LEADERSHIP POLITICA/2

Original Leaders: Reclaiming Citizenship in the Age of the Internet.
A response to some of the main arguments of Paolo Giusta on Leadership

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I-Introduction

Democracies no longer go out with a great flash but are rather slowly smothered by authoritarian tendencies (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

In his article on leadership, Paolo Giusta explores the role of citizens in a democratic system. He highlights that the real anti-thesis of leadership is not followership but victimhood. According to Giusta, when citizens begin to consider themselves victims of their circumstances, or victims of a certain system, they abdicate their role as the "original leader", that is their role as the primary source of legitimacy and sovereignty in any democratic system. A reflection such as this one

Keith Haring, *Tuttomondo*, Pisa, 1989

is more relevant than ever these days, as new challenges, such as a global pandemic, for instance, offer a chance to re-evaluate the systems we are living in and our relationship with them as citizens.

In his article, Giusta highlights four main ways in which citizens may abdicate their role as "original leader": (1) by renouncing to inform themselves; (2) by renouncing

to their vote during elections, either by abstaining completely or by exercising a "vote of protest"[1]; (3) by renouncing to participate and be active in civil society, and; (4) by renouncing to their ability to hold those who govern accountable by refusing to re-elect non-performing officials, or by putting pressure through signing petitions, or even communicating directly and in writing with the institutions in charge. All of these points represent the traditional fundamentals of healthy citizenship under the umbrella of a healthy democratic system, and they are still true today. However, the reality of how they may be practiced nowadays has changed tremendously, in a way that necessitates new reflection into the ability of the citizen to exercise all of these duties as original leader. One main factor is the Internet. Concerns about the future of democracy within the age of the Internet have made news headlines for a while. Though technology panic is not new, it does not mean that we do not have a duty as citizens to reflect on how it is changing the political playing field.

The first premise of Giusta's analysis of how a citizen may renounce his role as the original leader is information. Citizens' access to information has long been established as key to a healthy democracy. Access to information supports citizens' role as decision-makers in a democracy (Krabbe Boserup and Christensen 2005), helps to decrease corruption (DiRienzo et al. 2007), and generally protects against a monopoly of knowledge that slowly degrades into totalitarianism. This is not to say that information alone is the basis for democracy. Information is necessary but not sufficient (Fox 2007), and in the absence of the other fundamentals of democracy, a truly democratic process is not possible.

Nevertheless, a sound and healthy access to information is the prerequisite for any other level of political participation. Without healthy information, it is not possible to participate effectively in elections, to make an informed vote, to participate in civil society or to exercise any kind of pressure on elected leaders. Greater access to information enhances the creation of more open and free societies (DiRienzo et al. 2007).

Discussing Giusta's emphasis on citizens' responsibility to inform themselves in a democracy, it is impossible not to consider what information means in the digital age. Since the time of the Ancient Greeks, technology panics have been a fact of social life. When novels became particularly trendy in the 18th century, society became increasingly concerned about "reading addiction" and its association with immoral behaviour among young people (Orben 2020). The impact of technology on political life is also not new. As television became more dominant in the 20th century, observers worried it was favouring charismatic electoral candidates over others (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). While it is true that we have historically been able to get over technology panic, integrating technologies into our lives and using them to our benefit, it is also true that the pace of their development has never been so fast. This article will attempt to explore the potential effects of the Internet on

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[1] According to Giusta, a vote of protest is a vote given to a certain candidate or party who merely protests the status quo without offering any valid alternative solutions.

political life, particularly on access to information, and to demonstrate the importance of understanding the new playing field if citizens are to perform their role as original leaders today and in the future.

