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Bright Mirror: How Latin America is Enhancing Digital Democracy

by Cecilia Nicolini and Matías Bianchi

Abstract

Digital Democracy has emerged as a phenomenon that aims to transform the entire relation between state and society, potentially being able to fix the current crisis of liberal democracies. Despite the fact that reality is showing that we are far from that technological panacea, many government and social movements are using those tools to empower marginalized actors, to make governments more transparent and accountable, and to make policies more participatory. This article unpacks the opportunities and challenges digital democracy has to offer, and reviews specific cases from Latin America in which these tools are being used for improving the quality of democracies.

Introduction

Our democracies are outdated. In the second decade of the 21st century, governments seem unable to address the complex challenges the world is facing, and citizens' trust in public institutions is at the lowest point in decades. The good news is that the digital revolution is providing a window of opportunity for bringing politics back to society. The so called "Triple Revolution" (i.e. internet, smart phones, and social media) can help us move from hierarchical decision-making processes and representative democracies to more inclusive, horizontal, and participatory mechanisms for dealing with public issues.

Yet, there are still many obstacles to overcome such as the digital divide, the domination of techno-elites, or the abuses of the owners of the technology infrastructure. In Latin America, many young activists and governments are using technology to address some of those challenges, by increasing participation, making governments accountable, or providing new voices to the public arena.

Digital Democracy

In his famous book *Polyarchy*, Robert Dahl describes democracy as "the continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals."¹ Today, we have the technological tools to fulfill these premises more efficiently, to make them more inclusive and in real time. This phenomenon, called Digital Democracy or E-democracy, has emerged in the last years as "the practice of democracy using digital tools and technologies"² and has the potential of transforming the entire relation between state and society.

This transformation could bring government and society closer,³ allowing citizens to formulate their preferences, signify them, and weigh them equally in a free public contestation realm.⁴ New software, web platforms, and mobile applications are accelerating and facilitating the processes necessary for idea collection, discussion, decision-making, and voting, as well as media and content creation. This approach sustains that by going digital, democracy can go beyond representation by using,

for instance, an online space for deliberation and voting political proposals such as DemocracyOS software,⁵ secure trust by using blockchain,⁶ increase accountability of public officials with Chequeado.org,⁷ or even profit from collective intelligence to design and execute public policies with an initiative such as GANA PAE.⁸

The benefits that digital democracy is bringing are enormous. Technology became a powerful weapon to demonstrate that complexity was not a wall anymore to keep citizens out of the decision-making process. Hacktivism and civil disobedience emerged as common elements for social movements around the world, providing governments and institutions the tools and solutions to become more transparent and accountable. Digital technologies enabled now to communicate in a horizontal way, with networks that allowed more people to participate, becoming “decisive sources of power construction.”⁹

The Limits of Technology and Politics

Sadly, reality is showing that we are still far from that utopian vision of digital democracy. Twenty years after publishing his famous book *Strong Democracy*, where he over-celebrates the power of new technologies, Benjamin Barber acknowledges that far from solving the most urgent problems, technology has, in many cases, “mirrored and reinforced deficits already existent in our democracies.”¹⁰ Some years ago, technologies promised a “new global agora, a new democratic electronic frontier”¹¹ with new possibilities for direct and deliberative democracy. However, skepticism arose among a number of experts, pointing out the problem of the so-called digital divide.¹² Robert Putnam worried about a possible “cyber-apartheid”¹³ and the increasing exclusion of those without access to internet or technologies, while

others showed concern with the market concentration within the technology sector, deepening the already wide income gap with the richest 1 percent owning half the world’s wealth.¹⁴ Harvard professor Cass Sunstein believes that as the power of the internet grows, it creates new threats to democracy. He emphasizes the role of social media and the power to create echo chambers driving political fragmentation, polarization, and even extremism.¹⁵ The so-called filtered bubble created an ideal environment for fake news, trolls, and other pernicious elements to impact democracy in a negative way.

