Book Review: Digital Technology and Democratic Theory edited by Lucy Bernholz, Hélène Landemore and Rob Reich

In **Digital Technology and Democratic Theory**, *editors* **Lucy Bernholz**, **Hélène Landemore** *and* **Rob Reich** *bring together contributors to explore how new digital technologies are reshaping our understanding of democracy and democratic theory. This original and important contribution promotes cross-disciplinary scholarship on questions of democracy in the digital age, writes* **Rahel Süß***.*

Digital Technology and Democratic Theory. **Lucy Bernholz, Hélène Landemore and Rob Reich (eds).** **University of Chicago Press. 2021.**

How do new digital technologies shape and reshape our understanding of democracy and democratic theory? Current discussions about the domination of global platforms reveal the need to engage with this question more thoroughly. By any measure, the edited volume *[Digital Technology and Democratic Theory](#)* is an important contribution to a field previously overlooked by democratic theorists. In an age in which digital environments create new barriers to equal rights and political participation, the volume carefully assembles an array of cross-disciplinary perspectives and asks the question: is there a need for a digital democratic theory?

Much has been written about the democratic challenges brought by new digital technologies. While scholars of race and technology studies, media studies and critical algorithms studies have been researching the effects for some time, the silence of democratic theorists is puzzling. The urgency and directness of *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory* — edited by Lucy Bernholz, Hélène Landemore and Rob Reich — attempts to end this silence. The central aim of the volume is threefold: firstly, exploring the political consequences of digital technologies; secondly, enriching our understanding of the limits and possibilities of the deployment of digital technologies in the political realm; and thirdly, investigating how democratic governance might support the design of new technological objects and infrastructures.

Digital Technology and Democratic Theory is an original work, covering a range of different concepts and practices with notable precision. While some scholars aspire to use digital technologies to enhance e-voting or move beyond the nation state to globalise democratic governance, others underscore the need for online deliberation and the crowdsourcing of civic expertise and judgment. Still others promote the ideas of technologically empowered forms of non-elected democratic representation or regulative reforms such as open-data and transparency initiatives, a 'data tax' and democratic currencies.
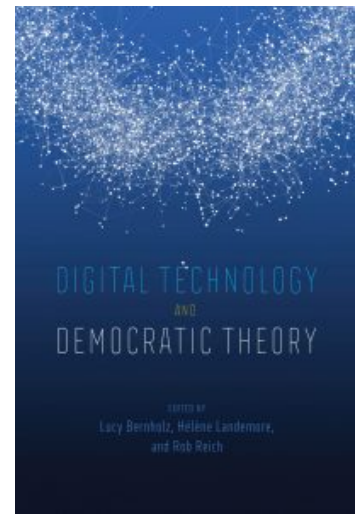
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Conceptually, the book hovers between a Habermasian paradigm of deliberative democracy, a pragmatist's lineage, the Schumpeterian model of democracy and participatory and direct forms of democracy. Some contributors to the volume analyse the intersection between democratic theory and digital technology mostly through the lens of procedural fairness while others emphasise the importance of outcome quality. Others again focus on the informational conditions of a healthy digital public sphere or aspire to (re-)define citizenship beyond the sporadic activation of citizens as voters.

The volume dwells longest on the possibility of a digital public sphere. Following the footsteps of Jürgen Habermas, in their chapter 'Democracy and the Digital Political Sphere' Joshua Cohen and Archon Fung, for example, characterise the overarching political problem as an erosion of reason in public life. The ideal of democratic society which combines 'mass democracy and public reasoning' (27) becomes undermined, they claim, by powerful private corporations, online harassment, censorship, affective polarisation and homogeneous information spaces. As suggested by the authors, attempts at building a more democratic digital public sphere must be attentive to 'regulating speech and powerful private corporations; the productions of high-quality information, privacy and security; and the creation of a civic culture of responsible, democracy-reinforcing behaviour' (43).

In Chapter Two, 'Open Democracy and Digital Technologies', Landemore makes a strong point of asking how representative democracy could be reinvented with the help of new digital technologies (65). What interests her primarily is the question of how the key institutional principles of her new model of 'open democracy' can be facilitated using digital technologies. While her idea of 'openness' refers to citizens having general access to power, the key principles of open democracy comprise 'participatory rights, deliberation, the majoritarian principle, democratic representation, and transparency' (7). For Landemore, digital technology can advance open democracy because those technologies (namely, augmented reality tools) can enable much larger meetings 'of disembodied or reembodied (using pseudonym or avatars) individuals' (73). It can further facilitate so-called 'mini-publics' that gather a 'random sample of the entire demos' (74) for deliberative exchanges.

In the chapter 'Democratic Societal Collaboration in a Whitewater World', David Lee, Margaret Levi and John Seely Brown convincingly explore the potential of digital technologies for scaling collaborative problem-solving. Seen through the lens of John Dewey's model of democratic experimentalism, they understand 'civil society as a collective problem-solving endeavor and democracy as a form of self-governance' (223) that enhances opportunities for civic learning and crowdsourced problem-solving.

Although the editors are right to point out that *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory* is just the beginning of a scholarly conversation, there is a significant problem with the volume. How power is embedded in new digital technologies is understudied. Though the volume hints at the ways digital technologies might affect the balance of power, for example, between experts and others as well as corporations and the state, it could have benefitted from more nuanced exploration of power dynamics. Lacking therefore is any sense of what the democratic problem in the digital age entails beyond concerns of transparency, accountability and legitimacy.

Undoubtedly, much excellent work has been conducted by the contributors to the volume on the deployment of new digital technologies in the political realm. While rendering digital technologies accountable and legible has come to be seen as the most efficient means of re-establishing democratic control, validating truth and the public good, the volume overlooks forms of power that constitute those technologies in their ownership, design and control. According to Cohen and Fung, for example, 'internet companies should help users behave as citizens by designing their platforms to foster participants' democratic orientation' (50).

While there is much to recommend in what deliberative and regulative strategies can and ought to achieve, privacy regulations and increased participation in the creation of data and processes of datafication don't go far enough. Democratic theorists also need to engage with the social and technical conditions under which digital technologies emerge and operate. The key task of scholarly work can't be limited to exploring the informational conditions of a healthy public sphere and infrastructure of civil society, as suggested in the introduction to this volume. Given that democracy and new digital technologies are twin objects of deep, though ambivalent, attachment in the contemporary liberal imagination, the task for democratic theorists must also expand in two ways: firstly, by understanding both terms — democracy and digitalisation — through the other; and secondly, by asking how liberal ideas shape and limit the way we think of both democracy and digitalisation.

Liberal democrats imagine digital technology through their understanding of democracy, and increasingly understand democracy through their encounter with technology. For example, scholars imagining digital technologies as democratic often raise the question of how those technologies can help in realising democratic ideals of inclusion and equality. What gets insufficient attention in *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory*, however, are the ways that those ideals are lodged within a long history of violence and exploitation. Thus, instead of turning a blind eye to the limits of democratic ideals, any call for designing democratic norms directly into algorithmic systems must come to terms with the ways those norms have often served to legitimise specific political settlements — granting a certain freedom to those who are well-represented by those norms, while eradicating the experiences of others.

To conclude, *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory* is an important contribution to a rapidly emerging field. The original potential of the volume lies in promoting cross-disciplinary scholarship on questions of democracy in the digital age. Thus, for scholars and students of a variety of disciplines including media studies, social science and the humanities, as well as engineers, the volume is essential reading.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics and Political Science.