



Article

The Ideal of Pluralism and the Problem of Online Polarisation. Four Scenarios and Five Proposals for the Future

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Abstract

According to Berlin, Rawls and Arendt, a democratic system should be characterised by a public language through which to communicate. However, digital platforms lead to individuals closing themselves off in echo chambers and filter bubbles. In this paper we attempt to model some scenarios in order to determine the potential consequences of the development of digital platforms on democratic pluralism. The driving forces are the polarisation on the Internet and the possible role of liberal democratic institutions in promoting “reasonable” pluralism. In the final section, we suggest five possible actions that could mitigate the problem of online polarisation.

Keywords

Pluralism, Polarisation, Liberalism, Public sphere, Internet

Introduction

The question of political pluralism has often been addressed by liberal culture. Institutions and social order involve the establishment of a system to enable a mutually advantageous cooperation between citizens who are free to pursue potentially conflicting interests. Nevertheless, beyond a certain level of conflict, there may be problems, not just in pragmatic terms – given the potential for the political system to be undermined – but also in foundational terms, since a liberal democracy must be morally and culturally acceptable to citizens (Parekh 1992, Callan 1997).

It is at this level that political pluralism raises key questions for liberal democratic institutions: how should a society be structured to ensure that different lifestyle choices are mutually pursuable? What limits must be set for differences between people to ensure that these are sustainable within a shared and inclusive social order? What should the institutional response be towards different standards that undermine the stability of a democracy? The importance and urgency of these questions is exacerbated when individuals and societies become “hyper-pluralistic” (Ferrara 2012) and are characterised by a “polarised pluralism” (Sunstein 2017), or by a growing divergence in ideas, values and beliefs. As Morgan (2020) claims, today we find ourselves with multiple, deeply conflicted worldviews, each protecting their solutions to prior problems.

In recent decades the political sustainability of pluralism has been challenged by phenomena like the advancement of medicine and bioethical dilemmas (Turner, 2004), the management of immigration (multiculturalism) (Tempelman, 1999; Parekh, 2002), new dietary habits (e.g. veganism) (Cherry, 2006)¹. In this article we want to point to the existence of a new challenge for pluralism in liberal democracies deriving from information and communication technologies, in particular from the current “Internet of platforms”. Bioethics, multiculturalism or ethical dietary choices are obviously significant issues, but they are specific: they concern

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This paper is a joint effort of the authors. Namely, Giacomini wrote the sections “Introduction”, “Pluralism according to liberal theory”, “Current changes in the digital sphere” and “Promoting reasonable pluralism on digital platforms”, while Paura wrote the section “Four futures for pluralism in the digital environment” alongside Giacomini as a contributor.

fundamental yet limited aspects of the life of an individual or a society. However, the issue of ICT in the contemporary public sphere is broader and more fundamental: it could be deemed a meta-issue – i.e., one that affects other issues. Through a use of innovative technological instruments that allow users to be profiled and content to be customised, the Internet of platforms appears to increase the fragmentation and polarisation of the public sphere and society². These information and communication dynamics have systemic consequences since they tend to “close communities” – especially highly active communities (Del Vicario et al. 2016) – and polarise their positions (Parisier 2011, Sunstein 2017). The Internet has been promising to bring efficiency, understanding and happiness to humankind. However, instead of tech-utopia there has been a fracturing of reality (Dufva et al., 2020).

The paper is structured as follows: in the first part we shall briefly present theories that have contended with pluralism in contemporary societies. Authors like Berlin, Rawls and Arendt put forth political models to reconcile the freedom and plurality of ideas, lifestyles and values with the stability and justification of liberal democratic systems. In the second part we will show how the Internet of platforms (through the profiling of users and the customisation of content) risk magnifying the socio-psychological dynamics of homophily, leading to individuals closing themselves off in “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles” and radicalising their positions. The risk is that of aggravating social and political conflicts that are already problematic. In the third section, we attempt to model some scenarios based on the above discussion to determine the potential consequences of the development of digital platforms on democratic pluralism. In the conclusion we draw on the ideals that should inform the response of liberal democratic systems to suggest five possible actions for Internet of platforms that could – with appropriate guidelines from institutions through laws and public policies – mitigate the problem of online polarisation.

