore different visions of the future. After all, we cannot predict the future, but we can envision it. These visions of the future can help us make informed choices in the present.

Often, this process revolves around technology without adequately taking into account socio-cultural changes. An example of that is the self-driving car, an idea that was first visualised as early as the 1950s.[2] On black and white images, we see how families are playing a

board game in the car. Of course, the man is closest to the wheel; as the head of the family he has to be able to intervene. But if we look at modern images of the self-driving car, we see how people save time along the way, for instance by attending meetings. 'Work on wheels'. When we look ahead, we often place a new technology in the existing environment. We also encounter this principle in science fictions shows, like *Black Mirror.* A new technology is fast-forwarded forty years, for example, while society and its customs stay largely the same. Needless to say, this has tremendous entertainment value and makes it easier to imagine the consequences, because we recognise our own world in it. But in terms of exploratory value, it is a limitation. If we fast-forward time, our behaviour and the social relationships will also change. And this in turn affects the developments the technology undergoes, etc. That is why we need to start asking ourselves for what purpose we can to use technology, instead of seeing technology as an end in itself. How can we use technology to create a better world? And what exactly is a better world? In this context, the term normative scenarios is sometimes used.



Source: Saturday Evening Post (1956)

Hope

I began the previous part not only with a promise, but also with a statement, namely that a hopeful future for digital democracy is within reach. The future is often seen as something that is happening to us, but I believe that we can shape it together. In the previous part, we saw that the experts expected that, in the next ten years, the use of technology will contribute to necessary social innovations. They expect that democratic institutions will be more open to citizen involvement and that public activism will increase. Technological innovations can connect people and bring them together for a common goal. Political decision-making will be more transparent through the use of technology and voters will be able to voice their concerns more directly using new online tools. All of this will lead to a situation whereby policy changes will increasingly be driven my digital citizen involvement. And it is not just the experts who are hopeful. In the same part, we saw that research indicates that people all over the world believe that ordinary citizens are able to influence the government. And as we know by now, young people are also hopeful. Which is why, in the next chapter, I won't be the one doing all the talking, but also included input from the thinkers of the future.

Hope will never by silent.

Harvey Milk (1930 - 1978)

13

Chapter 13

A hopeful future is within reach *Even though we need to hang the garlands ourselves*

To imagine a hopeful future for digital democracy, fortunately we don't have to look twenty or thirty years into the future because the first hopeful outlines are already visible. All over the world, various experiments and pilots are carried out whereby digital technologies are being integrated into the political decision-making process to enable citizen involvement, for example the crowdfunding Constitution in Iceland, which was drafted by twenty-five elected citizens in four months' time using a huge digital constituency. Or the *vTaiwan* platform, with which the citizens of Taiwan can decide on proposed laws online and offline. Of course, there are some issues with these projects, but we can learn a lot from them for the future.

When we start shaping the future of digital democracy, we need to involve young people. It sounds like a cliché, but young people are actually the future. And yet, at the moment, young people are insufficiently involved in political issues. Wrongly so, as we saw several times in this book, because they are more socially involved and are often much more critical when it comes to information technologies than is often thought. 'Instead of reducing teenagers

to statistics, we need to make sure that teenagers have the opportunity to tell their own experiences in a creative way'. I have decided to take Taylor Fang's advice seriously. In collaboration with Teach the Future, a global movement promoting 'future literacy' as a skill for students and teachers, I issued an international essay contest, to ask teenagers for their vision of the future of democracy. How do they envision political participation in the future. And what digital tools to they think their vision would require? These visions, complemented with international examples and other insights from this book, provide the input for the scenarios for the future. Because if we really want it, a hopeful future for digital democracy is within reach.

I. A kickstart for digital democracy

In recent years, Taiwan has shown that technology and politics can merge and enable new forms of political decision-making and citizen involvement. Taiwan, which has only been a democracy since 1996, since then has found a consensus where it first seemed to be impossible. It all began in 2014.

The Taiwanese government is about to sign a controversial trade deal with China. A large part of the population is afraid that this trade bill will give China more influence. On 18 March 2014, hundreds of students storm the parliament building of Taiwan and demand that the agreement be rejected and that public scrutiny for future trade agreements be guaranteed. In the meantime, the protest grows into a bigger movement, with hundreds of thousands of protesters taking to the streets. Because they use sunflowers as a symbol of hope, the movement is also known as the Sunflower Movement.[3] It is a largely peaceful movement that is surprisingly well-organised. The protesters manage to keep the parliament hall for three weeks. Instead of hanging around, the protesters spend their time usefully and organise meetings about all kinds of topics. In very little time, the protesters manage to develop an improvised IT infrastructure, allowing all of Taiwan to follow these meetings online via livestreams. That makes the movement not only a form of protest, but also a manifestation of digital democracy. The protesters include members of the civic hackers collective called g0v (pronounced 'gov zero'). The aim of the collective is to reconsider the role of the government starting from zero.[4] Unlike cybersecurity hackers who try to expose weak spots in existing systems, civic hackers develop digital tools to better reflect the digital will of citizens in democracy. The collective tries to promote the transparency of government information and is involved in developing information platforms and tools for citizens to take part in society.

The Taiwanese government eventually succumbs to the pressure and decides not to proceed with the trade agreement with China.[5] Instead of banning the protesters from parliament hall, the government decides to ask the civic hackers to help them. What's more, one of them is appointed Digital Minister of Taiwan. In 2016, thirty-five year old Audrey Tang became not only the youngest, but also the first transgender minister of Taiwan. Because Taiwan is becoming more divided about a range of subjects, the government wants to develop new processes to allow citizens with different opinions to reach a consensus. These insights can then be used to develop new legislation and regulations, for which there is actual support among the population. According to Tang, the political problem is an information problem. In IT terms, she argues that by voting once every four years, you only upload 5 bits of information to the system. With referendums every two years, you get to maybe 10 to 20 bits. For the sake of comparison, with a basic internet connection, you can exchange 50 million bits per second. Elections occur too rarely to give legislators a good idea of what the public wants. And referendums often divide the public into two sides. That is why Tang looked for ways to fight polarisation and stimulate consensus. She believes that many governments are open to receiving more information, but have no need for more 'noise'. One of the main concerns is that, when you use traditional platforms and tools, they will in no time be taken over by trolls, leading to a toxic conversation. Draft decisions often unintentionally create a polarised debate in which the differences are

exaggerated. But according to Tang, it is also possible to design for consensus, whereby corresponding needs emerge instead of opposing positions and ideologies.

