



POLITICS AND TECHNOLOGY: HOW DOES THE INTERNET SUPPORT AND HINDER DEMOCRACY?

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Abstract

This study aims to explain the relationship between politics and technology by specifically discussing how the Internet supports and hinders democracy. This conceptual elaboration was prompted by recent controversies about the democratic power of the Internet. The controversy is framed in three perspectives, namely the perspective of utopia, dystopia, and syntopia. By using a qualitative approach and constructivist paradigm as well as literature studies, this paper argues that the three perspectives are reductionist and simplistic. Based on their technological determinism approach, they ignore subject agency and socio-cultural context in framing the relationship between the Internet and democracy. This paper offers holistic reading that the success and failure of technology adoption in democratic practice is a product of the organic interaction between technology and subject agency as well as social, political, and cultural contexts.

Keywords: *Digital Democracy; Internet; Politics; Technology*

Abstrak

Tulisan ini bertujuan menjelaskan relasi antara politik dan teknologi dengan secara khusus mendiskusikan bagaimana Internet mendukung dan menghambat demokrasi. Elaborasi ini dipicu oleh kontroversi mutakhir tentang kekuatan demokratis Internet. Kontroversi itu dibingkai dalam tiga perspektif, yakni perspektif utopia, distopia, dan sintopia. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan paradigma konstruktivisme serta studi literatur, tulisan ini berargumentasi bahwa ketiga perspektif itu bersifat reduksionis dan simplistik. Dengan basis pendekatan determinisme teknologi, ketiganya mengabaikan agensi subjek dan konteks sosial budaya dalam membingkai relasi antara Internet dan demokrasi. Tulisan ini menawarkan pembacaan holistik bahwa keberhasilan dan kegagalan pengadopsian teknologi dalam praktik demokrasi merupakan produk interaksi organik antara teknologi dan agensi subjek serta konteks sosial, politik, dan budaya.

Keywords: *Demokrasi Digital; Internet; Politik; Teknologi*



A. Introduction

The massive growth of personal computers and the Internet since the 1980s and 1990s has significantly changed the dynamics of global politics. This change was felt by almost all countries. In a new world order built around networks, countries are being urged to restructure their politics. Not only democratic countries, but countries with closed and authoritarian political systems also are not free from this influence. The downfall of authoritarian regimes that had been in power for decades in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yaman during the Arab Spring in 2011 and 2012 are examples of countries that were shaken by the power of the Internet network which encouraged significant mass movement mobilization.¹ The fall of the New Order authoritarian regime in Indonesia was also inseparable from the power of networks that enabled the consolidation of civil movements through mailing lists.² Learning from a number of countries, superprotective countries such as China, Vietnam, Bahrain, Russia, Belarus, Surya, and Iran to a certain extent see the Internet as a major threat to power. Therefore, they are very careful in formulating Internet-related policies.³

The power of the Internet in changing the political dynamics of countries cannot be doubted. Democratic countries were the first to feel that. Initially, they welcomed the Internet with open arms because they saw it as encouraging democratization. However, instead of presenting a progressive force that encourages democratization alone, the Internet also comes with worrying excesses. The increasing friction, fragmentation, and polarization of politics as well as the rhetoric of right-wing populism and digital fascism during the general election process and important political events in America, Indonesia, India, Hungary, Turkey, France, Philippines, England and a number of other countries in recent years underlies the anxiety something like that.⁴ The Internet at this point not only enables the implementation of digital democracy, but also threatens the fundamental values of democracy.⁵

¹ Cf. Harris Hyun-Soo Kim dan Chaeyoon Lim, "From Virtual Space to Public Spce: The Role of Online Political Activism in Protest Participation During the Arab Spring", *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, Vol. 60, No. 6, 2019.

² Cf. Merlyna Lim, "The Internet, Social Networks, and Reform in Indonesia", in Nick Couldry and James Curran (eds.), *Contesting Media Power: Alternative Media in a Networked World* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), pp. 273–288 & Merlyna Lim, "Freedom to Hate: Social Media, Algorithmic Enclaves, and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia", *Critical Asian Studies*, June 2017.

³ Cf. Jian Xu and Haiqing Yu, "Regulating and Governing China's Internet and Digital Meda in the Xi Jinping Era", *Media International Australia*, Vol. 185, No. 1, 2022, pp. 3-8, Fan Dong, "Controlling the Internet it China: The Real Story", *Convergence: The International Journal of Research Into New Media Technologies*, Vol. 18, No. 4, 2012, pp. 403-425, An Xiao Mina, "Batman, Pandaman, and the Blin Man: A Case Study in Social Change Memes and Internet Censorship in China", *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol. 13, No. 13, 2014, pp. 359-375, Nikolai Topornin, Darya Pyatkina, dan Yuri Bokov, "Government Regulaton of the Internet as Instrument of Digital Protection in Case of Developing Countries", *Journal of Information Society*, 2021, pp. 1-14, and Geoffrey Cain, "Kill One to Warm One Hundred: The Politics of Press Censorship in Vietnam", *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2014, pp. 85-107.

⁴ Cf. Christian Fuchs, *Digital Demagogue – Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter* (London: Pluto Press, 2018) and Christian Fuchs, *Digital Fascism – Media, Communication, and Society*, Vol. 4 (London & New York: Routledge – Taylor & Francis Group, 2022).

⁵ Christian Fuchs, *Digital Fascism – Media, Communication, and Society*, *ibid*.

