Future of **Democracy**

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Media **Literacy**

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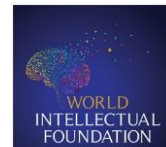
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Table of Contents

Social media sabotaging democracy

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Social media is distorting democratic institutions. Earlier, the 'ruled' needed safety and security, and now, the 'rulers' need safety and security. So, the power objectives and structures are inverted for grabbing power and aided by the internet and social media tools, and it is far easier but dangerous in the long run.

SOCIAL MEDIA SABOTAGING DEMOCRACY

| Prof. Rajendra Pratap Gupta

In pre-historic times, it was a case of equals, as everyone lived and found ways to survive. With every sunrise, people had two key goals; find food to survive and avoid becoming food of the wild, and this perhaps continued for thousands of years. For humans, this age was perhaps the most equal as a society, driven by instincts for safety and survival. There was no governance, no administration; it was indeed a democratic society sans leaders or philosophers with everyone equally living for existence!

With time passing, the population grew, so did the need and the greed, and people started not just finding ways and means to become safe by finding shelter but also securing their food and other basic needs. Then, it was about controlling a geographic area for consuming resources and confining the daily living, which might have led to starting families, hunting and staying together, which gave better chances for survival and safety as a 'collective unit'. In these times, those who were physically powerful had more say, and ruled.

Over time, the system of communities grew, and the community head became the leader or the Chieftain. Things kept progressing, and later, kings, order of armies, and proletariat came into existence. This institution of kings and kingdoms continued for thousands of years, and even, exist today in the form of monarchies in a few countries.

| Prof. Rajendra Pratap Gupta

Democracy

The Greek word 'democracy' is a combination of two words: 'demos' meaning whole citizen living within a particular city-state and 'Kratos meaning power or rule (National Geographic Society, 2019). Origins of Democracy can be traced back to Athens about 2500 years ago and so, it is the newest form of governance and the longest documented form of political administration. So far, democracy has remained the best model of government where the elected ruled the electorate, and it was considered fair with equality of rights.

During his address at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, President Lincoln defined Democracy as the "government of the people, by the people, for the people." We have continued with this institution for a long, and it seems that it works for the people and is egalitarian in principle. Even though, inequalities are increasing with each decade, I'm not certain if the democratic system has improved the basic governance model of delivering 'public welfare' in reality.

Nowadays, the political parties rely on the weapon, wealth, or manipulation of the agendas to capture votes and win elections. This is beautifully summed up in this old quote, *'Politics is the means of extracting money from the rich and votes from the poor at the pretext of protecting each from the other.'* When we look at the increasing divide amongst the 'haves' and the 'have nots', this is what politics has turned Democracy into! It is now a means of misleading the masses based on oratory and

half-truths or lies. Lying is a tool of the statecraft (Mearsheimer, 2011), and disinformation is deforming democracies aided by powerful digital tools.

Leadership

Democracy was not only an institution to run the government but also a system that created leadership. Earlier, the leaders worked at the grass-roots level to win elections by voting, and voters chose them based on their public service, either witnessing them or hearing about their work within their network. The population was significantly smaller, and so, the 'Servant Leadership' took off. However, with time, the corporatization of politics has taken place, now it is no more a social good and service, and politics has transformed into to a market-driven for-profit model. Politicians are backed by investors (lobbyists or vested interests) and are a marketable and tradeable commodity. Politics is about branding, marketing, sales, profit, and staying ahead of the competition, and winning in the 'electorate marketplace.' There are professional managers and companies which handle political strategy and election management.

Due to the increasing divide and fissures in society because of the widening chasms and sectarian conflicts in society, politicians started exploiting the sentiments and using divisive politics to divide and win. In the process, they used businessmen and anti-social elements to raise money to gratify voters and to flex muscle to grab votes. This has been in practice for decades. Those who were used as pawns earlier to extract

| Prof. Rajendra Pratap Gupta

money and grab the votes have thrown their hat in the ring, and instead of working for their masters, they are the new masters! Elections are moving to power brokers who are themselves becoming powerful enough to join mainstream politics. So, the politics have moved up, and the democracy has slid downward with unscrupulous elements who were earlier supporting from behind the scenes started becoming politicians themselves. With the latest technology tools at their disposal, it would not be wrong to conclude that Democracy is in a freefall.

Our era

In the 21st century, the rise of the internet and the prominence of the virtual world has been phenomenal. Its impact on our daily lives, and the fundamentals of governance is undergoing a paradigm shift with every passing election. Various platforms of the internet shadow people on digital real estate and bombard them with information that might be manipulated. Most importantly, the virtual world now understands a person's likes and dislikes more than their immediate family members. Cookies on our browsers, hidden programs, and malware always keep track of our moves. I have seen Alexa, Google Home, and Siri suddenly responding to a family conversation despite being in 'off mode', and this proves that the most sophisticated spies are around us all the time. All we are sharing over email and phone calls is being tracked and monitored.

SOCIAL MEDIA SABOTAGING DEMOCRACY

| Prof. Rajendra Pratap Gupta

If we consider the developments, the writing is on the wall that privacy and Democracy are have suffered a near-fatal attack with the emergence of social media.

Politics affected

The Russian meddling in the U.S. Elections is not an old story. The statement from the Senate committee reads, *"The Internet Research Agency—an entity with ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin—used social media to sow disinformation and discord among the American electorate, And, as this report makes clear, individuals affiliated with the Russian government launched cyber operations that attempted to access our nation's election infrastructure, in some cases succeeding."* (Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate).

In the 2020 US Elections, as stated by senior data scientist at Facebook, 'instead of users choosing to receive content from these actors, it is our platform that is choosing to give (these troll farms) an enormous reach'. And this content reached almost half of the US population (Hao, 2021).