Pluralism According to Liberal Theory

Throughout the 20th century, the leading liberal theorists contending with the question of pluralism were Isaiah Berlin, John Rawls and Hannah Arendt.

According to Berlin, living in a pluralist society implies that everyone enjoys “freedom from chains” (“negative liberty”): a pluralist political system challenges interferences, exploitation, enslavement by people trying to impose their own goals on others (Berlin 1959, Mack 1993). In an early formulation, Berlin’s idea of a “pluralism of values” was that someone’s value of something depends on the position they find themselves in. Being part of a certain social group or national community, or living in a certain era, will influence the formation of a person’s preferences and values. From this perspective, the source of value is exclusively subjective (Berlin 2000a, Crowder 2003). However, in this way interpersonal and intercultural assessments cannot be made.

Subsequently, Berlin explained that recognising the existence of a plurality of values does not imply accepting subjectivism, and that values can be plural and still be “non subjective” (Berlin 2000b). In this regard, a pluralism of values is not an impediment for accepting another thesis: every individual is able to understand the actions of human beings who live, or have lived, in very different environments, because the fundamental characteristics of human life are sufficiently similar to enable different values to be intelligible. A non-subjectivist pluralism requires every individual looking beyond themselves and the group they belong to, not necessarily through dialogue but at least with their imagination (Crowder 2004). In other words, Berlin’s position leaves room for a rational discussion where there is a disagreement over the value of something.

With Rawls, the central issue raised in *Political Liberalism* (1993) is the presence within contemporary society of different doctrines which he calls “comprehensive”, i.e., worldviews that individuals believe to be inspired by fundamental truths, that are so at odds and deep-rooted as to be, at least in part, irreconcilable. Rawls attempts to answer the “problem of pluralism” in liberal democratic societies, using “consensus by intersection” as the essential tool for neutralising and, in a way, overcoming it. According to this model, people with different conceptions of the good can nevertheless converge on a subset of political values and thereby continue in their social cooperation.

It is as if the morality of individuals were split into two parts: on the one hand, we have the morality of people as a whole, which rests on deep-rooted and overall cognitive and ethical views, on the other, we have a more limited institutional morality, which concerns citizens and is not rooted in the personal values of each of them but rather in everyone’s loyalty to a political and constitutional system. A political conception based on institutional morality also allows for the “management” of pluralism in conceptions of the good, through the creation of a “consensus by

intersection” between citizens who, despite remaining convinced of their own ideas, are able to put these aside within the public sphere and accept a shared institutional morality. This type of consent is not deep, but it is broad, and its main purpose is a political conception of justice to ensure a certain degree of pluralism. Rawls hoped that a conversion on certain “minimum” political values would allow for pluralism without jeopardising the stability and the justification for a democratic system (Krasnoff 1998).

However, it should be noted that this is only the case under certain conditions of “reasonableness”. Individuals must retain a posture that is open and amenable, meaning their personal convictions must not lead to them foregoing cooperation with people with different beliefs. In Rawls’s vision, individuals must always be ready to propose – or to accept when it is others doing the proposing – the essential principles for a fair and equal cooperation. When required by circumstances, reasonable people should honour these principles even if this means going against their own interests (Rawls 2002). For the well-structured Rawlsian system to hold, the spectrum of conceptions of the good must not be too wide (Bohman 1995). Most people are reasonable and being religious or atheist, vegans or otherwise, a believer in vaccinations or an ‘anti-vaxxer’ – in most cases – is not something which prevents cooperation over time. However, Rawlsian political liberalism could be undermined by radical pluralism. An increase in polarisation can be a problem. Therefore, before it reaches certain levels that are not sustainable, it may be appropriate to identify mechanisms for limiting polarisation (Gaus 1999).