Virtual Taiwan

The solution developed by the former hacker is called *vTaiwan* (with the 'v' for virtual). Via 'presidential hackathons', Tang wants to make it possible for citizens to help shape, improve and discuss legislation at any time. The process of *vTaiwan* combines online and offline elements and relies on a range of existing open source tools that can be adjusted at will. The process starts when someone submits a problem and there is a relevant government organisation that agrees to manage and participate in the problem. Since 2017, every ministry is obliged to appoint a 'participation officer' responsible for the process. Roughly speaking, the process consists of four stages. First of all, in the 'proposal stage', there are offline and online discussions about which problems need to be tackled, using, among other things, the tool *Discourse* to conduct the discussion, *sli.do* for sharing documents and *Typeform* for distributing questionnaires. When a problem has been selected, it is further discussed in the 'opinion stage', using the aforementioned consensus tool *Pol.is*. With the help of an algorithm, the substantive opinions of participants are analysed and visualised, providing an efficient and scalable way to show who is involved, what their interests are and where there is consensus. These insights are shared with the public and the relevant government organisations. Next, in the 'reflection stage', two stakeholder meetings are organised, which can be watched online by all of Taiwan via livestream. Anyone who wants to, can leave a comment in the chatroom. *HackPad* is used to keep track of and share the notes online, after which the solutions are elaborated further in the 'ratification stage'. The solutions vary from changes to existing laws to policy changes. Ultimately, the Yuan, Taiwan's legislator, decides whether or not the legislation is passed. Via the *vTaiwan* website, everyone can monitor the progress. Tang emphasises that the process is flexible and that the path often deviates from this 'roadmap'. Some problems are solved in three months, while others take more than a year. This approach has by now been used for more than 26 legislative proposals, in particular in the digital economy. For instance, *vTaiwan* was used to regulate Uber. The taxi service expanded very rapidly in Taiwan, much to the anger of the traditional taxi sector. Uber drivers were not obliged to have a taxi license and paid other taxes than local companies, while customers enjoyed cheaper rates and more convenience. After the various voting rounds in *Pol.is*, there emerged four different opinion groups: taxi drivers, Uber drivers, Uber passengers and other passengers. There turned out to be more of a consensus between these groups than was originally thought. And the regulation was adjusted.[6]

Despite the aforementioned limitations of tools like *Pol.is* (the approach requires very digitally literate participants), *vTaiwan* contains various interesting elements. First of all, they approach political participation as a process rather than a separate activity. *Pol.is* is merely one of the elements, but not the only one. Because the process is divided into different stages, citizens can decide for themselves when they want to participate. If they only want to suggest a problem? Fine. But if they want to discuss with stakeholders in detail, that is also possible. A range of tools is used for that. Both online and offline. That allows people with different participation needs to take part in different ways. In addition, there is a great focus on transparency in the process; everything is streamed and recorded, allowing viewers to participate as well. Furthermore, this approach makes it clear why some steps in the process take time. By experiencing (or observing) the process for themselves, people can be more understanding with regard to the occasionally necessary slowness of the political decision-making process. Because reaching a political consensus is not an easy thing. Perhaps you have experienced yourself how hard it is to get a group of friends to agree on a future holiday destination. But what is perhaps the most important thing is that Taiwan has formally embedded the process in its political decision-making. The participation initia-

tives are always followed up, including when the decision is made not to pass the proposed law. Such a decision is then accompanied by an itemised explanation.

According to Tang, *vTaiwan* has provided two important lessons. The first lesson is that the government has to trust its citizens, without demanding its citizens to trust the government in return. That means that transparency only has to be a one-way street, from the government to the citizens. The government cannot demand its citizens to be transparent because that opens the door to authoritarianism. The second lesson is that technology must always be brought to the people, instead of asking the people to come towards technology. That means that the technology has to be adapted to the needs and wishes of its users, instead of the users having to adapt to the functionality of the technology. As such, technology must always be designed from the perspective of inclusivity, with a customised approach not an option, but a requirement. That way, people are involved more in the democratic process, instead of being forced to speak the language of bureaucracy.

Tang also makes a valuable suggestion: be imperfect. If you ask a question that is formulated too perfectly, nobody will answer it. Often, politicians and civil servants try to cover themselves by being extremely complete, boarding up the process with bureaucratic rules and frameworks. But if you spend years perfecting an issue, it will not only be outdated by the time it is brought into the open, but people won't be able to make a contribution. The more of a perfectionist you are, the less the innovation community can add. It is especially when you raise an issue that still has holes in it that people start trying to fill those holes. As such, digital democracy isn't just about the right tools, but also about the right mindset. It is in particular the underlying motivation and culture that determine the success of citizen participation. Tang has been Minister of Digital Affairs since 2016, but still regularly emphasises that she doesn't work for the government, but with the government. She looks with a hopeful eye to the future of digital democracy.

> *'One of the most important disruptions will be the people realizing that collective intelligence is not only good for discovering and defining social problems, but also for developing and delivering solutions as well.'*[7]

According to Tang, the collective intelligence that digital technologies produce will in the future not only be used to analyse problems, but increasingly to create solutions. Digital technologies can make listening to citizens scalable, can ensure that people who are disadvantaged are given a voice to share their experiences, and that people with different backgrounds can empathise with those experiences. Democracy is a continuous process and we have to make sure that technologies reinforce the right elements. That requires an inclusive philosophy, language and design mechanism.

II. Dear Democracy: young people about digital democracy

If we talk about the future of digital democracy, we cannot ignore the vision of young people, because they are the ones who will actually have to shape that future. On the basis of all the insights in this book, I am hopeful that we will leave democracy in good hands. As we saw in part three, young people are hugely interested in political issues and social challenges, believing more than ever in their individual strength to bring about meaningful changes, and they are very conscious when it comes to dealing with information technology. Instead of using traditional institutions, like elections, young people try to create pressure from without, making more and more use of digital technologies, for instance using social networks to talk about social issues and take part in protests. If we want to bridge the gap between the increasing social involvement and traditional institutions in the future, we need to involve young people more in the solutions. We need to give them a voice and listen to them.

