Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 2, Episode 7

How can we structure digital spaces more democratically?

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Published 15 July 2021

Democracy in Question? is the podcast series of the Albert Hirschman Center on Democracy at the Graduate Institute, Geneva, the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, and the Excellence Chair, University of Bremen (Research Group: Soft Authoritarianism).

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SR: Welcome to Democracy in Question, the podcast series that explores the challenges democracies are facing around the world. I'm Shalini Randeria, the director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Graduate Institute in Geneva and the rector of the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna.

SR: I'm joined today by Evgeny Morozov whose work focuses on the political and social implications of technology. In 2019, he wrote "Digital Socialism? The Calculation Debate in the Age of Big Data," an article we'll be looking at in our conversation today. Thanks so much for being with me here today, Evgeny.

EM: Thanks for having me.

SR: Technology and the internet are increasingly dominating our lives, from our phones to smart fridges. We live in a digitalized world which provides big tech corporations with enormous power.

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Many critics have voiced concerns about these companies when it comes to free speech and censorship but also our privacy as well as national security. At the same time, however, technology is also seen as an innovative force that could solve almost all our modern dilemmas, from economic inequalities to environmental issues. So, the question is how can we structure digital spaces more democratically and how can we harvest the transformational potential of technology?

The unprecedented level of accumulation of user data and the monopolization of digital technology by a few corporate companies have resulted in a clamor for more rules, more regulations to protect privacy. The opposite camp has been making the argument we should let the market rule instead of the state.

[00:02:00] You have argued that this is a false dilemma and that regulation or the lack of it is not really the problem, but the market is also not the solution. So, could you explain to us why you would like to transcend the binary opposition of more state or more market?

EM: Well, I started maybe around 2007, 2008 by criticizing something I named "techno utopianism." And, at the time, my critique was that, essentially, a lot of the promises made in the name of social networks and blogs, and especially as they were then represented by companies like Facebook or Google or even Myspace, they were fake and they were empty and that this great promise of democratization of authoritarian regimes being overthrown by people armed with mobile phones and text messaging and social networks, all of that was not helping. And it was actually giving us this extremely misleading view of what in fact the proliferation of Facebook and Google actually were going to have in the world.

[00:03:00] Unfortunately, my initial critique kind of deviated into many different branches. So, you know, maybe 5 or 7 years ago, it became popular to talk, for example, about "surveillance capitalism," which presented these firms not only as selling us fake promises but actually

manipulating our minds and agendas and instilling some kind of false consciousness almost in us. And that painted an extremely dark picture but without offering anything by means of an alternative other than maybe some kind of non-surveillance capitalism that the likes of Apple, who stuck privacy a little bit more, would be offering us, right?

And that to me seemed also like an extremely fake and false dichotomy. Why do we have to choose between Amazon and Apple or Facebook and Apple? Can't we find something genuinely different, with a different set of institutions to drive this agenda? And I think that the only currently viable alternative that's been articulated well would be the alternative of using these technologies to build and create more markets, right? So, it's really this sort of hyper neoliberal vision of using information technologies to create boutique markets out of everything.

[00:04:15] And what I have I think discovered in the last 3 or 4 years is that this genuine alternative that wants to use information technology to build institutions other than markets is genuinely missing, and all that we are trying to do is, essentially, impose some extra rules on the likes of Amazon and Facebook. But it's not really anything resembling the kind of institutional infrastructure imagination that I would like to see in the world. Obviously, the solution to the digital problem should also be the solution to our overall kind of alienation, disaffection with the liberal democracy as such.

SR: So, let me take up this argument, part of it which you have already made in your book "To Save Everything, Click Here," where you say

"solutionism," as you call it, is one of the dominant ideologies of the Silicon Valley which led the technological transformation. So, what exactly do you mean by this term which you introduce and why do you think it's a problem for politics?

[00:05:15]

EM: If you were to think in terms of ideologies and how they succeed each other in the last, you know, 7 to 8 years, the periodization that I would draw would have us moving from, you know, managerialism to neoliberalism to actually solutionism now. But I don't see them as, in any way, being completely distinct from each other, I see them as building on each other, in one way or another. So, for me, solutionism is a regime, ideological regime, that succeeds neoliberalism and accepts many of its key assumptions. For example, the primacy of the market as the dominant form of social organization is not questioned by solutionism but it adds a lot of extra features on top.