While there are not magic tools or solutions to a broader array of problems our societies and governments have, digital technologies can be part of the solutions to achieve more equal, transparent, and inclusive democracies. Yet, “finding ways to reincorporate technology into a strong democratic strategy will depend not on the technologies themselves, which remain pro-democratic in many of their aspects, but on political will.”¹⁶

A Bright Mirror

Despite all these risks and threats, technology can certainly bring more opportunities to improve our democracies. Latin America has both inspired and been inspired by social movements around the world. Participatory budgeting in Brazil during the 1980s, the network of the Zapatista Movement in Mexico, or the Popular Assemblies of the *Piqueteros* in Argentina, shaped new ways of understanding civic engagement and political disruption. At the same time, the Arab Spring, the *Indignados* in Spain, or the Occupy Wall Street Movement in recent years became sources of activation for the creation of new spaces of contestation in the region. Emerging political expressions such as #NiUnaMenos

in Argentina, #Soy123 in Mexico, and more recently #JusticiaYa in Guatemala, or #Yasunidos in Ecuador, have raised solidarity and actions all around the region. There is a new generation of democratic and digital natives that are using technology to strengthen new voices, to foster civic engagement, to increase accountability, and to propose a new ethics for politics.¹⁷

In most of the cases, social movements implemented an innovative decision-making process, using decentralized and horizontal organizational approaches to make collective decisions or co-create proposals with the help of technology platforms.¹⁸ They promoted spontaneous mobilizations, letting it “overflow” their own movement, creating transnational movements of solidarity and common action such as #NiUnaMenos to defend women against violence or #Yasunidos to protect the Yasuní Natural Reserve. Finally, they developed new subjectivities, with reference to the framing of the self and the others in an attempt to denounce the cooptation of power and abuses by a ruling elite.¹⁹

Social movements and civic insurgence are paving the way to create a new array of experiences in Latin America that are using digital technologies for improving democracy. The following lines will show some innovative initiatives that are proposing profound changes to politics in Latin America. Some are bottom-up, like *Wikipolítica*, *Verificado S19*, or the Academy of Political Innovation; and others are government-led, like *Lap por la Paz*. Some aim at increasing participation, others transparency, and others to a more effective delivery of public goods. All of them are trying to bring state and society closer together.

Innovative Experiences

MEXICO: “Wikipolítica,” Defying the Idea of Representation

“The walls do fall” was the rallying cry of Pedro Kumamoto and his group in Jalisco, Mexico during the elections of 2015. Inspired by the #YoSoy132 mobilizations in 2012, instead of creating a party, they developed a collaborative platform to promote independent candidacies willing to disrupt the traditional party competition and promote an innovative and participative new way of representation.²⁰

Wikipolítica emerged in an environment of distrust and fragmentation of political institutions in Mexico. According to *Latinobarómetro*, only 9 percent of Mexicans trust political parties, and only 18 percent are satisfied with the way democracy works in the country.²¹ But instead of building their narrative in a contentious and belligerent way, *Wikipolítica* decided to become a beacon of hope, promoting collaboration, transparency, and inclusion. Decisions would be made collectively, they would not accept public funding, and local politics would be a priority.

Naturally, digital technologies became their main ally to amplify their message and reach a wide number of supporters. They defied the whole idea of representation, putting the citizen again in the center, avoiding professional politicians, and creating a dynamic relation between online and offline communities that could retro-feed and collaborate to rewrite the narrative of what it means to be a real democracy.

BRAZIL: “Co-Lab,” Citizen to Government Engagement Platform

A Brazilian entrepreneur wanted to bring citizens and local government closer and enable a direct conversation to solve the city’s everyday problems. Therefore, he

created an app or “management platform” to allow users to file reports for daily problems such as potholes, graffiti, or broken lights.²²

But the app went beyond, and citizens are now able not only to propose solutions to problems, but to give constant feedback on public services. People evaluate their experience at public hospitals, schools, or even at the police department. Both the mayor and the responsible officials of the area receive the feedback, making it easier (or unavoidable) to respond in a more agile, efficient, and transparent way.

The innovation also resides in its pushing strategy. While some cities still didn't implement the app, people are able to give feedback about the service or infrastructure of the city, upload the data in the platform, and eventually, make it very hard for the government to avoid opening a channel and engage in a direct conversation with their citizens.

COLOMBIA: “*Lab por la Paz*,” Opening the Box of Policymaking

Located on the periphery of Colombia, at the border with Ecuador, the department of Nariño contains many socio-economic challenges: low-income ethnic minorities such as African-Colombian people and indigenous communities are present in an area of rough geography, where a historical armed conflict has been present for decades. The current Governor Camilo Romero (2016-19) proposed technological innovation at the core of his platform. Becoming the first open government initiative at the subnational level in the country, his administration promoted 10 measures to combat corruption, ranging from publishing affidavits of every public official and every spending of the budget to a tracking system of food delivery in public schools.²³

In February 2018, the state government launched *Lab por la Paz*, a public accelerator that supports 11 technological solutions to make peace possible in a country torn apart by 50 years of violent conflict that affected an estimated more than eight million victims. The Lab has invited 100 experts from Latin America and other countries around the world as well as mentors, technical experts, and local mediators in order to turn these prototypes into real innovative solutions.

