Crossing distance or crossing it out

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Negative and positive power

How to look at the question how digital technologies could affect politics? Politics is about power. I follow the definition of power as the ability to affect choices. This can be done by affecting the options available for choice, or what one might call the *room* for choice, and the *selection* of an option.

Useful also is the distinction that Albert Hirschman made between *voice, exit* and *loyalty.* In voice one submits disappointments in relations to debate, with the intent of jointly solving the problem. In exit one walks out when disappointed. In loyalty one submits and accepts the situation.

Now, there is a distinction between negative and positive power. Negative power restricts the options or forces a selection. It can obstruct voice, block exit, and impose loyalty. Positive power expands the space of options and enables rather than forces selection, enables voice, and allows for exit. For example, monopoly yields negative power, without exit to an alternative. The populist is a monopolist, claiming to embody the true will of the people, all the people, reviling any competition and even the judiciary. A dictatorship imposes loyalty.

Digital technologies affect the cognitive, cultural, and moral distance between people. For positive power, they can be used to connect, cross such distance, clarify, provide a basis for voice, widen choice. For negative power, they can be used to avoid, ignore such distance, cross it out, obscure, narrowing choice, in exclusion. How does that play out?

Moral robots?

Digital technologies include robots. There is debate on whether robots will destroy more employment than they create. The jury is still out on this. Economists mostly argue that previously novel technologies, such as the steam engine, electricity, and computers have added more new employment than they destroyed and that this (therefore?) will also apply to robots. There is, however, a difference. Steam engines did not build steam engines, lamps did not build lamps, computers did not build computers, but robots will build robots, who build robots, ……

So, this time it may be different. And if there is massive net loss of employment, the pressure to resort to a universal, unconditional basic income (BI) will be irresistible. And that is a political hurdle of the highest order. There are many grass roots pressures and experiments with BI, but political parties, almost without exception, remain mordantly against. It constitutes a radical break with the prevailing work ethic.

There are fears that a BI could be financed only at a prohibitive rate of tax. But reliable econometric calculations cannot be made since what will happen has not occurred before, and therefore is not present in the statistics the models are based on. But while financing by tax on capital would normally chase that capital away to other countries, here it cannot be, because the robots need to be present where they perform, so that one can levy local tax on this modern form of slavery.

Another major issue is ethical. It is about power relations between robots and humans. There is talk of 'singularity', where robots surpass humans not only in the speed and range of calculation but also in intelligence and even forms of creativity (writing essays, say). The capabilities of robots surged since the introduction of genetic algorithms: trial and error with selection and amplification of algorithms that yield success. That mimics evolution, but at a lightning speed rather than the imperceptible creep of the evolution of Man.

The question then is: who determines the selection environment, the criteria for success? Should one allow robots to replace human labour, or make them so as to complement and enhance it? Increase distance between humans and robots, or reduce it? The latter is possible,

but only later, after much further development for robots to acquire social skills of collaboration with humans. That choice would require political intervention in markets, since the robots that replace will be available earlier and at lower cost than robots that enhance humans.

And then, will robots have rights? If they are smarter than humans, won't they take over? Would we need to also develop moral capabilities in robots? Take killer robots, for example: will they be able to correctly distinguish foe from friend? To offer mercy?

How would one develop morality in robots? Also in the mode of genetic algorithms? Or would it be much slower? Human morality developed by trial and error over a long evolution. Could that be mimicked in artificial selection? Would not robots develop their own morality, unpredictably, unobtrusively perhaps, and not necessarily beneficial to Man, in their evolution? Will robots be loyal, exercise voice, or come to dominate?

Humans have an inclination, probably as an instinct acquired in evolution, for *parochial altruism*: altruism within the group that one sees as one's own, and suspicion and discrimination towards outsiders. What, then, of robots, when they evolve to develop morality? If they evolve according to the scenario of complementing humans, their morality might be benevolent to humans. When replacing humans, who then become the outsiders, their morality might become less humane. This requires a political decision, in the choice of direction for developing robots.

Tottering truth

Truth is tottering. There are forces that can make it fall, and sources that can make it stand. It may fall in some places and stand in others.

Social media (SM) such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter offer fabrication, hype and emotion as if equivalent with facts, opinions as equivalent with arguments. Newspapers are under pressure to go along, in their competition with SM, and their dependence on them for distributing their content and for advertising income.

If truth were to fall in this way, it would be disastrous for democratic politics. Next, governments can use this for an argument to block or filter the Internet, as is already happening in China, for example, and then use it for censorship.

An underlying fundamental issue is that postmodern relativism undermines the credibility of truth, in what is called 'post-truth'. There is an answer to this problem, where illusory objective truth is replaced by a notion of 'warranted assertibility', but there is no space here to discuss it.