One of them is that it acknowledges explicitly that markets are not perfect, that they produce problems, and that these problems require solutions and that the solutions need to be generated as a matter of policy but ideal is through markets themselves. Which, to some extent, is different from the earlier rhetoric that we heard in the 70s and 80s when a lot of neoliberal economists would even deny the existence of climate change, right, or the existence of inequality. They would say that that's the cost of progress or we'll be able to somehow deal with it later on.

[00:07:00] Right now, if you look at the rhetoric coming out of institutions like Davos, there is an explicit acknowledgement that capitalism is broken, there is inequality, everybody is getting poorer, you know, the climate is killing us. But the way to solve them is through some kind of combination of finance and technology. So, we can build for example thematic stock indexes where we'll only have companies that are LGBTQ-friendly or we will have, you know, companies that only invest in green technologies. And by using, you know, the standard mechanisms of finance, or technology for that matter, you would be able to resolve a lot of these problems organically.

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SR: One of the important features of the technological revolution is the proliferation of social media. And it seemed to be inherently democratic, right? Openness, participation, these were the key pillars characterizing the growth of these media giants. And the popular uprisings like the Arab Spring or the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, which we have recently seen, made use of these media resources, social media, on the one hand, and the platform economy. So, Uber, Airbnb, etc., thrive on a rhetoric of openness, inclusion. Is this just glib sales talk?

EM: We probably have to distinguish here a little bit between the platforms that sell goods and services, Uber and Airbnb and, to some extent, Amazon, from the social-media platforms.

[00:08:00] What unites them though is this idea that somehow, they have become the most important vehicle for mobility, in the sense of

social mobility. That anybody who previously did not have access to certain resources or did not have access to the ability to become an entrepreneur or did not have access to public space or public sphere within minutes or hours could become a very important participant in those debates, right? And it's in that sense that they mobilized this idea that somehow people who were previously on the margins by means of greater integration into this platform economy could suddenly become influencers and opinion makers and whatnot.

I think here the dynamic, or at least the promise of the dynamic is not very different from the promise at the heart of capitalism itself, where you, essentially, manage to insert the lower classes and promise them more and more and greater mobility and that they will eventually become part of the bourgeoisie. And that part, I think, is easy to criticize because, ultimately, the reason why a lot of these platforms are so cheap and accessible is because you have big players like the sovereign wealth fund of Saudi Arabia, for example, pouring billions into institutions like SoftBank, which is gonna subsidize drives for Uber passengers, so you end up paying maybe one-third of the cost with someone else picking up the other two-thirds. And, of course, if you don't know the actual cost of the business, you think that, "Wow, it's really a miracle of efficiency and innovation and digitization and it's really the genius of these people from Silicon Valley that is responsible for making the price so low."

[00:09:30] The social-media business is not very different. They have spent the last, you know, 15 years offering us free services, which

allowed them to accumulate a lot of data about users. And that data is partially responsible for the refinement and the development of the services which now they are selling to everybody else. So, in a sense, we have enjoyed a similar subsidy.

[00:10:00] What I want to flag is that of course the reason why we have so much utopian aspirations for the transformative effects of these activities is because I think a lot of people, especially a lot of people on the left, after the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, they just have no alternative vision whatsoever as to how digital technology could be useful either in kind of building more robust public spheres or in building alternative economic systems.

And since we did not have that vision, we ended up celebrating the short-term outburst of political activity that happened because somebody sent out a text message or somebody set up a Facebook group. Which in itself is to be celebrated but it's just a normal feature of life that political movements take advantage of whatever infrastructures they find available, given the imperatives of the particular political moment. It doesn't mean that, from a strategic long-term perspective, we should be encouraging or not even thinking about whether having those infrastructures to begin with, as they are, is a good thing or a bad thing for democracy, justice, solidarity, etc.

SR: So, that's exactly the kind of argument you are making in this piece, "Digital Socialism," where you identify something you call "the feedback infrastructure" as a key element of building any kind of long-term and

comprehensive alternative to the structure of the current digital world. So, could you explain what you mean by "feedback infrastructure" and how would it help us to have some form of public control over this infrastructure?

[00:11:30]

EM: After, again, the fall of the Soviet Union, a lot of people on the left, they have entered a very unproductive intellectual period where they can no longer imagine alternative forms of large-scale social and economic organization that does not rely exclusively on the market. To recover and to kind of restart and rekindle that conversation would require having access and control over digital infrastructures, because of digital infrastructures that these new forms of social organization would probably emerge.