MEXICO: “*Verificado 19S*,” Providing Trust

Only minutes after the earthquake hit Mexico in September 2017, killing more than 300 people, citizens came out to the streets to help survivors under debris, and to collect medicine and food supplies for victims. Despite the good intentions, information was confusing, fake news was widespread, and the lack of an efficient government response made aid chaotic and difficult to manage.

A group of activists, coders, and journalists decided to build a platform that could make information more reliable, and able to provide details about what was actually needed, where and when. Overnight these organizations created *Verificado 19S*, which included an interactive map and a collaborative database that kept verifying the information coming from the news and the people on the ground on a real-time basis.²⁴ The platform soon became the trustworthy reference to coordinate the crisis and a more reliable source of information than the government itself.

LATIN AMERICA: “*Academia de Innovación Política*,” Preparing Leaders for Digital Democracy

If the world is changing, our democracies need leaders with the capabilities to face those challenges. Who is training them? In 2016, the Argentinian NGO *Asuntos del*

Sur, led by one of the authors of this article, mapped and analyzed the curricula of 165 training programs for leaders in Latin America. The result was conclusive: we are still training leaders for a state-centered, hierarchical, industrialist world. Trying to fill that void, they launched the Academy of Political Innovation, an online platform for training leaders for the 21st century.

Using the open software Moodle, they are training social and political leaders on hacker ethics, the use of open data and big data, and innovative tools for more inclusive and participatory democracies. In its first year they trained over 500 leaders from 21 countries. They have specifically supported emerging political movements like the ones described above (e.g., with *Wikipolítica* they tailored a specific program for their teams).

Conclusion

Today, liberal democracies are at their lowest levels of trust in decades, and therefore democracy is screaming for a reinvention.²⁵ Digital technologies are providing the tools that could potentially restore trust and improve the quality of public policies. We are experiencing an array of innovative experiences that are taking advantage of those tools to help reconnect the *demos* with the *kratos*.

Yet, it is important not to be blinded by sophisticated algorithms and beautiful platforms and forget about the main priority of making our democracies more inclusive and egalitarian. The goal of democracy is to respect and enhance citizen rights. If digital democracy does not do that, we will be just experiencing a digitalization of the *status quo*.

NOTES

¹ Robert Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (New Haven and London: Yale University, 1971), 1.

² Julie Simon et al., “Digital Democracy: The Tools Transforming Political Engagement,” NESTA, February 2017, 11, https://www.nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/digital_democracy.pdf.

³ Jan van Dijk, “The Myth of Digital Democracy: Digital Citizenship, the Internet, Society and Participation,” *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 61, no. 3 (March 2010): 631-633.

⁴ Dahl, *Polyarchy*.

⁵ For more information about DemocracyOS, see <http://democracyos.org/>.

⁶ The World Identity Network (WIN) initiative seeks to provide internationally valid identifications for people. See <https://www.win.systems/>.

⁷ Chequeado is an Argentinian non-partisan, non-profit digital media organization that is dedicated to the verification of public discourse and the promotion of access to information and the opening of data. See <http://chequeado.com/>.

⁸ This policy is designed to track the distribution of food in public schools in Colombia. See <http://ganapae.narino.gov.co/public/>.

⁹ Manuel Castells, *Redes de Indignación y Esperanza* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2012), 25.

¹⁰ Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

¹¹ Barber, *Strong Democracy*, xv.

¹² Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

¹³ Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

¹⁴ “Global Wealth Report 2017,” Credit Suisse, <https://www.credit-suisse.com/corporate/en/research/research-institute/global-wealth-report.html>.

¹⁵ Cass Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

¹⁶ Barber, *Strong Democracy*, xv.

¹⁷ Matias Bianchi et al., “Transformaciones de la participación política en América Latina,” *Revista Electrónica de Ciencia Política* 7, no. 2 (2016).

¹⁸ Geoff Mulgan, *Big Mind: How Collective Intelligence Can Change Our World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

¹⁹ Donatella Della Porta et al., *Movement Parties Against Austerity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

²⁰ For more information about *Wikipolítica*, see <http://wikipolitica.mx/>.

²¹ Latinobarómetro, “Informe 2017,” <http://www.latinobarometro.org/LATDocs/F00006433-InfLatinobarometro2017.pdf>.

²² For more information about Co-Lab, see www.colab.re.

²³ For more information, see GANA (Gobierno Abierto de Nariño), <http://gana.xn--nario-rta.gov.co/>.

²⁴ For more information about Verificado 19S, see <http://www.verificado19s.org/>.

²⁵ Larry Diamond, "Facing Up to the Democratic Recession," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015).

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