

## FAHRENHEIT 451 OR A “NEW CAFÉ”? Old and new issues on political participation

## FAHRENHEIT 451 OU “A NEW CAFÉ”? Velhas e novas questões sobre participação política

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**Abstract:** Does e-participation enhance, or not, citizens’ political participation? Such a debate implies identifying whether there are contexts of social change and/or social reproduction, and, if change actually occurs, which direction it takes. When it comes to online political participation, it is necessary to highlight whether there is some continuity from the offline form of participation and if some new features of the online participation challenge democratic societies. Regardless of the optimism and pessimism in the field of (e-)participation, this article presents a reflective discussion on crucial issues impacting on political e-participation. More specifically, it discusses social inequalities in political participation as well as surveillance and threat posed to free political choices. In addition, it discusses how the public sphere and citizens’ (informed) political participation are challenged by the use algorithms, fake news, political propaganda and manipulation without public scrutiny.

**Keywords:** e-political participation; social inequalities; surveillance; (dis)information.

**Resumo:** A e-participação promove, ou não, a participação política dos cidadãos? Dar uma resposta a esta questão implica identificar contextos de mudança e/ou de reprodução social e, no caso de existir mudança, identificar que direção toma. Quando se trata da e-participação é necessário destacar se há elementos de continuidade em relação à participação política offline e se novos aspetos associados a esta participação desafiam as sociedades democráticas. Rompendo com o otimismo e o pessimismo no campo da e-participação, neste artigo, o nosso objetivo é apresentar uma reflexão sobre questões cruciais que têm consequências na participação política digital: as desigualdades sociais na participação política; a vigilância e a ameaça que se coloca a escolhas políticas livres; o modo como a participação política (informada) dos cidadãos e a esfera pública podem ser desafiadas através do uso de algoritmos, do aumento de notícias falsas e da propaganda e manipulação políticas sem escrutínio público.

**Palavras-chave:** participação política digital; desigualdades sociais; vigilância; (des)informação.

## Introduction

Democracy always requires some form of citizenship participation. This has become inseparable from media action, these being a way of promoting, mitigating or conditioning democracy. New media not only sharpen these possibilities, as they amplify the potential for contradiction in the mediated public sphere. The same medium or platform comprises positive and negative effects to citizens and to democracies. Modern public sphere is a “space of plurality and tension, place of crossroads between interests, values and norms with heterogenous origin and nature” (Negreiros, 2004, p. 34). In this space, new media (or social media) bloom and become central, turning the old and classic “public sphere” into a simulacrum: a “hypermediated public sphere”, a sort of contemporary “virtual agora”.

Are new ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) being used for new political activities unreachable before or are they used to perform the same equivalent activities, although by other means? For example, an individual who used to write letters to politicians can now use the e-mail. Is the action in this case different than before? Has participation changed? Or is it just a case of participatory equivalents? (Anduiza, Cantijoch, & Gallego, 2009).

Participatory equivalents that, on the one hand, allow higher opportunities for people to express themselves politically, faster political messages that also reach a larger number of citizens (be an opinion or a call for action), organise and congregate political activities without time and space restraints. But, on the other hand, participatory equivalents can keep a continuity aspect facing offline participation, and yet, develop new constraints. Regarding this, what kind of changes are we facing in the political participation field?

When a new technology appears in the field of information and communication, a broader debate about its democratic potential is inevitable. It happened with the ICTs, the forums, the blogs and especially now with the web 2.0, also designated as social media, like Twitter or Facebook. More recently, the recurring optimism reports to democracy 4.0.

As it was the case with other media, we should actually acknowledge that the theoretical framework for the political (e-)participation field spans from optimistic authors, such as Rheingold (1996), Dahlgren (2005), Towner (2013) and Baek (2015) who pointed out the transformation of the field of political participation through the use of new technologies, to pessimistic authors, such as Moore (1999), Sunstein (2001), Baumgartner and Morris (2010) and Morozov (2013) who referred that (new) ICTs do not generate significant changes in political participation.

The dominance of the liberal conception of democracy in contemporary societies and the internet's libertarian ideology has contributed, "until the turn of the millennium and in large extent, nowadays, to a gap between the supposed potentialities of ICTs and the practices that have developed in all domains of life, including political participation" (Simões & Jerónimo, 2018, p. 180).

Both points of view, either the optimistic or the pessimistic, seem to be very simplistic according to the complexity from the sociological point of view self-reference deleted. At the empirical evidence level, several researches, although yet scarce, point out to opposite results which are related not only with methodological questions that have yet to be assessed, but also and mainly due to the use of different theoretical frameworks about political participation, to the unspecified type of participation being researched, as if participation were a neutral word, and also to the fact that the more structural social issues and observed trends in political participation in contemporary societies are not being fully considered.

Thus, within the field of (new) ICTs in political participation it seems that there still is a long path to go, both from the theoretical and the empirical point of view. The focus of this article is not this issue, but confronted with several definitions of political participation and aiming at the core of the debate on the impact of ICT in political participation, we highlight the need to explain the concept being used, and for comparison effects, we have to use the same one, whereas in real or digital context. For similar reasons, on the other hand, due to the variety of political participation levels, we outlined also the necessity for the researchers specify in each investigation what level or levels of participation they are dealing with.