So, the case I'm making is that, if we are lucky and there are forces, political and intellectual ones, from the left that manage to rekindle that debate, the short-term goal should be at least to make sure that they don't surrender control over the infrastructures that will actually make such experiments possible. But, attached to that priority, there have to be at least some alternatives and some experimental projects that can tell us whether we want to revive central planning as it existed in the Soviet Union and still exist in China, to some extent, but by using a little bit more big data and different set of algorithms and a different set of sensors. Or whether we want something genuinely different, right?

[00:13:00] And this is where, in the piece, I go into various options discussing this idea of designing new markets of using solidarity, for example, as a discovery procedure in a very explicit contradistinction to the way neoliberal economists conceive of competition. You know, Hayek would present competition not just as a way of making sure that markets are more efficient but rather present competition kind of as the greatest source of uncovering all sorts of innovative practices, to put it very bluntly. That's the neoliberal utopia of more data means more markets means more innovation.

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But what we need to do is to basically show that, fine, we can accept the premise that we want new innovation, we don't want to be extremely conservative, and we want to involve digital infrastructures in the generation and production of them, but it's not at all obvious that competition is the only way to get there. Right? And this is where I think we need to create spaces to experiment with other forms of discovery.

SR: I think you make a strong argument to say competition is not the only driver of innovation. Can you give a few concrete examples so that one understands how one could organize innovation and discovery based on a principle of solidarity?

[00:14:00]

EM: So, you know, the example that I often give is language learning. Now a lot of people learn languages not with textbooks but with apps.

And a lot of these apps come from the solutionist part of the digital universe, they're just built by startups, and they are consumed by users. And there is no interaction, no modification, no improvement, it's just, essentially, a service given to you the way a textbook would have been given to you 10 or 15 years ago. But there are also plenty of open-source and free software apps for language learning, which actually allow the users to conceive of new functions and to communicate them to other users or to build them themselves. This system, it has the initial elements, right, of this alternative solidarity-based economy that I would like to bring into existence, but it's still missing a lot of key features.

[00:15:00] Imagine if the detection of our shared problems and needs was actually automated, in one way or another, and the problems that I encounter in learning Mandarin, for example, on a daily basis were made visible to other people with more technical skills than me, right? In that case, you would actually be able to have five people who would say, "Okay, I just would like to dedicate myself because I have technical skills to helping people learning Mandarin to resolve their problems in the most efficient manner, but they need to know which problems to tackle." But, in order to know what problems to tackle, you do need to have a much more transparent view of what the underlying needs are so that you don't go after solving problems of 3 people when 30,000 are actually suffering from something else.

The only similar equivalent of this that we have is actually how technological and digital platforms operate. So, if you look at what they

do, they operate their own platform, like Google does with Android or Apple does with iOS, and they have certain features. You know, everybody gives you a flashlight and everybody gives you a calculator, everybody gives you a map, right, everybody gives you a browser, but then they start monitoring and seeing what other apps people are installing on the phones from their own app stores. And after, you know, a closed study, they discover, "Okay, there are 60% of people who have installed an app that is a dictionary." And, lo and behold, in the next version of the operating system, they actually introduced this feature as a default infrastructure that is present and is used by everybody.

[00:16:30] So, I'm not dismissive of the platform economy at all but I think that, this model of platform capitalism that has emerged in Silicon Valley, we might as well juxtapose the model of platform socialism, we would actually preserve a lot of good features of the platforms but we would tweak them in such a way as to actually start with the needs of people and satisfying those needs while allowing for the creativity the people are showing in their everyday life without having them to interact with the market and its turbulence and its preferences and the way that the current platform capitalist system operates.

[00:17:00]

SR: So, let me return to the big question of privacy and big data which this raises. What would follow from your argument that the fact that the big tech corporations are monetizing our data doesn't mean that the alternative to it is that they should pay me a monetary compensation for

the fact that they have accumulated all of this data but that we could treat this data itself and then, of course, the infrastructures that you have just discussed as public goods. So, could you elaborate on this idea? What would it mean?