In order to practise what I preach, I also want to give young people a voice in this book, which is why, in collaboration with Teach the Future, I have organised an international essay contest

asking teenagers for their vision of the future of digital democracy. The mission of Teach the Future is to transfer future-oriented skills to students and teachers all over the world and inspire them to shape the future. Because if we feel that knowledge of the past is important enough to include in every form of education, why don't we teach students how they can influence the future? Based on that notion, Dr. Peter Bishop, professor of Foresight at the University of Houston, founded Teach the Future in 2015. By now, the movement consists of teachers and volunteers from all over the world who want to promote and teach this new approach to the future among youngsters, both in schools and elsewhere. In the summer of 2021, they created the Young Voices Network, which is designed to recognise and support young idealists between twelve and seventeen years old. There are so many young people doing wonderful things to enable a more inclusive and just future. For instance fifteen-year-old Amna from Pakistan, who wants to use her 'Global Creative Hub' to give all Pakistani girls access to education and digital literacy.[8] This international group of change-makers seemed to me to be a perfect candidate for my essay contest. In November of 2021, I sent the group the following invitation:

Generation Z doesn't care about politics, right? (essay contest)

According to adults, Generation Z is indifferent, purposeless and apolitical. And in fact, the turnout among young people during elections is lower than it is among adults. But although young people may not be interested in political parties, they are very much involved in social issues. Look at the Climate March and Black Lives Matter! To involve young people, democracy needs an update. Do you have ideas about that? Then take part in the essay contest 'Dear Democracy', with the opportunity of having your essay included in a book!

On behalf of the Netherlands Study Centre for Technology Trends, Rudy van Belkom is conducting research into the future of democracy. In April, his new book will be published and your essay can be a part of that book! The assignment is as follows:

- Write an essay of about 600 words about the future of democracy. Start your essay with 'Dear Democracy'.
- In your essay, answer questions like: how do you envision political participation in the future? And what digital tools would that require? You can think big and it doesn't have to be technologically possible.
- If you find it hard to write, you can also record your essay as a vlog.

During the kick-off, Rudy will give more information about the project and there is room for questions. The three best essays will be festively announced in January.

To be honest, the responses didn't come flooding in automatically. That took some video calls and e-mail exchanges. I was very much aware that it was a big ask and I can imagine that writing or recording a text is a challenge. But I am writing a book and want more than to ask young people to fill in a questionnaire and reduce them to statistics. Fortunately, it was alright in the end. And the result is pretty impressive. I was able to select three inspiring essays from three different continents. Initially, the idea was to select one winner from these three essays and to include that essay in the book in full. But all three essays contain wise lessons, which I am happy to share with you. So I shortened the essays to be able to include all three.

Young people want to be heard

The essay by fifteen-year-old Amna Habiba from Pakistan makes it clear that the hope we have in the younger generations is justified. They want to be involved in the political decision-making and are willing to take responsibility. Young people feel that the future is being taken away from them and therefore want more ownership. They are ready to use their voice for positive change in the world, and embrace technology to do so. They believe that technology can be a catalyst for a just and inclusive democracy, in which everyone has a voice. Amna's essay is reviewed by Quratulain Hussain.

"Dear Democracy,

Listen to the voice of thousands of young people coming together to combat the world's most pressing problems. From school strikes to bringing life new movements, we are using our voice as a power to bring change to the world. But when our voice as a significant population group is not represented in the building of the future, you cannot create a purposeful future. When such a unique generation is empowered and enabled, we bring change that no previous generation has accomplished before. Imagine the power we can harness when our voice is included in decision-making.

Technology is of vital importance in the 21st century to voice our opinions on a global level; with it we demonstrate our leadership potential, strive for a better future, and launch global movements towards bringing a revolutionized system and improved standard of living. When you enable us and provide platforms where our voice is heard, we show you the power within us that strives to create a just and democratic environment, across the globe without any boundaries and limitations. With the arrival of digital tools and platforms, we can make powerful decisions, as individuals and as communities. From empowering local communities to the representation on global platforms, for us it is important to fight for what matters.

We cannot leave the development of our future to others. Technological progress offers a new platform in developed and developing nations on which our diverse voices can be heard and be brought forward. When you include and harness tech for social good, every person's voice is heard and represented. With the 21st-century skill revolution, we possess the skills of the next century and are the ones that can change tomorrow. From decision-making skills to critical thinking and problem-solving, my generation of citizens is the next generation's leaders. When you include us through technology, you can create a better future for the generations to come. I hope I can live in a future where the climate problem has been solved, where every girl will have an equal opportunity to education and in which every voice, no matter how diverse, is heard.

So dear democracy, if you really want to build a bright future for our race, it's high time you include our voices and empower us to be citizens of the future. I want you to know that when you include people and use technology to make better, inclusive, and effective decisions, you're actually ensuring the future of our world. Thank you for all that you do. And keep on including more young people's voices to the table. Because when you include us, you're ensuring that we have a better tomorrow.

Thank you,

Amna".

Young people have concrete ideas

They're not just hopeful words. Young people are actually working on concrete solutions. The essay by fifteen-year-old Deona Julary from the United States shows that they are not only able to provide an astute analysis of the current situation, but that they are actually able to translate those insights into solutions. Although they are hopeful about the future of digital democracy, they understand that a lot still needs to be done. In this context, the power of technology is both part of the problem and part of the solution.

