Democracy and participation under threat. The other side of AI

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While Artificial Intelligence's impact can bring considerable benefits, especially for the private sector, there are undeniable risks for the public sector.

The main concerns are related to security, prejudice and discrimination, and privacy issues.

Artificial intelligence can drop a veil over decades of achievements in terms of democracy and participatory processes, drawing citizens and their underlying interests away from the public decision-making circuit to which they had been painstakingly drawn.

The challenge to democracy posed by artificial intelligence passes through information as a data medium for democratic participation. It has already been accused of creating uncontrollable news on the web, where content is presented based on what the user has interacted with in the past, instead of creating an open environment for multi-voice, inclusive and accessible debate. It can also be used to create fake but extremely realistic images, videos and audio, known as deepfakes, which can be used to defraud, ruin reputations and undermine trust in decision-making processes. All these risks leading to the biasing of public debate and the manipulation of elections.

Adoption of AI in democratic participation naturally raises important ethical and transparency challenges. Algorithm opacity and a lack of understanding of how AI makes decisions could undermine public trust. It is crucial to ensure that AI-based decision-making processes are transparent, inclusive and include accountability mechanisms. Furthermore, it is necessary to prevent discrimination and misuse of data in the creation of AI algorithms and models.

AI technology may pose large-scale risks to democracy, including acute harm to individuals, large-scale harm to society. Problematically, there may not be a single responsible party or institution that primarily qualifies as the culprit even when there is a single responsible institution, there are different types of misunderstandings and intentions that could lead to harmful outcomes. These types of risks include larger-than-expected, worse-than-expected AI impacts, deliberately accepted side effects of other objectives.

Possible ways forward go in different directions and must concern a connection between the principle of participation and the new technological challenges through the realization that the institutions as conceived decades ago are obsolete, but the principle of law guiding them is not.

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