

Session 5: « **Is it Still Possible to Find Out the Truth ?** »
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Pierre Dockès
Honorary Professor Université Lyon 2

Technologies, post-truth and democracy

Between July 20, 1789 – a few days after the Storming of the Bastille – and August 6, 1789 – two days after the abolition of privileges – France, almost in its entirety¹, went through an odd and impressive phenomenon known as the Great Fear. From only a few places, the belief in large brigands' troops burning crops (it was a time of anxiety linked to the upcoming harvest) spread like wildfire. It was said that they attacked the villages, killed men and children, raped women. These robbers, it was said, took their orders from aristocrats or the bourgeois of the cities, the Queen, or foreign princes. It was also believed that the latter wanted to punish people from the countryside following the first events of the French Revolution. The alarm bell sounded in villages, inhabitants fled or organized themselves to resist, stormed others' castles, burned burrows (acts proving peasant royalties) and sometimes their castle itself. But there were no gangs of robbers, except for many beggars who were driven by the economic crisis and hunger on the roads. As for those whom the aristocrats called brigands, they were panicked peasants who took advantage of the situation to abolish “in fact” seigneurial rights. Rumors grew from village to village. When one had seen two beggars in one place, they became a troop of 3,000 bandits a few miles away. There were many dead, aristocrats or bourgeois murdered and peasant leaders hanged by the agents of the repression that followed. The night of August 4th was not this almost unanimous generosity of the privileged, but the result of the panic that seized the National Assembly.

There was no justification for this fear of bandits. Today, we would talk of fake news and conspiracy theories. There was no need for social networks so that in a couple of weeks, rural France as a whole, or almost, would arm itself and rebel. This was not the first time that the “red rooster” had ignited the countryside. Many riots or frictional revolts had indeed characterized the Old Regime. But the geographical magnitude of the phenomenon in the summer of 1789 and the speed at which rumors spread were exceptional.

While lies, rumors, conspiracy theories have not waited for hyper-connectivity and social networks, new technologies are a prodigious sounding board and accelerate their spread². However, we are not simply dealing with an everlasting phenomenon that is being multiplied and accelerated. In the past, the means to obtain information were lacking. The peasants of 1789 did not have the means to obtain information on the arrival of bandits. False news flourished in a deep fog. Today, we often have the means to check. While new technologies

¹ Except Alsace, Brittany and Languedoc.

² Jean-Hervé Lorenzi, Mickaël Berrebi et Pierre Dockès, *La Nouvelle résistance. Face à la violence technologique*, Paris : Fayard, 2019.

allow for the almost instantaneous circulation of Infox, they also provide the means to combat disinformation and build a reasoned opinion. The same technologies that speed up the flow of poison into the social body deliver the counter poison, the weapons of “detox”.

The problem is that on the Internet, particularly on social networks, we find everything, real and fake, in bulk. The specificity of the post-truth era in relation to the old world is to be a situation where objective facts and falsifications coexist, with an almost equivalent status. This is fundamentally an education problem. A reasoned opinion is built; sorting and prioritizing information can be learned. This is nothing new. On the other hand, the degraded status of the true is new, at least since the triumph of the Enlightenment. This phenomenon is due to a whole series of reasons.

First of all, we have a mistrust of the media and experts. Above all, there is confusion between knowledge, opinion and faith: the proponents of “platism” or creationism tell us “it is my opinion and it is my right to have it”, and you must respect it. François Flückiger (Le Monde, March 13, 2019) observes the confusion between these three terms merged into a “catch-all” under the generic term “ideas”, each claiming the fundamental right to erect a simple belief to the status of truth. From then on, “it is my free will to believe that 2+2 is 3”. The scientist is all the more embarrassed because he himself explained that truth is only provisional, as long as it has not been refuted. Economics is certainly not a hard science, but if it is vain – and dangerous – to proclaim an eternal truth, reasoned opinions must confront each other and this confrontation helps to form a partial and temporary truth (and this is the aim of the Cercle des Economistes). On the other hand, there is now a proliferation of simplistic or fundamentally contradictory Voodoo-economic theories asserting themselves in the name of freedom of opinion. On issues as important as, for example, Brexit or the possible exit from the euro, the economic and social consequences of the European Union, the effects of free trade or protectionism, the economic consequences of social inequalities, opinions of economists differ. It is useless to seek to reconcile them in order to obtain absolute truths and certainties. But it is necessary to confront enlightened opinions by rejecting factual lies and pseudo-theories. There is no – there has never been – “consensus of economists” for a solution, a true theory, a necessary policy, but on the other hand a consensus can be formed against the different kinds of counterfeit theories.

