



## Use IT or Lose it

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### Digital technologies could be used to destroy democracy, or to save it.

By George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 7<sup>th</sup> March 2017

Has a digital coup begun? Is big data being used, in the US and the UK, to create personalised political advertising, to bypass our rational minds and alter the way we vote? The short answer is probably not. Or not yet.

A series of terrifying articles suggest that a company called *Cambridge Analytica* helped to swing both the US election and the EU referendum by mining data from *Facebook* and using it to predict people's personalities, then tailoring advertising to their psychological profiles. These reports, originating with the Swiss publication *Das Magazin* ([published in translation by Vice](#)), were clearly written in good faith, but apparently with insufficient diligence. They relied heavily on claims made by *Cambridge Analytica*, that now appear to have been exaggerated. I found the story convincing, until I read the deconstructions by [Martin Robbins on Little Atoms](#), [Kendall Taggart on BuzzFeed](#) and [Leonid Bershidsky on Bloomberg](#).

None of this is to suggest that we should not be vigilant. The *Cambridge Analytica* story gives us a glimpse of a possible dystopian future, especially in the US, where data protection is weak. Online information already lends itself to manipulation and political abuse, and the age of **big data** has scarcely begun. In combination with advances in cognitive linguistics and neuroscience, this data could become a powerful tool for changing the electoral decisions we make, in ways of which we might not be fully aware.

**Our capacity to resist manipulation is limited.** Even the crudest forms of subliminal advertising swerve past our capacity for reason and make critical thinking impossible. The simplest language shifts can trip us up. For example, when Americans were asked whether the federal government was spending too little on "assistance to the poor", 65% of them agreed. When they were asked whether it was spending too little on "welfare", [25% agreed](#). What hope do we have of resisting carefully-targeted digital messaging, that uses trigger words to overcome our capacity for discrimination? Those who are charged with protecting the integrity of elections should be urgently developing a new generation of legal safeguards.

Already, big money exercises illegitimate power over political systems, making a mockery of democracy. The battering ram of **campaign finance**, that gives billionaires and corporations a major political advantage over ordinary citizens; the **dark money network** (a web of hundreds of lobbying groups funded by billionaires, that **disguise themselves as think tanks**), **astroturf campaigning** (employing people to masquerade as grassroots citizens' movements) and *botswarming* (creating fake online accounts to create the impression that large numbers of people support a political position): all these are current and urgent threats to political freedom. Our election authorities (such as the *Electoral Commission* in the UK) have signally failed to control these abuses, or even, in most cases, to acknowledge them.

China shows how much worse this could become. There, according to **a recent article** in *Scientific American*, deep-learning algorithms enable the state to develop its "*citizen score*". This uses people's online activities to determine how loyal and compliant they are, and whether they should qualify for jobs, loans or entitlement to travel to other countries. Combine this level of monitoring with nudging technologies – tools designed subtly to change people's opinions and responses – and you develop a system that tends towards complete behavioural control.

That's the bad news. But digital technologies could also be a powerful force for positive democratic change. Political systems, particularly in the Anglophone nations, have scarcely changed since the fastest means of delivering information was the horse. They remain **remote**, **centralised** and **paternalist**, where technology should long ago have rendered this model redundant. The great potential for participation and deeper democratic engagement is almost untapped. Because the rest of us have not been invited to occupy them, it is easy for billionaires to seize and enclose the political **cyber-commons**.

A **recent report** by the innovation foundation *Nesta* argues that there are no quick or cheap digital fixes. But, when they receive sufficient support from governments or political parties, new technologies can improve the quality of democratic decisions. They can use the wisdom of crowds to make politics more transparent and accountable, to propose ideas that don't occur to professional politicians and to spot flaws and loopholes in government bills.

Among the best uses of online technologies it documents are the *LabHacker* and **eDemocracia** programmes in Brazil, that allow people to make proposals to their representatives and work with them to improve their bills and policies; **Parlement et Citoyens** in France, that plays a similar role; **vTaiwan**, that crowdsources new parliamentary bills; the **Better Reykjavik** programme, that allows people to suggest and rank ideas for improving the city, and has now been used by over half the population; and the **Pirate Party**, also in Iceland, whose policies are chosen by its members, in both digital and off-line forums. In all these cases, digital technologies are used to improve representative democracy, rather than to replace it.

In most instances (Reykjavík is the exception), participation tends to be deep but narrow. Tech-savvy young men are often overrepresented, while most of those who are alienated by offline politics remain, so far, alienated by online politics. But these results could be greatly improved, especially with **the help of blockchain technology**, text-mining with the help of natural language processing (that enables very large numbers of comments and ideas to be synthesised and analysed) and other innovations that could make electronic democracy more meaningful, more feasible and more secure.

Of course, there are also great hazards here.

No political system, offline or online, is immune to hacking; all systems require safeguards that constantly evolve to protect them from being captured by money and undemocratic power.

The regulation of politics lags decades behind the tricks and scams and new technologies deployed by people seeking illegitimate power. This is part of the reason for the mass disillusionment with politics, the belief that outcomes are rigged and the emergence of a virulent anti-politics, that finds expression in extremism and demagoguery.

Either we own political technologies, or they will come to own us. The great potential of big data, big analysis and online forums will be used by us or used against us. We must move fast to beat the billionaires.

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