Facebook paid a considerable sum (USD 5 Bn) to U.S. Federal Trade Commission to settle the data scandal related to Cambridge Analytics (Clayton, 2021). Cambridge Analytica scandal had brought to light how the data of millions of Facebook users was

used in the Donald Trump Campaign to profile voters to target them (Confessore, 2018).

Role of Twitter in hate crimes has been researched. In the U.K., the Woolwich attack (2013) against a section of the society was fuelled by twitter and this leads us to the fact that online abuse and violence can be equated to street level abuse and violence (Awan, 2014), and the reality is, that the online violence can amplify and spread hate violence faster than the street violence.

Twitter sets the political agenda and influence the key opinion leaders (influencers) and shapes the new politics' race to the bottom (Hinsliff, 2016) amplifying the extreme political rhetoric, and this may lead to pushing inflammatory political rhetoric, misinformation, conspiracy theories and lies. YouTube's algorithms have pushed fringe content to its subscribers and helped in radicalizing them (Darcy, 2019).

The sights of violence on Capitol Hill are still fresh in memory. The Facebook whistleblower – has stated that the – Facebook was used to fuel violence to mount an on-attack Capitol Hill (Clayton, 2021), and this was intended to scuttle democratic institutions and duly elected governments. Francis Haugen, the another whistleblower from Facebook who has taken the world by storm, testified before the British Parliament that the social media giant would promote more unrest and divisiveness because of the way its algorithms work. Haugen stated that the social media giant was making things worse regarding hate (Collins, et al., 2021) (Reuters, 2021).

| **Prof. Rajendra Pratap Gupta**

On WhatsApp it harder to track and contain rumours, which has contributed to fake news and even mob deaths (Samuels, 2020).The latest Pegasus episode has revealed how the phones were hacked using spy software to keep a watch on political opponents (Lakhanai, et al., 2021).

Action needed

With lesser time in the hands of people given the volume of information being pushed through the internet, people are just browsing information at a superficial level, seeing, and believing what is available in the virtual world. 99% of the people browsing the net have no appetite for dissecting data and getting into the bottom of the truth; what is seen is believed. With deep fakes becoming a reality, it will be easy to influence the voters and malign the opponents. Elections will not be about one's hard work or image but about damaging the opponents and building narratives. Earlier, it was seeing and believing, and now it is reading and believing, which is a big shift and an adversary for a democratic system.

It is no more just about the actual work at the ground. It is the work in the virtual world in the 'internet age.' It will be no more about bottom-up leadership. Elections and democracies are increasingly getting in the hands of power brokers and career politicians who have made Democracy and elections a façade to fool the public and

SOCIAL MEDIA SABOTAGING DEMOCRACY

| Prof. Rajendra Pratap Gupta

usurp institutions to remain in power using social media. The more social media gets closer to politics, the more politics get disconnected from reality(democracy).

It is a fact that the concept and practice of Democracy have undergone a massive change. While in every sector, technology is removing the 'middlemen' and making life easier. But in politics, technology acts as a middleman, and creates a filter and amplifies the lies politicians want to push through their electorate. It is not surprising to find the social media accounts of global leaders being suspended or removed, or countries banning twitter (Africa's most populous country Nigeria, banned Twitter for deleting their President's tweet in June 2021).

When Aristotle propounded whether people should be ruled by the best leaders or the best laws, he concluded that it was better to be ruled by the best laws. If we connect this with the thoughts of the French philosopher Montesquieu, who said in the 17th century that 'without strong public virtue, a democratic republic is likely to be destroyed by a conflict between various "factions," each pursuing its narrow interests at the expense of the broader public good.' Today, we have another dimension: the 'social media platforms' in addition to factions.

The Genevan philosopher Rousseau believed that Democracy is incompatible with representative institutions, which renders it all but irrelevant. When we look at the recent whistleblower's leaks on keeping profits above people's welfare and

SOCIAL MEDIA SABOTAGING DEMOCRACY

| Prof. Rajendra Pratap Gupta

encouraging divisive agenda, if social media existed during Rousseau's time, he would have written 'social media' instead of 'representative institutions!

Due to the proliferation of social media, elections have become a referendum on virtual perceptions and social media has been used to deflect attention from critical issues (Lewandowsky, Jetter, & Ecker) and to push for false narratives. Over the years, the nexus between social media, unscrupulous elements have become inseparable when it comes to political campaigning and results. A few decades ago, social workers and ground-level political workers rose and won elections, and now it is the people who manage and muddle social media that end up winning. The social media platform threatens the legitimacy of the choices available for the people to exercise their franchise for a successful democratic setup.

The proliferation and abuse of social media have subverted the very fundamentals of the democratic process. Social media is a potent tool for creating political perceptions, thereby influencing the polarization of the masses, and deciding the swing of voters in favour of the social media hype. Thereby failing the concept of 'Servant leadership' and replacing it with 'Celebrity Leadership' by convincing the electorates to vote in favour of a particular narrative or personality through the mass bombing of information (Gupta, 2021). Also, there is enough research available to prove people's appetite for accepting negative news. Social media will be used to disrupt elections in favour of powerful manipulators. It is right to conclude that social media is subverting and sabotaging, and inflicting a nearly fatal blow to the time-tested model of Democracy

SOCIAL MEDIA SABOTAGING DEMOCRACY

| **Prof. Rajendra Pratap Gupta**

Democracy 2.0

Press, which was referred to as the fourth estate, is now being replaced by social media. Manipulations existed in traditional media as well (Chiang & Knight, 2011), but social media has taken the manipulations to a new level. Given the vast influence of social media over the masses, I would call it the psychological media. A few years ago, at the LitFest, I said that the time is not far when social media giants will become the news channels, and things are becoming apparent as time passes. Social media uses its ubiquitous presence not to ;cover' but 'create news,' which is dangerous for Democracy. It is not just about amplification; it is about manipulation. A few weeks ago, a leading global tycoon lost fifteen billion dollars for a single tweet. If we understand the impact of such actions on nations, it could lead to wars or have a much more profound influence on the future of nations (Gupta, 2021).