In this article we intend to make a small contribution to a more sociological and reflexive research on the use of internet platforms towards political participation. Our goal is to centre the reflection, on the one hand, on a continuous and recurring aspect: the social inequality in (e-)political participation. On the other hand, also taking into account the necessary requirements for political participation, we selected the aspects that are emerging or reinforcing themselves on internet platforms as fake news, filter bubble effect, nudging techniques and surveillance. In contrast to what we find in several articles, we based on sedimented knowledge from political sociology, to further develop those constraints placed on online political participation that may threaten the democratic system as we know it nowadays.

Firstly, we will defend that e-participation cannot be understood without taking in consideration the social inequalities that cross the political participation in real context. What are the effects of e-participation upon the different levels of political participation? Being the human societies structured according to gender,

age, income, social and professional category and ethnic group, and knowing that the interest to participate and the necessary skills for participation are also unequally distributed, as Bourdieu (1979) says, what happens in online contexts?

Secondly, it is imperative to think about organizational surveillance and its consequences. To an extent, the identified opportunities brought by new technologies to political participation can be destroyed, taking into account the threat of surveillance on civil and political rights.

Finally, being information a fundamental demand for political participation, our focus is on the difficulties that citizens face to become more informed about politics due to the large-scale proliferation of fake news and filter bubble effect that block the debate between different ideas and political stances. On the other hand, considering that surveillance, theft and selling of data allow to create citizens' profiles, it is important to analyse the threats posed to participation and democracy when some forms of manipulation and propaganda can be directed to the most vulnerable and receptive citizens, with no trace of public accountability.

### **Social inequalities and levels of political (e-)participation**

The acknowledgement of political rights and political equality exist in western democracies alongside with a structured social hierarchy concerning a diversity of social dimensions, such as gender, age, income, education, social and professional category, ethnic group, residence, etc. (Memmi, 1985). The same way, the sense of duty or the interest to participate or the political competences and efficiency are also unevenly distributed (Bourdieu, 1979; Mayer & Perrineau, 1992; Memmi, 1985).

For Memmi (1985), those inequalities are to be found in all political activities, whether inside the political parties or within the same socioeconomic group. Verba and Nie (1972) studying the Americans and Bourdieu's (1979) research in France, established that the socioeconomic condition strongly affects the political participation as well as the necessary interest and skills.

The major role played by education in political engagement has also been a large influence on researches about (in)competences. This is clearly understood in Memmi's (1985) statement that "all political practice has a character eminently intellectual, it consists, in most of cases, in the use of word and concepts" (p. 338). Most of the political activities are discourse-related (whether producing or reproducing it) and only a small number of people are engaged with them.

One must admit that different types of capital have contributed to inequalities of participation, as they do not have the same effect on social and political

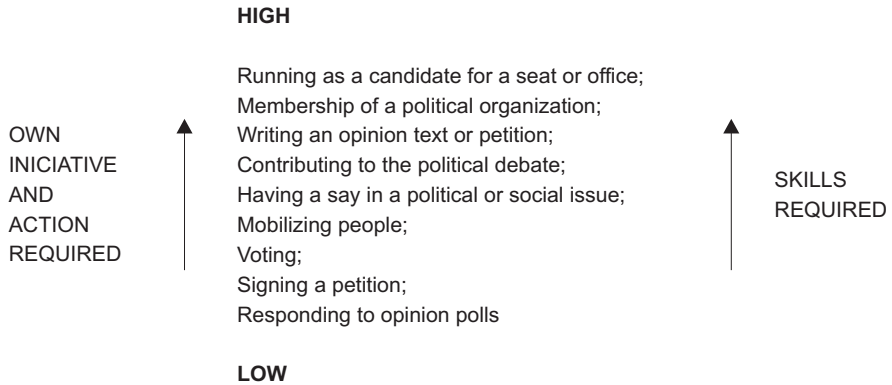
systems. The same action may have a “symbolic value” in the mediated public sphere that changes according to the “value” of the performer. Communication in the mediated public sphere uses language and its use “depends on the social placement of the utterer, which commands the access to the institutional language, the official, orthodox, legitimate word” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 97). Discourse is an instrument of power, which manifests itself in the established relations of force between groups that coexist in society, each one operating with a corresponding linguistic skill (Bourdieu, 1989).<sup>1</sup>

Just as other authors, Carvalho (2014) points out that political inequalities reflect the social inequalities and those can be observed through the diversity of forms of political participation. Given the major trends of this inequality, an interrelation between skills and participation variables demands a clarification in the diverse forms of participation, leading to the proposition of a complexity scale concerning participation, from the simplest degree – voting – to the most complex one – writing a speech or actively participate in a political organisation. Logically, the top-scale actions require more skills than the down-scale ones. With the use of ICTs, would the unequal distribution of political participation be mitigated or reinforced?