Arendt has also dealt with the political issue of relations between people who are different. For Arendt, freedom, at its core, is understood to be freedom of movement, an ability to get out of oneself and encounter otherness (Arendt 1958, Arendt 1970). In the conception of Arendt’s politics, “barbarism” has a dual meaning: it is not just totalitarianism that is barbaric through its violent negation of the vitality of the public space, as it also describes the attitude of people in a liberal democracy who keep themselves outside the shared world and remain isolated, prisoners to themselves and victims of prejudices (Arendt 1951, Hinchman 1984). This is why it is necessary to recapture the political sense of “active life” that was customary in the Greek city states: to defend freedom and, at the same time, recreate the conditions of a political life of exchange between thoughts that are in flux, and open and not closed. Magni (2018, p. 24) notes that, in Arendtian thought, politics emerges in the intermediate space that is left between individuals, net of their memberships, affiliations, beliefs, and represents an essential “in-between” for completely different beings. It is no coincidence that one of Arendt’s models is Socrates. For Arendt, Socrates’s failure opens a new perspective, that stands in contrast to the Platonic perspective of “withdrawal from the world”.

The allegory of the table is particularly eloquent (Arendt 1958). With this metaphor, Arendt sets out to convey the unique balance that should be achieved between detachment (which is seen as the ability to step back in a critical manner from conditioning or interferences) and belonging (not just from the political community but also from a shared real world). Living in the world together means that is a world of things between the people who share this world, like a table between people who sit around it. The world, like every “in-between”, brings people together yet at the same time separates them. The public sphere brings us all together but nevertheless prevents us, in a sense, from falling on top of one another: when there is no plurality of perspectives of the shared world there is no public space, when the shared world no longer exists (and only different visions remain) the possibility to establish political connections vanishes (Canovan 1994).

Berlin, Rawls and Arendt, theorise the value of a pluralism nurtured by a “minimum public language” which everyone chooses to adhere to, and through which they can communicate. For Berlin, the individual must be free from chains, but also be able to step outside the group of reference to understand the actions of other human beings and grasp “non subjective” values. For Rawls, people have different “comprehensive” doctrines, but they must at the same time be reasonable and maintain an open and amenable posture, in order to converge on a subset of political values and thereby continue to engage in social cooperation. For Arendt every individual should cultivate freedom of movement in both their actions and thought, in order to fully inhabit the space of politics, i.e. the intermediate space that is left between individuals, net of their memberships, affiliations, beliefs, and which represents an essential “in-between” for different beings.

Current Challenges in Digital Sphere. From Customisation to Polarisation

According to Floridi (2014), the virtual world and the real material world are continually interacting and are inextricably intertwined. This intermingling is captured by the neologism “onlife”, which comes from blending the expression “online” (used to describe the series of activities carried out on the Internet) and “offline” (which refers to a state of disconnection from the Internet). “Onlife” is easy to grasp but it risks leading to a blurring of the peculiar characteristics of the two levels. Indeed, if that which happens on the web has consequences in the physical world, and vice-versa, it is equally true that the web is a type of “reality” that is different from material reality. In the case being analysed in this article, the means through which pluralism is achieved in the real world and online (especially in web 2.0 platforms) may be quite different, and this may have consequences within the political sphere.

This point can be explained through a specific example. Imagine being a local council employee working in the construction services department. The workplace is an environment where people also discuss public issues and are presented with different views of the world. In conducting your professional activities, you will have dealings with colleagues, surveyors and architects, company representatives, and beyond working matters, you are also likely to discuss cultural, social and political issues. The key issue is that, in this fragment of physical, analogue reality, you will be able to have “random encounters”. In the case in question, your work colleagues will have been selected based on their expertise in administrative construction matters. You will therefore come across Christians and otherwise, omnivores and vegans, people who support official medicine and people who do not, right-wingers, centrists, left-wingers, and so on. Therefore, your working environment forces you to interact, directly or indirectly, with different ideas and values.

In the digital world, especially the world of platforms, which manage a very significant quantity of information and communication traffic, things are quite different. In truth, the digital and physical worlds do have something in common: the principle of homophily, according to which individuals tend to spend time with other individuals who think in a way that is similar to them (Ulbig, Funk 1999; McPherson et al. 2001). Homophily, along with dynamics such as selective exposure, confirmation bias and availability bias, make us more likely to interact with content that confirms our pre-existing opinions, and represent the major factors for polarisation, offline and online (Frey, 1986; Stroud, 2008).