In the digital democracy landscape, the discourse about the democratizing power of the Internet is broadly framed in three perspectives. The first perspective emphasizes a more utopian vision of the Internet in the field of politics and democracy. The Internet is seen as having revolutionary and transformative implications for the democratization of politics and society at large. The second perspective exists as the antithesis of the first perspective. In contrast to previous utopian visions, a number of scientists and politicians maintain dystopian views. They see the Internet as a threat to democracy as well as encouraging populist movements and increasing information inequality. The Internet is also seen as not offering a solution to increasing citizens' political motivation, which has tended to decline in recent decades. Instead of judging in black and white, the third perspective actually comes with a more balanced vision. This third perspective maintains a synthetic view of digital democracy as a synthesis of the two previous perspectives. The syntopian view highlights the opportunities and risks of digital democracy.⁶

Based on literature study, this paper argues that the perspectives of utopia, dystopia, and syntopia are reductionist and simplistic. These three perspectives tend to highlight the character of technology that supports and/or hinders democratic practices. That is an inevitable consequence of using a technological determinism approach in reading the relationship between the Internet and democracy. The main weakness of this approach is that it tends to ignore the agency of the subject and the social and cultural context in reading the relationship between the Internet and democracy. This article offers novelty by promoting the importance of a balanced portion of instrumental and substantive readings of technology in reading the relationship between the Internet and democracy. A balanced portion between instrumental and substantive readings in reading the relationship between the Internet and democracy allows us to identify the interrelation between technology, subject agency, and social, political and cultural contexts in supporting the successful adoption of technology in democracy.

B. Method

This research uses a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach was chosen for two reasons. *First*, this research focuses on a conceptual study of the relationship between politics and technology, which has been a controversial topic since the 1980s until now. Studies on the relationship between politics and technology are generally framed within the theme of digital democracy. *Second*, this conceptual research seeks to provide a theoretical framework for empirical research on the influence of digital technology on democratic practice. The method used in this research is literature study. Data were taken from national and international books and journals containing studies on digital democracy published from the 1990s to 2022. The books and journals selected for review in this research were chosen randomly without certain considerations other than solely based on the availability of references that can be accessed through online and offline sources. The data is then reviewed and analyzed descriptively and thematically to produce

⁶ Jan A.G.M. van Dijk, "Digital Democracy: Vision and Reality", *To be Published in I Snellen & W. van de Donk. Public Administration in the Information Age: Revisited, IOS-Press*, 2013. (This article previously published in the *Journal of Innovation and the Public Sector*, Vol. 19, No. 1, 2012).

a valid synthesis or conclusion. The paradigm used in the entire research process is the constructivist paradigm. As the antithesis of the positivist paradigm, the constructivist paradigm places the researcher's subjectivity in a central position. Therefore, the depth and accuracy of the analysis in this research is very dependent on the depth and breadth of the researcher's knowledge as the main research instrument.

C. Result and Discussion

1. What is Digital Democracy?

The controversy regarding the democratic power of the Internet originates from the digital democracy discourse in the 1980s.⁷ At that time, a teledemocracy perspective emerged, inspired by the "Athenian agora". However, if we refer to the year of publication of some of the literature cited by Lincoln Dahlberg,⁸ discourse about digital democracy began to emerge towards the end of the 1990s when the Web began to be used en masse in the world.⁹ When talking about digital democracy, most of scholars use Habermas's public sphere theory as a basis for debating whether the Internet can mobilize democratic practices and participation or not. However, since the term "digital democracy" first appeared until now, there has been no single understanding of the term. Therefore, as a conceptual foundation before discussing three perspectives regarding the vision of digital democracy (utopia, dystopia, and syntopia), the author first outlines the conceptual limitations of digital democracy.

Digital democracy is a complex and dynamic term. There is no single consensus regarding the definition of the term. Scholars understand it from various points of view with diverse approaches and articulations. This happens because democracy itself substantially refers to a series of practices, institutions, structures, and movements.¹⁰ Meanwhile, democratic practices, institutions, structures and movements are understood in various ways by experts. As a result, in the digital democracy landscape, different articulations of a series of practices, institutions, structures and movements produce different understandings of digital democracy.

Even though it is understood in various ways, according to the author, the term digital democracy does not substantially change the understanding of democracy. Substantially, democracy is still understood as a value principle, as a result of the articulation of democratic and liberal values. From the democratic tradition there are values or principles of equality, separation between those who govern and those who are

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Lincoln Dahlberg, "The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere", *Information, Communication, and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 2001, pp. 615–633.

⁹ Cf. D. Kolb, "Discourses across links", in C. Ess (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Computer-Mediated Communication* (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), R. Tsagarousianou, Tambini, D. and Bryan, C. (eds), *Cyberdemocracy: Technology, Cities and Civic Networks* (London: Routledge, 1998), K.A. Hill, and J.E. Hughes, *Cyberpolitics: Citizen Activism in the Age of the Internet* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), Dahlberg, *ibid.*, dan Lincoln Dahlberg, "Re-constructing Digital Democracy: An Outline of Four 'Positions'", *New Media & Society*, Vol. 13, No. 6, 2011, pp. 855-872.

¹⁰ Simon, Julie, Theo Bass, & Victoria Boelman, *Digital Democracy – The Tools Transforming Political Engagement* (London: Nesta, 2017), p. 11.

governed, and the sovereignty of the people. Meanwhile, from the liberal tradition there are values or principles of supremacy of law/rule of law, respect and protection of human rights, and respect for individual freedom.¹¹ The set of practices, institutions, structures and movements in digital democracy do not change these values, but only support their realization.