The most technologically optimistic authors do not show – some partially, others entirely – any concern to this fundamental issue of social inequalities regarding political participation or the uneven distribution of political skills. Their technological deterministic approach proclaims ICTs as enough to eradicate inequalities in this domain; e.g. Krueger (2002) and Vicente and Novo (2014). General literacy (media, digital, health related) is, nevertheless, a contemporary key-skill. One can admit that media literacy, understood as a resource, be an “essential condition to the exercise of an active and full citizenship” (Commission of the European Communities, 2009, p. 10).

Other authors consider that traditional resources produce impact on individuals’ online behaviour, especially with respect to their online political engagement (Best & Krueger, 2005; Hansen & Reinau, 2006). For van Dijk (2000) there are strong probabilities for the inequalities to increase or, at least, to stay the same as before. A research on digital political participation in Portugal carried out between 1998 and 2002 by Simões (2005) points out the same direction. Vázquez & Cuervo (2014), on their research, highlight that digital contexts reinforce the opportunities of those who already were participants on offline contexts.

In view of the above, a political participation scale is also helpful to research political e-participation, one is presented in Figure 1. At the bottom of the scale, a large number of people conduct forms of participation close to what we name as



**Figure 1** Kinds and levels of political participation

Source: Adapted from van Dijk (2000, p. 176).

“mouse click” participation, like electronic polling, an action usually immediate and spontaneous. Otherwise, upscale there is to be found an active political elite, using the most modern electronic tools to improve their political activity, including participating in the decision-making process. Outside this frame, and consequently of the participation scale, lies the real excluded, those to whom ICTs are not even available.

Nonetheless, in the case of digital political participation, as Simões (2005) states, we can point out to a triple filtering process regarding digital political participation, because social differentiation factors, as gender, academic qualifications and professional category, that impact in political participation are also present in access and use of ICT, as well as in the distribution of skills in operating electronic devices, a fact also stated by Breindl (2010). Considering everything presented so far, a question can be raised: which kind of electronic tools do people use for different political uses?

Despite the necessity of carrying out these researches during several years, attributing them an extensive character, we can find a new media segmentation, according to political participation inequalities self-reference deleted. The reflection about the online tools chosen for different types and levels of political participation “suggests that, despite the multifunctional character of some electronic tools, tools are, to a large extent, being placed in a hierarchy according to types and levels of political participation” (Simões, Barriga, & Jerónimo, 2011, p. 57). The top of the scale presents us the electronic NGO’s, political organizations that relies on the involvement and mobilisation of its members. These members should have cognitive resources — and other kind of resources as well — necessary to organise

and mobilise citizens for concrete actions, including drafting petitions, write letters or spread information.

Under this organisations’ layer, there are the bloggers that regularly approach political issues, which, according to Barriga (2007), are more focused in a deeper, systematic and argumentative form of political discussion and opinion-making.

Descending the scale, we find Facebook, Twitter and other social media. As seen in the spring of 2011 in Northern Africa or more recently in 2013, in such places so distant from each other as Portugal, Turkey or Brazil, they have had an important role for mobilizing and organizing social protests (Price, 2010; Shangapour, Hosseini, & Hashemnejad, 2011). Facebook, as noted before, might be the most multifunctional tool available on the web. Notwithstanding, as Simões, Barriga and Jerónimo (2011) state, the political activity most present in Facebook is the production of small texts calling for mobilisation of social protests. These short texts ask for little expertise, especially compared to the skills applied by bloggers.

In the last layer there are the simpler online participation modes, mostly requiring no more than a click, therefore called “mouse-click participation”.

### **Surveillance and the threat to political participation**

The darker side of surveillance has exponentially increased after 9/11; it has extensively broadened to all spheres and fields of social activity, intensively entering the routines of our private and daily lives, as has been referred by Lyon (2003).

Surveillance modalities were increased, and artefacts are becoming more and more sophisticated. Electronic cards, either for payment or identification, can trace shopping places and products (books, for example), revealing everyone’s political stances. Devices like CCTV can easily be used for political purposes, recording meetings without anyone’s permission or acknowledgment self-reference deleted. Biosurveillance also allows to trace connections between the bureaucratic and the physical realms (e.g., biometric passports or IDs) for political purposes. Surveillance is not just limited to fixed places, but also to online and offline mobility area. Offline mobility systems, namely GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) and GIS (Geographic Information Systems), allow locating and monitoring drivers and its use can be expanded to political sphere to watch where our political meetings and other political actions take action. On the other hand, online mobility also allows recording what we search for, what we read, with whom we speak and what is said. All of these artefacts can be used for purposes of political surveillance (Simões, 2011; Simões & Jerónimo, 2018).

This could be upsetting, as an increasing number of people are willing to make their personal data available in a relatively uninquiring way, especially in

the online context (Gainsbury, Browne, & Rockloff, 2018; Lee, Gillath, & Miller, 2019). The change in citizens' behaviour led to an exposing culture, where people are fascinated by showing their private lives everywhere, a kind of lateral surveillance or "sousveillance" (Ganascia, 2010; Han, 2014; Harcourt, 2015; Morozov, 2013). All these data are very appreciated by public and private organisations. This process of extensive and intensive sharing of information does not necessarily mean that people do not reflect on the use that is made of their data (Lupton & Michael, 2017). It is possible that the perception of risks associated with the sharing of personal information may be influenced by numerous aspects, such as the sense of familiarity with the context in which information is shared and the sense of confidence that it is possible to manage and control personal information in certain environments (Gainsbury, Browne, & Rockloff, 2018; Papathanassopoulos, Athanasiadis, & Xenofontos, 2016).