Nevertheless, according to several studies, “homophily principle” is weaker in the real world and stronger in digital platforms for a series of technological reasons. Let’s return to our example of the local council employee: normally, if you consider a colleague to be bad company because he has ideas of the world you do not agree with, you won’t choose to see him outside of the workplace. In terms of the principle of homophily, this means you won’t invite him for a drink after work and you won’t be friends on Facebook. This consideration reveals a difference between the real world and the world of platforms: in a sense, the former forces us to have random encounters, while in the latter we are able to completely indulge our homophylic inclinations. In the workplace you can’t “cancel” a colleague and need to continue dealing with them. However, on a social networking site, to remove or even block a contact, and prevent any form of relationship in the present and future, all you need is a click.

In the online world it is easier to be exposed only to information we like. Big digital platforms don’t just allow their users to do this, they actively incentivise, promote and encourage this (Pariser, 2011; Flaxman et al. 2013; Rader and Gray, 2015; Spohr 2017; Cinelli et al. 2021). Firstly, Internet platforms are particularly inclined to promote selective exposure because of the potentially vast quantity of information that can be presented to each user. Secondly, the platforms have commercial goals and mechanisms based on advertising and the collection of personal data, which are in turn based on managing the attention of users. For them to appreciate an environment and spend a long time there (and see the advertising and allow their data to be collected) the platform must offer everyone something they are interested in (Zuboff, 2019).

One of the most interesting studies on the effects of algorithmic processing in social networking sites monitored whether customisation technology increases the number of clicks and time spent reading political articles aligned with users’ opinions (and reduces the number of clicks and time spent reading misaligned articles) (Dylko et al., 2017). The study reached the conclusion that, because of its automatic functioning, customisation technology is particularly effective in reducing cognitive persistence and avoiding information that is not aligned with individuals’ interests, tastes and values and that customisation based on the system (e.g., the newsfeed of Facebook’s algorithm) reinforces psychological customisation that is guided by the user and the principle of homophily. Moreover, the

results of the study show that ideologically moderate individuals were particularly sensitive to the influence of customisation, leading to an increase in selective exposure in this group – a propensity that is known to promote ideological polarisation by making individuals more extreme and less willing to engage in dialogue with others.

According to other studies, Facebook users with a specific ideological profile do not have many friends with opposing profiles and do not share much content with them; but, to be specific, almost 71% of new information presented to a user by the system in the newsfeed shows opinions that are aligned with the ideology of the user in question (Colleoni et al. 2014, Bakshy et al. 2015). Even on Twitter it emerged that citizens tend to interact with other users who are similar to themselves: there is a tendency to acquire information and share messages within homogeneous groups, where discussions take place between people with similar positions and where different opinions are generally marginalised or ignored (Himmelboim et al. 2013).

For pluralism, polarisation is a meta-issue that has a cascading impact on many other social issues. For example, some studies suggest that the use of Internet and social media can encourage religious radicalisation in individuals, both in Europe and in other continents (Schäfer 2018), who are “closed” within groups targeted by propaganda, for example by ISIS (Wakeford 2020). Other recent research examines the issue of dietary pluralism. Jennings, and some colleagues (2019), wondered why so few Americans choose to become vegans despite evidence showing the health benefits of a vegan diet. The results suggest that the lack of interest for veganism is linked to a poor knowledge of the benefits, which is also caused by the fact that on social media vegans are in an echo chamber and have very little interaction with non-vegans. Similar studies have been conducted on the (absence of) relations between groups of users who support official medicine and those who support alternative medicine (“anti-vaxxers”): according to these studies, in online social media communities the phenomenon of “shutting up like a clam” is evident (Bessi et al. 2015, Del Vicario et al. 2016).