From the explanation above, it is not surprising that various definitions of digital democracy are found in a number of literatures. However, in the author's research, the most emphasis is given to the dimensions of democratic practice. Within the framework of the dimensions of democratic practice, digital democracy is understood as the use of digital tools or platforms to provide information and promote political and governmental openness. There are also those who understand it as the use of information and communication technology to broaden and deepen participation. Apart from that, some people also describe digital democracy as an effort to empower citizens to be involved in direct decision making through online tools.¹² By not trying to reduce the diversity of definitions, following Simon et al.,¹³ the author understands digital democracy as the use of digital media to encourage democratic practices.

Furthermore, Simon et. al. distinguish two definitions of digital democracy.¹⁴ The first definition was mentioned the minimalist definition. A minimalist definition of digital democracy focuses on providing access to government information to citizens and opening up opportunities for government interaction with citizens through consultation and online transaction services. The second definition is the maximum definition. This maximal definition of digital democracy imagines the participatory role of citizens in politics. Citizens are enabled to collaborate with government officials in making various community decisions. In addition, citizens are also enabled to make their own decisions about how they and their local communities are governed.

Based on the definitions above, the question arises, does digital democracy encourage the modernization of democracy or the democratization of democracy? According to Marco Deseriis,¹⁵ digital democracy encourages both. However, it must first be understood that the two processes, democratization of democracy and modernization of democracy, are driven by different logics. Democratic modernization refers to the process of democratic reform. Democratic reform itself presupposes the modernization of democracy in a set of administrative (government) procedures. Digital technology in this context can drive these reforms. Meanwhile, democratization of democracy refers to the transformation of power relations within and outside existing democratic arrangements. In the frame of democratic modernization, digital democracy is first used for the efficiency of the democratic process because digital democracy has the ability to reduce governance costs and rationalize government administration. Meanwhile, within the framework of

¹¹ Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso, 2000., pp 2-3.

¹² Simon, et al., *loc. cit.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Marco Deseriis, "Rethinking the Digital Democratic Affordance and Its Impact on Political Representation: Toward a New Framework", *New Media & Society*, Vol. 23, No. 8, 2021, pp. 2452–2473.

democratic democratization, digital democracy aims to fulfill various demands for the redistribution of resources, skills and power from groups that have them to groups that do not or lack them.

2. Four Positions of Digital Democracy

After understanding the diversity of digital democracy concepts, the author will then briefly outline the four positions of digital democracy. The position intended here refers to a general category of digital democracy based on an identifiable set of similar phenomena (rhetoric, practices, identities, and institutions). This mapping of the four positions of digital democracy was created by Lincoln Dahlberg¹⁶ to facilitate understanding of the diversity of concepts and typologies of digital democracy. The four positions are liberal-individualist, deliberative, counter-public (antagonistic and/or agonistic), and autonomous Marxism.

First, liberal-individualist digital democracy. Liberal-individualist digital democracy advocates providing opportunities for individuals to realize their particular interests within a liberal political system. Within the framework of this understanding, digital media is seen as an effective means for transmitting information and views between individuals. Digital media is also considered to facilitate a representative decision-making process because it allows individuals to obtain the information needed in the decision-making process. By obtaining the necessary information, individuals can consider competing political opinions and issues. Furthermore, digital media also offers the ability to record and collect individual decisions obtained through opinion polls, online feedback systems, petitions, emails, online surveys, etc.¹⁷

The democratic subject of liberal-individualist digital democracy according to Dahlberg is a rational and self-interested individual.¹⁸ The individual tends to maximize the instrumental utility of his/her best interests. Such individuals reflect the classical liberal economic agency found by Schumpeter in the concept of democracy as an aggregation of individual interests, wills, and preferences.¹⁹

Second, deliberative digital democracy. This position supports the view that sees digital media as an expansion of the deliberative public sphere which allows occurring the process of formation of public opinions through deliberation or rational, free, and equal discourse. Drawing on Habermas's views on deliberative democracy,²⁰ proponents of this idea provide several examples of online deliberation of varying quality to produce consensus. Some of this can be seen in the cases of Minnesota E-Democracy and

¹⁶ Dahlberg, "Re-constructing Digital Democracy: An Outline of Four 'Positions'," *loc. cit.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 858.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Cf. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, trans. Tegu Wahyu Utomo (Yogyakarta: Pustaka pelajar, 2013).

²⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, translated by Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger, print. 5th (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1993), and Habermas, "The Public Sphere", in Robert E Goodin dan Philip Pettit (eds.), *Contemporary Political Philosophy, An Antology* (Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 1997).

Kuro5hin, citizen journalism writing and comments, and various other online discussion forums.²¹

The subjects of deliberative digital democracy are individuals who develop through a process of rational deliberation based on the principles of public reason. These individuals are public oriented and interested in the public interest. They are actively involved in critical discourse in the official decision-making process.²²

Third, counter-public digital democracy. This position emphasizes the role of digital media in the formation of civil and political activism and the contestation of political groups. Proponents of this position do not position digital media as a deliberative public sphere that allows rational individuals to deliberate to reach consensus.²³

According to Dahlberg,²⁴ the democratic subject in this counter-public digital democracy perspective is formed through involvement in group formation, activism and contestation. Such a subject is more affective than the deliberative position. The subject is moved to act based on perceptions of exclusion and systemic injustice. He is bound by solidarity with others. Therefore he/she acts beyond the individual.