However, ICT remained central because they not only aggregate data from all kinds of surveillance, including their own, but also became possible the construction of widely interconnected databases, the categorization and the upcoming classification of individuals also for purposes of political surveillance. As Simões and Jerónimo (2018) says "Without ICTs, there would be no Big Data" (p. 189). The Big Data concept has been well exemplified when Snowden, on June 10, 2013, exposed several secret surveillance NSA programs carried out by government entities in conjunction with private companies, namely Facebook, Google, Apple, and other tech companies (Hintz, Dencik, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2017; van Dijk, 2014). As Han (2014) says "The vigilant State and the market merge with one another" (p. 74).

In fact, all the mentioned forms of surveillance became threats to liberty, privacy, social justice and human rights. Imbalance of power between the "vigilant" and the "monitored" is growing and thus the risk of emergence of totalitarian societies, composed by increasingly "transparent" citizens (Lyon, 2001).

Facing quantitative and qualitative changes in surveillance, Haggerty and Ericson (2000) argue that we are witnessing the "'disappearance of disappearance' – a process whereby it is increasingly difficult for individuals to maintain their anonymity, or to escape the monitoring of social institutions" (p. 619). In this sense, these authors and others consider nowadays that the foucauldian tale is not the most adequate metaphors. Manokha (2018) disagrees and retakes the panopticon allegory, pointing out that it is still very accurate concerning electronic surveillance in contemporary societies, saying "the Panopticon clearly involved two sides of power: on one hand, the 'power over,' that is, the ability to spatially organise different categories of inmates, to observe them, to punish, and to discipline those whose behaviour violates the rules that must be followed; on the other hand, the



power exercised over oneself, that is, inmates who know that they are under constant surveillance end up exercising self-restraint and self-discipline, making any coercion totally unnecessary except in some rare cases of disobedience" (p. 222).

Manokha (2018) refers how the concept of "chilling effect", firstly used by Dolich (1993), perfectly adapts to the reality of nowadays, and it is used mainly to describe the great impacts on freedom of expression after Snowden's revelations, citing several researches showing how individuals and journalists changed their behavior, caused by their acknowledgement of being surveilled.

Facing the threats to political participation and democracy caused by surveillance, most authors focus democracy/privacy interdependence. Simões (2011) and Simões and Jerónimo (2018) point out a different assumption: surveillance challenges our autonomy as social and political actors. Regarding political participation, the debate around the autonomy concept is more heuristic than the privacy one self-reference deleted. Most people, when facing the claim around privacy-security trade-offs, rapidly choose security, saying they have nothing to hide. But "are they aware of the consequences brought to their autonomy by losing privacy? Are they aware of the loss on their faculty and power to make political choices and to participate in decision-making within the public domain?" (Simões, 2011, p. 95). Thus, when we face threats to political participation, the central issue, we argue, is autonomy.

Individual liberty is only possible when individuals are not systematically watched in public contexts and when state or other organizations do not interfere in individual private life. With individual liberty assured, individuals in an autonomous way acquire opinions about public issues affecting their daily lives and make their choices – the right to be unbothered and the right to privacy are therefore crucial issues of civil rights. Self-reference-deleted. The same happens with political rights: these rights will only be ensured if neither public nor private organisations follow, watch or interfere with individual political activities (Simões & Jerónimo, 2018).

In a similar way, theories of political participation, regardless the liberal conception of democracy in contemporary societies and the internet's libertarian ideology, outset from a very important principle: inequalities in economic, social and political resources limit autonomous choices, judgments and action. The most important issue is not if, but how people act, which became crucial to restate, on one hand, the effectiveness of civil, political and social rights, and enunciate, on the other hand, the concept of autonomy and the conditions to its effectiveness (Simões, 2011; Simões & Jerónimo, 2018).

Autonomy involves the ability and freedom to debate, judge, make choices and take decisions in private as well as public life. This demands not being

constrained by others or by the institutions where each person is integrated. The authenticity exists when autonomy is built and chosen by any given individual, and not by any other. To be authentic, autonomy also requires a rational presentation of itself. Autonomy depends on liberating from whatever restraints derive from relationships of domination (Held, 1996; Oldfield, 1998; Roche, 1998).

In this way, autonomy is a crucial and necessary condition for the exercise of democracy and, consequently, for political participation (Couldry, 2017; Simões, 2011; Simões & Jerónimo, 2018). Nowadays we are facing intensive and extensive upgrades of surveillance that are threatening citizens' autonomy authors' reference deleted. Different surveillance artefacts may induce in citizens the awareness of their permanent "visibility", make them feel fear and afraid concerning political activity. They can also prescribe our political behaviour, from responding to opinion polls or voting to more complex activities like being active members of a political organization.