Although the debate is ongoing and some studies urge caution³, we can conclude that the aims and mechanisms of Internet platforms risk increasing and reinforcing selective exposure. Arendt explained the importance of freedom of movement – in one’s actions and thoughts – to get out of oneself and contribute to democratic politics. Instead, the use of cookies, the way Google’s algorithms work by enabling customised searches, suggestions of posts on the Facebook newsfeed and lists on Twitter all contribute to driving people towards online environments that are increasingly “tailor-made” and which provide users with what they want and reduce the likelihood of random encounters. This acceleration in the polarisation of the virtual world can clearly be a major problem for the liberal democracies described by Berlin, Rawls and Arendt: we risk eroding the possibility of a “minimum public language” in the public sphere through which people can communicate, despite continuing to speak distinct non-public languages. Purely subjective views are indulged, and unreasonable individuals will find it easier to avoid dialogues.

Four Futures for Pluralism in the Digital Environment

Scenario planning is one of the most traditional areas in futures studies. It aims to envision and describe future situations from an idealised standpoint, usually by using a matrix where multiple scenarios represent “ideal types” of possible futures. Scenarios can be defined in terms of probability (exploratory scenarios) or in terms of preferability (normative scenarios), where the alternative visions are classified as desired or feared (Godet, 2009; Bishop, Hines & Collins, 2007).

To choose the method to define the possible scenarios of the digital environment, we firstly considered the purpose of the present work: our goal is to understand what outcomes a trend such as the increasing polarization of the Internet may assume, and therefore what correctives could be made to the regulation of the Internet to reduce this trend. We assume that polarization represents a distortion of the principle of pluralism on the Net. To achieve our goal, it is necessary to explore the implications and interconnections between different trends. From the discussion in the preceding paragraphs, we have therefore selected two types of driving force: on the one hand, the polarisation induced by digital platforms through the processes of profiling and customisation on which the algorithms that determine their success are based; and on the other, the possible role of politics and states, i.e. the regulatory action of the public sphere.

To explore the implications of these two trends, we applied the Four Futures methodology, based on archetypal scenarios (Dator, 2009). This is a method widely used at the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies of the

Political Science Department of the University of Hawaii at Manoa to conceive of using “alternative futures”. The method is based on the principle that it is possible to clusterise the different, potentially infinite images of possible futures into four different scenario archetypes (Jones, 1992). A scenario archetype is defined as a family of similar scenarios of the future of mankind. It is a generic, abstract meta-image of the future, to which several images of the future can be reduced (Fergnani & Song, 2020). Scenario archetypes can effectively render the big picture (Dator, 2014; Dator, 2020). The method allows us to work on large generalisations and is therefore appropriate for our goal of anticipating the evolution of the Internet as a whole.

For instance, the first archetypal scenario may be a “business as usual” one, and assume a continuous economic growth as its framework (“continued growth” scenario); the second one can instead be at the opposite side of the range, and be based on the communicative and economic implosion of the Internet of platforms, which reveals itself to be unsustainable for both society and environment (“collapse”); the third scenario depicts a disciplined society where a central authority forces values that allow an orderly transition to an economy based on redistribution and not on perpetual growth upon the population (“disciplined society”); finally, in the fourth scenario, technology (e.g. robotics, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, space colonization) operates a transformation into a society of abundance where growth can go on indefinitely in a post-human future (“transformation society”) (Dator, 2009).

We can therefore try to apply these four archetypes to the exploration of the possible scenarios of Internet evolution. The “continued growth” model envisages that no correctives are applied to the current polarization trend. We define this outcome as Balkanised Internet, as it represents the current situation of the digital environment, where platforms generate revenues by user profiling and increasing the number of echo-chambers (a polarisation unfavourable to dialogue and favourable to extremist positions). While low regulatory interventionism (*laissez-faire*) encourages platform capitalism because of considerations dictated by neoliberal economic logic and the American legal tradition (the Fifth Amendment and the Industrial Law, historically against public intervention in private property), the platforms themselves exceed their sphere of action, crossing over into the political domain, as shown by the case of Cambridge Analytica among others (Zuboff, 2019). In this scenario, the management of the Internet will slowly become the exclusive prerogative of a few large players, with an oligopolistic tendency where the rules will be defined directly by these subjects, leaving the citizen/user at their mercy.

