

Democracy, social media and neoliberalism

By Paul Budde

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(Image by @BillKerr / Flickr)

In order to safeguard our democracy into the future, a "smart" technological and grassroots approach is needed to shift the balance back from its neoliberal swerve to the right, writes [Paul Budde](#).

There are plenty of doom and gloom stories regarding the future of our democracy. Technology is certainly playing a key role in this. However, technology could equally be an important part of solving the problem.

Let's, for example, look at often-maligned social media. While trust is at an all-time low in relation to politicians, corporations and other groups at the top of our society, social media as a grassroots system relies on trust in the people around us. True, this has led to problems with the phenomenon of echo

chambers, but people are learning quickly and the negative effects of this can be overcome.

Presidents of the United States have more information at their fingertips than anyone on the planet. But President Trump pushes crazy conspiracy theories, lies, and has his view of the world shaped by Fox News bloviators and a Twitter echo chamber of propagandists.

— Dan Rather (@DanRather) [September 29, 2019](#)

The problems that we are facing, however, are far more structural and there are no easy ways to solve them, with or without technology.

Going to the core of democracy, it is interesting to look at how democracy started. Democracy wasn't something that suddenly arrived. We all know about Greece being the cradle of democracy, some 2,500 years ago. But the modern version of it arrived two millennia later. It started with the Dutch Republic in the 17th Century, followed by the developments in England and later the USA.

The hard work by the people involved in these processes was aimed at fighting against the autocratic systems of the rulers of those days — basically the kings and nobility. However, those supporting these emerging democratic developments were white, male and were basically securing

their property rights (wealth) from grubby kings and princes.

For the next 200 years, this was what democracy was all about. There were some proto democracy revolutions in the 19th Century but serious changes only arrived in the 20th Century. The current state of democracy evolved after WWII and is therefore still very young and vulnerable. Based on current developments, it looks like we will see again another form of democracy arriving over the next ten to 20 years. Technology will play a key role here, for better or worse. Who knows what this will look like, but in the end, it is up to us, the people. With social media and other technology tools, we do have an option to positively influence what will happen next.

The current democratic system took a turn to the right over the last 20 years. Capitalistic democracy saw corporations and their lobby groups manipulating the political system, supported by armies of clever lawyers to use the original core elements of the early democratic system – protecting the white, male and wealthy – to their advantage. This has been done through fewer regulations, more tax benefits and privatisation. It has led to the enormous growth in wealth of those who are spending the most on legal manipulations and basically has resulted in a transfer from state wealth to private wealth.

Now that Trump has decided to regulate business investment, in addition to controlling every other aspect of the economy, worth revisiting this oldie from April. <https://t.co/FJ02tXYwSJ>

— Keith Johnson (@KFJ_FP)
[September 27, 2019](#)

These legal manipulations have also

crept into economic policies. While economists are big supporters of the so-called "invisible hand" of the economy, they have ignored that the above-mentioned legal interferences have destabilised the balance in the economic system – land, labour, capital – in favour of capital. Neoliberal governments who oversaw the transfer of state wealth to private wealth now have to pass on state costs in relation to education, healthcare and social services to the public, which further increases national imbalances, especially in relation to the levels of inequality. Those on the top of the ladder have plenty of money to look after themselves.

Coming back to the early developments of democracy, what we are seeing here is that people who are not white males with property (wealth) are not necessarily supporting the current flavour of our democratic system and these are the core of the people supporting populism.

Now back to technologies and social media. Because of the above-mentioned imbalances, we see divisions occurring in our society. The current political systems seem to be unable to address these issues and as a result, are fuelling the divisions rather than restoring the balance. Social media has become one of the main "weapons" in these conflicts. Furthermore, those who would profit from these divisions for their own political or economic benefit are also using social media to fuel the divides. Allegedly, Chinese and Russian governments are some of the main countries using these tactics.

In this political game, all sort of issues that can divide society are cleverly used, be it race, immigration, refugees, abortion, religion and so on. As a result, the divisions are widening even further. The response from the politicians has, by and large, been less than effective and trust in them is now at an all-time low.

However, it is also important to note that most people are using social media in a positive way and by connecting and becoming involved in some of the issues at a grassroots level, this is having a positive social effect. Simply look at how refugees and migrants are welcomed in local communities in comparison to the rhetoric of some of the politicians and the media.

With regard to "fake news" and lies, look at what people such as Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, [Jair Bolsonaro](#) and [Recep Erdoğan](#) are saying. Or the meddling of the governments of [Vladimir Putin](#) and [Xi Jinping](#). If we, as societies, want to flourish we can't trust many of these leading politicians. Social media can play an equally positive role in comparison to the negative role of fake news and the manipulation of news from the other side.

What is also clear is that we can't have governments regulating social media. They have a far too vested interest. They don't like criticism and tend to use their powers to limit such activities on social media. What we need instead, are independent organisations that are going to assist in regulating social media and there are good signs that this is happening.

If we consider SPAM, for example, this was a much bigger issue five to ten years ago than it is now. Combined efforts from all parties involved have lessened the damage. Why can't this happen with other problems such as fake news and social media manipulation?

High-speed broadband infrastructure plays an important role in Smart Cities <https://t.co/I7lgRFnjNf> [#smartcities](#) [#broadband](#) [#telecoms](#)

— paulbudde (@paulbudde)
[December 1, 2018](#)

Looking at how to best safeguard democracy into the future, it would be logical to do this from the ground upwards — this is, in fact, how democracy was born. The above-mentioned grassroots developments could also be boosted by smart city developments. This is based on citizens working together with their local governments to improve their environment, lifestyle and social and economic wellbeing. Smart in this context means using technology to make that happen.

But there are many more technology aids available. In the context of democracy, it is fascinating to follow developments in Barcelona. This was one of the first cities to embrace the smart

city concept. However, at its early stages over a decade ago, this was totally focused on technology. A new local government turned the city strategy around in 2015 and put the citizens in the middle. Based on hundreds of community-based groups, new policies were developed with the aim to improve housing availability, public transport and reorganising pedestrian-friendly residential, so-called "superblocks" with an emphasis on improving public space.

Cities such as Amsterdam, Copenhagen and Melbourne are all looking at smart city options to improve people's lifestyles and increase the liveability of their cities.

These community-based developments will all be key in securing our future democracy.

This is a very good talk on the way the far right use social media - particularly Facebook. Refers mainly to [#Brexit](#) but applies generally to far right manipulation of people.
<https://t.co/CACLKyzSjl>

— Bill Ebrill Lies
have a half-life, truth
does not
(@BillEbrill)
[September 28, 2019](#)

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