For the overoptimistic, risk can be faced through either statutory agencies or/and technological solutions. But regulation measures cannot keep up the rate of technological development, it is difficult to implement legislation, and nothing can assure that it will be carried out. Public debate is undervalued, current trends – like rising populism and extremism getting to power – are ignored, while the number of countries detouring to "digital authoritarianism" is increasing, as Shahbaz (2018) alerts. These countries adopt the Chinese model of extended censorship and automated surveillance systems. As a result, internet global freedom decreased by the eighth consecutive year in 2018, accordingly to the latest Freedom on the net report mentioned by the author.

The widely publicised scandals involving Cambridge Analytica and Facebook, in 2018, thickened the disbelief and brought the old questions of privacy violation, surveillance and control by digital platforms and their owners over citizens<sup>ii</sup>. Short time after, Twitter was accused of sending mass messages praising the Labour party and criticising the Conservatives, in the last campaign for the British general elections. In this matter, these are not a new phenomenon. As known, in 2014, Google assumed that it runs all incoming and outgoing mails in Gmail accounts, to create customised ads.

From another point of view, we can say that politicians and governments are under suspicion of threatening freedom and democracy, as they use networks of users to spread messages with the aim of silencing critical voices with personal attacks. This phenomenon intends to create a wave of indignation, public pressure and fear about unfavourable opinions, and stop the spreading of those ideas. It was called "patriotic trolling" (Nyst & Monaco, 2018).

The expanding surveillance brought with it the threat or the reinforcement of totalitarianism. Facing this situation, what can we do? Understanding the impacts of surveillance technologies is a necessary condition for being able to assess ethically its effects, to participate in their choice and design, to regulate its use and to contribute for more responsible social practices that don't threaten the civil and political citizenship rights, i.e. the political participation.

### The fake news issue and the challenges to public sphere

One of the most persistent myths on the Internet, widely propagated by libertarians and the most optimistic is the major force of democratization underlying the Internet. Everyone would have access to information and be able to engage the public sphere created by the Internet, without being gatekept by more powerful interests.

In western countries, most governments, political pundits and journalists, given the predominance of liberal ideas, confuse availability of information with being informed. We can admit that the consumption of information, if it is not a form of participation, it is at least a boosting factor. Looking for information is a potential manifestation of an exercise of citizenship (Cabral, 2000), whereas the exposure to information media is a variable of civic and political involvement (Martin & van Deth, 2007). To have an active role, good citizens must be significantly informed about the government (Dalton, 2008).<sup>3</sup>

For Yankelovich (1991), the role that information has in the quality of public opinion is undeniable, but the equivalence between the quality of public opinion and being well informed is unacceptable.<sup>4</sup> A society working on this assumption interprets wrongly the nature and purpose of the public opinion in a democracy, as it undervalues the importance of a good public judgement defined as "a particular form of public opinion that exhibits **(i)** more thoughtfulness, more weighing of alternatives, more genuine engagement with the issue, more taking into account a wide variety of factors than ordinary public opinion as measured in opinion polls, and **(ii)** more emphasis on the normative, valuing, ethical side of questions than on the factual, informational side" (Yankelovich, 1991, p. 5). As the same author points out, arguments and counter-arguments contribute for the foundation of opinions. Public participation demands a public sphere containing a diversity of opinions. It is in that confrontation that citizens form their own opinion.

The public judgement issue is not technological, it is social. Even if according to the futurist utopians the ICTs can make this process easier, they do not contribute themselves to develop public judgement. It would depend on the choices made

by social actors who had the power to implement mechanisms that stimulate its development, namely the horizontal debate of public questions. Is the use of new media taking that road?

As said above, the predominance of liberal conceptions in western countries is such, that sometimes information availability is mixed up with being informed, which would send us back to the quality and veracity of the available information. What are we looking at, in this “brave new world”?

On the one hand, as previously discussed, resources that enable political participation are unevenly distributed. Confronting online reality, a Reuters Institute’s recent research (Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen, 2018) revealed social inequalities in news consumption in the United Kingdom. As online news sources grow, the inequality level in news consumption also grows. This confronts us, thus, with the possibility of new media promoting inequalities that strengthen the old social inequalities.

Social media, used in such a massive way, serving commercial interests of communication companies and governments or other political organisations, including terrorist groups, have been frequently used to disseminate fake news, feeding populisms and disinformation. The “fake news” expression is used so broadly and imprecisely that it has no exact meaning, which can have negative effects over democratic institutions and the public trust in the media. Actually, it comprises multiple conceptions and report several situations (falsehoods, errors, manipulations and conspiracies). Thus, conceptually, there is a recognised difficulty in framing fake news and their traits (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Aymanns, Foerster, & Georg, 2017; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2018).

In the report of the “High Level Experts Group” (2018), requested by European Commission, the expression “fake news” is avoided, because it is considered inadequate to capture the complex problems of disinformation, which include contents that combine made up information with actual facts. Disinformation is defined as false, inexact or distorted information, conceived, presented and promoted to obtain profit or cause an intentional public hazard (European Commission, 2018).