Starting from the poststructuralist and anti-essentialist perspective of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau,²⁵ Dahlberg explains the two main assumptions of the counter-public position.²⁶ First, social formations in any form always involve relations of exclusion and inclusion as well as discursive contestation. In that context, discourse is always understood as a contingent and partial fixation of meaning that shapes and organizes social relations (including identities, objects and practices). Second, an antagonistic situation (friend-enemy relationship) which is then converted into an agonistic situation (friend-adversary relationship) becomes the basis for the formation of a dynamic “counter-public”. In democratic theory, the term “counter-public” is usually associated with the tradition of critical public sphere theory which developed from a sympathetic inquiry into deliberative ideas (cf. Fraser, 1992; Habermas, 1996; Negh and Kluge, 1993). Meanwhile, the term “counter-discourse” is connected with Chantal Mouffe’s idea of agonistic democracy.²⁷ However, the counter-public position of digital democracy refers to both, namely the terms counter-public and counter-discourse.

From the perspective of the counter-public position of digital democracy, according to Dahlberg,²⁸ digital media can support the reproduction of dominant discourse, but can also facilitate counter-publics and counter-discourse. This counterpublic can be formed through the practices of alternative online sites, social movement initiatives, and subaltern online spaces, and so on. Furthermore, the articulation

²¹ Dahlberg, “Re-constructing Digital Democracy: An Outline of Four ‘Positions’,” *op. cit.*, p. 859.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 860.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 860-861.

²⁵ Cf. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy – Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, second edition (London: Verso, 2021).

²⁶ Dahlberg, “Re-constructing Digital Democracy: An Outline of Four ‘Positions’,” *op. cit.*, p. 861.

²⁷ Cf. Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of The Political* (London: Verso, 1993), Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, *loc. cit.*, and Mouffe, *On the Political – Thinking in Action* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).

²⁸ Dahlberg, “Re-constructing Digital Democracy: An Outline of Four ‘Positions’,” *loc. cit.*

of politically diverse counter-publics leading to the formation of a strong and effective opposition can also be formed through email lists and social movement sites (such as: APC.org and World Social Forum), alternative digital media networks (such as: Indymedia and OneWorldTV), and social networking sites, wikipedia, and blogs. Then, in relation to inter-discursive contestation, digital media is seen as being able to help articulate marginalized voices through online and offline activism. These two activisms can support each other in articulating marginalized voices.

Fourth, autonomous Marxist digital democracy. This position emphasizes the important role of digital media as a means of enabling radical democratic political practices that accentuate independently organized and open participation that transcends centralized state and capitalist systems. Digital networks in this context are placed as the basis for the formation of independent and democratic equality.²⁹

Furthermore, from an autonomous Marxist point of view, democracy is understood as autonomous self-organization of a centralized system of power. Democratic decision-making occurs organically (and radically) through the productivity of decentralized collaborative peer networks. This vision contains the meaning of political revolution and the formation of a completely new democratic society, because it requires joint socio-economic arrangements as the basis for the formation of a democratic society.³⁰

The question arises, who are the subjects of digital democracy according to the autonomous Marxist perspective? The autonomous Marxist position basically sees “the multitude” as the subject of democracy. In the context of digital democracy, collective network subjects are referred to as “the multitude”. They describe a plurality that cannot be reduced to a single community. The subject does not appear as part of the “mass” or the “people” or the “working class”, all of which imply unity, but as an autonomous actor who enforces difference through the operation of a network of co-production that is a commonality and cannot be reduced to individual subject and group at once.³¹

The four digital democracy positions described by Dahlberg above represent an optimistic perspective on the democratic nature of the Internet. The Internet is inherently democratic. Is such optimism wrong? Of course not. However, optimism of any kind must be accompanied by skepticism. With skepticism, we can balance optimism and pessimism. For this purpose, below the author will explain the utopia, dystopia and synthopia of digital democracy.

3. Utopia of Digital Democracy

Utopian visions of digital democracy began to emerge with the mass promotion of personal computers and the Internet in the 1980s and 1990s. As a network that connects computers throughout the world and can be accessed by everyone, the Internet is seen as able to expand the deliberative public sphere, encourage increased political participation of citizens, become a medium for promoting individual interests and communal values,

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 863.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

and become a space for civil and political activism.³² Lincoln Dahlberg's classification of the four positions of digital democracy described earlier is motivated by this kind of utopian vision.

There are at least several characteristics of the Internet that encourage the birth of a utopian vision of digital democracy according to Jan AGM van Dijk.³³ *First*, the Internet is seen as an interactive medium. This characteristic is very different from traditional mass media which works based on a one-way communication model. *Second*, the Internet is a medium that allows users to be active and creative. On the Internet, users are not only viewers, listeners and readers of content, but can also become participants and/or producers. *Third*, the Internet is a medium that allows direct and real time communication. *Fourth*, Internet platforms in principle offer equality in terms of expertise. However, this expertise must be proven first before it is recognized. *Fifth*, the Internet is a network that allows the creation of works collaboratively online, not by individual authors or companies.

Based on the five characteristics above, van Dijk³⁴ assumes that the Internet is inherently democratic. This assumption is the background to a utopian vision of digital democracy which is imagined as a total revolution of political democracy and public governance. This revolution was carried out by adopting digital technology into democratic practices and government governance.

According to van Dijk,³⁵ the utopian vision above encourages four waves of expectations for digital democracy. The first expectations emerged in the 1980s. At that time, a teledemocracy perspective emerged, inspired by the "Athenian agora". Technology in this context is seen as being able to encourage political and democratic activities. In technological networks (cable TV and later the Internet), citizens could engage in politics. At this point, technology erases spatial boundaries and locality. The elimination of spatial and local boundaries allows a form of direct democracy where people can directly contact parliament and the government anytime and anywhere.