> "Dear democracy,
>
> The future of digital democracy is bright. Young voices are utilizing social media and other transformative technological tools to get more politically involved. Youth participation is increasing as years go by. I envision citizens making informed decisions and being more involved politically in the future. But we are not there yet. The political polarization in today's society is due to the lack of empathy, trust, and knowledge. We are not able to go out of our comfort zones, ideologies, and beliefs, to understand the views of other people and form a more harmonious world to live in. Technology is far-reaching. Many citizens vote for candidates and make decisions daily based on what their colleagues say around them and the headlines they see. Many American citizens don't trust the public's political wisdom because of this. I believe automated review technologies could be instituted in the near future to prevent the spread of misinformation. This technology will help run real-time fact checks on information and social media posts posted online. Reputable organizations like the World Health Organization could help develop such technologies. Legitimate information helps the public make informed decisions. Putting in place such safeguards will be crucial to uphold the integrity of democracy. Another innovative idea is to have points-based political participation using smart devices like watches. Every time a citizen pays taxes on time, votes, or does something positive according to the handbook, points will be added to their profile. Once a citizen gets a certain amount of points, they will be rewarded. Giving incentives to citizens via such technology could encourage citizens to participate politically, crafting a representative democracy. The way people vote could be completely changed. Instead of voting for one candidate right off the bat, each voter will receive a set of quantitative-based questions. These questions address essential issues and policies like climate change or LGBTQ. The computer will submit a vote to the candidate that best fits the voter's overall responses. More holistic voting will eliminate some bias in voting, therefore ensuring the elected candidate addresses the most critical issues.
>
> Young voices will be at the center of innovation for years to come. We seek creativity, independence, and our voices to be amplified. Technology expands our capabilities to improve the political climate and solve global issues effectively. The future of digital democracy is humane and promising. I know that political participation will be at high levels in the coming years. We will not stop.
>
> Kind regards,
>
> Deona."

Young people demand inclusivity

The essay by seventeen-year-old Chantal Nyuykividzem from Cameroon made me aware of my own blind spot. While I am above all looking for future visions in which people use digital technologies to have more influence in addition to elections, some people dream of living in a democracy where there is no corruption and where there are fair elections. In large parts of the world, young people feel excluded and demand a voice. It is great to see that here, too, hope prevails and technology can offer a positive contribution to an inclusive democracy.

"Dear democracy,

Your history in Africa is a complex one. In the 1980s, there was a struggle in many African countries to understand how to best implement your principles. Since then, to date, you are defined as "Government of the people, by the people and for the people". However, this definition is more of a theory than practice. What is more practical in Africa is your revised definition: "Government of some people, by some people and for some people". Democracy, you no longer have the inclusive concept that your initiators envisioned for you. Due to the limitations that have been imposed on you, the common man in Africa, especially the youths, feel left out. Although the youths, aged 5-35 years, constitute a greater percentage of Africa's population, they don't play a very insignificant role in politics. Indeed, democracy, your past and your present make us wonder what your future will look like.

The future I envision for you is one full of bright, sunny days where we can have free and fair elections. A future in which we practise advanced democracy, that encourages youths to take the reins of decision-making in their hands. The youths consider politics as something that concerns the old, voting and protesting in Africa are a waste of time. Likewise, they believe voting or not voting makes no difference as electoral fraud is the order of the day in most African states. Thus, encouraging youth political participation in Africa must begin with a psychological revolution in youths. Young people need to be educated more on the importance of political participation; their voice must be heard in political discussions. African states such as Namibia and Rwanda have begun doing this by including youths in their governments. Rwanda has a young man of 20 years overseeing its scientific and technological innovations while Namibia has a 23-year-old female member of parliament. If more African states take up this initiative to place more young people in positions of political responsibility, it will make the youths know that their point of view does matter in politics.

In addition, more can still be done in the domain of technology to boost youth political participation and revolutionize the concept of democracy in Africa. Today more people are very engaged in technology and science, as such, improving tech could be a magnetic force that would attract young people to politics. More to that, the voting process can be transformed into e-voting, that is, voting using thumbprints on an electronic ballot box. This system would be designed to allow immediate counting of votes and prevent the electoral fraud through tampering with votes. By so doing, this will promote free and fair elections, thereby encouraging youth political participation.

Chantal."

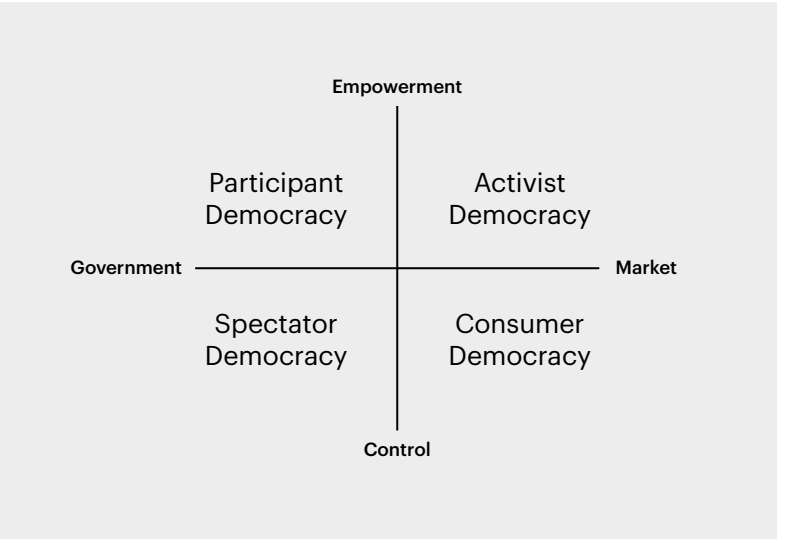
I can say that I am very impressed by these essays. When I was a teenager, I was nowhere near as philosophical about my environment and the role I could play in it. Initiatives like Teach the Future are therefore a perfect match for the vision of the aforementioned philosopher Roman Krznaric and his book *The Good Ancestor*. In his view, we need to learn to think in terms of centuries, instead of years. The visions for the future of these young women is hopeful. I enjoy reading how they address democracy on a personal level. They are grateful, but they also demand change.

III. Scenarios for a hopeful future

To imagine a hopeful future for digital democracy, we need to explore different future visions. Because there is no such thing as *the* future. And we need to map both the desirable and the undesirable scenarios. And the underlying choices. As we concluded earlier, the future of digital democracy is above all about the changing relationship between the government, the market and citizens

(not only individual citizens, but civic society as a whole). Democracy is social decision-making. Who gets to decide on what and what is the role of digital technologies in that? Ultimately, this all revolves around power (*kratos)* and the trust we place in that power (authority). To be able to map the various scenarios, we need to determine where the power may reside in the future and how it will be used.