In the earliest times, everyone worked, and no one ruled, then the orders of kings came and they ruled, then came the age when the leaders were made through democratic process, and now, manipulated democracies are at work.

Aristotle wrote in his epic book 'The Politics' that the struggle between classes was reflected either by the Oligarchy (a government of the rich) and Democracy (a government of the poor) (Ellis, 2021). Now, with the likes of Facebook planning to diversify and position itself beyond social media (Newton, 2021) to metaverse (Grimshaw, 2014) we might well be moving to Oligarchy in the guise of Democracy

SOCIAL MEDIA SABOTAGING DEMOCRACY

| Prof. Rajendra Pratap Gupta

given the political clout of social media giants with the influence (power) moving in the hands of few such corporations.

"The old order changeth yielding place to new And God fulfills himself in many ways Lest one good custom should corrupt the world," said Alfred, Lord Tennyson. The existing social media-influenced democratic order needs to be changed to stop the corrupt practices. It is time to ignite the discourse on Democracy in the age of social media - the democracy 2.0.

Prof. Rajendra Pratap Gupta

The Future of Democracy
GOVERNMENTS' FIGHT AGAINST TECHNOLOGY GIANTS
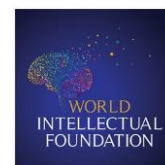
• **Sabina Inderjit** - Director of the Indian news agency INFA and Vice President of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ);

• **Dr. James B. Baty** - member of the Advisory Board of Directors of the US Capital Global fund

• **Supreet Singh Manchanda** - investor and president of one of the funds in the American Silicon Valley.

• **Dr. Malgorzata Bonikowska**, President, CIR

New media and instant messaging apps have taken over our professional, social and even political life. We are permanently connected, and when we are offline for a while, we feel uncomfortable. When recently Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram (owned by the same company) crashed for hours, the entire world froze. Modern technologies not only break away from traditional classifications, but are out of control as well. These have become an autonomous system, a "state within a state", which seem not to be able to promptly address irregularities taking place within their structures. At the same time, technological giants have gained power greater than the governments of many countries. By arbitrarily deciding who may access Facebook or Twitter, they can send even political leaders of the greatest powers into oblivion as experienced by, among others, President Trump.

THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY
GOVERNMENTS' FIGHT AGAINST TECHNOLOGY GIANTS

| Sabina Inderjit, Dr. James B. Baty, Supreet Singh Manchanda, Dr. Malgorzata Bonikowska

New media and instant messaging apps have taken over our professional, social and even political life. We are permanently connected, and when we are offline for a while, we feel uncomfortable. When recently Facebook, Whatsapp and Instagram (owned by the same company) crashed for hours, the entire world froze. Modern technologies not only break away from traditional classifications, but are out of control as well. These have become an autonomous system, a "state within a state", which seem not to be able to promptly address irregularities taking place within their structures. At the same time, technological giants have gained power greater than the governments of many countries. By arbitrarily deciding who may access Facebook or Twitter, they can send even political leaders of the greatest powers into oblivion as experienced by, among others, President Trump.

Information gained a completely new dimension and at the same time mass disinformation emerged, polluting the Internet, just like greenhouse gases pollute the environment. Apart of the cloud of dust and ozone holes that cause climate change on Earth, we have a "lie cloud" infecting democracy.

How to deal with the growing challenges of the digital age, fake news, power of new technology companies and the efforts of governments to control the content published on the Web? What exactly is social media, how to treat it? Is it media - so should it be responsible for what is published there? Or maybe these are business ventures - so their monopoly or dominant position should be legally restricted, or even completely limited, e.g. by division? Or maybe these are just neutral communication platforms,

which cannot be blamed for the content posted there - so we need to create a system of regulations and "traffic rules", for the breach of which Internet users should be held accountable by the judiciary?

Nature of the social media

We cannot treat social media on a par with traditional media, because it functions in a completely different way. Professional journalists and publishers are legally responsible for what they publish and can be sued. They are also bound by the code of ethics, rules related to the practice of this profession and regulations related to the operation of the media market, such as licenses. Meanwhile, all this is not on the Internet. By posting comments, articles or other content on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, an internet user does not immediately become a journalist. They are often anonymous and feel completely safe against any legal sanctions. Meanwhile, professional media is there to inform the public, to check authorities and thus to strengthen democracy. Journalism is not only a profession - but also a mission.

Social media had originated as IT projects, it developed commercialization skills and at the same time took on the characteristics of media, so it became hybrid. Today it is communication channels, media and companies - all at once, a kind of three-dimensional reality. That is why it is so difficult for lawmakers to approach them, because the regulator wants to know who and what regulates. The public sphere needs

clear definitions and categories, and so far technological giants are escaping this.

Consequences for democracy

Actions of technological giants have a huge impact on people and politics at all levels - from the personal, through local and national to global. Social media increases transparency and access to information for citizens, but simultaneously is a high risk factor for democracy, bringing information chaos and destabilization of the system. In addition, technology continues to evolve rapidly, and new internet ventures, applications, instant messaging and algorithms are constantly being developed. This means that even scientists and analysts cannot keep up with it, let alone the public. The law created by a regulator is already outdated when it comes into force and lawyers, officials and politicians often do not fully grasp the nuances of the Internet world or the digital market, and how these work. This is a big issue because it is difficult to set up good rules for something you have a poor understanding of.

