Are digital technologies making politics impossible?

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Are digital technologies making politics impossible? What is the relationship between a communication platform and the exercise of power? As it happens, the most important source of power results from the beliefs held in common in society. Beliefs that, in turn, are built from ideas that flourish depending on the available communicational platform. That is, the main mechanism through which members of society communicate sets the boundaries of the narrative that sustains power. Communication is the scaffolding of power.

Politics, as defined in Merriam-Webster's and OED, is the art or science of government, the debate between parties having power, the complex of relations between people living in society. Politics is mostly about power and society.

Power, the ability to influence or control other people's behaviour, comes from three different sources: force, resources, and beliefs. Coercive power is exerted by forcing others using violence, or at least a credible threat of violence. Economic power results from the use of resources, nowadays frequently called incentives, whether positive or negative. These two sources of power are very expensive, and rarely has a government relied solely on them to maintain power in a society.

The third source of power, normally called persuasive power, results from others changing their behaviour because they believe that it is the right thing to do. Closely associated notions are "authority" and "legitimacy." This source is hard to build, but very cheap to maintain. When a government manages to hold this authority or legitimacy among its people, the exercise of power goes on smoothly.

Experts have tried to explain human history along these lines. From the time of Herodotus until mid-19th century, history was explained mainly through the uses of coercive power, otherwise called "political history." After Marx, the idea that it was the economy that determined all the rest of social life led us to write a different kind of history, not necessarily called "economic history," but always resulting from changes in the economic structure reflected over the "superstructure."

It seems we have been wrong. If coercive power and economic power are expensive to use and cannot explain the survival of governments or political regimes, it does not seem like a good idea to rely on them to explain human history. Pharaohs, Kings, Dynasties and Emperors were able to exercise power because most of their subjects thought that was all right. They believed that was the right order of things.

It is those beliefs that require explanation, and it is through them that we can better understand our history, and imagine our future. What we are witnessing now, for instance, is not an economic problem. Neither Brexit nor the election of Donald J. Trump in the USA result merely from the economic losses associated with globalisation. Exit polls show a correlation between voting and age and city size that cannot be explained solely by the economy.

Moreover, it is not true that the economy defines the way societies function. The defining force in human societies results from the set of beliefs commonly held by large groups of the population. Those beliefs sprout from the story that people use to help them make sense of the world around them, what some scholars call "the narrative." My hypothesis is that those stories heavily depend on the available communicational platform. Although humans can imagine many things, and develop many ideas, only those that can be adequately transmitted to others can compete to become "the narrative."

The first communicational platform we developed was language, which is thought to have appeared around 100 thousand years ago (kya). Around 30 thousand years later it allowed for the production of the first symbolic artefacts, and, after another 30 thousand years, for the production of the first "narrative," of which we have evidence in Cave Art and figurines. It is generally thought to have been some kind of animism. By 15 kya, the Natufians, a people that lived in the Levant, found the way to break the natural limit of human group size (which experts like Robin Dunbar establish at around 150 individuals). The reason for that limit is that in larger groups some interactions among individuals can lead to poorer outcomes than what each individual could accomplish on its own. Game theory has shown that this is what happens in the Prisoner's Dilemma, or the Stag Hunt game. Counterproductive interactions can be avoided, however, when we have the ability to recognize our partners and keep track of cooperative transactions.

The change came through the development of a different story, the worship of ancestors. Natufians, it is believed, used the skull of an ancestor, not as a territorial mark like many other peoples before them, but, once cleaned and embellished, as a reference for the group. The "existence" of an imagined ancestor, monitoring and punishing those who did not cooperate fairly, allowed humans to live in larger societies, reducing the cost of deception implicit in social interactions. The existence of larger groups living in the same place year round allowed our ancestors to understand the annual cycle of plants and to then domesticate them. That is the origin of agriculture, which exploded once the climate became hotter and wetter at the end of Younger Dryass (11.7 kya).

About six thousand years later, humans invented writing. Writing permits the creation of grander narratives wherein ancestors move up and become gods. Cities had their god or goddess, and through battles and conquests, as cities were joined under one ruler, their gods were grouped into pantheons. The first we know of was in the Fertile Crescent, where two different (and apparently independent) sources of writing led to two different pantheons, in Mesopotamia and Egypt. We can, more confidently, call these sets of narratives *religions*. Several waves of Indo-European groups (with their own oral traditions) modified and complemented these religions over the Second Millennium BCE. By 1500 BCE, writing in the West was made easier with alphabets, abjads and syllabaries, and the logographic system of China appeared. The transit from sacred scripts to more common writing seems to be behind what Karl Jaspers called "the Axial Age," that is, the efflorescence of universal religions and ways of thinking.