There are possible remedies and opportunities for truth to stand. Government can force media to engage in fact checking. This is currently happening with respect to Facebook. There might be an argument to subsidise media on the condition of producing and protecting truth. It is then up to the media themselves to debate on how to distinguish truth. Not a ministry of truth. Truthful reporting may also mobilize demand for it that still remains.

Perversion of politics

However, politicians themselves are tempted. Political messages, packaged in rhetoric, hype, spin, and lure, can be tailored down to individuals, on the basis of profiles built from their use of the Internet, to link with their preferences, tastes, attention span, prejudices, and activities. For elections one can approach and mobilize individual voters that way, with social media, moulding mental frames. That blossomed in the Obama campaign, and came to full bloom in the campaign of Bernie Sanders, and culminated in Trump's tweets.

One can use all that to inform, crossing distance, but also for distraction from weak points in political competition, to hide weaknesses and to smear opponents, hiding distance. Twitter,

in particular, can be effective in this. Twitter sounds birdlike, attractive, but instead of offering voice it can derail in barking.

Here, the consequences for politics seem to be more the destruction than the flourishing of voice. Not crossing distance to the citizen but hiding it. The basis of voter choice is supposed to be party programmes, but in fact it is the fabulating media. How can voting then be meaningful? I rate this as one of the two most difficult problems to solve, because it is a matter for politics, parliament, to impose controls on itself. Will politicians gag the doll they love to squeak? How about freedom of expression? Politics entails narrative, and what is the criterion of truth for that? Are rules sufficient or is there a need to promote virtues? That would yield a resounding clash with liberalism. This nettled problem cannot be settled here.

Crossing distance or crossing it out
The second most fundamental problem, in my view, is the following. Internet and social media can be used for people to *contract*, to narrow focus on likeminded people, in 'filter bubbles', or to *extract* themselves from such narrow groups. To cross distance or to cross it out. This can be a matter of choice. People often seek the like-minded. Crossing distance takes effort and causes discomfort. Businesses that distribute information and offers are using algorithms to craft options that resemble past choices. This may be done as a service of convenience, ease and efficiency, but contraction yields a major political problem.

It entails a vicious circle. Crossing cognitive, cultural, or political distance requires absorptive capacity: the capacity to absorb, assimilate ideas that are not one's own. The flip side of that is the expressive, rhetorical capacity to help other people understand what one is saying or doing. These abilities to cross distance are developed in the practice of it. Lack of practice yields decline of capacity.

That yields a problem for politics, at least for democracy, which feeds on diversity and exchange and debate between diverse views. It requires voice, while contraction encourages exit. Present culture wars, between the familiar and the foreign, the indigent and the affluent, the left and the right, the religious and irreligious, the highly educated and the low, the city and the rural, exhibit an inability and an unwillingness to understand and be open to differences, to cross distance, to exercise voice, giving and accepting constructive criticism, needed for democracy.

An answer to populism
Here is a positive point for politics. Social media also enable people to connect without meeting, to alert each other. It can be so used by terrorists. The positive is that it can be used, in local communities, to communicate offers and needs for help of the sick or frail, to make coalitions in local political decision making concerning services, amenities, public space, infrastructure (bridges, roads), playgrounds, etc. For connecting potential entrepreneurs with providers of capital (as in crowdfunding). This yields a political opportunity, for less central, more local politics. Trust and control become more informal and personal. Many grass roots initiatives for this are cropping up, some under the banner of 'the commons'.

The potential for localized politics may help to meet one of the present complaints, in the populist upheaval, that politics has become too far removed from the population, enveloped in 'the elite' that no longer sees local needs, and cannot cope with diversity and fluidity of values, practices and conditions. Giving an adequate answer is a matter of high urgency.

Here there is an underlying, fundamental philosophical issue. In the history of Western intellectual development, the Enlightenment (and earlier Platonic philosophy) offered a strong lure of universality, of truths, rights, logics and rationality to cover the world. And then digital *computer* technology offered the means for centralized planning and control.

I propose that present digital *communication* technologies present the means for implementing the rival philosophical view of the local, the specific, the context-dependent. That requires letting go: allowing scope for the locally specific crafting of collaboration between public and private. Here, democracy is no longer a matter of periodic representation and *positioning*, in a political party, election or referendum, but a continuous *process* of participation, doing things together, in configurations that vary in time and according to location and the issue at hand. A politics that does not cater to this and holds on to a centralized, universalist regime will no longer be viable.

Two caveats. One is that this allowance for variety opens up inequalities between localities. Already, complaints arise concerning unequal treatment in health care between municipalities. A role remains for a central state to assure a minimum of equity and justice between localities. A second caveat concerns the danger of local tutelage and corruption, with local bobos doling out favours, bundling enabling power that next degenerates into the negative power of limiting or imposing choice. There also, a role of scrutiny remains for a central state.