Secondly, the Internet makes it possible to coordinate horizontally and no longer vertically, a return of the multitude becoming resilient instead of recourse to the State. But from the multitude to the crowd, there is only one step and social networks that have become omnipresent can lead to these collective and brutal phenomena. Indeed, we know from Gustave Le Bon³’s book that the crowd is volatile, subject to passionate, irrational movements, to brutal reversals. This form of primary collective movement born from a fusion of isolated individuals, without real solidarity, presents immense dangers. Crowd movements lead both to panic and to the drift from spontaneous insurrections to “popular emotions” (in the sense of the Old Regime) or populists, to scenes of collective lynching. The merging multitude can always throw themselves into the arms of a vulgar demagogue. The fascist dictatorships were able to play with crowds, their passions.

Today, social networks are the sounding board of emotions, make them merge, promote their self-reinforcing. Verbal violence and the incitement to physical violence so widespread on the Web are coupled with a form of violence characteristic of fake news and conspiracy theses,

3 Gustave Le Bon, *Psychologie des foules*, 1895.

that which is at work when the twisting of facts is treated as a legitimate difference of opinion.

Resilient horizontality also results in segmentation that leads to an increased risk of confrontation and anomie, a general loss of benchmarks. Society is “tribalizing”. Communities and affinity groups can live side by side, ignoring each other and making authoritative information, infox and conspiracy theories flourish, never again confronted with criticism. Hobbes had drawn from the Bible the Leviathan monster to represent the State. He had also drawn from the Bible the Behemoth monster to designate the raging multitude and civil war. Social networks first allow individuals to be grouped on the basis of their affinities. These are diverse: tastes, interests, ideology, social origins, identity. They then allow their consolidation and that of the ideas exchanged, since only shared ideas emanating from the same culture are exchanged, and therefore strengthened. A resonance box is thus formed. In addition, social network operators filter information through the algorithms used: only those that support their opinions reach the members of the tribe. Little by little, they come to consider their preconceived opinions as true since they find them continually uttered by all those who share their affinities with the way the two Dupont in Tintin in the land of black gold, find in the desert the traces of their own jeep and believe that it is another car, and yet another one, etc, and go round in circles believing themselves on a track that is becoming more and more confirmed! Members lose all critical thinking and, not without jubilation, see their prejudices confirmed. For example, since it was reformed in early 2018, Facebook’s algorithm reduced the room for general information in favour of “like” conversations. It certainly encourages the formation of groups, creates places for thematic debates, and allows people to organize themselves. But the risk is that communities of all kinds each remain in their closed bubble in which opinions strengthen, and where the untruths are formed and spread.

Thirdly, fake news are produced knowingly by various actors for the purpose of manipulating public opinion and encouraged by GAFAM and BATX. A study conducted by the University of Oxford⁴ shows that fake news broadcasts between 2015 and 2017 were mainly used to manipulate public opinion. By analyzing the tens of millions of messages published on various social networks during periods of elections and political crises in nine countries – Russia, China, Taiwan, the United States, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Poland and Ukraine –, the authors of the study denounce the practices of propaganda and disinformation to destabilize governments. To carry out these manipulation campaigns, one of the techniques consists in programming robots, bots, which « like », publish, share information automatically, thus creating the illusion of support for a cause or for a political candidate and, through an effect in return, obtaining real support from public opinion. Another classic way to manipulate is to spread fake news by targeting its dissemination to people who, through their political sensitivities, are likely to disseminate it even more widely.

BigTechs systematically promote opinions that are radical, controversial, and false because they attract the attention of the browser. Advertising platforms engage in manipulation that encourages the most “reactive” content that generates significant viewing times. This is the case with Twitter, whose algorithm is designed to provoke emotional excitement⁵ or YouTube (which belongs to Google). When one watches a video on this platform, it automatically inflicts or offers one related content which is chosen by its algorithm. It is secret, but one can

4 Samuel C. Woolley, Philip N. Howard, « Computational Propaganda Worldwide: Executive Summary », *Research Project*, Working paper n° 2017.11.

see that it is built in such a way that it takes one to videos that make one stay and are, in that sense good advertising platforms. The result is a tendency towards controversial videos, often racist, fascist, conspiracy theories. In the course of the 2016 U.S. election campaign, it was observed that Donald Trump-friendly videos, particularly fake news and conspiracy theses, were favoured by the algorithm⁶.