II.The Influence of the Internet on Political Life

"The use of the Internet has led to more continuity than transformation of political systems" (Van Dijk and Hacker 2018, 205). The debate on the relationship between democracy and the Internet (and internet-based technology) is a diverse one like many others. In the early 2000s, according to (Papacharissi 2002), there was a general feeling of optimism among scholars and a utopian expectation about how access to the Internet would democratise information and liberate the people by providing avenues for personal expression, promoting citizen activity, and reversing the decline of the public sphere. This may have come as a natural reaction to some success stories in the 1990s, such as the Indonesian experience of how web-based publications helped to expose information on the corrupt Suharto government, eventually leading to its dismantling (DiRienzo et al. 2007). Two decades later, the conversation is less certain. According to the research conducted by the (Pew Research Center 2020), *Concerns About Democracy in the Digital Age*, a significant number of technology experts participating in the study (50 per cent) saw a bleak future for the effect of the Internet on democracy. There are others, however, who believe that citizens will be able to adjust and to become more aware of how to use this technology for their benefit. Another group argues that, overall, the Internet will not have a very significant influence either way on democracy. This diversity in viewpoints seems to be reflected in the wider literature as well. Some opinions seem to emphasis both sides of the technology coin, recognising that while the Internet and social media have the potential to contribute to stability and dialogue and to offer a nonviolent political solution, it can also be used by elites to manipulate, spread rumours, and polarize groups into extremism (Haider, Mcloughlin, and Scott 2011). Others have put in question some early assumptions about the role of social media, such as the assumption that it would offer a cheap campaigning platform for less wealthy electoral candidates, making electoral races more equal. Shmargad and Sanchez (2020) argue that instead of acting as an equalizer, social media has mostly exacerbated existing inequalities among electoral candidates. Several scholars also posit that the nature of the relationship between democracy and the Internet is entirely contextual. Best and Wade (2009) highlight the possibility of the Internet to range from a very supportive tool for democracy to a very debilitating tool of control depending on the context in which it exists. Stoycheff (2020) similarly argues that Relative Deprivation theory[2] occupies a central role when it comes to the Internet. That is, in countries where autocratic rule still prevails, the Internet can act as a window to the rest of the world and

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[2] Relative Deprivation (RD) theory suggests that when people feel they are being deprived of something considered essential in their society they will organize in political action to obtain the things they need (Longley 2020).

relative deprivation would then play a role in catalysing a movement for change. It does not have the same impact, however, in countries with a more or less functioning democratic system. The appeal of democracy seems to be stronger in countries still aspiring to reach it than in countries already enjoying some form of democracy (Stoycheff 2020). This viewpoint is shared by Zang et al. (2019), who argue that the effect of the Internet on democracy is more significant in less advanced democracies than in more advanced ones. And in even in such cases of less advanced democracies, the impact starts to increase at the beginning and then slowly starts to decline. In their research, Van Dijk and Hacker (2018) prove, for instance, that digital media use has not led to an increase in voter turnout. This could be considered an indication that social media platforms do not, in themselves, guarantee more participation. They also argue that the fast pace of online communication does not allow for sustainable collective political action online.

Despite all the diverse opinions about the impact of the Internet on democracy, even those more optimistic than others recognise that even if we eventually learn to use it for our benefit, the journey towards that outcome is one filled with challenges. Democracy is jeopardised by humans' use of technology due to the speed and scope of reality distortion, the decline of journalism, and the impact of surveillance capitalism (Pew Research Center 2020).

a-Information Overload

"Cheap, fast, and convenient access to information does not necessarily render all citizens more informed, or more willing to participate in political discussion" (Papacharissi 2002, 22). The Internet has increased access to information, but it has resulted in an overload of information in big quantities and questionable quality. The overload of information that we suddenly have access to has often resulted in confusion and apprehension. The majority of citizens are unable to distinguish what is relevant from what is not and often feel overwhelmed by the sheer quantity of information available out there. This potentially leads in some cases to apprehension and aversion to the information available online, or in other cases to acquiring false information and confusion.

b-Reality Distortion

One of the main topics to address when talking about information online is Fake News and reality distortion. Information manipulation may not be an entirely new thing. Misinformation and disinformation are present even in mainstream and traditional media, often controlled by the powers that be. Even Access to Information Acts and the mechanism involved in them provided information that was often misleading, deceiving, and harmful (Gingras 2012). With the Internet, however, the phenomenon has exploded. While the manipulation of information may have previously been reserved to the elites, it is now in the hands of everyone. One may even argue that mainstream media manipulation by the elite was relatively

easier to identify. If a certain TV station or newspaper is owned or funded by a certain group it is likely to be biased in that direction. The appearance of online media phenomena such as *deepfake* and *cheapfake* – creating fake videos of politicians making a certain statement that appears real – have taken reality distortion to another level (Schick 2020) and has made it that much more difficult to identify the bias. The implications of such fake information being circulated in a fast and uncontrollable manner are not insignificant. The spread of misinformation and disinformation sows confusion and insecurity. Furthermore, awareness of fake information being available online is not always met with a positive reaction of increased vigilance and scrutiny when it comes to online information. In many cases, increased citizen awareness of the potential for false information to be weaponised by certain groups in power has significantly affected their trust in institutions and in each other (Pew Research Center 2020).