The second expectation emerged in the 1990s. At that time, various virtual communities emerged. This virtual community appears in the form of Usenet and other online communities. These virtual communities are formed based on certain interests and support existing physical communities.

The third expectation emerged in the 2000s, when the Internet spread massively, which was marked by the emergence of a new democratic vision that was equivalent to a new economic vision. This vision is based on the idea of increasing citizen participation in politics and public policy making via the Internet. The idea of online consultations and debates emerged in this wave.

The fourth expectation emerged from 2004 until now. Since 2004, there has been

³² Lincoln Dahlberg, "The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere", *loc. cit.*, Merlyna Lim, "The Internet, Social Networks, and Reform in Indonesia", *loc. cit.*, and Jan A.G.M. van Dijk, *loc. cit.*

³³ van Dijk, *ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

a drastic increase in the use of the Internet and social media. The increase in use of the Internet and social media is accompanied by an increase in the amount of user-generated content. This raises hopes that citizens will increase their contribution or participation in policy making in various ways, such as through online petitions, weblogs, Wikipedia, citizen journalism published via YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, etc.

For Henry Jenkins (2009), as quoted by Christian Fuchs,³⁶ increasing citizen participation (in the fields of economics, politics and democracy) in various ways in the era of social media proliferation cannot be separated from the spreadable characteristics of social media itself. Social media is media that can be spread (spreadable media), meaning that its content can be distributed widely. On social media, consumers play a central role in producing content. Consumers in this model are grassroots communities. They advocate for social issues that are personally and socially meaningful to them. The logic of social media in this context is “if it cannot be shared then it dies”.

4. Distopia of Digital Democracy

The antithesis of the utopian vision above is the dystopian view. This view is defended by a number of political scientists and politicians such as Guehenno, Norris, and Sunstein.³⁷ Contrary to the utopian view, according to the dystopian view, the Internet does not inherently have democratic characteristics. The internet has actually become a threat to democracy. In addition, according to them, a political system based on direct democracy is impossible in a very complex modern society, although for utopians it is possible with the existence of the Internet. Then, instead of supporting political participation and deliberation, the Internet actually shakes democratic values through encouraging increased populism and information inequality.³⁸

One of the most recent dystopian views of digital democracy was expressed by Micol Burighel.³⁹ Starting from Cass Sunstein’s theory about the urgency of group polarization in a democratic society and then combining it with empirical studies of several online groups, Burighel found that instead of encouraging democratization, digital media/the Internet actually encourages increased polarization.

Group polarization has been a serious problem in democracy for a long time. Group polarization is formed when deliberative group members move to extreme epistemes based on the direction of their members’ pre-deliberative tendencies. Consequently, when faced with different views during a discussion, people still tend to move towards the view they already believed before the discussion.⁴⁰ Trends like these in turn sharpen social and political friction and fragmentation.

According to Burighel, the above tendency is very dangerous in democracy. When

³⁶ Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: a Critical Introduction* (London, Los Angeles, New Delhi, Singapore, and Washington DC: Sage Publications Ltd., 2014), p. 53.

³⁷ Cass Sunstein, *Republic.Com* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

³⁸ Van Dijk, *loc. cit.*

³⁹ Micol Burighel, “Polarization and the Role of Digital Media”. Seminar Prosiding, 2019. <https://nome.unak.is/wordpress/volumen-14-no-2-2019/conference-proceedings-volume-14-no-2-2019/polarization-and-the-role-of-digital-media/>, accessed on 01 Oktober 2022.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

society develops into factions that cannot communicate and understand each other, democratic institutions naturally become weak because a healthy and strong democracy requires a healthy and strong (that is, open, constructive, balanced) public debate.⁴¹

Furthermore, Burighel explains that polarization is certainly not a new problem in democracy.⁴² Long before the advent of the Internet and social media, society tended to be polarized. However, the presence of the Internet and social media has a different explanation for the causes of polarization compared to previous times. In the previous era, polarization was formed because of three things, namely (1) the human tendency to move towards a point that is in harmony with their views and beliefs,⁴³ (2) reputational reasons: people tend to accept dominant views because they are afraid of losing their reputation and are afraid of being isolated. – compare Noell-Neumann's spiral of silence theory (1984), and (3) overconfidence and extremism: people who are not too sure about an argument tend not to maintain extreme beliefs about that argument, whereas people who are too sure about an argument tend to be extreme in their beliefs. defend that argument. Meanwhile, in the era of the Internet and social media, polarization is formed through technological mechanisms (algorithms and filter bubbles), biases and heuristics (mental shortcuts based on empirical thinking), and the formation of echo chambers. The following is a brief explanation of some of the causes of online polarization.⁴⁴

First, bias. There are various types of bias. However, confirmation bias is the most important aspect in understanding online polarization. This bias occurs because a person selectively collects evidence or gives it undue weight to support his position, while at the same time he neglects efforts to collect evidence for a position that opposes it. Two other biases are blind spot bias (the inability to recognize one's own bias) and the bandwagon/follower effect (individuals adopting the majority opinion).

Several types of bias create sharp polarization on the Internet or (digital) social media. This is supported by the ecology of the Internet or social media which creates social networks whose members consist of people who have the same values and interests. This fact is often referred to as homophily. Homophily is what explains why on Facebook users tend to be friends with people who are ideologically and politically homogenous or on Twitter people tend to follow people they already know. In this context, similarity is what gives birth to connection. A further effect of this homophily tendency is the formation of online echo-chambers.

