

INFOCRACY. THE END OF DEMOCRACY?

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The present book, written by the South Korean-born German philosopher Byung-Chul Han, serves as a concise yet powerful introduction to the issues raised by contemporary social transformations under the technological impact of digitalization. Although the book is the size of a brochure and uses an almost aphoristic language, it highlights the essential aspects of the changes we are all undergoing.

First of all, it should be noted that we are dealing with a paradigm shift, which is not only technological (the transition from the industrial economy to the digital economy), but also social. While industrial society functioned under a regime of discipline and surveillance, which aimed to exploit bodies (of the workers) and energies (both human and mechanical), digital society is moving towards an informational regime in which data and information are exploited. The disciplinary regime and the information regime are the two paradigms set in opposition by the author. Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, the famous prison model designed so that all prisoners could be observed non-stop, or Orwell's Big Brother, in which all screens in homes included a video camera, are illustrative of the disciplinary regime.

Nowadays, however, individuals are no longer monitored in order to be disciplined and to adapt to the factory regime (based on the model of 19th-century classical capitalism). Instead, surveillance occurs voluntarily, because the effort to be visible is not imposed, but rather desired by the individuals. This occurs especially within social networks, where each individual manifests himself, expressing and interpreting himself. Coercion and punishment are replaced by motivation and optimization. Surveillance and control thus take place in conditions where the individual feels free, authentic, and creative, and it is in no way physically or psychologically forced or constrained. The smartphone, which each of us carries in his pocket, is an

extremely powerful information source. No factory supervisor or political police in a totalitarian regime could ever have achieved such performance. The smartphone is a manifestation of individual freedom of expression and, at the same time, a tool for surveillance. The paradigm shift consists in the fact that violence is no longer necessary for control, and that information is provided voluntarily. Its efficacy is incomparable to that collected in a classical disciplinary regime. Freedom and discipline are no longer opposites, but they merge in the new paradigm.

Infocracy is defined as a social regime in which data and its processing become an important economic and political resource. The author provides a brief analysis of the transformations of the public sphere, a concept developed by Habermas in the 1960s, which the German philosopher considers fundamental to the proper functioning of a democracy. The basis of communication in democracy is provided by books and the written word, which also represent the support for rational discourse of the Enlightenment. Through the written press, especially the cultural and literary press, a space for public debate is created. Political issues are subjected to public discussion and evaluation. The public sphere is also changing with the evolution of the media. Television brings with it videocracy, or the power of the image, through which public communication is transformed under the pressure of entertainment and spectacle. Debates of public interest become talk shows. Infocracy also changes this model, leading to informational explosion. The public sphere is threatened by infodemic – that “viral” information that spreads exactly like a virus, causing distortions in the communicative space, just as the explosive spread of a virus causes a pandemic. Although the term “viral” has entered common usage to emphasize the rapid success of an online message, the medical connotation of the term, which refers to the spread of a disease, is completely lost.

In the online environment, the public sphere tends to disintegrate, being subject to the centrifugal forces of an infinite number of private spaces. The network is a public space, but its architecture is not that of an amphitheatre, where many people interact with each other in a common space, but rather a rhizomatic structure with billions of branches, corresponding to the number of users. The reasons why public space is becoming tribalized (to use McLuhan's fitting expression) are manifold: the algorithmic personalization of messages and the attempt to capture users' attention through messages that insist on irrational, almost subliminal emotions or stimuli, which Chul Han calls the “digital unconscious” (p. 17). These factors are related to the commercial nature of social networks, which are profit oriented. In addition to the technical factor, there are social factors

that push the individuals in the same direction: individual atomization and alienation, stimulated by electronic means of communication, globalization, and hyper culturalization, which destroy the common space. Without the common space, the background that makes dialogue and communicative action possible disappears.

The lifeworld is a concept taken by the author from phenomenology. It is also used by Habermas in his theory of communicative action, and refers to an experience lived spontaneously, without conscious reflection, consisting of socially and culturally sedimented meanings. The lifeworld is possible within a community where the pre-understood meanings are structured by a common culture. “Today, there are no longer any conventional offers of identity with pre-reflexive validity. We are no longer thrown into a world of life that we perceive as obvious and unproblematic. It now becomes merely a matter of projection. The holistic horizon, perceived as indivisible, is undergoing a radical process of fragmentation.” (p. 37) The global world, and the internet that accelerates it, are destroying the lifeworld, because pre-understandings are becoming less and less possible, being replaced by individual projections that can take on very different meanings, once they enter into the cyberspace. If the lifeworld is impacted within digital environment, the space for dialogue and its communicative reason also suffer. Real dialogue requires an Other, one who is listened to when he presents and argues his own point of view. Dialogue and rational communication require time; however, online communication is instantaneous, fragments perception, and lacks temporal stability. In the digital sphere, discursive rationality is threatened by affective communication on one hand, and digital rationality on the other. Affective communication refers to the content of discourse, where emotional and affective elements replace argumentation and discursive logos. Digital rationality, meanwhile, provides the tools for a new discursive model based on algorithms and artificial intelligence. I will return to this aspect later.

