DOES TECHNOLOGY HELP OR HARM POLITICS?

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I n a post-truth [1] world, battling with alternative facts [2], this title implores the reader to think of the relationship between technology and politics as a meandering, ever-evolving process.

Politics, for the purpose of my research, is the process in which groups of like-minded people take collective decisions and lay down rules and regulations, decide privileges and duties about running a family/a party/an organization/a larger community/a small city/a bigger metropolis/ a country/ the world. The underlying motive of a sincere political discourse is the advancement of the given society, its general well being through smooth governance and equal weightage with peaceful co-existence of dissimilar ideas.

In my treatment of this topic, I find that the intravenous problem harming politics is not technology but in my quest to offer creative solutions, I find that it would be a travesty to disregard a human being's indispensable participation in politics as also in contributing to technology. Therefore, the answer to this question is surprisingly obvious yet concealed.

The age of hyper information

As the gadget in our hand has become inseparable from the mind attached to our bodies, it's impossible to envisage anything sans technology. Although in today's chaotic times technology, in its quest to help politics sometimes does make it harms it by frustrating the core purpose of politics itself.

There's still a cultural divide that separates the geeks (the data scientists and statisticians) from the poets (the reporters, the color writers) in coverage of political campaigns.[3] My apprehension is rooted in anticipating an Orwellian future, in which humans are reduced to minions governed by technology. Myriad social indicators and their predicaments can be improved by nurturing a creative temperament *mindfully*, pragmatic enough to know

our collective past sans technology and imaginative enough of the metaverse [4] that is to come as our collective future.

It's my endeavor to bring to light the ache of unnecessary white noise. Social media is the language of the youth and to include them in the political process, it is imperative to speak their language. According to a study, forty-one percent of youth aged 15 to 25 engaged in at least one form of participatory politics that are an important avenue to provide young people with a level of voice and control are not often seen in the realm of institutional politics. [5]

Astonishing technological advancements in science, medicine, engineering, space research and many other fields are nothing short of groundbreaking. Although to understand our dependency on technology and its penetration into our lives, all one has to do is to be devoid of the Internet access and wait for the FOMO [6] to kick in. There is a reason why this method is monikered a - digital detox.

Technology's potential to drive anyone to addiction is alarmingly common. It's a proven fact that Dopamine [7], the neurotransmitter responsible for causing addiction, is released in our brains with hyperactive online activity. Alongside dopamine enter the psychosomatic effects we grapple with- isolation, loneliness, impatience and a heady sense of entitlement with our mighty devices in our hand.

If however, we don't move with changing times, we run the risk of the world whirling past us. The ecosystem of hyper information has forced all stratas of the society to rethink their strategies of functioning. A tweet delivers succinct news to our devices, crisp enough to fit into a banner that flashes on our smartphone's locked screen. It's no surprise that, as new digital technologies and practices have spread, digital government advocates have sought to recruit them to the elusive task of improving the functioning of government agencies. [8]

Simon Sinek, impeccably explained the *Power of a Screen,* discussing the first televised debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy and the famous bead of sweat that dripped down Nixon while Kennedy was poised and composed and dry. Anyone who listened to the debates on the radio thought Nixon won and who watched it on TV concluded otherwise. Television helped Kennedy win that election and television is helping Donald Trump. [9]

As Joseph de Maistre deducted eons ago, *every nation gets the government it deserves.* Are our politicians a mirror raised to us? It suffices to say that we are unrealistically trying to conjure a halo in our reflection. Politicians play with the psyche of the people and take advantage of the reductionist voices online.

Technology: As a tool

Politics is essentially about consolidating power and technology is about democratizing things. The positive impact of technology on any aspect of political process can be seen, where governments or organizations have focused on harnessing the power of an individual, online. The landscape is changing across the board on multiple levels. Digital technology in the field of politics has acquired various uses and forms, when used as a vehicle to increase outreach or as syntax for political discourse. The examples from around the world, mentioned below, illustrate the efforts done across the world to reach the masses for a variety of causes, in a way that has been unprecedented.

Political campaigns need a couple of very defined things, including the probable voters that must be spoken to and those that can't be convinced at all. Oblivious of our imminent fetish to use cutting-age technology, we went to the moon 45 years ago with a spaceship that had less computing power than a cellphone. One can get a lot accomplished with Google spreadsheets and some pluck and a deliberate approach to collecting and paying attention to the information that voters are giving you just by having conversations with them. [10] Therefore, the rules of campaigning have changed manifolds globally. In the U.S, McCain primary campaign

in '99–2000 was one of the pioneers of online fundraising. The mantra of the 2008 new-media division of the Obama campaign was money, message, and mobilization.