As we saw in this book, in part thanks to the emergence of digital technologies, a shift in power is taking place. It is increasingly easy for citizens to represent and mobilise themselves. We know by now that that has generated an enormous empowerment. But we also know that it is still market parties that develop the various tools and that it is the government that can regulate the use of those tools through legislation and regulation. The expectation is that this will not drastically change in the decades to come. The monopoly position of big tech may be tackled and the government will claim more authority in the digital domain, but the overall infrastructure will not be transferred to civic society in the decades to come. It is imaginable that civic movements will increasingly exert influence in the digital democracy, but the digital technologies being used will predominantly be facilitated by the market or the government. As a result, the question where power resides will be primarily be determined by the relationship between government and market. The main question is how that power will be used. In this book, we saw several times that technology itself isn't good or bad, but that it depends on how technology is applied. Is it used to monitor citizens? Or to increase and facilitate the level of empowerment of citizens? When we position these opposites along two axes, four scenarios emerge, focusing above all on the role of citizens in the digital democracy.



Future scenarios for a digital democracy

To better imagine the various future scenarios, I translated them into news articles from the future. What are the possible headlines in 2050? We look at the causes as well as the (sometimes unintentional) consequences. A brief disclaimer at this point: scenarios reflect extremes, which means that, depending on one's perspective, they can be doomsday scenarios. However, that also serves a purpose; to prevent the negative consequences of our choices, we first need to map them. It is important to reflect on the possible implications. If we know which future visions we want to avoid, we will be better able to work towards the desired future.

Spectator Democracy (Government - Control)

Elections now officially a thing of the past

Editorial • Politics • January 24, 2050 • 1 PM

The Minister of the Interior this morning announced that the elections this year will be cancelled permanently. Where citizens used to have the freedom to cast their own votes, their votes are now calculated using behavioural data. The latest pilots again showed that algorithms are better able to map the collective needs of society.

The Minister's decision not only ends elections, but also political campaigns and debates. Politicians no longer have to try and persuade people to vote for them; algorithms now determine which combination is best for the country. Instead of elections taking place every four years, our needs are now being monitored constantly and, where needed, policies are adjusted. Powerful computer models and *digital twins* can map the implications of the intended policy choices. It seems a matter of time before political participation becomes completely redundant.

Algocracy

Because of the nationalisation of large tech companies, governments have enormous amounts of data at their disposal. When you link all these data and apply advanced algorithms, it appears that these systems are much better able than we are ourselves at predicting our deepest convictions. According to tech ethicist Lian Chen, in itself that is not all that surprising. 'The human decision-making process is capricious. We are constantly influenced by irrational components and our thought processes are filled with biases. What is much more striking is that the government now openly prefers these kinds of technologies to human decision-making.' Proponents are especially glad that this measure may signal the end of the political circus. In their view, politics is now mostly a popularity contest in which the issues have become more and more irrelevant. Opponents fear that citizens will be reduced to passive bystanders, turning democracy into an 'algocracy', in which government algorithms call the shots. More and more experts warn about what they call a black box society, in which the choices of the algorithms can no longer be retraced.

In the past, we saw similar developments, where the indestructible faith in algorithms led to complications, for instance in the case of the automated fraud detection systems, in which citizens were wrongly branded as frauds. Under the guise of security and efficiency, we keep losing more and more democratic freedoms and rights. According to Chen, the government uses this strategy as an excuse to maintain control. 'This approach is based on distrust. People have become too empowered and they have too many ways to let their voices be heard. By placing the process in the hands of algorithms, the government can claim to be objective. But it actually offers opportunities for manipulation. The government increasingly controls the flow of information, creating an alternative reality that it imposes on its citizens', according to Chen.

The Minister claims that this measure needs to ensure that the needs of the voters are considered to a much greater extent in the decision-making process. This is probably not the direct democracy that many people had imagined.

Consumer Democracy (Market - Control)

Zuckerberg bets the house on personalised democracy

Editorial • Politics • January 24, 2050 • 1 PM

Meta has taken a first step towards the 'personalised democracy'. An interview with CEO Mark Zuckerberg shows that the tech giant intends to match the use of digital participation tools to the user's profile. Based on behavioural data, you are provided with the 'best' participation options. The question is, however, how that is determined exactly.

The 65-year-old CEO doesn't seem to be thinking about quitting any time soon. He claims that the plan will contribute to a more meaningful experience of democracy. According to Zuckerberg, it's the same as it is with advertising: 'You don't want to see ads for products you're not interested in. It's the same with participation. If I have young kids, childcare is an important theme to me, but if I don't, I don't necessarily have to have an opinion about it.'

Dependence

This personalised approach in practice means that Big Tech from now on determines how you can take part in democracy and how much influence you get. Experts wonder how democratic it is when a handful of tech entrepreneurs, who weren't elected, make these kinds of choices. It's a discussion that has been going on for years. Should they decide which information is or isn't misleading? And which accounts are or aren't damaging? The line between personalised content and censorship is a very fine one. Tech expert Raul Garcia is especially worried that vulnerable target groups will be hugely disadvantaged. 'Based on their data, people are pigeon-holed. Aspects like education, work and oncome will all be taken into account. But also how many news articles you read and whether you occasionally spread fake news and what the tone of your messages is. While microtargeting used to be deployed to control information flows, it is now used to track 'capable citizens' and provide them with the right participation tools'.

Many people are surprised that governments support such plans, which will only increase the power of Big Tech. After all, the gatekeepers of the internet will also become the gatekeepers of democracy. 'In recent years, governments have become dependent on big tech companies. They have used the free tools to their heart's content and were thrilled with all the data analyses. But now, the tech giants own the governments. Regulation may be effective, but that will only be against their own interest. Government are unable to create a similar infrastructure within a short time frame', according to Garcia. Citizens are reduced to consumers. Do you want to take part in democracy? Then you will pay with your data.

Zuckerberg maintains that he is mostly providing a service. 'It is our mission to create meaningful communities. Instead of sending citizens through a maze of all kinds of different tools, our algorithms help create the perfect match.' The question is if people wouldn't rather make that match for themselves.

Activist Democracy (Market - Empowerment)

Citizens are increasingly bypassing politics

Editorial • Politics • January 24, 2050 • 1 PM

It is a trend that has continued in recent years: election turn-outs are dwindling and people make less use of participation options. At the same time, we see a sharp rise in civic movements. Incidental protests have grown into well-organised global movements. Especially in the metaverse. Like warfare, protests and activism have moved more and more towards the cyber domain.

