Book Review: Accelerating Democracy: Transforming Governance through Technology

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John O. McGinnis demonstrates how new technologies combine to address a problem as old as democracy itself: how to help citizens better evaluate the consequences of their political choices. Ana Polo Alonso thinks we can support or dismiss McGinnis's proposals, but we cannot deny that the author makes a major effort to bring forth ingenious measures to really 'accelerate democracy.'

Accelerating Democracy: Transforming Governance through Technology. John O. McGinnis. Princeton University Press. December 2012.

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James Madison once wrote that "a popular government, without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both". This quotation showcases that the strive for acquiring sound and reliable information to sustain political action is not a new one –actually, it proves it is as old as democracy itself, albeit it still remains a goal to be fully accomplished.

In order to fill up this historic "knowledge gap", John O. McGinnis, the George C. Dix Professor of Constitutional Law at Northwestern University, proposes in his book *Accelerating Democracy* innovative measures to unleash the full potential of current technological breakthroughs with the aim of improving the way information is generated, gathered, and shared.

McGinnis believes that nowadays, in a world beset with incertitude, financial turmoil, and major historic challenges, it is imperative to spur shrewder policy deliberations. Therefore, he staunchly advocates for putting a major emphasis on empirical, fact-checked arguments instead of relying upon the raucous, parochial, quarreling –and often unsubstantiated—voices that vastly dominate current political debates.

To achieve this, he strongly supports the creation of a more favourable environment for information to flow smoothly –a scenario where researchers could more easily expose their findings to the general public, where policymakers could quickly acquire reliable information, and where citizens could become more knowledgeable about public issues at a greater speed.

Technological advancements, McGinnis posits, can make this scenario possible. As he exhaustively details, the steady increase in computer processing power now allows the storage of almost endless volumes of data, as well as the use of more sophisticated statistical and mathematical tools to analyse them. On the other hand, the Internet enormously facilitates the access to and the spread of new knowledge, while new media sites and online platforms dutifully aggregate information scattered through billions of websites, and makes it easy to digest.

Why then, McGinnis questions himself, are we not yet harnessing the full potential of these advances to raise the quality of political debates, enhance government efficiency, and improve policymaking?

In this book, McGinnis proposes innovative measures for government to embrace the opportunities that technological advancements offer. And it is important to underscore the word innovative here –-for while it is true that many efforts have been already deployed to achieve the same goal, and that thousands of books and academic papers are rife with proposals, they all tend to revolve around the same catalogue of recommendations. Hence the importance of *Accelerating Democracy*: it takes a step forward, and complements previous attempts with new ideas.

The most interesting idea –and often overlooked in books addressing the same issue– is undoubtedly the use of online political prediction markets to better forecast the consequences of any given policy proposal. This is an option that is currently illegal in the United States (authorities consider they don't trade anything tangible), but the author considers that they should be, not only immediately legalise, but also promoted.

As McGinnis explains in great detail, political prediction markets are platforms that "allow the public to speculate on election and policy outcomes". Based on the idea that James Surowiecki popularized in his 2004 best-selling *The Wisdom of Crowds* –- that a group of independently-thinking individuals can make better predictions than experts — McGinnis considers that these political prediction markets can aggregate vast sums of information from a vast array of individuals, and thus they can perfectly serve to assess "the likely effects of policies before they are implemented" (p. 60).

Although for many people this idea could seem like gambling on serious issues, the author is adamant in his praise of the multiple benefits of prediction markets: with a wide array of studies, he proves that they are very efficient, immune to manipulation, and that they can quickly incorporate new knowledge.

Just to single out one example, the already operating platforms that allow people to forecast the outcome of political contests have already demonstrated that these beneficial features are true. Take into account, for instance, Intrade, an Irish-based prediction market that famously and accurately forecasted the results of the presidential election in 2012. Or the IOWA Electronic Market, run by the University of Iowa for academic purposes only, and which has more accurately predicted elections than Gallup polls for decades.

Actually, as surprising as it might seem, recent scholarly studies agree with McGinnis's view. In the last years, a lot of research has been conducted in order to test predictive market's reliability and efficiency, and results so far almost overwhelmingly confirm both of them. For example, work done by Erik Snowberg (Caltech), Justin Wolfers (Wharton-UPenn), and Eric Zitzewitz (Dartmouth) has demonstrated that prediction markets exhibit lower statistical mistakes than professional polls.

Yet it is important to underscore that research also says that predictive markets are efficient and reliable only when a number of conditions concur (basically, when there is a great number of people operating). I am afraid that it is dubious that people would get interested in participating unless there is a much-vaunted event to gamble about (such an immediate presidential contest).

On the other hand, as some scholarly voices have already pointed out, these markets operate well when there are clearly-defined options (like option A and B), but nonetheless the reliability of predictive markets is still to be tested when there is no clear solution, and where optimal results are difficult to gauge.

With all their advantages and pitfalls, tough, one would have to agree with McGinnis that predictive markets should be taken into consideration. Actually, we have to give him credit for widening the spectrum of technological possibilities. You can support or dismiss his proposals, but you cannot deny that the author makes a major effort to bring forth ingenious measures to really "accelerate democracy". Thus, this provocative book is worth reading for everybody interested in improving policymaking, or all those willing to explore new ways to help citizens through a more efficient use of technology.

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Ana Polo Alonso is a speechwriter and political adviser. She holds a BSc in Political Science from the Pompeu Fabra University (Barcelona), and a MA in Public Administration from Pompeu Fabra-ESADE. She also studied Marketing and Branding at the New York University, Project Management at Stanford, and specialized in Digital Marketing at Instituto de la Empresa (IE) Business School. Ana served as Responsible for Communications at the Women's World Forum, and has collaborated with International Organizations to develop advocacy strategies. She was also Lecturer of Marketing at ESERP Business School, and taught Branding at the International MBA held at Staffordshire University-ESERP in Barcelona. She is currently finishing her first book, focused on the history of US Presidential campaigns. Read more reviews by Ana.