However, we consider this scenario unlikely because of some important signals about regulatory interventionism: for instance, the recent academic debate on the need to apply antitrust to the digital market (Zuboff 2019, Wu 2020), or the European Union’s activism on regulation (GDPR, proposed Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act).

The second scenario pertains to the archetype of “collapse”. As in the first scenario, it involves an increasing polarisation and a lack of countermeasures. However, instead of leading to growth, this sort of scenario leads to its opposite: collapse. We call this outcome Communicative and Economic Implosion. The increasingly strong echo chambers bore and disenchant people, first by slowing down the growth of users, and then by decreasing the number of registered users of big tech platforms. Most importantly, polarisation creates radicalisation in individuals. Numerous hate speech and fake news scandals, facilitated by high polarisation, permanently undermine any trust on the Internet and digital platforms. Finally, increasingly detailed profiling and personalisation require great amounts of data and gigantic data processing capacities. This contributes to accelerating energy problems, making the Internet an excessively energy-intensive environment, thus an enemy of sustainability.

This is perhaps the most difficult scenario to realise. Indeed, it would be destructive to the interests of the platforms themselves. Even though governments did not intervene, new platforms would propose alternative business models, which would eventually become established and would at least avoid communicative and economic catastrophes.

The third scenario assumes the archetype of a “disciplined society”. The Digital Governance outcome shows a polarisation of the digital ecosystem, although with a more incisive regulatory intervention from the public power. Obviously, an increase in public intervention to regulate the action of platform capitalism would be not only unjustified, but also authoritarian, in case the authority used the excuse of the distortions produced by the web on political pluralism to limit the autonomy of the Internet. However, in this scenario we assume that the public authority is genuinely and authentically willing to address the problem of Internet polarisation. Moreover, we assume that it does so while respecting the fundamental rights of individuals. This outcome implies an increased awareness of the democratic problem represented by an excessive interference of digital platforms in the political

domain. It leads to the regulation of the online public sphere to guarantee the stability of the political system and the “reasonable” pluralism theorised by Berlin, Rawls and Arendt, which the polarising processes of platform capitalism cannot foster. Although polarisation affects a limited number of people (a minority of highly active people), it may become a problem as the number of “unreasonable” people (Rawls, 1993) increases, which can undermine democracy. From what has been discussed so far, we assume this thesis and maintain that this scenario is the most probable and most relevant in a democratic context.

The archetypal scenario of “transformation society” is based on the belief that the current distortions of the Internet will be solved spontaneously through technology: the idea behind it has that thanks to technological evolution the greatest freedom will generate correctives to the problems of digital polarization and platform economy. These kinds of solutions fall under the definition of “technological solutionism” proposed by Evgeny Morozov (2013). We define this scenario as Utopic Internet. It roughly corresponds to the historical situation of Web 1.0, where the digital environment was still characterised by the absence of content profiling. Although homophily was also present in Web 1.0 (e.g. the role of links and cross-references between websites on similar topics), it was a spontaneous homophily created by the user, whereas today homophily is reinforced by algorithms without the user being capable of intervening on them⁴. Therefore, this scenario characterises one of the possible evolutions of the Internet, namely Web3. Web3 is supposed to be the model that, according to its supporters, will allow people to organize themselves online without the need to resort to the services and infrastructures of large Internet companies such as Facebook, Amazon, or Google, which dominate Web2. That is, it will use a technology (blockchain) based on a worldwide network of computers that communicate with each other and validate and record transactions without human intervention and without centralized supervision (Tiffany, 2022). A sort of Web3 avant-garde is represented by decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs), a kind of Internet collectives where automated blockchain technology should make it easier to establish divisions of ownership and decision-making power among members (Faqr-Rhazoui, Arroyo & Hassan, 2021).

As persuasive as this scenario sounds, it would require a spontaneous shift from a landscape where the algorithms underlying the platform economy generate deep polarisation because of their need to customise the user experience to a situation where they no longer produce echo chambers and filter bubbles. However, this sounds implausible since platform economy is based on the principle of value extraction of user data, which possess value because of the existence of profiling and customisation algorithms, which in turn generate the effect of polarisation. The hypothesis of a spontaneous transition to a scenario of low impact of polarisation would require the complete overcoming of the mechanics of platform capitalism which the immense economic success of these platforms is based on, undermining their economic and financial potential (Zuboff 2019).