Nevertheless, it is consensual that this is not a new phenomenon. The Pasquins, in Italy, the Canards, in the 17th century France, the fabricated news, in Germany, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, or the case of Theodor Fontaine, the Orson Welles’ radio show, that staged The War of the Worlds are examples of that. In the current context, with the technological transformations and the online environment experience, the potential for wide spreading has increased significantly.

Social media architecture and their business model increases the speed of disseminations of disinformation — recent researches conclude that false information

run at higher speed than truthful and trustworthy information (cf. Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018). In traditional media, falsehood can easily be wronged, as information is under legal bindings towards contradictory and equanimity. In social media, there is no self-regulatory measures against fake news, which can get readers at a global scale. Even if such news are contradicted or showed false, no one can assure that the correction will be read by the initial number of readers. Furthermore, the next day, that is no longer the top issue, facing real news and the excess of information.

In a causal relation, the lack of trust in media and politics is sharpening. According to Edelman Trust Barometer, 2018 (which comprises 28 countries), 63% say they cannot distinguish between good journalism and fake news; 59% consider themselves unable to identify the truth; just 56% trust political leaders. Following Habermas, we can say that journalists and politicians occupy the core of the political system and they are "two types of actors without which no public sphere could ever work" (Habermas, 2008, p. 14). Nevertheless, with new media, we see the transformation and perversion of the role of both. For example, politicians like Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro use social networks in a way highly marked by the elimination of the mediation role of journalism.

The increase of false news may have the outcome of producing more social inequalities in political participation, considering the issues above: the lesser the socioeconomic condition and cultural capital and the lower the levels of literacy, the shorter skills to identify false news, which could be thought further in future researches. Most human activities are socially regulated, and the regulation of digital media is unsurmountable, which raises the identification of solutions. Which solutions? Facing the installed intensive and extensive surveillance, there is the threat of a widespread censorship. A wrong to fight another wrong.

With the increase of false news, it becomes even harder, according to Yankelovich (1991) to form a good political judgement.

Advancing to the analysis and challenges presented to the public sphere, the debate, the arguing and counter-arguing of political issues are easier in the virtual sphere through the creation of multiple virtual public spheres? It is this assumption that we intend to defy, given the importance of algorithms in the process.

The political choice includes, on the one hand, debate, because individuals, when discussing with each other, often disagree in civic and political issues that worry them. On the other hand, it helps individuals to overcome their narrow interests. It is through debate that individuals constantly reencounter, reevaluate, and reorganize their values, beliefs and opinions, which will serve as a basis for political participation. The idea that tested and reevaluated values and opinions,

confronted by opponent arguments, are preferable to those acquired and never again reconsidered underlies the concept of deliberation (Barber, 1984; Fishkin, 1997; Oldfield, 1998; Yankelovich, 1991).

What happens with ICT, including social networks? Even before the rise of social networks, some authors revealed that in debating forums, like mailing lists, people tended to group around similar political beliefs, making the debate and the clash of ideas almost inexistent. These forums were not politically heterogeneous, and they constituted and consolidated with participants with similar political opinions (Dahlberg, 2001; Wilhelm, 1999).

Algorithms allow deepening this trend, instead of creating a new reality, as it is often referred. Algorithms are not neutral. Algorithms introduced by powerful organisations, namely Google, organise their sources of information in a way to provide people only the information they want, i.e., data are more individualised and craved towards the users' interests, and at the same time they are drawn away of finding or knowing people with different points of view and different forms of interacting with the world (Pariser, 2011; Reed & Boyd, 2016). This problem is known as "filter bubble" (Pariser, 2011). In other words, "personalized information builds a 'filter bubble' around us, a kind of digital prison for our thinking. How could creativity and thinking 'out of the box' be possible under such conditions? Ultimately, a centralized system of technocratic behavioural and social control using a super-intelligent information system would result in a new form of dictatorship" (Helbing, Frey, Gigerenzer, Hafen, Hagner, Hofstetter, Hoven, Zicari & Zwitter, 2017, p. 12). Anyone who reads far-right sites will find only far-right sites in their searches. With traditional media, people have more access to opposite opinions and to contradictory arguments, and even when they buy their preferred newspaper or magazine in a newsstand, they will eventually end up looking at other front pages.

The referred situation may cause a growing polarization and fragmentation, due to the formation of separated groups, which no longer debate among themselves, do not even try to understand each other's point of view, and stimulate the conflict against the opponent (Helbing, Frey, Gigerenzer, Hafen, Hagner, Hofstetter, Hoven, Zicari & Zwitter, 2017).

No only algorithms are making public debate harder. The exchange of opinions online is frequently typified by insults. The existence of "hate speech" is palpable, nowadays. It is so frequent that some internet behaviours gained their own slang, like haters and trolls. These incite behaviours that are the opposite of what Dalton defends as "good citizens": to participate in democratic deliberations and to discuss politics with other citizens, understanding their points of view (Dalton, 2008).