The coexistence today of the false next to the truth with an almost equivalent status and more generally new technologies endanger democracy. Of course, in a small number of countries, the struggles of men and women allowed the technical changes of the past to be accompanied by democratic advances, but it was in a way against the technique itself. The utopians who could have imagined that the technique was generating democratic advances and more autonomy for men and women, even the formation of libertarian societies, were mistaken. Not only have the worst autocratic regimes come to terms with the most sophisticated technologies of the moment, but they have strengthened themselves. Think of the mass technologies at the service of the Third Reich and their systematic use in the implementation of genocide. True democracy, on the other hand, and mastery of technology necessarily go hand in hand. Democracy is often defined by Lincoln's formula: "the government of the people, by the people and for the people". But the people are plural and the old question "technical progress for whom, for what?" remains. When entire factions of the people suffer the negative consequences of technical changes, true democracy is altered. When Tocqueville was studying democracy in America, he pointed out that democracy was founded above all on equality of conditions, not on strict real equality, but on the assumption that, in addition to the disappearance of privileges, the reduction of income and wealth differences, equal access to fundamental rights, education, culture and political rights. We need only look at the state of American democracy today to see how technological advances have not translated into democratic development, quite the contrary!

Today, new technologies are putting real democracy at risk in a way that is both different and deeper than yesterday's technological revolutions around the "machine" in the broad sense. They do it in two related directions.

On the one hand, the ability of technology firms and states to control our personal data, to manipulate our preferences and behaviours has become extreme. Democracy is then in danger, not only because authoritarian regimes have the means to rule over men and women, not only because "safe city" or "social credit" China presents risks of oppression, not only because GAFAM guides choices, behaviours and interpersonal relationships, but because human beings are led to want what is dictated to them, their autonomy is reduced to nothing by bringing their preferences and actions into conformity. As can be seen from political manipulation, the danger lies first in the ability of the powers to directly influence the votes of citizens by targeting their preferences and activating specific categorical fears. But more profoundly, it is in this bringing men and women into conformity with the needs of technology or BigTechs who implement them, an enslavement that accompanies the homogenization of preferences and behaviours.

5 Lanier, Jaron [2018], *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, London : The Bodley Head.

6 Between 81% and 88% of videos favouring Trump were such. See Yochai Benkler, *La richesse des réseaux*, Lyon : PUL ; Lewis, Paul, McCormick, Erin [2018], « How YouTube Algorithm distorts Truth », *The Guardian*, February, 2.

On the other hand, social networks profoundly alter the status of truth, facilitating the multiplication and propagation of false rumours and conspiracy theories. There has always been a consubstantial link between democracy and truth. It works in both directions: only democracy allows the truth to emerge, even if it is often in the long run, and the truth allows the triumph of democracy, hence the usual recourse to falsehood by its enemies. Yesterday, totalitarian regimes, whether communist or fascist, maintained a constant relationship with lies, false rumours, plots. Today, fake news on social networks and conspiracy theories are systematically in favour of the parties and regimes most opposed to democracy.

However, can we not hope that digital technologies will help a representative democracy that is in crisis everywhere, that is no longer seen as a true democracy by a growing number of citizens? By construction, representative democracy regimes present the risk of its representatives no longer really representing the people they have been mandated to represent and forming themselves into a political caste far removed from the needs felt by the population, capable of perpetuating themselves indefinitely, if not individually, but as a “class” by self-production. Moreover, when the divide between the economic, technological, intellectual and other “elites” of the people – the “people of the people” – is widening and the “political elites” are linked, and these higher fractions of civil society, the deeply divided society risks sinking into class clashes, violence or anomie. Democracy can be at risk when partisan authoritarianism factions are on the lookout, asserting themselves to the “real people”, guarantors of a change in the “system”. Hence the renewed interest in participatory democracy, which demands that representatives may, at any time, be dismissed by their constituents, the one which believes that the exercise of democracy must be strengthened through referendums of popular initiative. Can we not hope that digital technologies will facilitate the “citizens' referendum” (RIC)? Is this a way to rescue a representative democracy in crisis, since it is no longer seen as a genuine democracy by a growing number of citizens? Of course, they should not be confused with state referendums, which always have a plebiscite dimension. From a certain point of view, they are even the opposite. But they encourage infatuation or panic, fashion effects, volatility. This is what the Greeks called a *Pharmakon*, a remedy that is also a poison (for Hippocrates, as we know, “everything is poison, nothing is poison, everything is in the dose”). There is no question here of developing the advantages and disadvantages of the “doses” of participatory democracy. Its support has always been ambiguous, since on the one hand there are libertarians who are critical of the representativeness and of parliamentary democracy and on the other extreme right think tanks who believe that initiative referendums could have helped avoid the abolition of the death penalty or the legalization of abortion and would make expulsions of foreigners in Europe possible. If the Internet can facilitate participatory democracy and if it allows for the vertical tilting of power towards more horizontality, it is at the risk of potential conflict generation. When the status of the true and the false is blurred, when we are in the presence of crowds in a tribalized and anomical society, the volatility of opinions causes public opinion to shift from one extreme to the other through the centre. When degenerated freedom of opinion comes to undermine objective truth, democracy is in danger.