In 1992, Francis Fukuyama argued that we were at the end of history and that liberal democracy had won the confrontation with authoritarianism. Today, democracy is again at an impasse, gnawed at by authoritarian regimes that use technology and the Internet to manipulate, disinform and destabilize. In March 2021, the governments of Germany, Denmark, Finland and Estonia made an appeal to the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, to accelerate the digital transformation

THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY
GOVERNMENTS' FIGHT AGAINST TECHNOLOGY GIANTS
| **Sabina Inderjit, Dr. James B. Baty, Supreet Singh Manchanda, Dr. Malgorzata Bonikowska**

and increase the European Union's ability to make rules and regulations on the Internet. The problem is that even if Europe manages to find the best way to do so, these decisions will not extend to other parts of the world.

We are in an unfortunate position because we have to apply old labels to completely new phenomena. Innovative technologies in the communication and media industry were created to enable better connectivity between as many people as possible, and consequently - helped to increase the activity of citizens and strengthen social dialogue. But all at once, they also opened up the possibility of speaking to everyone and in any way, which contributed to the deepening of polarization, the radicalization of the language of public debate and the rise of hate speech.

Like a knife, information and communication technologies have two sides. They can cut bread, but they can also hurt and even kill. I myself invest in this type of projects, because I believe that it is not only a business, but also a tool to fix the world, provided that we use it wisely. Billions of people can communicate globally today, and geographic boundaries and distances have become meaningless. It is a great value. We would not have survived a pandemic without technology. But the internet and algorithms have also opened us up to cyber threats and information manipulation on an unprecedented scale. That is why I believe that we are entering a new stage in the development of society, into an era of digital human rights and the creation of a system of accountability for what goes online.

GOVERNMENTS' FIGHT AGAINST TECHNOLOGY GIANTS

| Sabina Inderjit, Dr. James B. Baty, Supreet Singh Manchanda, Dr. Malgorzata Bonikowska

There is undoubtedly a need for self-regulation by companies such as Facebook and Twitter. But also the State should introduce rules, acting in concert with international organizations, such as, for example, the International Telecommunications Union, the United Nations or the European Union. In the transatlantic space, Brussels and Washington should cooperate in this regard. It is not only about protection against cyber-attacks or abuses, but also about defending liberal democracy. The European Union is already at the fore in the protection of privacy and personal data, the best example of which is the GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), which has become a valued model of international cooperation in the field of data protection. Now we need a model to protect digital human rights.

Fighting disinformation

This is important especially in the context of democratic countries where politics is based on the will of citizens expressed, among others, in free elections. Citizens, on the other hand, are constantly bombarded with content of varying value. The contemporary plague is "Internet illiteracy", that is, susceptibility to half-truths and misinformation and the inability to think critically.

Technological development in the telecommunications and media industry is already so advanced that an individual cannot do anything about disinformation on his own. We will not win against algorithms, especially since we usually have no idea about

their existence, because they operate in an invisible way. In addition, the digital environment is becoming more and more autonomous which makes fact-checking difficult. The struggle against disinformation came from the social media itself and partly from the state.

Currently, there are quite effective ways to increase security on the Web. One of them is a wider use of identity certificates, which can facilitate the elimination of fake news. In terms of the fight against information manipulation, journalists' organizations can play an important role in ensuring reliability in communication. It is not only about helping you identify the real news, but also about meeting new challenges.

This can be compared to the fight against pollution that is causing global warming. Disinformation is the dirt on the internet that fools people. It spreads chaos in the virtual world, but also affects our psyche in the real world. At the same time, however, we observe an interesting trend: many journalists are moving away from traditional media and publishing directly on social media. This phenomenon can improve the quality of news and increase the credibility of information available on the Web. In addition, in order to deal with the above-mentioned flood of information more easily, one should perhaps consider separating the communication component of large corporations offering instant messaging from journalism and advertising.

Governments obviously want to manage information and control its flow, organize it. On the other hand, citizens want access to uncensored information. It's perfectly

normal, but there is a problem of dealing with disinformation related to this dichotomy of expectations. The issue of creating and disseminating false information on the Web must be solved in a systemic manner. This is the only real and rational possibility. I believe that with time a system will be created under which people or institutions publishing fake news will bear financial consequences. It would be a good solution. An age-old problem, of course, is how to set limits on what may and may not be published. And we will have to find effective ways to earn money by publishing the truth, because so far we have found that publishing lies attracts more people's attention and, unfortunately, is more profitable in terms of business.

This raises an important question of how far platforms can go in removing content - both on their own initiative and under pressure from outside. For example, in my country, India, the government has the tools to influence traditional media and now wants to have more control over social media. It is not so much about protecting citizens as about censoring content that does not suit the authorities. So we currently have a conflict between the government and Twitter which has blocked the accounts of some ministers but does not want to block - despite the request from the authorities - activists who report, for example, about the disastrous state of health services during the pandemic.

Therefore, attempts to regulate social media from above must be fair. The government must not create laws restricting new media to limit democracy and freedom of speech. They have to block accounts and delete posts that harm social harmony or state

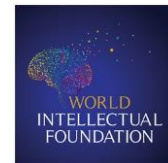security, but they should not act against citizens who disagree with the government. The best solution would be to appoint an Ombudsman for Citizens' Rights on the Internet. Professional collegial bodies for digital platforms could also play an important role. Surely, there needs to be fact-checking in social media itself, but the way that content is verified needs to be transparent and clear.

Media Literacy

HOW TO GET THERE IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES?

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Voices are becoming loud to regulate social media and other digital communication platforms. Under pressure, Facebook, Twitter, Google, and others are putting in place measures to minimize misuse of their platforms, but the White House of the United States and some other influencers believe that self-regulation by social media organizations is not yielding desired results. The fear of seeking a solution through an over-restrictive regulatory regime is that it would freeze free speech, which will turn out to be counterproductive for nations heading towards greater techno-globalism.