Religions, whether the first, local ones or the subsequent complex universal religions, allowed not only for living in groups of hundreds of humans, but for the large polities linked by beliefs and organisational structures that we call kingdoms and empires. These universal religions and ways of thinking seem to be necessary to hold an empire together, whether we think of the Roman, Han or Parthian empires of two thousand years ago, or more recent empires around the Christian or Muslim faiths. In China this way of thinking results from the combination of Heaven and Confucian and legalistic beliefs.

The next big change came with the printing press. Oral stories can only be transmitted in person, to small groups and are susceptible to alterations from one storyteller to the next. Written stories can survive for generations, are more stable, and can be read by anyone who has learned how to. Although literacy increased notoriously in the First Millennium BCE, it was very restricted by modern standards. Printing made the difference. Printed books were not only easier to read, they were a lot cheaper than their handwritten predecessors, allowing for ideas to spread quickly.

Printing also created a market for ideas. We can find diversity of ideas also in previous ages of literacy, like in Greece, India or China from the 5th to the 2nd centuries BCE, but there is nothing comparable to what happened in Europe from 1450 on. Printing is mainly a European

phenomenon, and it is there where it had its strongest impact: literacy increased, ideas flourished, conflicts surged. What made Europe different from the 16th Century onwards was essentially caused by the printing press.

The large market for ideas made it incrementally difficult to sustain a single doctrine on how to reach God. Later on, it made it difficult to even believe in that God. But since that concept was what allowed humans to live in large groups, its demise could mean the end of society. A new core concept was needed, and *Reason* took its place. After two centuries of conflict and arguments, Reason itself gave rise to *The People* as a replacement for God in the 18th Century, the Enlightenment. Although we normally use 1648 as the year of birth of nations, at the end of the Thirty Years' War, they really begin some decades later, over the *settecento* and reach maturity with the American and French Revolutions.

So printing, a new communicational platform, allows for a new set of stories, a new narrative. In these stories, God loses its preeminent place and is replaced by Reason and The People. Reason yielded the notions of deliberation, democracy, the social contract, the nation. But Reason can also be undermined by print.

Change in a communicational platform happens in two stages: First, the platform itself and the stories it holds are considered sacred; second, they become a utilitarian tool. With language, the sacred stage happened around animism, but in the worship of ancestors it was just a tool of communication. In writing, there is a sacred stage with hieroglyphics (that is: sacred letters), and then it is used in a more utilitarian way. Reason and The People had a sacred stage, in which they managed to replace God, but after Kant, reason was demoted to be just the basis of science and industry.

It is around Reason that we built what we call Politics. The logical use of power, as in Machiavelli; the utopian social contract, as in Rousseau; and most of the concepts we use: nation, bureaucracy, policy, political parties, democracy, elections. It was printing that allowed for newspapers, leaflets, and coffee-house discussions that made public deliberation the source of political power. That is how The People became the centre of public life.

We like to think that we still live in that world, but it disappeared a century ago. The invention of mass media came to exert another change of communicational platform. Sound film and radio appeared soon after the end of World War I, and television just after World War II. Mass media do not transmit reason but sensation (feelings, perceptions, passions). The 20th Century World was not part of the age of reason, but of the age of sensations. It was media that fed Totalitarianism: Mussolini's ascent to power is unthinkable without the radio, as is Hitler's total control of German politics in the absence of Leni Riefensthal's films and Goebbels' propaganda. Eisenstein's movies were instrumental to Lenin's and Stalin's grip on the USSR.

When sensations and not reason is what the communicational platform transmits, then The People can no longer be the referent for society. They were replaced by The Celebrity. Mass media builds celebrities, and they become the referents for society. Politicians may use the word "people" liberally, but it hardly means anything. Meaning arises from the politician himself, not from the words he (or she) uses. It is their status as celebrities that matters.

Similar to other communicational platforms, mass media also has two stages. First, Celebrities are elevated to a god-like status; then they are just utilitarian artefacts. Picasso and Dali, Lenin and Stalin, Mao and El Che, Hitler and Mussolini, Rommel and Patton, Roosevelt and Churchill, Ike and McArthur, are examples of celebrities that were considered gods by many people. During the sixties, however, celebrities became utilitarian: Warhol, The Beatles ("we are most popular than Jesus Christ", true), Kennedy, Lady Di, just to name a few.