Unfortunately, Post-Truth politics is gaining ground on an international level. There seems to be a decrease in the prioritisation of seeking the truth (Kien 2020), enhanced even more by the role of modern technology in allowing individuals to curate their own narratives, their own truths. The 2016 U.S. elections are one notorious example of a debate on fake news. A study by Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) reveals some interesting facts about the relationship between "fake news" shared on social media and the presidential elections. For instance, 62% of adults in the U.S. reported getting their news from social media. Moreover, the most popular fake news items were shared more widely than the most popular mainstream news items and pro-Trump fake news was circulated more widely than pro-Clinton ones. In fact, in the database collected by Allcott and Gentzkow, 115 pro-Trump fake stories were shared a total of 30 million times on Facebook and 41 pro-Clinton fake stories were shared a total of 7.6 million times. To result in this total of approximately 38 million shares of fake stories, they estimate that these stories must have been opened and read approximately 760 million times. Putting all of this together, many have argued that Trump would not have been elected president were it not for the impact of fake news (Parkinson 2016). Reaching a definite conclusion about the scientific impact of fake news on voting results is more complex than that. There are many more factors to consider such as the extent to which these stories are believed by readers and whether they are read by people who already radically support one candidate or another. However, the proliferation of fake news is large and growing even more. The need to be responsible and vigilant viewers and consumers of this type of news is not to be underestimated (Stelter 2016). Social media platforms, especially Facebook, have been taking some new measures to fight this phenomenon, such as flagging some news items as unverified. While this might help in keeping things more transparent, it also raises a question about who then becomes the determiner of the truth.

c-Surveillance Capitalism

Another important phenomenon to mention is surveillance capitalism. This has become a simple fact of our digital lives. Tech companies collect data and then use

it in so many ways (Mental Floss 2016), including selling it to the private and public sector. And although we may still be horrified by how much "they" know about us, we have almost all accepted it as the price to pay for using these technologies that our lives have come to depend so fundamentally on. Online data collection (and use), however, has opened new areas of concern when it comes to protecting democracy. Some experts fear that this practice is creating power imbalances by empowering the governing at the expense of the governed (whose data is subject to surveillance). This has opened the door for the powerful to exploit digital illiteracy – the majority's lack of understanding of how these digital mechanisms work – and wage information wars (Pew Research Center 2020). When major corporations are in control of search engines and design algorithms to collect data, they manage the traffic of information and prioritise what we see first (Van Dijk and Hacker 2018). This has grave implications on individuals' ability to inform themselves as citizens. Moreover, according to a study by Stoycheff (2020), the more people believe their online activity is under government surveillance, the less willing they are to use Internet-based products for political purposes. This undermines the potential for the Internet to act as a force for positive political action.

<u>d-Social Inequalities and Divisions</u>

Some less visible repercussions may not be as easy to spot. For instance, the effect of the Internet on people's trust in each other (mentioned above), has serious ramifications on their ability to organise political action. Moreover, people's increased occupation with global issues through the use of the Internet has somewhat come at the expense of their involvement in local issues around them and local civil society (Pew Research Center 2020).

III-Conclusion

Whether the Internet has the potential to enhance democracy or not, for now, what is clear is that modern technology has a big impact on citizen's ability to inform themselves, and therefore on their ability to perform all their other functions as "original leaders". While it may be true that human beings have historically proven to be able to adapt to technology and use it to better their lives, this article argues that this should not mean that while we wait for this new technology to be normalised there is nothing to do but to sit cross-armed and observe. If we are truly to use technology, and particularly the Internet, to improve our potential as active citizens, it is important to be vigilant and informed about how it is affecting our access to the fundamentals of active citizenship, particular those highlighted by Giusta's article. There remains much more to be explored in greater depth than what was covered by the scope of this article, such as the impact of the Internet on civil society, the agency to organise, and political action. Moving forward, however, the responsibility lies on the shoulders of everyone involved. Governments certainly have a major responsibility in developing the needed strategies to combat disinformation, even though the most binding regulation for Social Platform

Accountability (SPA) are inherently limited because fast technological development renders them rapidly obsolete (De Blasio and Selva 2021). In addition to governmental regulation, what is needed is increased digital education and literacy and greater awareness of the mechanisms we are using (Pew Research Center 2020), to increase citizens' understanding of this issue and their ability to be attentive. Again, the fast-changing technological ecosystem challenges the ability of education to keep up. That is why innovative solutions are needed to make sure that awareness develops as fast as technology. Finally, there is a significant ethical component that needs to be involved, both on the part of technologists (suppliers of these technologies) and their users. Human behaviour has always threatened democracy, but enshrining new values could help move away from this threat.

Finally, I would like to end with two thoughts. While information and transparency may be inextricable foundations of functional democracies, they may not be sufficient for accountability. In many cases, even when citizens have full information and can disclose incriminating facts based on which to hold leaders accountable, in the absence of more power to do something, the information was proved useless.

Moreover, if we as citizens succeed in using the Internet for greater political mobilisation, the manner in which we will organise might not resemble traditional hierarchical forms of organisation (Herasimenka 2020). We may need to keep an open mind about how political life and our practice of citizenship may look in the future.

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