The media reach out, due to amplification from social media platforms, is on a boom. Literacy about media and information, on the other hand, is witnessing a sharp decline if it's not at its lowest ebb. More so, a parallel narrative blowing across nations is that a literate may not necessarily be media literate as well. This paradox itself advocates a more significant push for media and information literacy.

WHISTBLOWERS

Whistleblower Frances Haungen's disclosure on an American channel about the worrying and alarming conduct of Facebook brings out two things. Foremost is the questionable intent to overlook public harm for profit and growth. The leaked tranches of Facebook internal documents and subsequent revelation by the company's former product manger Haungen indicate profiteering was at the cost of rights of millions of subscribers across the globe. 'There were conflicts of interest between what was good for the public and what was good for Facebook' - Haugen told CNN. At the same time, she asserted the social media behemoth 'chose to optimize for its own interests, like making more money'. (Duffy, 2021).

And the second is how long can Facebook and other online entities indulge in such infringing practices devoid of any sense of accountability? The rights to life and liberty as well as to freedom of expression cannot be exercised without invoking other principles of democracy. Social media platforms seek legitimacy of their operations because of the right

to express, which includes the right to inform and get informed. With the sheer limitation of algorithms, social media end up being party to disinformation or misinformation campaigns that contravene the right to freedom of expression. The informal social contract that exists through cyberspace engagement - between social media, governments, and users - is prejudiced mainly against the people.

Facebook, Twitter, Google, YouTube, and other data oligarchs seek personal information in the form of preferences, opinions, and ideologies and leave algorithms and artificial intelligence to do the jobs responsibly. The governments world over are trying to technologically regulate social media, keeping society and nations' interests in mind. Owners of information, which are people, do not have control over their intangible assets. People are being encouraged to hand over their responsibility to e-platforms that suffer from inherent inequality and bias. Conversely, machines are becoming intelligent to work like human brains and behave like human beings to display emotions and feelings -- as an improvised alternative for much faster and precise decision-making abilities.

E-GOVERNANCE TO LEARN FROM DEMOCRACY

So, how democratic is the online governance structure? Explaining the recent trend on the internet, *Noema* – a magazine in an academic article - says the online governance behaviour is still evolving and compares it with the 'early democracy' phase. Rulers during those days 'relied on their people to provide production of information and to aid with governance,

HOW TO GET THERE IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES?
| **Dalip Singh**

whether it be raising revenues or engaging in the external defence', argue authors in '*Ancient Democracy For An Online World'* (Stasavage & Schneider, 2020). Unlike modern democracies that elect people through elections to govern jointly, the published study says early democracy worked through 'delegating authority to councils and assemblies'. The same is 'resembled' in online platforms, which is 'always dependent on outside developers for content' - it points out. Democracy and internet disconnect found an echo in former French President Nicolas Sarkozy's remark at the e-G8 Forum, held in May 2011. 'The universe you represent is not a parallel universe. Nobody should forget that governments are the only legitimate representatives of the people's will in our democracies. To forget this is to risk democratic chaos and anarchy' - he had said in the presence of top representatives of the global tech giants (The IT Countrey Justice, 2020).

The opaque environment and ignorance, at times wilful, has exposed the Big Tech companies for abuse and, in the process, created an ecosystem that is aiding mainstreaming of the fringe - socially, politically, and economically. Information is getting weaponized for targeted gains in politics and the health sector, destabilizing the national security of countries and tarnishing individuals and groups' identities.

German psychiatrist-philosopher Thomas Fuchs says digital advancements have many positives but, he emphasizes, human beings alone can take responsibility for the world. In his book, *In Defence of Human Being,* Fuchs makes a case for defending the 'humanistic image of man' pitted against the futuristic perception historian Yuval Noah Harari tries to

establish. 'Homo sapiens is an obsolete algorithm' - Harari, as per Fuchs, argues in the book Homo Deus (2017) (Seralathan & Brahme, 2021).

Attempting to control e-space defines many on-going global struggles, given the firm realization that information is the new oil that drives the world economy and power. Countries like the United States, China, and Russia are trying to stay ahead of the curve in their cyberworld exploits, with knowledge now doubling after 12 hours, unlike the World War II era when it would take 25 years. Or, before that in 1900, when human knowledge would double every century, Buckminster Fuller had famously coined the 'knowledge doubling curve' in 1982.

NOT WELL-FILLED MINDS BUT WELL-FORMED MINDS

A deeper and comprehensive approach, in the backdrop of such an emerging situation, would be to shift the discourse towards the need to have 'well-formed minds' and not just 'well-filled minds' (Tharoor, 2013). Humankind is constantly under the digital shadow, with artificial intelligence and big data emerging as the new universal belief aggregator-cum-keeper. The tools offer opportunities to navigate individuals, filling them up with envelopes of information to negotiate different turns in lives.

Statistics also support the gradual transformation towards digital lives. Each person spends 6 hours and 43 minutes on the internet, which is 40 percent of the awake time if the average

sleeping time of 8 hours is taken into account. Fetching primary data from the findings, the '*Digital 2020: Global Digital Review*' report (Kemp, 2021) suggests that more than 60 percent of the world's population of 7.75 billion is online. Also, internationally there are 5.19 billion users of mobile phones, which is 67 percent of the total population. Similarly, the internet penetration is 59 percent, which means 4.54 billion use the internet and 3.80 billion people are active social media users, which is 49 percent of the total population, the Global Digital Review report points out.

In addition, a trend is that most youth no longer rely on conventional mainstream media for their daily diet of information because they feel the outlets don't feed them with relevant news. And that smartphones are a preferred instrument for accessing news through social media (Férdeline, 2021). The narrative on data sets speaks of a direct interface with digital platforms. Simultaneously, the constant secondary influence of the digital intervention on persons happens routinely, either consciously or unconsciously.