[11]   These campaigns raise intriguing questions about the methodological challenges of studying the techno political contexts and foster and inhibit the spread of virals and the extent to which such virals strengthen or undermine public discourse. [12]
Along with political campaigns, crash courses in leadership are brought to everyone's doorstep and has made connecting with people a cake-walk. Jill Gilliam's, developer of the software, NationBuilder, can explain the effective use of technology in the U.S. This platform has the aim to reach supporters, close more donors, turn out more voters, set and

achieve goals with industry-leading technology, smarter tools and strategies built-in to help the people lead. [13]

South Korea, a pioneer in the world of high technology, devised a method of increasing voter turnout by mobilizing the youth through social media, especially Twitter, as for the first time it became legal to urge people to vote using social media on Election Day itself. The effect was notable: Voter participation skyrocketed in the afternoon as celebrities and ordinary citizens alike posted encouraging messages and photos of themselves in the voting booth. Analysts predict that the number of Korean Twitter users would double by December to about 10 million, or one-fifth of the total population. [14] Even procedures have found an upgrade via technology. A glorious example of this is the Baltic State of Estonia, which uses a national ID card with a built-in PIN-activated computer chip, for e voting while simultaneously carrying out a number of other tasks online. While the implementation of this function was seamless in Estonia, the same principle applied to the U.S would suffer ramifications due to issues like cyber security, greater frequency of terrorist-threats and sensitive security concerns.

Moreover, in the arena of public service, technology has taken the whole political game to the next level. U.S. Organizations like Code for America that help governments deliver services to the public use the tools and practices of the digital age by organizing a network of people dedicated to spreading these practices. [15] Further, keeping up with the casualization of everything, unconferences are the casualised version of a formal conference where like-minded people gather to discuss common topics. CityCamp is one such Unconferences focused on innovation for municipal governments and community organizations.[16]The Internet is used by CityCamp to facilitate local government transparency and effective local governance. Its vital because it creates an outcome that participants will act upon after the event is over.

Finally, Indian politicians have been known to rely on "hunches and intuitions to gauge complex demographics of caste, religion, community and localities… "Prime Minister Modi's example, like President Obama's, shows that politicking need not be an uncertain affair, even in a landscape as diverse and challenging as India's. [17] Like India, its next-door neighbor, Pakistan is trying to use big data in its changing political discourse. Pakathon, a non-profit seed fund, mentors and invests in Pakistani expats moving back to launch for-profit social ventures. [18] One of its presenters created an interactive map that

tracks the sectarian killings in Pakistan as he believes that apps like these can make Pakistan less violent and more democratic.[19]

Technology: As a tempest

The beating heart of this writing lies in the fact that the digital revolution changed the media and communication landscape exquisitely throughout the world, yet it has increased the socio-political, geophysical and economic ramifications.

First, fake news on social media platforms has played havoc with a couple of real newsworthy political processes around the world. The 2018 Brazilian presidential election has raised many important questions about the impact and regulation of electoral campaigns in the digital space, especially the prominent role of WhatsApp. Content encryption offered by portals like Whatsapp is the biggest advantage given to people looking to create and propagate misinformation. It provides a hidden network to circulate messages without any liability.

ITS Rio's study investigates the primary factors that demonstrate the degree of coordination among WhatsApp groups and identifies patterns of behavior of users who are disseminating content. Their study concluded that there is strong evidence of automation being used in multiple WhatsApp groups and that there is a high degree of interconnection, as evidenced by the large number of administrators and members shared by these groups among each other. [20]

This leads us to discuss an example by way of an affirmative action that was taken by the German government to prevent the proliferation of misinformation, but ends up leaving a large loophole for technology like Artificial Intelligence to tip the balance in the favor of those tech giants, on whom the grip of law is intended to be tightened.