EM: What I would like to propose is a much more ambitious system where we do not buy the story that Silicon Valley tells us, which is the story of them being the most efficient, innovative, and perhaps the best model or what could be built using digital technologies and digital infrastructures. The reason why I think Google has achieved its dominant position in search has far more to do with the dominance of the country where it was born, in the United States, the dominance of the Pentagon and the Wall Street and of Stanford, the university where it was born, and not so much with the genius of Larry Page and Sergey Brin who invented it in their garage being, you know, the new Albert Einstein.

And, once you understand that you can actually envision an alternative vision where, instead of having one giant company in Mountain View organize all of the world's knowledge, you'll actually have smaller bottom-up projects that will be organizing knowledge that exists locally but they would be doing it and organizing it in a way that corresponds much more to local needs.

[00:18:45] And we know it's through history, we've seen that, you know, we've had libraries, we've had post offices, we've had universities, we've had all sorts of knowledge-intensive institutions, which were not market-based and that produced fantastic results. If you think about them

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through this length of the platform, which now obsesses us and dominates our thinking, what is a library if not a platform that brings together various audiences, authors, academics, leaders, taxpayers? You know, they were all brought together and some great public social good was produced as a result.

The greatest mistake that we make is by associating this immense potential for institutional infrastructural innovation and imagination that the digital makes possible with just one particular institutional form, which is a commercially run startup out of Silicon Valley.

[00:19:30]

SR: Let me come to the last question which I wanted to raise with you, and that is also another aspect of the question of privacy and big data, this is the kind of argument that Edward Snowden, for example, the American whistle-blower, makes. They are saying, no matter how stringent the legal framework around the industry is made, there is always a risk of it being misused, and misused not only by governments but by the nexus of industry and government working together. So, their argument is big data should simply not exist. The collection of data and not its regulation is the real problem. Are we now in a situation, Evgeny, where it's more difficult to imagine the end of big data than the end of the world itself?

EM: Well, I mean I can easily imagine it it's just that I think the problem with a lot of the people in the Snowden camp, and I respect them tremendously, but their problem is that they are fixating on the question

of privacy and data, which are important questions, but they don't see it against the many other problems, from climate to inequality, that besat, you know, liberal-democratic, and not just them, regimes. Unless we come up with a viable non-neoliberal, non-populist, non-authoritarian alternative to how these problems can be resolved, we will end up in a situation where, you know, the abuse of our data would be the least of our problems because there will be so many other racist, post-fascist practices that the governments will be unleashing that what happens to our data perhaps would not top our list of concerns.

[00:21:15] And it's against that background that I think it's essential for us to start thinking what those alternatives might look like and then, given those alternatives, what would be the most privacy-friendly solutions that we can build. I just don't buy into the argument that somehow, we have to renounce the potential of these infrastructures because there is potential abuse. I mean, by that logic, we would never build the post office or the library. I still think that there is something valuable in that institutional experiment. And we have to understand that, within our best capacities, we should be able to articulate a vision for how some of the data can be anonymized and be kept secure. And, you know, in Europe, after all, we do have a very strong tradition of data protection. And just because we have National Security Agency do whatever it wants in the United States doesn't mean that, in Europe, we should completely abandon on the last 40-50 years of innovation in data protection.

[00:22:00] The question, of course, is then how you reconcile data protection with this alternative vision that I've outlined because we also don't want to end up in a world where we protect our data but, in Europe, we have no more industry because we cannot compete in AI and we do not have any alternative models so we've delegated everything to the market. That kind of extremism cannot define our political horizon, in my opinion.

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SR: Thank you very much for this fascinating conversation on technology and democratization.

EM: Sure, thank you so much for having me.

SR: We have heard a powerful argument to transcend the dichotomy of techno utopianism versus what we could call cyber dystopianism. Mobile phone wielding crowds are unlikely to overthrow authoritarian regimes and to democratize our societies. But the state is equally unlikely to be able to reign in the power of Big Tech companies and solve the problem of what is being called "surveillance capitalism" either. Instead of allowing these corporation to monopolize access to and the ownership of the data they have collected, we should treat the data and the infrastructures themselves as public goods. We therefore need to use this accumulated massive knowledge to build digital infrastructures from the bottom up in order to create more robust public spheres or even alternative economic systems that meet local needs. But this means changing our view that competition drives innovation. The Silicon Valley

profit-oriented model of the commercial start-up is neither the only institutional form nor necessarily the best one, if we are to use the potential of these new technologies for the common good. Instead, we must organize innovation based on the principle of solidarity and the public good.

Thank you for listening to another episode of Democracy in Question.