In the current highly competitive era, people, especially, youth are under pressure to excel since the beginning of their academic careers. Studies and entertainment sources are shifting online -- accelerated more since the outbreak of the covid pandemic last year. This scenario limits chances of getting effortlessly informed through daily-life physical interactions and social experiences. Vanishing physical interactions, consequently, draws people away from reality and surroundings, making them vulnerable to manipulations on the internet. Studies have shown that classical reasoning can help discern truth and fake information available on different media platforms, including print and social media.

'People who deliberate more' or are more 'reflective' (The Psychology of Fake News, 2021) are less likely to fall for misinformation or disinformation, and they have better capabilities of critical thinking.

TRUST DEFICIT AND MEDIA LITERACY

Trust is demonstrably one of the causality of modern-day life, partly due to growing proximity between the real and e-world. Increasing erosion of trust is manifested in relationships, whether among individuals, groups, institutions, or nations. How can faith be brought back into society equally important for facilitating independent critical thinking and absorption of values that cherish inclusiveness and promote progress and the nation's overall well-being? Trust is also intrinsic to culture and democracy, and it lends sanctity to communication. Infusing values in society through culture can be a tool for making people media and information literate. It has to start, firstly, at home because parents are the first teachers, and in school. Kids ought to be introduced to an enriching environment that deters them from accepting anything without questioning through different subjects and exposure.

Similarly, higher studies curricula and adult education programs can be tailored to further media literacy, which many countries already do. That would help society abstain from getting mobbed by information, data, and images floating on the net. Finland has successfully adopted media literacy in its education curriculum for increasing people's capacity to boost resilience towards the infodemic. It has been rated as the top nation

among the European Union in the *latest Media Literacy Index (Media Literacy Index 2021: Double Trouble: Resilience to Fake News at the Time of Covid-19 Infodemic, 2021*), which assesses countries on the three parameters of press freedom, education, and trust to rank them on their capabilities to check onslaught deceptive news.

Great democracies, on the other hand, may take time to get a grip over mushrooming of disruptive online interventions. The battles US and India are waging against adulterated news trends can be addressed through adequate digital media literacy interventions, insists a research article published last year based on '*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America'*. Media companies, journalists, and educators, though, need to 'reinforce these lessons regularly' to check withering away of its effect on the people (Guessa, Lernerb, Lyonsd, Montgomerye, & Nyhanf, 2020).

India is expected to meet the digital divide challenge between urban and rural areas by 2025, with 900 million internet users. By that year, India's internet users canvas will have different colours - rural areas would have more consumers than in urban dwellings, so says a report on the internet usage in India (*Internet Adoption in India:* ICUBE 2020). The Indian government has formulated social media guidelines in the backdrop of outrage over online harm leading to law and order problems, complications during a covid pandemic, political exploitation, and check the impact on national security. Data privacy bill is also pending in parliament. Since 2014, the central government has launched schemes like National Digital Literacy Plan and Digital International Media Literacy Education Project. So far, the central government has attempted to equip people technically and bring some

regulatory measures, but it needs to roll out associated educational programs and election reforms ahead of the next general elections in 2024.

PUSH FOR A GLOBAL SOLUTION

For over a decade, attempts, including by the United Nations, have been made to build a global consensus for creating an appropriate digital information environment. In March this year, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution to treat 'Media and Information Literacy (MIL) as a mainstream and urgent public matter' for achieving sustainable development goals. 'We need Media and Information Literacy to be recognized as integral to the international development agenda. And as key for the 2030 sustainable development goals – as vital for advancing health, gender equality, education, jobs, and the environment, amongst many other social goods' – it was written in United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO's) second edition of Media and Information Literacy Curriculum (Media and Information Literacy Curriculum for Teachers, 2011).

The UN and the European Union will also have to work harder towards creating some international treaty or any other overarching regulatory mechanism to deal with situations where mischievous information can be turned into a new form of proxy war or weapon of mass destruction. The existing vulnerability of the internet platforms allows it to become a low investment but high-yielding proposition which attracts dirty minds and conspirators.

That, if used by a nation or a terrorist organization against their adversary targets, may escalate into a conflict between countries.

Otherwise, forces that believe they can subvert democracy have been emboldened since the Taliban took over Afghanistan post sudden American exit. The Taliban regime is also indulging in active disinformation to disguise its people and the outside world from reality – which is in sequence with terrorists for long exploiting technology for their propaganda or unleashing terror. Not to underestimate is also that corporate interests and rivalries know no boundaries. Therefore, there cannot be mere local solutions for global problems online harms can simultaneously unleash, leaving little response time.

As of now, there are international conventions and regulatory mechanisms to address organized crime, terrorism, digital offenses, and economic and trade issues, among others. One of the steps could be to empower Interpol for investigating international crimes emanating out of mischievous information. Article 2(1) of Interpol's Constitution says it can be approached for 'widest possible mutual assistance' among police authorities of different nations to realize 'the spirit of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*' (Constitution of the ICPO-INTERPOL, 2017, p. 3). Criminalization and adulteration of content do constitute a crime against humanity. It's time global leadership holds their ambition to control the internet and responds to collective conscience for doing public good, which prompted former Facebook employee Haungen to stand up against the massive cover-up by the leading social media organization.

MEDIA LITERACY
HOW TO GET THERE IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES?
| Dalip Singh

The scrutiny on social media platforms should equally focus on global corporate business ethics. Unethical business practices have repeatedly rocked the financial world for ages. Enron and Lehman Brothers cases are a couple of them that personify potential damage big companies can do to the lives and reputation of the people and the corporate world at large. Online companies are now facing serious allegations, such as allowing advertisers to target teenagers with inappropriate content. Paid e-armies, rented obliquely by politicians, corporates, rogue elements, and nations, are responsible for the proliferation of the disturbing e-content. The embedded story of possible corruption behind a content generation or ticking 'likes' too has to be assessed for grievance redressal.