There doesn't seem to be a civic revolution. There are no angry citizens manning the barricades or storming the Bastille. Nor do they have to, now that the metaverse is increasingly the stage for political decision-making. Tech-savvy civil movements are able to put immense pressure on governments and politicians without being physically present. More and more citizens discover that, when they join a civil movement, they have more influence on the government than they do at the ballot box.

Opinions divided

Experts disagree on whether this development is positive or negative. More than 2000 years ago, Greek philosophers already dreaded the 'tyranny of the majority'. Democracy would become an ochlocracy, in which the mob rules by intimating legitimate authorities. According to sociologist Nyah Abebe, there is no doomsday scenario. 'New digital technologies make it possible for minorities to mobilise as well. Movements are increasingly organised around a specific theme, like climate or emancipation. That allows citizens to increasingly decide for themselves on which subjects they want to have an influence. It is not one big mob deciding everything.' The rise of these civil movements does not come out of the blue. People have been disappointed in politics for years. Promises about a new political culture were broken and participation initiatives were not taken seriously. What do you do if you are not being heard? You start shouting louder.

And that's what many critics are afraid of. Citizens have more and more digital tools at their disposal to mobilise themselves and apply pressure. As a result, civil movements increasingly take matters into their own hands, undermining the legitimacy of traditional institutions, opening the door to anarchism. Critics fear a lawless society, in which might is right. Recently, a G7 summit was shut down after thousands of citizens managed to break into the virtual meeting room in the metaverse. Researchers of the University of Johannesburg mapped the structure of the various civil movements and discovered that many of those movements are funded by private organisations. 'Rich tech entrepreneurs not only build the tools, but in many cases they also decide the direction of those movements. They decide to a large extent which movements are given an opportunity and can become successful', according to Abebe.

As such, although it appears power has shifted, it is still a small group of individuals who have the greatest influence. And the question is if the government is able to turn the tide.

Participant Democracy (Government - Empowerment)

European Parliament imposes online participation duty

Editorial • Politics • January 24, 2050 • 1 PM

A majority of the European Parliament this morning voted in favour of the proposed law stating that all citizens in the European Union will have an online participation duty. The Parliament is of the opinion that every European citizen should be able to voice their opinion at least once a year via one of the available participation channels.

The reasoning is that, as long as political participation is without obligation, it is always the same group of citizens participating. Various studies show that it is especially the more highly educated and affluent citizens who engage in political participation. The EU now wants to change that. Participating is easy and secure via your European Digital Identity. The plans are part of the attempts on the part of Europe to promote a an inclusive democracy and digital sovereignty.

Responsibility

Citizens can decide for themselves on which themes and in which phase they participate. It can be a simple vote, or a more intensive involvement in proposed new legislation. Via the online environment, citizens can also submit projects themselves. If there is enough support, the projects will be taken up. It is unclear, however, how much of a mandate the participants will be given exactly. According to political scientist Paula Francesca, this is a fundamental issue. 'You can expect citizens to participate, but if institutions can then simply ignore the results, participation has the opposite effect. It will be a matter of time before people start to protest. Furthermore, the project stands or falls with transparency. All steps and choices have to be transparent for everybody'. The new legislation to a large extent ventures into unexplored territory. There are countries with a mandatory election turnout, but things are different for online participation. Thanks to the introduction of the *Self-Sovereign Identity*, people manage their own data. You can force people to participate, but not to relinquish their data without their prior permission.

The question also rises to what extent all European citizens have the digital skills to engage in online participation. Francesca expects that the actual skills won't be the problem. 'A large portion of the population grew up with these kinds of technologies. But to engage in political participation, you also have to be able to interpret all the available information correctly. Often, these are complex issues that take a lot of time, especially for less literate citizens. In that area, the existing participation tools often still create thresholds.' The danger is that people will make choices under pressure that they don't really support. Many people find it hard to call in help. So the question is to what extent this will generate a truly inclusive democracy as long as the tools are not yet available to everyone.

Ironically enough, the EU has not presented this new legislation to its citizens. An independent survey by the University of Zurich-shows that Europeans are still divided, with exactly 50 percent in support of the legislation.

Making choices for the future

As indicated, these scenarios are constructed from extremes. This approach helps us see how the future will develop if we extrapolate in one of these directions. Although they may sound futuristic, we can already see realistic signs of each of these scenarios. For instance, although it may seem enormously far-fetched to think that algorithms will once be making political decisions, research by the World Economic Forum indicates that young people are so worried about corrupt leadership that even now they have more confidence in a political system that is being run by algorithms rather than people.[9] And although Europe's citizens are unlikely to be obliged to engage in political participation for the time being, it is likely that there will be a European Digital Identity in the near future. The plans for a digital wallet, with which citizens can manage their own personal data, have been in the works since 2019.[1] More ownership also means more responsibility. If in the future you find it hard to keep up or your data are being used against you, then it's your own fault. As a result, the gap between the cans and the cannots will widen.

In practice, the future in which we live will always contain a combination of different scenarios. The contrasts are not that black and white; there are all kinds of intermediate considerations. The challenge is to eliminate the negative elements as much as possible and stimulate the positive elements. Although the ideal future is different for everyone, we can formulate a number of ingredients on the basis of various insights that, in my view, can lead to a more inclusive and fair digital democracy.

1. Take dissatisfaction seriously

Critical citizens are often seen as 'difficult' by authorities and politicians. Especially the loudmouths voicing their discontent on social media. Don't get me wrong, the existing design means that extremes receive an inordinate amount of attention, but apparently they see no other suitable channels to voice their dissatisfaction. Room for criticism is one of the conditions of a healthy democracy. If young people do take part in protests, but vote less often, the problem isn't just those young people. It also lies with traditional institutions. Involve young people in the quest for solutions. Connect to population groups who have given up on the existing democracy and involve them in the development of new processes and tools. If you listen to people, they don't have to shout so loudly.

2. Have faith in citizens

One of the lessons of *vTaiwan* is that the government needs to trust its citizens, without being able to demand trust in return. That means that transparency is a one-way street, from the government to its citizens. The government cannot demand its citizens to be transparent because that opens the door to authoritarianism. This requires a completely different approach than the one to which governments are used to. Now, technology is often used to prevent abuse. People are by definition suspect. However, digital democracy only works if governments genuinely want to listen. It cannot be a hidden form of collecting metadata or exerting control. Data must never be used for other purposes.