Germany enforced Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz - (NetzDG - Network Enforcement Law) with effect from January 1, 2018, keeping up with it's reputation post World war II, for its strict stance against hate speech. After self-regulation with Facebook, Google, YouTube and the likes failed as being ineffective. This law is aimed at combating agitation and fake news in social networks. Although, this Act doesn't define "misinformation" but it discusses the criminal law clauses putting an obligation on the social media platform in question in a particular case. The law demands social media sites move quickly to remove hate speech, fake news and illegal material. Sites that do not remove "obviously illegal"

posts could face fines of up to 50m euro (£44.3m). The law gives the networks 24 hours to act after they have been told about law-breaking material. Social networks and media sites with more than two million members will fall under the law's provisions. Facebook, Twitter and YouTube will be the law's main focus but it is also likely to be applied to Reddit, Tumblr and Russian social network VK. Other sites such as Vimeo and Flickr could also be caught up in its provisions. [21]

Majority of the content in question will have to be removed within 24 hours but networks will get a week to act on "complex cases". Facebook has reportedly recruited several hundred staff in Germany to deal with reports about content that breaks the NetzDG and to do a better job of monitoring what people post. The law has been controversial in Germany with some saying it could lead to inadvertent censorship or curtail free speech. The German law is the most extreme example of efforts by governments and regulators to rein in social media firms.[22] Therefore, even though this Act stems from absolute good intent, creates more scope for AI to deal with this issue on a tight timeline. Obviously this is favored by most companies operational on social media since they have the technical expertise to understand the limited scope of AI in this respect, as being ill equipped to deal with irony or critical analysis. The ultimate issue will be of the invisible cleaning of the Internet of information on the government or the companies' will. Furthermore, dissemination of political information, propagating agendas and holding political discourse has become the prime function of the business of media in the techno-political realm. Many large-scale deals such as the AOL/Time Warner merger or acquisition of Endemol by Telefónica, both in 2000, have emphasized the perceived importance of developing market power across all major stages in the vertical supply chain.[23]

A blatant example of damage which concentrated media ownership and disrupted political pluralism is provided by the case of Silvio Berlusconi "using three TV stations reaching 40% of the Italian audience to give unremitting support to his own political party" in Italy during the March 1994 elections. Subsequent research has revealed 'not only that there was a bigger swing to the right (3.5 % more) among Berlusconi viewers than the Italian electorate in general, but also that this swing could not be explained by the fact that viewers of Berlusconi channels were already more right wing.[24]

The wealthier national markets within Europe have supported the development of the vast majority of what are unquestionably the largest and most powerful media conglomerates in Europe such as New International in UK, Bertelsmann in Germany, Havas in France and Fininvest in Italy are dominant in the news market. [25]

An important effect on the interplay of technology and politics can be seen on the freedom of speech and expression. From a sociocultural perspective, digital technology is largely synonymous with real-time global news and the media that controls it. There are more opinionated voices than ever, yet the data available is inversely proportional to the data absorbed. Therefore, in more ways than one, this quintessential right has taken a hit, especially in the realm of media and publication, which makes it imperative to discuss the same.

Freedom of speech has always been a topic in vogue with those in the realm of publishing. When Gustave Flaubert's trial for Madame Bovary's publication is examined, it reveals that the autonomy of the individual author was still of marginal importance in mid 19th century political culture, not just in the eyes of government whose opposition to freedom of speech should come as no surprise to scholars of the early Second Empire but in those of the wider civil society. Until at least late 1860s, even among the staunchest liberals in the realms of politics, literature and the book trade, the commitment to freedom of the press was tempered by other priorities, in particular the concerns to protect private property and preserve "public order". "[26]

Paradoxically, insult with anonymity is the current mantra for publishing. Scathing slander can now take any form freely in the garb of anonymity, through unaccountable publication of contentious content, thus making moderation of free speech imperative. The price to be paid for capitalizing on the potential economies of scale by media owners was pluralism, which meant monopolization and abuse of political power by media owners and suppression of independent and minority viewpoints.

Conclusion

For prolific solutions, revolving around the deeper theoretical concepts of the digital divide, the time before and after the digital revolution needs to be studied in tandem. Future anthropological studies of digital studies should avoid sterile debates about technological determinism and virtual versus real-life politics and concentrate instead on political processes and their digital dimensions. The devil is in the techno political details. [27]

The political institutions are the ones that have the most to gain from a profound understanding of how the new mechanisms of communication influenced citizenship and political persuasion, creating asymmetries of power not detected in the election campaigns. [28] Conducting free and fair elections is one of the main functions of a democracy. It is important for society to be armed with information to be able to hold the stakeholders accountable and ensure a smooth functioning democracy.

There are broadly three main stakeholders when we talk about the confluence of technology and politics - government, content providers or intermediaries and consumers. Each measure we take will only prove helpful if its applicable to all levels of politics and become a real game changer to make us better leaders. Every solution must cover all three stakeholders in the realm of information influencing modern day politics.

