Technical Sovereignty and Digital Democracy in Europe – Follower of Influencer ?

A New Media Approach

The digital turn has considerably impacted geopolitics in terms of power, governance and regulation, leading to a proliferation of stakeholders and networks at multiple levels (states, international organisations, private companies, civil society and citizens), new dynamics of competition in a transnational space that is becoming increasingly virtual, borderless and deterritorialised (cyberspace), and novel forms of learning, work and human activity. Digital technologies have also brought about a paradigm shift in information and communication systems, with the emergence of new media (online platforms, interactive websites, algorithmic decision-making ecosystems, etc.) that will have a long-term impact on social and cultural practices, interpersonal and societal relations, the public sphere and the exercise of individual and collective democracy. In the absence of a comprehensive legal and ethical framework, effective means of verifying information and an acceptable level of digital literacy and critical capabilities among users, there are real risks of manipulation and misinformation which need to be managed – as seen in the Brexit referendum and US presidential election in 2016, the cyber-attack against Microsoft which seriously affected the European Banking Authority in March 2021 and the wave of Covid-19 pandemic-related conspiracy theories that circulated on the web in 2020-21.

Competing with United States, China and Japan in the technological geopolitical order, the European Union faces a fourfold challenge: 1) Completing its Digital Single Market, which is beset by "contradictions between techno-nationalism and techno-globalism", contrasting approaches between Member States and the asymmetry between "under-connected" and "hyper-digitised" countries; 2) Developing - through research, innovation, investment and policymaking - its technological and digital sovereignty in cutting-edge fields such as artificial intelligence, 5G, cybersecurity, robotics, semiconductors and space, as well as the regulatory and governance strategies in the field and a specific niche trade policy; 3) Strengthening its democratic model via digital democracy by promoting the enhancing of quality information, accountability, civil participation, digital literacy, and critical thinking; 4) Fostering a more appealing narrative and brand image and using it worldwide to convey the EU's fundamental values and freedoms. (New) media have a major cross-cutting role to play in tackling these four challenges.

Against this analytical backdrop and adopting an interdisciplinary perspective, this contribution combines an examination of the theoretical, conceptual and methodological frameworks with an analysis of various relevant public and private archives, with the purpose of discussing: 1) how the EU (and its Member States) has dealt with new media (in technological, economic, regulatory, communication, and consumption terms) and what are its present vulnerabilities; 2) the transition from traditional to new media and the related continuity and disruptions, benefits and pitfalls for information and content quality, the media landscape and the EU's brand image; 3) the issues and challenges raised by the proliferation of fake news, disinformation, and undesired content (as hate rhetoric, child pornography, elements of pro-terrorism guidance or proselytism) conveyed by new media and the repercussions for human rights, freedom and democracy in Europe; 4) future prospects, risks and uncertainties in the artificial intelligence era.

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