Algorithms have, indeed, a significant role in giving form to the field of news and information, increasing the concerns about its impact on public speech. The way that they are programmed raises the question of equal access to the means of production, dissemination and access to online information. This happens because there is a significant barrier to multiple and underground channels through which the population communicates, spreads information and challenges powerful interest groups, essential issues referred by authors like Barber (1984), Yankelovich (1991), Fishkin (1997), and Hale, Musso and Weare (1999).

Many critics consider that we are facing a new unprecedented challenge. But the challenge is old, only surfacing again under a new shape that undermines democracy and widens social inequalities. We face the recurrent issue mediation/gatekeepers. The analysis and accountability mechanisms are changing with a growing power of mediation from the big technological conglomerates, like Google, using algorithms. Google, as well as Facebook, are free to manipulate information with algorithms. They interfere in the type of news we consume, and in the way we form our own opinion (Helbing, Frey, Gigerenzer, Hafen, Hagner, Hofstetter, Hoven, Zicari & Zwitter, 2017). As Leonhard (2017) says, where will the concerns about the recurrent filtering, manipulating, or biased information stand?

Helbing, Frey, Gigerenzer, Hafen, Hagner, Hofstetter, Hoven, Zicari and Zwitter (2017) argue that powerful networks and complex relations established among the media, the governments, and big corporations lead the mainstream media to reproduce the points of view of the most powerful groups within society in an auspicious way, including those of the owners of the big media conglomerates. A relevant question can be raised: how far can we stand that big companies like Google, Facebook, Apple have more power than national governments and defy international institutions?

Likewise, as Held, McGrew Goldblatt & Perraton (1999) had affirmed, we have been watching a rising concentration of global scale media. Just as an example, look at the Murdoch empire, owner of the Wall Street Journal, The Times, The Sun, Fox News and Fox Television Stations, the publishing house HarperCollins, just to name a few, which are dominant in the public sphere of their original countries. It does not seem excessive to say that the space for keeping and creating new alternative media is narrower each day. Every time it is more difficult to give voice to "informed citizens" without economic power.

The issue of spreading fake information by the available online media, which assume more intensive and extensive characteristics, is intertwined to new forms of manipulation and propaganda in digital context, which are against democracy.

The Brexit referendum, the American presidential elections of 2016 and the presidential elections in Brazil, in 2018, are good examples of that. In the last-mentioned case, the massive dissemination of fake news and the use of on-line apps like WhatsApp, used to mobilise a large number of voters, seem to have been decisive for the election outcome. As Augusto Santos Silva (2018) wrote in the Brazilian Newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, “the disinformation and populism feed each other, and both represent an enormous danger to democratic public life. They are tied, especially, by the cult of the leader (opposing to cosmopolitan and open elites), the lack of love for the public sphere, and, in correlation, the despise for communicational rationality” (n/p).

As Helbing, Frey, Gigerenzer, Hafen, Hagner, Hofstetter, Hoven, Zicari and Zwitter. (2017) say, nudging techniques are driven towards specific audiences (more vulnerable to manipulation), opposing to the traditional media, where political propaganda was publicized and open to contradictory. Parties, governments, companies wanting to influence electoral outcomes possess the ICT users' profiles, and communicate only with specific individuals, namely the ones that can be more receptive to some kind of propaganda, that interference not being noticed nor publicized.

To these authors (Helbing, Frey, Gigerenzer, Hafen, Hagner, Hofstetter, Hoven, Zicari & Zwitter, 2017), the combination of nudging techniques with Big Data leads to a new form of nudging, which they name as Big Nudging. The profiles of the citizens are built with an increasing amount of information largely collected without consent. These profiles explicit not only what people think and feel, but how they can be manipulated in very specific ways to do certain choices that they would not do without that interference, either to vote in a certain party or to buy a certain product. Nudging techniques are used with millions of people, without people realizing that they are being a target. There is no transparency or public scrutiny of that intervention, nor ethic constraints by the broadcasters. Several social networks, like Facebook, has already admitted taking part in these kinds of practices.

We are confronted with one more dimension of inequality, if we consider some theories of reception, which state that critical ability and reaction skills to what is broadcasted by media depends on the socioeconomical condition and the cultural capital of the receptors. In this process, given the knowledge of people's profiles, people with less critical and interpretative skills can be chosen to be targets of manipulation. Those who control the nudging techniques can win elections, acting over the most uninformed people and the undecided voters.

We are being confronted with an eroding movement inside the democratic system (Helbing, Frey, Gigerenzer, Hafen, Hagner, Hofstetter, Hoven, Zicari &



Zwitter, 2017), because the above-mentioned manipulation and propaganda are not public, they are hardly reported, and they are driven to some audiences only.

It is clear that "manipulative technologies restrict the freedom of choice. If the remote control of our behaviour worked perfectly, we would essentially be digital slaves, because we would only execute decisions that were actually made by others before" (Helbing, Frey, Gigerenzer, Hafen, Hagner, Hofstetter, Hoven, Zicari & Zwitter, 2017, p. 8).