Although politics seems to be similar to what it was in the Nineteenth Century, it is not. Especially after WWII, power is not reached through public deliberation, but by *celebrity construction*. Elections are now to be won on radio and television, through an avalanche of thirty second spots, sound bites, debates. It came down to phrases rather than policy: "Ich bin ein Berliner," "Mr. Gorbachov, tear down that wall," and so on.

Celebrities become global very easily thanks to mass media. Similar to winner-take-all markets, we now have Global Celebrities, and Nations have started to crumble. The real organisational structure during the Twentieth Century is the bloc: Western, Soviets and the Third World; then the European Union, NAFTA, APEC.

But communication has changed yet again. Information and Communication Technologies (ITCs) are different from mass media. They transmit sensations, like mass media do, but also reason, as writing does. They can reach not just hundreds or thousands, but billions of humans at the same time. And most importantly, they are a two-way, or better said, a multi-way communicational platform. By 2016, half of the world population was connected to Internet. It's not yet clear when we should date the start of this new era. Maybe 1994, with the creation of the World Wide Web. Maybe 2006, with the coming of age of social media. But we are now in a different world, in which the core of the narrative is not reason or sensation, but information by itself.

Over social media, people send, receive and resend information. It does not have to be fact-checked to be re-sent. Information is created and recreated literally at the speed of light. It springs from thousands of different sources. Nobody has control over it. This is a very profound change. In the Twentieth Century, the information received by everyone within a nation was controlled by its government through a couple of TV networks and newspaper chains. They set the agenda. Now, the public agenda is set by minorities over social media using whatever kind of information they have. Sometimes, social media becomes very useful, gathering supporters for a good cause such as volunteers for a blood drive. But they also can be used to promote partial or simplistic ideas that are never confronted or corroborated given that groups are made of people that already think the same way.

Social media allows us to select with whom to interact, so people build groups with others that think and do the same things. This means that individuals at the fringe of society, isolated from their communities, can build a virtual group with people like themselves, all over the world. But any time a group exists, politics emerge and politicians are now reacting to groups that didn't exist previously, that are a clear minority, but that have become vocal over the Internet.

The market for ideas that the printing press created five centuries ago was seriously disrupted by mass media one hundred years ago, but over the last few years it seems to have been completely devastated by social media. What we now have is a large bazaar in which thousands of small shops tenders yell continuously trying to attract customers.

Modern politics was a result of the printing press. It was composed of newspapers, books, deliberations and laws. Conflicts were settled through elections, in which participation was originally restricted to the few who could read and deliberate. Reason was the currency.

Twentieth Century politics was an offspring of Mass Media. It was composed of celebrities, sound bites, spots, and a lot of patronage. Conflicts were settled by elections in which everyone participated, so *quid pro quo* became critical, giving a needed push to the Welfare State. Although its first version can be associated with Bismarck, the real development of the Welfare State arose in Great Britain with Lloyd George and the Beveridge Report, in the first half of 20th Century. Public expenditure, as a percentage of GDP, increased consistently from 1946 to reach absurd levels at the beginning of the eighties. That can be understood as a serious redistribution effort, a big step towards justice. But it also can be read as the result of mass media and the

extension of franchise. That is, its origin can be traced not only to economics or politics as such, but to the communicational platform and the narratives it allows.

Events such as Brexit, or the election of Donald J. Trump, cannot be explained solely by inequality or by the damages (real or imagined) that globalisation has caused on British or American families. Taking into account what we know about voters' demographics, a better explanation has to do with the fear that people over 40 years of age have about the way society is changing. They are the product of mass media society, where it was the government who defined public agenda through television and newspapers. They grew up in the Celebrity culture. They don't understand what is happening now. They are afraid, and they want to turn back the clock. They will inevitably lose, but they are right to defend what they know.

ITCs and social media are not the platform of the Celebrity. That can be confirmed by the music industry, where we used to have a handful of young celebrities, and now we have thousands of groups with few but very loyal followers. We may still have some global celebrities (as we still have Gods, and animist beliefs), but the main character of the new story will not be the celebrity.

Digital technologies are not making politics impossible, but different. The new narrative will not be centred on animals (as it was 40 kya), nor on ancestors or gods (as it was until the 1500's), nor on The People or Celebrities. The current communicational platform allows for dialogs (multilogs) like nothing before it. It is language potentiated billions of times. Now we do not need to appeal to Kings, Emperors, Presidents, or MPs. What we need now is followers, groups, apps, that allow for the construction of those coordination mechanisms we have been calling Politics. Coercive and economic power will follow the new narrative. They are already moving: Drones, self-driving vehicles, tailor-made production, virtual retailing.

Politics is not becoming impossible. It is becoming virtual, decentralised, and tailor-made. That is why it looks so strange.