3. Leave Big Tech out of it

Governments often still depend on the digital tools and systems of Big Tech, the attraction of which is understandable. The tools are often free to use and work very well. But the data being collected can fall into the wrong hands. The results of political participation must serve the common good, not the revenues of big tech companies. It is better for governments to work together with local market parties. They can build the tools, but not manage them. Citizens have to be able to participate anonymously, without having to worry about their personal data being traded.

4. Provide a formal framework

Participation options need to be formally embedded in the political decision-making process. That means that they need to be followed up and cannot be without consequences. As we saw in one

of the scenarios, you can expect citizens to participate, but if government bodies can then simply ignore the results, that has the opposite effect. The challenge is to be relevant. You can't force citizens to take part. And it is important that governments don't take over control. There always has to be room for citizen initiatives. That also requires trust.

5. Organise participation as a process
We mustn't view political participation as a single act, but as a process. Different levels of participation are interconnected and together can generate change. Citizens have to be able to participate both at the start and at the finish of the political decision-making process. On both national and regional issues. It is important that both former clicktivists and hacktivists feel heard in this. These processes have to be transparent, so that citizens understand why certain aspects take time. All steps and choices have to be clear to everyone.

6. Make inclusivity the norm
Another lesson we have learned from *vTaiwan* is that technology always has to be brought to the people, instead of asking people to come to technology. That means that technology has to be adapted to the user's wishes and requirements, instead of users having to adapt to technology. Customisation is not an option here, but a requirement. There is no 'model citizen'. So that also means that 'one size fits all' doesn't work. Different citizens have different participation needs and those have to be met in different ways. In the digital age, participation must no longer be a luxury product, but a basic provision.

7. Don't place blind trust in technology
To be able to guarantee inclusivity, there always have to be offline ways to participate. Not only for those who aren't able to participate online, but also for those who don't want to. This isn't always about limited skills. People can have other reasons to prefer participating offline. For instance, for privacy reasons or a need for physical interaction. It is dangerous to see technology in that regard as our 'salvation' (or our doom). We can use technology as a tool for progress. But if it turns out not to be the best solution, we also need to have the courage to admit that it is better not to use technology.

8. Be imperfect
The tip from Audrey Tang should also be taken to heart: be imperfect. If you ask a question that is formulated perfectly, nobody will answer it. Give citizens room to submit projects themselves. They are also allowed to be imperfect. The participation process has to be aimed at generating input, so that plans can be improved. If you board everything up at the front end, there will be no support. Citizens have to have shared ownership. That is why we have to design for consensus. It is the government's job to facilitate that.
When I look at the future of digital democracy, I envision a kind of 'Kick-starter model'. But instead of money, it is all about support. Like the crowd-funding platform, citizens can contribute on different levels, and on different subjects. People can vote or show their support for initiatives and projects. People can submit proposals themselves and find allies. If there is insufficient support, a project won't progress. Because the platform is embedded in the decision-making process, that principle also applies to the government's new proposed laws and initiatives. Digital democracy under one umbrella, designed for consensus. People can 'subscribe' to different themes that they consider relevant. Information can be offered in the form of short videos instead of lengthy and complex policy documents. Politicians and civil servants need to do their best to make information available, because otherwise they won't be able to gather enough support. Everything is recorded and streamed. And physical meetings are organised for all initiatives.

I am glad that people like Audrey Tang have already shown in Taiwan that it is possible. I hope that this book will inspire policy-

makers, civil servants, designers and developers to commit to an inclusive and fair digital democracy. And that everyone who reads this will look at the future with different eyes. If we take democracy seriously, we need to organise it for the generations to come. The trick is to see the light in the darkness.

You cannot swim for new horizons until you have courage to lose sight of the shore.

William Faulkner (1897 - 1962)

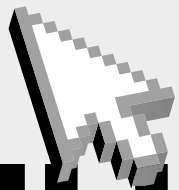
Epilogue

Writing this book has provided me with lots of new insights. At various moments during the research, I was made aware of my own prejudices and biases. It is, after all, not pleasant to be confronted with information that goes against your own convictions and opinions. One way or another, I wanted to believe that fake news is destroying democracy and that young people are indifferent when it comes to democracy. When I visit my brother, his teenage daughters (my nieces) are almost literally glued to their screens. All I see and hear are 'stupid videos' and 'silly dance routines'. But thanks to this research, I know we need to approach them differently if we want to engage them in democracy and political decision-making. While they scroll and swipe aimlessly (in our eyes), they are busy creating their identity and perspective. They are much more critical about new technologies than is often thought. My girlfriend is pregnant at the moment with our first son. I was always a little scared to put another child on this planet in these polarised times, where technology seems to be exaggerating our differences, and tensions continue to increase. But, in part thanks to the insights of this book, I am more hopeful about the future. We agree with each other more than we think. If technology can blow up our differences, it can also reduce them. Look at the examples from Taiwan, where technology was used to reach a consensus. Successfully. It all depends on how we use technology. I am not implying, incidentally, that technology is *the* solution. It is still only a tool (or rather, that's what I think it should remain). Ultimately, it is all about human behaviour and how we relate to each other and to technology. But if we try to create a better world, that world is within reach.

My thanks go out to my college at the Netherlands Study Centre for Technology Trends, especially Patrick van der Duin, who allowed me to turn my hobby into my job. For eighteen months, I was able to immerse myself in a subject that I have been passionate about for so many years: democracy. I thank Evert de Vries of Bot Publishers for his faith in my story. I also thank Yurr Rozenberg for designing the super cool front cover and all illustrations. I thank Franca Gribnau, Eefje Op den Buysch, Carlijn Naber, Maaike Harbers, Linda Li and Monique Steijns for their critical but constructive feedback. Furthermore, I thank the members of my steering group and thinktank for their input. They are listed by name under ‘Research approach’. And I thank my girlfriend Stephanie for her patience and giving me room to write this book. I dedicate this book to my unborn son. I want you to inherit the hopeful world I outline in this book.