Promoting “Reasonable” Pluralism in Digital Platforms. Five Possible Actions

To take seriously the challenge of polarised pluralism in contemporary society, which is worsened by the algorithm choices in major platforms, means abandoning a fully laissez-faire political approach and adopting a more interventionist approach, stemming from the principle of the division and balancing of powers, to enhance the role of the state and public power in general (Montesquieu, 1748). Only public power can safeguard certain fundamental democratic principles in the case that it becomes evident that the “invisible hand” of the market cannot achieve this independently (Keynes, 1936).

The proliferation of social media and its underlying conflicts brought forth a crisis in which people doubt the extent to which they share realities with others and feel an enormous strain in being confronted with the multiple, rapid-fire views of news, cultural circumstances, and economic and self-interests. Yet, these strains and misunderstandings exist alongside the capacity of social media and democratic institutions to identify creative solutions (Rowell, 2020). In conclusion, we draw on the analysis above to present certain ideas which could contribute to protecting and promoting on various levels the value of pluralism as defined by Arendt, Berlin, and Rawls, in the Digital governance scenario. We have sketched a brief presentation and will leave it to experts in legal or economic fields to define these actions precisely, after conducting feasibility assessments and a painstaking calculation of costs and benefits.

A first action may be to strengthen the legislation on the protection of personal data. If profiling and

personalisation feed filter bubbles and are based on the ability to collect large amounts of data, then setting limits on “data trawling” would loosen the algorithmic precision which tailor-made content is based on. Stricter privacy regulations, indirectly, could make the boundaries of information bubbles more “porous”. The recent European GDPR already seems to be moving in this direction.

A second action may concern the enforcement of antitrust law. Today we have large concentrations on the web: often a single group of companies dominates a given sector. For instance, the Meta group (Facebook-Instagram-WhatsApp) manages a large deal part of the traffic in the social network sphere. According to Wu’s account (2020), concentration in the case of digital companies is a noteworthy fact from a democratic point of view. Weakening large groups through antitrust actions would achieve a double objective. First, the depth of analysis would decrease with the “separation” of databases in different companies. Second, we would have more companies in the public digital sphere, more experimentation with the business model. Thus, we may achieve an alternative to the model based on personalisation (and polarisation).

A third action, which is suggested by Floridi (in Giacomini, 2018), could be that of setting limits for online advertising, thereby reducing the commercial aims which currently encourage platforms to engage in aggressive profiling and customisation activities. As things stand, the online information system essentially involves the use of data for economic purposes (Zuboff, 2019) but, by establishing legal advertising limits that must not be exceeded, we could reduce incentives for online companies and shift the focus away from studying the tastes of users and producing an offer that is so customised it produces echo chambers and filter bubbles.

Let’s consider, by way of a mental exercise, an extreme situation where online advertising does not exist: in this hypothetical case, platforms would have to seek other means to generate revenue and survive, e.g. by offering additional information or services that would be paid by users. In this situation, we are likely to see a reduction in the free transfer of users’ personal data to online companies, since this data (and its collection and processing) would not be as profitable as it is under an advertising-based system. Companies like Google and Facebook would be forced to rethink their business models. Instead of benefiting from a “gift” of services in exchange for their attention and data, users would pay for the services they want and would choose the ones they consider best, without being pressured by profiling and customisation. As the pressure from advertising becomes less, users would increasingly live in a system where it would be easier to come out of their bubble.

Fourthly, the state (e.g., through an independent authority) could make it obligatory for online platforms to offer users a minimum quantity of “random encounters”, especially concerning certain information, such as that deemed to be of public interest. Introducing random news and information would be an easy change for social media platforms to make and would be healthy for pluralist dialogue. When people make online purchases of products like televisions, toasters and lamps, profiling and customisation is useful, and this does not pose a risk for a liberal democracy. But when information is provided on issues of public interest, the effect is quite different: only offering to the users ideas, information, and opinions that are already aligned with their own, might make these individuals more satisfied and content, but on the whole it restricts their opportunity to consider different theories and erodes their ability to contend with new points of view with a dialogical spirit, which authors like Arendt, Berlin and Rawls considered to be essential.