What is emerging is redolent of medieval conditions with local fiefdoms loosely tied together under a monarch. As between former city states we begin to see modern cities developing independent links, in trade and culture, with cities elsewhere in the world. In research on 'small world' networks, this pattern of relatively autonomous but mutually connected local communities has been shown to be optimal, combining strong local ties for the sake of social coherence, with weak external ties, at a greater distance, for continued influx of novelty.

Platforms

Platforms, such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Airbnb, Uber, Amazon, etc. offer information or booking services, and employ data from use to build profiles and sell them or to use them to tailor advertisements. There are several issues: ownership and access of user data, monopoly formation, outflow abroad of profits and tax revenue, exclusion by reputation and selection mechanisms, and dodging regulations. Examples of the latter are the violations of labour conditions and taxes for taxi drivers by Uber, violations of security and safety conditions of apartments by Airbnb, inflation of house prices in the buying of apartment buildings to profit from renting, and public nuisance in overpopulation of tourists.

I do not rate this as an intractable problem because governments can and do intervene to impose restrictions and conditions. There is little new about innovations that upset current markets and require time for regulations to adjust. And people can form their own cooperative platforms, to avoid monopolistic profiteering. All this still has to play out.

A remarkable counteraction is that of the city of Sao Paulo concerning Uber taxis. Those are allowed to operate only on the basis of credits supplied by local government, which determines both their volume and price, to nudge the service into socially acceptable or even desirable directions (such as hiring more women drivers and providing access to areas with few transport facilities). Government can act to turn the tables. It should not hold back innovation with outdated regulation but innovate itself.

Hacking and dispersion

There clearly is a problem of hacking, disabling facilities and manipulating information to unhinge politics. However, Government can fight back, aided by ethical hackers if needed.

Digital ICT also offers opportunities for dispersed, decentralized gathering and disclosure of information. Cell phones are used to gather evidence, in the form of photos and videos, locally, by residents, passers-by, or 'digital detectives'. Such reporting is no longer the province only of official media. Digital maps can be used to pinpoint the location of

misconduct. Lies by politicians can be unmasked by fact checking. This can be used to thwart secrecy of authorities concerning disasters, administrative failures, collateral damage in warfare, police misconduct, covert operations, corruption, and other public misdemeanour or crime. Work is being done on how to authenticate such information gathering, to block deformation or fabrication of events.

However, governments, in turn, can resort to obstruction, blocking access to information sources and dissemination on the Internet. Citizens may retaliate with hacking sources that are closed off to the public. This can yield things like WikiLeaks and, more recently, the 'Panama papers' that reveal tax evasion.

Conclusions

Concerning digital technology in the form of robots, there is a choice: to favour robots as complementary and collaborative with human activity, or to set them free to replace it. That has great political implications, in the extent to which social and humane moral capabilities will or will not be part of their development.

Concerning digital ICT, one fundamental issue is the tottering of truth in fabrication and lies. This may be countered by imposing fact checking on the media, and subsidising some media if that were needed to keep them alive to do this. However, politicians themselves are tempted also to create, distort and target information to gain, frame and distract electoral attention, and thereby disable democratic politics. This problem is fundamental because here politics has to correct itself, and correction by parliament seems difficult since it is itself involved. How about freedom of expression? What is truth in political narrative?

A second fundamental problem, I propose, is that while ICT yields opportunities to cross cognitive and cultural difference, in *extraction* from narrow communities, it can also be used to cross it out, in *contraction* of communities. The latter tendency seems the stronger, for the ease and comfort of the confirmation of prejudice that it offers. That would be bad news for democratic politics, which must bring together a diversity of ideas and perspectives. It will not be easy to turn this around. Perhaps it may be countered by education, schooling, and counselling.

There are several problems of platforms, but they can perhaps be addressed with adjustments or innovation of regulation, and cooperative platforms. Hacking, though not a small problem, also is amenable to counter-action by governments.

More positively, cooperative platforms enable citizens to consort and collaborate locally, with each other and with local political institutions. That yields an opportunity to decrease distance to government, since they can now become part of political processes of planning and execution. It enables a shift from democracy as a periodic positioning in political parties and representation, to a more fluid democracy as a process of doing things together. Hopefully, that may contribute to an answer to the populist revolt.

Also more positively, concerning the gathering of information there are opportunities for citizens to engage in it in large numbers, thus breaking the secrecy that politicians are tempted to exercise, to expose failures and scandals. One can expect an arms race between digital detectives trying to unmask authorities, and authorities obstructing their access to sources.

Underlying the analysis, several issues cropped up that merit further elucidation.