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Disinformation

HOW TO REDUCE THE DIGITAL ERA'S POLLUTION?

CENTRUM STOSUNKÓW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH — CENTRE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

WORLD INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATION

REFLECTIONS

12/2021

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The coronavirus pandemic and ensuing economic crisis have weakened democracy and made societies much more vulnerable to the spread of a 'digital pollution' - false information on the Internet. The rapidly growing challenges have been exacerbated by the political and social polarization that can be seen everywhere – from the USA, to India to Poland. It does not just feed disinformation - it constitutes a national security threat.

DISINFORMATION
HOW TO REDUCE THE DIGITAL ERA'S POLLUTION?
| Bruno Surdel, PhD

In the communication industry social media have dominated the advertising market to that extend, that fewer traditional press titles have been able to survive.[1] It does not lead to a reduction of pieces of news but rather to make 'guardians of facts' less relevant. The commitment to stay financially afloat has good chances to undermine the readiness of the media to combat disinformation spread on the Web. This also includes misinformation and accusations which have a negative impact on social and political life as well as people's understanding of the world. The lack of a certain level of knowledge and curiosity among the Internet users adds to the problem. People do not seek to search for accurate information from serious sources which they often find boring or difficult to comprehend.

Negative emotions

Disinformation often causes fear and – on the other hand – it is fed by it because this is the basic instinct that governs public opinion. As a rule, if people are afraid of something, they react in three ways: escape, confrontation, or wait with no reaction. In the pandemic era people are afraid of the virus. They absorb information and also all conspiracy theories coming with it. This was evident in Italy, where some part of the population believed that the European Union or NATO was behind the lockdown and its restrictions.[2]

In general, the pandemic reinforced all conspiracy theories, including anti-vaccine and anti-5G – mysteriously interconnected in some disinformation narratives.[3] The problem is that

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[1] David J. Moore, Identity crisis: *Why Google and Facebook dominate digital advertising*; 19. May, 2020. https://digitalcontentnext.org/blog/2020/05/19/identity-crisis-why-google-and-facebook-dominate-digital-advertising/
[2] Maria Giovanna Sessa, *COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories: Comparative trends in Italy, France, and Spain*, 27 April, 2020 https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/covid-19-conspiracy-theories-comparative-trends-in-italy-france-and-spain/
[3] Axel Bruns, Stephen Harrington, Edward Hurcombe, '*Corona? 5G? or both?': the dynamics of COVID-19/5G conspiracy theories on Facebook;* Media International Australia; 4 August, 2020 https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1329878X20946113

every conspiracy theory has its own 'experts' their supporters and followers believe in. Those who produce fake news prey on their emotions and quite often their rationale is purely of a financial nature. One can make money by spreading fake news and lies. However, increasingly they are politically motivated. There are numerous groups of political activists, as well as foreign language media and secret services of some authoritarian regimes – most prominently from Russia - who have a clear, specific interest and agendas in producing false information.[4] It is a significant challenge as lies are constructed convincingly, and often false information is presented in the form of seemingly reliable scientific arguments. In addition, the very mechanism of discussions within social media leads to unintentional misinformation caused by the atmosphere itself and the lack of mutual trust.

Strikingly, disinformation messages happen to appear in almost identical form in different countries. Quite often, those pieces of 'news' are practically literal translations of the same original article. In the European context, some of them are aimed at combating, for instance, NATO, the European Union or attempting to discredit Western-produced vaccines in order to sow mistrust in society, which is also a destructive factor in social and political life. It is one of the most critical challenges.[5]

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[4] Russia deploying coronavirus disinformation to sow panic in West, EU document says, 18. March, 2020
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-disinformation-idUSKBN21518F
[5] Russia, China sow disinformation to undermine trust in Western vaccines: EU, 28. April, 2021;
https://www.reuters.com/world/china/russia-china-sow-disinformation-undermine-trust-western-vaccines-eu-report-says-2021-04-28/

Institutionalized and grassroots solutions

The best model for counteracting disinformation is society's ability to use various information sources that compete with each other. A healthy media ecosystem can defend itself against the influence of foreign or internal malicious interference and misleading messages. Society itself may be capable of identifying disinformation but it requires our efforts in three basic areas:

a) media education;
b) a whole system of tools which are IT tools needed to build a healthy ecosystem and resistance to fraud and bot networks;
c) a particular legal system, a political culture which allows for strategic communication and a consensus in the society and politics on specific directions which is necessary for public discussion to take place. If we fight for everything, we are bound to lose our battle for truth in the public sphere.

In order to effectively deal with the disinformation, we need to get improved our countries' governance, gradually eliminate social exclusion, and to build up the public trust in State institutions. On the other hand, the crucial competency is media literacy. However, before promoting media literacy, the people must feel that they are in need of improving their media skills. Thus, the key issue is to make Internauts realize the scale of disinformation. If they are aware that there is a genuine issue or threat, they may be willing to identify it in what they consume on the Web.

However, it is not easy to filter and sift through the data. Education is the key. It is necessary to teach people how to distinguish facts from opinions, to explain how fake news looks like and how it is made, as well as who may produce them and why. The lack of knowledge is a massive problem. People are more resistant to disinformation if they are aware that such a phenomenon exists at all, that they have to think critically, and be vigilant

DISINFORMATION
HOW TO REDUCE THE DIGITAL ERA'S POLLUTION?
| Bruno Surdel, PhD

towards the information they are bombarded with on the Internet, especially if they see it affects their emotions. It has been well-documented that Internet users who post their opinions tend to be very emotional and these emotions are difficult to deal with. People usually do not approach controversial information as a riddle, which needs to be considered, studied, and addressed somehow. They react emotionally and share.