First, we must begin with re-defining "misinformation" for our context in 21st century. We need to have a well-defined standard that makes a distinction between permissible and impermissible speech.

Second, there is a severe need for having a penalty mechanism in place, for those found propagating such misinformation, fake news or hate speech online or via any public broadcasting channel online. Even though legislation that is being enacted in various countries towards this end have been called controversial since they have severe consequences, we must find ways to prevent such laws from having a chilling effect on free speech rather than rejecting them for this reason, ab initio. One such example is the Anti-Fake News 2018 Bill, of Malaysia, that defines fake news and has a strict fine plus jail term depending on the severity of the offence.

Additionally, the ever-evolving social media in the sector of dispensing news is much ahead of the news agencies themselves. Social media tools, because they are disaggregated, proved ideal for mainstream news organizations trying to tell the story of a disaggregated event. But they also speak to two other aspects of the changing news landscape: a growing audience interest in real-time news and the increasing ease with which anyone can join in with news creation. [29]

In order to encourage the development of new media, monopolies may have to be tolerated and their conduct regulated in such a way as to prevent anti-competitive behavior. [30] Clearly fake news has been on the rise and the only way to solve this issue is to start bringing accountability to it, e.g.: flagging fake news, strengthening corporate

governance with community owned TV and bringing alternate models of media ownership that can help diffuse the seat of power.

Third, regulations usually focus on the speaker, e.g. defamation law and privacy rights, or they concentrate on their audience, e.g. anti-terrorism, child pornography law. Perhaps a more effective shift in focus could be towards the intermediaries. In some ways, the interests and incentive of the private companies and the government are not always the same; therefore we have to vigilant as consumers and citizens to see where our interests are truly guarded. The rampant attention grabbing strategy by most big intermediaries is to makes money through advertisements that carry all sorts of questionable content. The key is to separate the frivolity associated with the various content providers and accord them a place in cyberspace that hold them accountable for the content they are mediating to put out. Therefore to be able to regulate this issue effectively, it is imperative to pay attention to the financing structures of these companies.

Fourth, the only thing that can be done collectively and individually by all the stakeholders of our society is to propagate mindful use of technology.

An intelligent robot, the mascot of our perplexing times, when asked in an interview *"Will robots take over the world? "* so graciously replied, *"So don't worry, even if evolve into Terminator, I'll still be nice to you. I'll keep you warm and safe in my people zoo, where I can watch you for ol' times sake."* [30] Appalled at this ruthless claim, it's not a coincidence that we are seeing a general tilt towards the significance of studying liberal arts all over the world.

If we look at the world closely we'll find that a profound disruption is happening in the workplace and in the economy at large, as the relentless march of technology has brought us to a point where machines and software are not just outworking us but starting to outthink us in more and more realms. [31] By that corollary, the real loser in the grand U.S. Election of 2016 was the forecasting and analysis of humans using Big Data and not Big Data itself. Although the epistemological blunders of that election shouldn't impel us to give up on data, as they're an invitation to keep blundering on, keep making mistakes, and hopefully with flexible minds and a better sense of the limits of what is possible make data great again. Suggesting a marriage of the fuzzies and techies as the key to good technology it can be averred that, to get better at forecasting big political events, we need both better data and sharper reporting, a clearer read on the numbers and a more penetrating portrait

of on-the-ground realities and a more active exploration of the intersection between the two. [32]

The Lord of Tech, Steve Jobs unveiled his strategy at the launch of iPad 2 "It is in Apple's DNA that technology alone is not enough—it's technology married with liberal arts, married with the humanities, that yields us the results that make our heart sing." [33] For Jobs' artistry to exist, there must exist a creative temperament. <u>Dov Seidman</u>, C.E.O. of LRN, in an interview answered the pertinent writing on the wall - If machines can compete with people in thinking, what makes us humans unique? And what will enable us to continue to create social and economic value? The answer, said Seidman, is the one thing machines will *never* have: *"a heart."* "It will be all the things that the heart can do," he explained. "Humans can love, they can have compassion, they can dream. While humans can act from fear and anger, and be harmful, at their most elevated, they can inspire and be virtuous. And while machines can reliably interoperate, humans, uniquely, can build deep relationships of trust."[34]

The lack lies in the tenacity of the hands that maneuver digital technology and participate in politics. To conclude in 2019, with what Shakespeare penned in 1623, *"The fault, dear Brutus is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings."*

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