If discursive rationality is diminished in the online environment, then electoral campaigns also shift, both in form and content. Debates, projects, ideas, and the capacity to sustain and argue a point of view lose their weight, as electoral communication moves online. In this environment, the efficiency of the algorithm may matter more than an interlocutor's ability to argue. Memes, photomontages, concise videoclips, and bot comments - all of these, implicitly or explicitly, influence the electorate. Dark Advertising, whose goal is to launch messages - most often false - with the aim of influencing the audience, becomes a commonplace practice. Electoral confrontations and speeches are replaced by “information wars” (p. 28), where the “digital product” matters more than the actual candidate. It is no coincidence that

elections today can be won by someone who does not participate in a single public debate; nor is it a coincidence that we hear daily talk of “hybrid warfare”. In the near future, information warfare may well become a banal component of our societies.

Fake news is another phenomenon that everyone is talking about today. Literally, it means “false news”. However, the reality circumscribed by the term “fake news” is much more comprehensive than the simple notion of a false report. Fake news is significant for a new informational ecosystem, moving beyond the classic opposition between true and false. What is relevant to the fake news phenomenon is not so much the existence of false news, lies, or disinformation—which have always existed—but the fact that this type of information has reached an unprecedented proliferation, becoming socially significant. Moreover, fake news items are not mere lies; they are indifferent “to factual truth”, and in the words of Chul Han, they “defacticize reality” (p. 52). In other words, the specificity of the fake news phenomenon is defined by the disappearance of a relationship to the factual dimension of reality or the loss of the real referent. This is what Baudrillard describes so well with his concept of the simulacrum. Fake news emerges and flourishes in a world of simulacra. Chul Han offers a suggestive comparison to help us understand this: the comparison between analog (classic) photography and digital photography. Analog photography is always an image, a copy of reality, while digital photography involves so many processing methods that it creates a new reality that does not exist, thereby eliminating reality itself as a referent. Similarly, for fake news, truth or falsehood vanish as referents or become, at best, irrelevant. This is also why “the attempt to combat infodemia with the truth is doomed to failure” (p. 30). Although fact-checking is invariably presented as a solution to fake news, it is most often impossible to achieve in terms of quantity or available resources, or it can lead to the creation of further fake news, precisely in the name of combating it.

It is precisely this indifference of fake news toward the truth that leads Chul Han to assert that fake news is characteristic of a de-ideologized regime. Modern ideologies, in the strong sense of the term, were secular political religions that claimed to offer a totalizing vision and, above all, a claim to truth regarding the world. Ideologies were the metanarratives of modernity. For this reason, the distinction between true and false is extremely important for ideology. Even when the truth is replaced by a lie, it happens precisely out of the conviction that lie possesses the value of truth, or that it serves a higher purpose. Ideologies are by no means indifferent to the truth. Fake news is significant for the crisis of the

communicative reason of truth and for the narrative crisis. Narratives produce a discourse that provides orientation and meaning to individuals. Therefore, truth is linked to narratives, whereas the infinite proliferation of digital information produces no narrative at all. Instead, the narrative crisis is accompanied by a proliferation of conspiracy theories, which become micro-narratives - discourses that offer resources for identity and meaning to individuals. What is important here is that, for their followers, conspiracy theories do not hold an epistemological status; those who spread them are not interested in the scientific testing of their truth value. Rather, they hold an existential status, as they signal the individual's adherence to a specific identity or belief. In other words, they attest to a “tribal” identity - intensely affective and emotional - without being rationally reflected upon. The identity to which followers of conspiracy theories adhere excludes any other identity the moment it is called into question.

The “tribal” identity, which presupposes a sensory and emotional communication similar to pre-literate societies, contributes to the diminishing of communicative rationality. However, the broader framework that makes this phenomenon possible is provided by digital rationality - that is, the entire ensemble of techniques and procedures established by information technology. Digital rationality replaces human knowledge with artificial intelligence, and discursive learning with machine learning. There are, of course, proponents of this type of rationality who believe that a world constructed with the aid of digital technology is inherently superior. Artificial intelligence has an infinitely greater capacity for knowledge compared to humans and, consequently, decisions made by AI are better than those made by humans. The societal ideal for proponents of infocratic technocracy is a society without politics, a society where politicians will be replaced by experts who, accompanied by AI, will have the role of administering society. Infocracy becomes a “digital post-democracy” (p. 44). Such a trend already exists in our societies; Albania, for example, is the first country in the world to have appointed an AI minister to its government, convinced that it could thus fight corruption more effectively.

Certainly, the aspects discussed by Chul Han reveal a tendency toward the weakening of current democratic regimes. The undermining of discursive rationality, of the capacity for dialogue, of listening and argumentation - all accompanied by the fragmentation of public discourse into infinite sequences - leads to a crisis of the public spirit and to potentially unpredictable reactions within our societies. The lack of a public sphere that defines a common space for dialogue is felt today through the growing difficulty of finding common ground with a dialogue partner who holds different convictions than your

own. Thus, as the common elements that make dialogue possible become increasingly scarce, social control shifts almost automatically to those who hold the informational levers - namely, the promoters of infocracy. This is a restricted elite with growing, and in some respects even overwhelming, power. Under these conditions, one cannot help but recall the century-old dispute between Lippmann and Dewey regarding the relationship between elites and citizens in a democracy. We must ask ourselves whether today's infocratic elite is not, in a sense, merely the successor to Lippmann's technocratic elite. If this is the case, then the model of democratic public debate defended by Dewey risks being definitively defeated.

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