THERE IS A CRACK IN EVERYTHING, AND THAT IS HOW THE LIGHT GETS IN.

Leonard Cohen (1934 - 2016)



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Research approach

Usually, the future explorations by the Netherlands Study Centre for Technology Trends (STT) take eighteen months. As a researcher, you are largely given a free hand: you are assigned a social issue and have to map in what way technology can influence its future. In my case democracy. Both 'democracy' and 'technology' are quite the container concepts, which is why the first stage consisted of defining a framework, looking for existing studies and reports, to see what has already been written about the subject and which (missing) approaches there are. Based on desk research and expert interviews, the research becomes more focused over the first few months. In December 2020, I wrote the following problem definition in my research plan:

'Documentaries like *The Great Hack* and *The Social Dilemma* show us that the technology that connects us also monitors, manipulates and polarises us. We know by now that technology is increasingly used to undermine democracy, for instance through the censorship of internet platforms by governments, the use of disinformation to mislead citizens and the increasing monopoly position of Big Tech organisations. The question is to what extent the effect of technology will affect how democratic our future is.

We should, however, not forget that technology is designed by people. It is a design issue. Technology itself is good nor bad, it's about what people do with it. It is time for technology to contribute to the connection for which it was intended. How can we deploy technology in such a way that it protects and reinforces democracy? And who is responsible for that? Is it the users, governments or the platforms themselves? This exploration picks up where documentaries like *The Social Dilemma* left off. We don't just identify

problems, but we also show other perspectives *and* offer alternatives. We don't just look at the impact now, but also at possible future scenarios. By making the future tangible, we can make better-reasoned choices in the present. As such, the design becomes part of the research and provides new insights, which has led to the following central question:

> *How can we use new technologies in such a way that they will protect and reinforce democracy in the future?*

That requires a holistic approach. Both Big Tech and the government, as well as the education sector and citizens together are responsible for this transition, which requires their combined efforts, at a local, national and global level.

The development of the *Technologie Kieswijzer* fits within this design-oriented approach. The aim of that tool was threefold: in addition to helping people orient themselves on tech-related subjects and motivating political parties to be more concrete on those subjects, it has served as a research tool. The results provided me, as a researcher, with a great deal of insight into how Dutch people think about digital technologies and democracy. Inspired by those results, I have focused on digital democracy for the remainder of the research. I have deliberately used the scenario planning method to show that there are several possible future visions, which allow us to make informed choices right now. In light of the subject, I have tried to involve as many people as possible in the research, for instance in the form of an international essay contest among youngsters to map how they feel about the future of democracy. In addition, various experts in the areas of technology and democracy have provided me with their structural input about the design and direction of my research.

Steering group

During the research process, I was supported by a steering group, which included the board members of STT, who represent the board and safeguard the added value for the grassroots. They have provided input about the structure and direction of the research:

Emile Aarts, Professor of Computer Science, Tilburg University
Peter van den Broek, Corporate strategist, Province of Gelderland
Roxane Daniels, Manager Public Values, VNG
Patrick van der Duin, Director, STT
Bernard ter Haar, Special Advisor, Ministry of the Interior
Fred Herrebout, Senior Strategy Manager, T-Mobile
Stefanie Klaassen, Advisor Information, Regional Body SIA
Luca Kuiper, Policy officer, Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Karel Luyben, Rector Magnificus Emeritus, Delft University of Technology
Ferry Smith, Director Public Affairs, ANWB
Tim Toornvliet, Head of Communication, NL Digital

Thinktank

The aim of the research was to come up with new solutions that use technology in such a way as to protect and reinforce democracy, which is why I also set up a think tank of external experts, who provided their input on possible solutions involving new technologies, regulatory frameworks, revenue models and information facilities:

Dylan Ahern, Initiator, De Kiesmannen
Tom Dobber, Post-doctoral Researcher, University of Amsterdam
David Graus, Lead Data Scientist, Randstad
Maaike Harbers, Lector AI & Society, Hogeschool Rotterdam
Lola 't Hart, Programme maker, De Balie
Natali Helberger, Professor of Law and Digital Technology, University of Amsterdam
Ayla Kangur, Machine Learning Engineer, Slimmer AI
Linda Li, Integrity & Safety and Security Coordinator, Dutch Police
Lucas de Man, Founder, Stichting Nieuwe Helden
Tijmen Schep, Privacy Designer, Pineapplejazz Design

Monique Steijns, Scientific assistant, The Netherlands Scientific Council for Government Policy
Amarens Veeneman, Knowledge Coordinator Digital Affairs, Dutch House of Representatives
Barbara Vis, Professor of Politics & Governance, Utrecht University
Jasper Zuure, Senior Advisor, Council for Public Management
Jornt van Zuijlen, Initiator citizen participation, Ministry of the Interior

All of you, thanks for your constructive contributions.

About the author

Rudy van Belkom

Rudy van Belkom (1984) is a futures researcher who speaks and writes about the influence of technology on our society. He believes that the question is not which future we will get, but which future we want. ‘No standard images and talks about drones and robots, but a well-reasoned story that makes people think’, according to one of his clients. At the moment, on behalf of the Netherlands Study Centre for Technology Trends, he is exploring the possible influence of technology on the future of democracy. For the last elections for the Dutch House of Representatives, he developed the *Technologie Kieswijzer*, a special election compass about tech-related subjects like privacy, fake news and the power of Big Tech, which drew a great deal of attention. In addition to interviews for the *Algemeen Dagblad*, *BNR* and *Nieuwsuur*, he was mentioned in the satirical TV programme *Zondag met Lubach* and published opinion pieces in *Het Parool*. No fewer than 30,000 people used the election support tool. The insights they provided formed the basis for this book. Earlier, on behalf of the Netherlands Study Centre for Technology Trends, he examined the future of artificial intelligence (AI). As part of that research, he produced three publications (Including *AI no longer has a plug*) and developed an ethnical design game for AI (*Ethics Inc.*).

About the Netherlands Study Centre for Technology Trends

The Netherlands Study Centre for Technology Trends (STT) is an independent foundation, founded in 1968 by the Royal Netherlands Society of Engineers (KIVI). For more than 50 years, STT has been conducting (domain-transcending and interdisciplinary) research on the crossroads of technology and society.

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