For example, for television broadcasters, the Italian lawmaker has already sought to ensure that citizens receive information that is linked to political opinions and assessments that are as plural and balanced as possible. The so-called law on “*par condicio*” aims to defend both the right to stand as a candidate and, more generally, protect the right to pluralist information for all citizens: no broadcaster can arbitrarily decide to give excessive coverage to a single political point of view. A similar principle could be applied, with the appropriate distinctions, to the digital sphere, if we also consider that big internet companies, like Facebook or Google, have significant power to influence people since they manage a large share of online information traffic. In this case, unlike television, it would not just be about preventing the risk of a company offering incomplete information, but rather about limiting the risk of a platform only offering its customers opinions or ideas that are already aligned with their tastes. The law could therefore make it obligatory for platforms to offer every user at least a certain quantity of different and conflicting information that is selected randomly.

A fifth line of action for public power could be the direct promotion of online communication experiences inspired by the principle of pluralism and dialogue between different individuals, as prescribed by the liberal theories

of Berlin, Rawls and Arendt. In terms of the parallels with television, public service (like the BBC in the UK) has been perhaps the most important and influential invention to be developed in Europe in the sector of mass communication during the 20th century. Returning to the digital sphere, a public service could be designed for the Internet by drawing upon the public digital identity which currently exists in many different countries in an embryonic form to allow citizens to access online services. In addition, public television companies (BBC, RAI, etc.) could also expand into the digital world, providing balanced information in the new media⁵.

The public sector is generally seen as not very innovative – too big and clumsy to act as a dynamic engine and therefore incapable of offering services comparable to the ones offered by private platforms. But, as was explained recently by Mazzucato (2013), this perception lacks a sound basis, since it is the state that bears the risk of major system innovations in advanced economies. Moreover, at local community and municipal levels, there are many examples of digital information, participation and collaboration platforms (Stoica & Ilas 2009; De Blasio & Selva 2016). These are generally websites that share data, news, and projects which communities can discuss and enter into dialogue over, with the aim of reaching decisions of general interest that are as inclusive as possible. These platforms are driven by community-related and public aims, as opposed to commercial aims, and could constitute a “digital public service” able to defend pluralist principles.

In conclusion, two objectives may be pursued via initiatives such as those inspired by ideals that should inform the response of liberal democratic institutions on the subject of pluralism. Firstly, ICT, particularly the Internet of platforms, would be more able to empower a political sphere featuring a series of parties interacting with one another. Secondly, we could defuse conflicts on delicate social issues that are already problematic (such as those concerning relations between different religions, political views, lifestyle choices, etc.) which polarisation and echo chambers on the Internet risk worsening. Promoting a Rawlsian reasonableness and an Arendtian “in-between” in the digital era could mean helping citizens engage in dialogue and reconciling pluralism through a stable and democratic collaboration.

Notes

- 5- Individualisation brought about new complexities, uncertainties, and controversies simultaneously (Genov, 2014; Giacomini, Colautti 2020).
- 6- Pariser (2011) refers to “filter bubbles”: everyone finds themselves in a cultural or ideological bubble in which they only receive information confirming what they believe. Others, including Sunstein (2017) speak of “echo chambers”, a closed environment where sounds reverberate and everyone finds what they like most and meets people with their own interests.
- 7- For example, although they do not rule out a tendency towards online polarisation, Dubois and Blank (2018) consider this to be weak and in a sense negligible, since they argue that polarisation ultimately only concerns a small segment of the population. However, it is precisely extremist minorities who are driving the problem of pluralism.
- 8- The low level of public regulation is typical of any experimental phase. In general, public intervention is limited to financing the technologies and infrastructures needed to spread the Internet (Mazzucato, 2013).
- 9- In the UK, they have recently suggested a levy on all broadband connections to fund the BBC, which has expanded into digital media, in place of the current TV licence that seems outdated. Such a fund would allow the continuation of this or an organisation similar to that.

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