Second, echo-chamber. An echo-chamber is a homophily group, a digital environment that brings together homogeneous groups of people. In this homophily environment, with the support of digital technology algorithmic mechanisms, it will be very difficult for someone to meet people who hold different views, values and beliefs. They eventually become polarized because the same opinions and information continue to be echoed while different opinions and information do not seem to exist. As a result they live in an information cocoon. Cass Sunstein was one of the first scholars to notice

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Sunstein, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁴ Burighel, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-7.

this phenomenon. In 2001, before the birth of social media, he wrote about the risks of fragmentation in the digital space and saw it as a threat to democracy. Sunstein writes:⁴⁵

...it is important to realize that a well-functioning democracy—a republic—depends not only on freedom from censorship, but also on a set of shared experiences and on unexpected, unanticipated, and even unwanted exposure to a wide variety of topics, people, and ideas. The “gated community” system is just as unhealthy in cyberspace as it is in the real world.

Third, filter bubbles. Filter bubble is a term coined by Eli Pariser (2011) to describe the collateral effects of algorithms. Algorithms created for the purposes of research, content promotion, selection and filtering on the Internet are found to cause distortion and deformation. It drives polarization and amplifies the effects of digital bias and echo chambers. This happens because algorithms, by prioritizing certain content, imprison people in their own bubbles. There, alternative points of view are very difficult to enter. Such mechanisms are created to support personalization of content and advertising based on user tastes.

A clear example of the polarization effect above can be seen in the rapid growth of hoaxes, fake news and hate speech on social media and/or the Internet.⁴⁶ Hoaxes, fake news and hate speech consumed and shared by social media users have been proven to increase social and political friction and fragmentation. This is very evident in the momentum of the presidential election of the Republic of Indonesia (Pilpres RI) in 2014 and 2019, the 2017 DKI Jakarta Pilkada, the 2017 and 2020 United States Presidential Election, and Brexit in the UK as well as several other important political events in several countries such as the Philippines, India, and others.⁴⁷

Pessimism about the democratic dimensions inherent in the Internet is also visible in the phenomenon of post-truth politics which has developed rapidly since 2016. Matthew D’Ancona (2017), a senior British journalist, expressed this pessimism in his book, *Post Truth, A New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (2017). D’Ancona writes that in the era of digital media, we are entering a new phase of political and intellectual contestation. During this period a sinister wave of populism shook orthodoxy and democratic institutions. Reason is threatened by emotion, diversity by nativism, freedom by the drift toward autocracy. According to D’Ancona, the practice of politics today, more than ever, is a zero-sum game, not a battle of ideas. Science is treated with suspicion and sometimes with open contempt.⁴⁸

Furthermore, D’Ancona argues that the essence of this global trend is the collapse of truth value, comparable to the collapse of currencies or stocks. Honesty and accuracy are no longer important priorities in political debate. As a candidate and President, Donald Trump, for example, has flouted the assumption that the leader of the free world should

⁴⁵ Sunstein, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Budi Gunawan and Barito Mulyo Ratmono, *Demokrasi di Era Post Truth* (Jakarta: Kepustakaan Populer Gramedia (KPG), 2021), p. 47.

⁴⁷ Cf. Matthew D’Ancona, *Post-truth, The New War on Truth and How to Fight Back* (Ebury Press, 2017), Lim, “Freedom to Hate: Social Media, Algorithmic Enclaves, and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia”, *loc. cit.*, and Fuchs, *Digital Demagogue – Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter*, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁸ D’Ancona, *ibid.*, p. 1.

have at least some knowledge of the truth. D’Ancona emphasized this because based on fact-checking sites, 69 percent of Trump’s statements on Twitter social media during the United States Presidential Election were proven to be false. At the same time, in the UK, the campaign to leave the European Union (Brexit) won with slogans that were demonstrably false and misleading, but also resonated nonetheless.⁴⁹

Based on the facts above, *Oxford Dictionaries* chose “Post-Truth” as word of the year in 2016. This term refers to the loss of influence of objective facts in shaping public opinion on social (digital) media.⁵⁰ This situation is supported by social media or the Internet which allows everyone to become producers and consumers of information without going through an adequate curation and filtering process. This is also supported by an algorithm mechanism that tends to match users with people who agree. This is what has helped accelerate the spread of hoaxes and hate speech on the Internet.

5. Syntopia of Digital Democracy

A more balanced perspective, as a synthesis of the two previous viewpoints, is the syntopian perspective. Syntopians argue that the Internet brings opportunities and risks to various dimensions of human life, including democracy.⁵¹ On the one hand, the Internet allows the expansion and improvement of people’s daily routines, strengthens emotional and social ties between users, and also encourages collaboration and social integration, but on the other hand, the Internet also carries risks that threaten social cohesion if not properly anticipated.⁵²

In the context of digital democracy, according to the syntopian view, the Internet can on the one hand mobilize political participation, but on the other hand it can trigger social fragmentation. In this context, the syntopia view is not trapped in a black and white perspective like in the utopian and dystopian visions. A perspective like this is needed amidst the euphoria of technology adoption in democracy. The adoption of technology in democracy is accepted without eliminating criticism. This means that the utopian vision of digital democracy must be followed by a critical and realistic attitude so that the vision does not destroy the values of democracy itself. This implies the need to be careful in utilizing technology in democratic and governmental practices.

6. The Importance of Instrumental and Substantive Reading

The three previous models of digital democracy perspective generally tend to highlight technological characteristics alone that support and/or do not support democratic practices. This is clearly a very reductionist and simplistic view. There are several reasons why these three views are considered reductionist and simplistic.

