

Chapter 1

Technoethics and Digital Democracy for Future Citizens

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ABSTRACT

In a digital democracy, education should help foster the development of ethically, socially, and ecologically responsible citizens capable of living autonomously and harmoniously within a networked society. Unfortunately, contemporary digital technology, communication media and education tend to give rise to conformity, individual satisfaction, and short-term goal seeking. Overcoming current obstacles requires modifying current values and strategies to better align digital technology use with democratic ideals and the capacity for harmonious long-term survival. This paper presents a technoethical systems perspective to help disentangle core threats to digital democracy and to highlight selected educational and communication tools needed to leverage future citizens within a digital democracy.

INTRODUCTION

That's when the hornet stung me – Gord Downie, Tragically Hip

When working in Connecticut during the final stages of U.S. presidential election debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, I was struck by the widespread scepticism and concern expressed by our younger generation about the current state

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of the economy and future outlook. Then an important idea came into my head that reminded me of the feeling of a hornet sting expressed by Gord Downie when one suddenly comes up with an idea during a moment of reflection— The dreams of the younger generation must become a global reality. This is not a complete solution but rather a first step and necessary condition to leverage current efforts to safeguard the planet and ensure a sustainable society, not just for the one percent of the socio-economic elite but for all. In this chapter, I argue that a digital democracy guided by an ethical systems framework is essential in advancing any sustainable democratic society in a world driven by technological progress.

Why would such a paradigm shift towards be adopted? I contend that the seeds of this paradigm shift are already present and rapidly growing. The first signs are already present and can be traced to a variety of driving forces including: improved global communications, rapid technological progress, a struggling global economy, and the declining size of the workforce catalyzed by the expansion of workplace automation and the growing proportion of the older population transitioning into retirement. Understanding these driving forces and their consequences (and possible consequences) is not a simple affair because these forces are context dependent, complex, and often difficult to track since they are embedded within continually evolving interconnected socio-technical systems which constitute our evolving technological society.

The concern for such a project is rooted in the observation that much of our education and training activities are largely instrumentalist, short-term in vision, and disconnected from the demands of contemporary society. This does not prepare the younger generation, as future citizens (and netizens), to cooperatively deal with the rapid development of new ‘game changing’ technologies or the complexities that come with the intertwinement of humans, technology, and nature. Neither does it prepare future citizens to navigate the powerful temptations of consumerism and advertainment which have entrenched themselves and challenge our future generation in ways that the previous generation did not have to deal with before the advent of digital technology. One only has to reflect on their snacking habits after viewing fast food commercials when watching a televised program of interest. Although eating large quantities of sugar and fat rich foods before sleep is not considered healthy, individuals find themselves binging on ice cream, cake, wings, and pizza during an evening of televised viewing at home or at a local cinema. It is no surprise that the current and projected statistics on obesity in the United States are so high and that it is more likely that, contrary to popular Hollywood films, North Americans will die from obesity than from natural disasters, violent conflict, or famine (see Harari, 2016 for a review). The values embodied in current education and training are inadequate at best for preparing future citizens to work harmoniously in dealing with current opportunities and challenges living in a digital age.

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