Therefore, we urgently need a larger involvement of fact-checking and media organisations to educate our societies how media work and how to deal with disinformation and misinformation. A large network of like-minded analysts and experts from each country affected by disinformation should be established, as well as active measures undertaken. Such a network is a necessary condition for the West to stay proactive in countering disinformation from Russia and China - and what is critical - be capable of building up its own narrative instead of persuading the public once again that the threat actually exists.

It is essential to connect international, governmental, and private initiatives to jointly counter disinformation and simultaneously further our own narratives. Such initiatives, if multiplied, may allow at least part of the society to get immune to disinformation. So that people stop believing that if something appeared on the screen of their computer must be true – as in the past when something was printed in a newspaper, it was considered true.

On the institutional level, university programs are slowly emerging that are dealing with the problem of disinformation. What's more, a relatively large number of fact-checking services have also been set up. The European Union is to launch a joint academic, journalistic and communication platform with an ambitious goal to reach out to the general public. If that European platform is set up there will be anti-disinformation centres in key EU nations.[6] We need both monitoring of the Internet and simplifying our communication with Web users. Unfortunately, in Europe, it is the populist parties that have mastered the

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[6] *Shaping Europe's digital future. Tackling online disinformation* https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation

art of excellent communication. They know how to build up their messages and encourage interaction, for example the League in Italy, AfD (Alternative for Germany) in Germany [7].

So the strategic communication alone is not sufficient for developing an enduring social resilience and ability of society to cope, adapt and quickly recover from critical situations or avoid further emergency escalation. There should be a long-term strategy to educate well-informed decision-makers, institutions and society, empowering them by providing practical knowledge and tools. Our societies are on the front line of confrontation and negative influences. Thus, forming a strong, resilient and critically thinking society that remains resistant to provocations becomes a key task in the face of today's security issues.

Definitely, NGOs could spur governments to transpose their insight and experience into the education system or public television programmes. But the situation is unfortunately different. This work is in the hands of non-governmental organisations. Furthermore, most important actors today – big transnational corporations like Facebook, Twitter are not particularly interested in "media literacy" as the emotions caused by disinformation serve their business model. The big tech's executives may 'fight' disinformation, but they perfectly know that element increases their turnover [8]. So it is a bit of a fight against windmills.

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[7] Sabine Muscat, *Nice on stage, ugly online: How hate speech and fake news undercut Germany's election campaign*; 1 October 2021
https://us.boell.org/en/2021/10/01/nice-stage-ugly-online-how-hate-speech-and-fake-news-undercut-germanys-election-campaign
[8] Miles Parks, Shannon Bond, 5 Takeaways From Big Tech's Misinformation Hearing, 25. March, 2021
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Younger generation is a key

While promoting media literacy our governments must adopt a broader perspective, taking into account how social media shape views and decisions of the younger generation. Whether or not people who are 15 years old today are aware of disinformation is extremely important, as they will soon become voters. They will make decisions at the ballot boxes based on some analysis of social reality. It is going to be a disaster if those decisions are based on fake news, misinformation, myths, conspiracies, etc. If we do not act now to eradicate that new type of pollution, and convince the youth to listen to our arguments, they will continue to live in their information bubble. It has a potential to blow up our democracies from within.

Textbooks are important but they are not sufficient. Good sources of information are necessary, but since we live in a flood of information our efforts may not have any significant impact. Therefore, there is a question of how to 'sell our message' in that ocean of pieces of news – among information, disinformation and misinformation. It is not so much a question of accessibility but of reaching people, in particular the younger ones. Workshops, classes at school, lobbying at the Government are a good solution to create a certain core curriculum for effective media literacy programs.

That is critical as younger Internet consumers come across many narratives on the Web, and each of them seems to be equally reliable to them. This is exactly what those who spread disinformation want to achieve: to equate all types of narratives so that our impact is minimal. While the world of media is changing day by day, the educational system and curricula are long-term investments by definition so we will not see effects of our work on media literacy for some time. Despite the risks associated with that situation, such education is absolutely necessary, especially in connection with the approaching launch of the 5G technology which is bound to introduce completely new quality and methods of communication.

HOW TO REDUCE THE DIGITAL ERA'S POLLUTION?
| Bruno Surdel, PhD

The basic scope of the media literacy must be offered by State institutions because without it all the rest becomes an ad hoc, point-based activity. On the other hand, many projects may be conducted by young journalists, activists - also within NGOs - for there are usually people who are most interested in social activity and influence the public debate locally or even more broadly. The starting point, however, is spreading awareness. This is a job for all of us who wish to preserve our freedoms in democratic societies against the encroachments of authoritarian regimes or autocratic tendencies from within.

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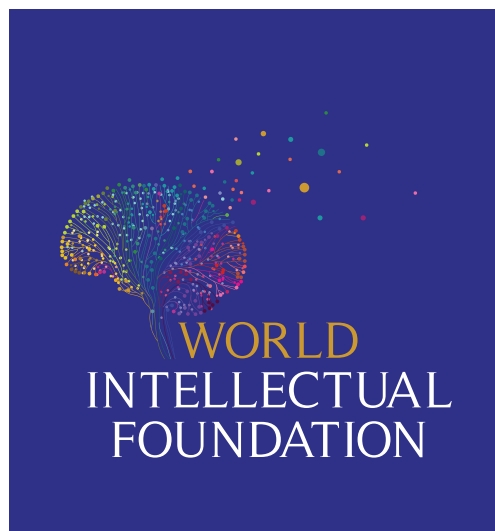
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