First, utopian, syntopian, and dystopian perspectives on digital democracy tend to simplify the complexity of digital realities and democracy into a single narrative that does not encompass the full spectrum of experiences and impacts of digital technology in

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Burighel, *loc. cit.*

⁵² Budi Gunawan and Barito Mulyo Ratmono, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.

society. The syntopian perspective sees digital technology as the savior of democracy, where political participation will be broader and more inclusive. This narrative often simplifies how technology can fix political problems without considering the underlying social, economic, and political factors. Meanwhile, the dystopian perspective emphasizes the negative impacts of digital technology, such as threats to privacy, the spread of disinformation, political polarization, and algorithmic manipulation. While these issues are real, the dystopian approach often ignores the positive potential of technology and does not consider how policy or regulation can mitigate these negative impacts. Furthermore, the utopian perspective sees digital technology as the perfect solution to social and political problems. This perspective is also too idealistic because it ignores the reality that technology is created, operated, and regulated by humans who are bound by political, economic, and power interests, so technology cannot be completely neutral or bring unlimited benefits.

Second, another reason why utopian, syntopian, and dystopian perspectives on digital democracy are called simplistic and reductionist is because they ignore the reality that digital technology and democracy are very complex, multidimensional, and often involve non-linear dynamics. This view simplifies the relationship between technology and democracy into scenarios that are either too positive or too negative without considering local, contextual, and historical variations in each country or community.

Third, utopian, dystopian, and syntopian perspectives on digital democracy often emphasize technology as the main actor in political change. They ignore the interaction between technology and political institutions, regulations, culture, and human behavior. In reality, technology is just a tool used by various actors with different goals, and its impact depends on how and by whom it is used.

Such a reductionist and simplistic perspective is an inevitable consequence of the logic of technological determinism used by utopians, dystopians, and synthopians. In the technological determinism perspective there is an assumption that technology determines social, economic, cultural and political change. Technological determinism isolates the role of human agency in driving social, economic, cultural and political change. Humans are seen as not having a central role in driving social, economic, cultural and political change. This view is clearly reductionist, simplistic, and ahistorical.⁵³ In the context of digital democracy, this view ignores the fact that the successful adoption of technology in democratic practice is the product of organic interactions between technology, subject agency, and social, cultural and political contexts. This can be seen from the success of digital activism in the "Gecko versus Crocodile" (Cicak versus Buaya) and the Prita Mulyasari cases in Indonesia. In both cases, the actor's skill in framing the issue was

⁵³ D. Chandler, "Technological or Media Determinis", Available at: <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/tecdet/tdeold.html>. Accessed on 08/12/2022, Aleksandra Čavoški, "The European Green Deal and Technological Determinism", *Envirometal Law Review*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2022, pp. 201-213, Sally Wyatt, "Technological Determinism is dead; Long Live Technology Determinism", in Robert C. Scharf dan Dusek (eds.), *Philosophy of Technology – The Technological Condition, An Antology*, second edition (EK: John Wiley & Sons. Inc., 2014), and Fernando de la Cruz Paragas dan Trisha TC Lin, "Organizing and Reframing Technological Determinism", *New Media & Society*, Vol. 18, No. 8, 2016, pp. 1528-1546.

crucial to the success of the movement.⁵⁴

Considering the limitations of the utopian, dystopian and syntopian perspectives above, this paper proposes the importance of giving a balanced portion to the instrumental and substantive perspectives of technology in explaining the relationship between Internet (technology) and (political) democracy. These two perspectives were introduced by Andrew Feenberg in his book entitled *Transforming Technology*.⁵⁵

First, the instrumental perspective. This perspective sees technology only as a pure means or tool. Technology is neutral towards political, social and cultural values. The following are four implications of this view according to Feenberg.⁵⁶

The first implication is that as a pure tool, technology does not care about the purpose of its use, whether for political or democratic or economic or ideological purposes. Second, in the modern world and especially in capitalist and socialist societies, technology appears indifferent to politics. Technology can be used for any purpose, no matter whether it conflicts with political principles or not. The illustration: a computer is a computer, a hammer is a hammer, a gadget is a gadget. These tools are useful in any social context. At this level, technology is distinguished from traditional legal and religious institutions which cannot be easily applied and transferred to new social contexts. Third, the socio-political neutrality of technology is usually associated with its “rational” character and the universality of truth contained in it. This means that what is successfully implemented in one society is expected to also be successfully implemented in other communities. The successful use of Internet technology for democratic purposes in Europe, for example, could become a standard for success in Indonesia even though the social and geopolitical context is very different. Fourth, the universality of technology may mean that the same measurement standards can be applied in different contexts. Because technology in this context is neutral. Technology essentially stands under the same norms of efficiency in every context.

In relation to the implementation of digital democracy, this instrumental view of technology ignores the complexity of the political economic dimensions of Internet technology. In fact, Internet technology itself was never designed to be neutral. Therefore, the way it works also inevitably hides the political economic interests of the maker. Apart from that, this instrumental view of technology also tends to ignore the technical obstacles inherent in Internet technology itself to implementing digital democracy. This view certainly cannot be fully accepted in the context of digital democracy. For this reason, another perspective is needed so that we can see in a balanced way the relationship between technology and democracy within the framework of digital democracy. This other perspective is the substantive perspective.

Second, substantive perspective. This substantive theory of technology is best known for the writings of Jacques Ellul and Martin Heidegger. Heidegger, for example,

⁵⁴ Merlyna Lim, “Many Clicks but Little Sticks: Social Media Activism in Indonesia,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 43(4), p. 637.