### **Final reflections**

The concept of participation is not a neutral word, as it is related to distinctive political and ideological conceptions. In this sense, in any research it is crucial to specify what type and level of participation are being used. On the other hand, within the broad spectrum of social research on technology, scientists have been more focused on case studies, and there is a need to move towards more extensive research, despite the difficulties that may be encountered. In this paper, we intended to point out another analytical perspective aimed to present sedimented knowledge from political sociology, which we consider the starting point to any discussion about ICTs potential. We consider that starting from that theoretical background not only we can verify what can be different when ICTs are used for participation, but also if the use of ICTs can significantly change what we nowadays consider to be political participation.

As technological possibilities are not automatically turned into social possibilities, i. e., as technological devices do not erase the existent social inequalities, it is mandatory to analyse that dimension, regarding the political participation in digital context, so we can understand the changes that might occur leading to the increase, the decrease or even the reconfiguration of said inequalities.

To the technological determinists, technological possibilities offered by such devices are invariably turned into social possibilities, which would inevitably lead to higher levels of political participation. However, those same possibilities bring serious threats to human, civic and political rights, by means of electronic surveillance, which come up with unavoidable ethical questions that should be discussed, in a world where totalitarianism is – or can become – a recurrent danger. This reality is not very far, if we realized that the number of countries adopting the Chinese model of extensive censorship and automatized surveillance systems is constantly growing.

The democratic character of the public sphere may be questioned in other ways. Public participation demands, among other requirements, a public sphere with a range of opinions, as the process of confrontation will form citizens'

opinions. Online opinion exchange is highly noted by the use of insults and hate speeches, pushing citizens apart from what Dalton (2008) considered to be “good citizens”. On the other hand, algorithms organize information sources to give the users personalized data, driven towards their interests, confining the users to information that corroborates their previous choices (“filter bubble”). With new media, the old difficulties intensify: read, listen, and confront ideas to form an opinion (Barber, 1984; Fishkin, 1997; Hale, Musso & Weare, 1999; Yankelovich, 1991).

In addition to what has been referred, algorithms allow a change in the traditional ways of disinformation and manipulation. Nudging techniques are directed to particular audiences, without public scrutiny. Organizations that intend to manipulate elections can concentrate their efforts on profiled individuals, without ethic constraints (Helbing, Frey, Gigerenzer, Hafen, Hagner, Hofstetter, Hoven, Zicari & Zwitter, 2017). Those who control nudging techniques may win elections, acting over more vulnerable and receptive people.

In this case, we face lack of transparency and democratic control, an eroding of the democratic system. Manipulation and propaganda are not public, hardly denounced, and driven to specific audiences. Surveillance, Big Data and artificial intelligence are not being compatible with the core values of democratic societies. They may lead us to an automated society with totalitarian characteristics, controlling what we know, how we think and how we act (Helbing, Frey, Gigerenzer, Hafen, Hagner, Hofstetter, Hoven, Zicari & Zwitter, 2017).

The increase of fake news and nudging techniques make more difficult to perform a good public judgment (Yankelovich, 1991). This situation reminds the new social inequalities in political participation, considering the referred issues: the lesser the socioeconomic condition and cultural capital and the lower the levels of literacy, the shorter skills to identify false news, manipulation and selective propaganda.

In this debate, with so many unanswered questions and hard empirical approach (thus, so scarce), the role of social sciences is central to, intertwined with other knowledges, enlighten the darkness, the unpredictability and the uncertainty of this “new world”. Most human activities are socially regulated, and digital media is a necessity. Thus, it matters to identify and discuss solutions. Which solutions? Facing the intensive surveillance, we risk a widespread censorship. An evil to fight another evil? Are we facing the dystopian dream of Bradbury’s “Fahrenheit 451”, and the promise of a new café was once again unaccomplished?

## Notas

- 1 If extended studies in several countries show the major trends and the centrality of these variables, statistically speaking, they do not end the debate. Several factors can be highlighted, which can overcome this homogenous effect between social inequality and unequal political participation. Firstly, a valued and conscient belonging to a community (ethnic, ideology, religious, or any other) can increase participation, and eventually, balance the effects produced by a dominated social position (Mayer and Perrinau, 1992; Memmi, 1985). Secondly, what Mayer and Perrinau (1992) call system effects. Political participation also depends on (i) how political systems are organized; (ii) if they stimulate political participation; (iii) if so, if the used mechanisms are the most adequate. Thirdly, participation depends on the models of citizenship accepted by social agents, expressing different models and representations of political participation (Memmi, 1985). To these factors, we would add unique social, economic and political contexts.
- 2 Actually, the information published by The Guardian in March 2018, that the British company had used information of 87 million Facebook accounts to manipulate and gain electoral advantages in favour of Donald Trump has uncovered these practices for the general audiences.
- 3 To typify good citizens, the author uses these indicators: participation (voting, volunteering, political action); autonomy (make own opinions without external influence); social order (obeying the Law, serving the military at war, being part of a jury at court, denouncing a crime); solidarity (helping people in need) (Dalton, 2008, pp. 79-80).
- 4 Yankelovich (1991) follows Thomas Jefferson's conception of an informed public: a public with reflective, analytical and critical capacities, high ethical standards as well as factual information; rather than that of current journalists and experts for whom an informed public is one with a large volume of information.

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