⁵⁵ Andrew Feenberg, *Transforming Technology – A Critical Theory Revisited* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

said that today's technology is relentlessly crucifying us.⁵⁷ The essence of this substantive idea about technology is that technology is not just a pure means or tool, but has become a new environment that requires adaptation from its users. As a new environment, technology has the capacity to frame, enable, and constrain the social behavior of its users. Just like the materialist perspective, this capacity is culturally constructed and shaped by the imagination and hopes of its users.⁵⁸ Algorithmic barriers such as algorithmic curation processes, biases, echo-chambers, and filter bubbles can be categorized into this perspective. These facts show that the Internet is not just a pure tool or tools, but has become a new environment with its capacities and limitations.

For the author, the two perspectives above cannot be applied partially. Both remain in a complementary relational relationship. In the context of digital democracy, this means that both perspectives can be taken into consideration when formulating policies for adopting technology in democracy. This is because the successful use of digital technology in democracy does not purely depend on technology alone or on users alone, but is the product of an organic relationship between technology and the capacity of users (subjects) and/or subject agency as well as the local social, economic, cultural and political context.

The importance of the organic relationship between technology and the capacity of users (subjects) and/or subject agency as well as the local social, economic, cultural and political context in digital democracy can be seen in the structural barriers of the Electronic Information and Transactions Law (ITE Law) in Indonesia. Historically, the ITE Law was first drafted in 2001 by the Directorate General of Posts and Telecommunications together with the Cyberlaw Study Center at Padjadjaran University. After being drafted at that time, the ITE Law was not immediately passed. This draft law was only passed in 2008 by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono after going through a long process and dynamics. This law is contained in Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 11 of 2008 concerning Information and Electronic Transactions. Law no. 11 of 2008 was later changed to Law no. 19 of 2016. With the passing of this law, the activities and use of information technology in Indonesia officially have a legal umbrella.⁵⁹

Since it was passed in 2008 and amended in 2016, the ITE Law has sparked various controversies in society. This law is often used by certain groups to silence the critical voices of citizens in the digital realm who express dissatisfaction with public services. This, for example, was experienced by Prita Mulyasari (2009) who was fined IDR 204 million because she was accused of defaming the good name of the Omni International Hospital in Jakarta due to a complaint e-mail she sent to her friends and relatives about the poor service at the hospital.⁶⁰ Even though Prita was later acquitted of all charges by the court at the urging of Indonesian netizens, this case remains a bad example of the use

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Deseriis, *op. cit.*, p. 2456.

⁵⁹ 7. Yoan Oktaviani, "Kronologi Perjalanan Panjang UU ITE", *Kompaspedia*, 08/05/2021. <<https://kompaspedia.kompas.id/baca/infografik/kronologi/kronologi-perjalanan-panjang-uu-ite>>, diakses pada 31 Juli 2022.

⁶⁰ Merlyna Lim, "Many Clicks but Little Sticks: Social Media Activism in Indonesia," *loc. cit.*

of the ITE Law to silence citizens' critical voices in the digital realm. Because Prita was previously found guilty on charges of violating the ITE Law.

The cases mentioned above are just an examples of a series of cases of violations of the ITE Law that threaten freedom of opinion and expression in Indonesia on digital platforms. There are still many other cases where, according to the Civil Society Coalition, the majority of victims come from activists, journalists and critical members of the public.⁶¹ It means that media ecology is not the sole determinant of the success and failure of digital activism or digital democracy. The local social and political context, as seen in legislative products, is also a factor that greatly determines the success and failure of digital activism or digital democracy

D. Conclusion

This paper has shown how the relationship between politics and technology, specifically, democracy and the Internet should be framed. Here the author rejects the idea that highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the Internet alone and ignores human capacities and/or subject agency as well as socio-political, economic and cultural contexts as seen in the perspectives of utopia, dystopia and synthopia of digital democracy. According to the author, the perspective, utopia, dystopia and synthopia of digital democracy are reductionist and simplistic. This is an inevitable consequence of the logic of the techno-determinist approach which is the theoretical basis of the three perspectives. Based on the author's theoretical investigation here, it is concluded that a more balanced perspective is needed in reading the relationship between the Internet and democracy. This balanced perspective can be seen in the integration of the instrumental and substantive perspectives on technology initiated by Andrew Feenberg. The integration of these two perspectives in looking at the relationship between the Internet and democracy results in the conclusion that the success and failure of using the Internet for democratic purposes is a product of the organic interaction between technology and human capacity and/or subject agency, social, economic, political and cultural contexts.

Based on this reading model, the author recommends two things for the successful implementation of digital democracy. First, the importance of redesigning the Internet so that it conforms to the tastes and principles of democracy. This proposal will certainly have serious challenges because we will be faced with economic or market logic which is the basis for the formation of Internet algorithms. Second, the importance of political literacy for society and the government. Political literacy is not only carried out for civil society, but also for the government because in many cases the government actually uses the Internet as a hegemonic instrument to silence critical voices from civil society.

Finally, because this paper is more conceptual in nature, the author recommends the importance of further critical studies based on micro empirical data about the relationship between the Internet and democracy. According to the author, empirical studies will greatly contribute to a broader critical discourse on the relationship between

⁶¹ Fitra Moerat Ramadhan, "Daftar Aktivis hingga Jurnalis yang Terseret UU ITE", *Tempo.co.*, 18/02/2022, <https://grafis.tempo.co/read/2549/daftar-aktivis-hingga-jurnalis-yang-terseret-uu-ite>, diakses pada 05 Juli 2022.

politics and technology.

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