

Chapter 2

Rereading John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* in the Digital Communications Age: Transparency, Participation, and the Challenges of the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

On Liberty by John Stuart Mill is about democracy, the limitations to political power, and the actions of individuals that protect the ability of the people to pursue their dreams and aspirations, as well as the shaping of modern democratic systems. The objective of this chapter is to review a classic of political science in the light on the current processes and developments in the Digital Age and thus extract new light on the impact the new digital communication technologies have on the relationship between the state and the citizens around the world. The widespread use of social media and digital communications will have and is having deep and unavoidable impacts on the relationship between the state and citizens. However, such impacts raise both hopes of a better future for democracies and dictatorships as well as concerns of privacy, freedom of speech and thought, consistency of public policy, quality of governmental services, and even the legitimacy and lifetime of regimes. The theoretical tools of classical political science may, however, aid us in better understanding such processes and steering change for the best.

INTRODUCTION

The world is in constant change. The relationships between the many social actors are also in permanent mutation and redefinitions. What variates over time is the nature of such

changes, their causes and possible outcomes. As each phase in human history proposes different challenges, specific solutions must be devised, or unknown consequences must be faced. Our time's new digital communication technologies have impacted the relationship

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between the State and citizens, as the title of this book suggests, but the real questions are of a deeper nature. Shifts in the relationship between the State and the people call for a re-shaping of political science and some dogmas on the functioning of Law and the State. In order to provide answers to such questions, we may turn to the classics of political science—those timeless works that survive the vicissitudes of time and that are therefore capable of providing new answers if read with new eyes.

On Liberty (Mill, 1989) is about democracy, the limitations to political power and to the actions of individuals that protect the ability of the people to pursue their dreams and aspirations as well as the shaping of modern democratic systems. At the time it was written, intellectuals in the advanced democracies could ignore what was happening in other parts of the world. This is no longer the case, as the extensive and profound integration of the globalized world and the consequent shared challenges are forcing the search for common answers (to shared questions) to advanced democracies, young and consolidating ones and dictatorships alike. Today, we cannot afford devising answers and explanations to just one (small) part of the so-called “civilized world”.

The objective of this chapter is to review a classic of political science under in the light on the current processes and developments in the Digital Age and thus extract new light on the impact the new digital communication technologies are affecting the relationship between the State and the citizens around the world.

Some of the the questions that must be asked can be extracted from the letter by Mark Zuckerberg, co-founder and CEO of *Facebook* to the United States Securities and Exchange Commission (Zuckerberg, 2012):

[...] We hope to change how people relate to their governments and social institutions.

We believe building tools to help people share can bring a more honest and transparent dialogue around government that could lead to more direct empowerment of people, more accountability for officials and better solutions to some of the biggest problems of our time.

By giving people the power to share, we are starting to see people make their voices heard on a different scale from what has historically been possible. These voices will increase in number and volume. They cannot be ignored. Over time, we expect governments will become more responsive to issues and concerns raised directly by all their people rather than through intermediaries controlled by a select few.

Through this process, we believe that leaders will emerge across all countries who are pro-internet and fight for the rights of their people, including the right to share what they want and the right to access all information that people want to share with them.[...]

Question 1: Is the relationship between governments and their peoples changing?

Question 2: What impact the new social media and digital communication technologies have in improving transparency and accountability by governments to their peoples?

Question 3: How are the roles of the representation system (in democracies) and the State bureaucracy (in both democracies and dictatorships) impacted by the new possibilities of direct participation, information gathering and sharing, and mobilization brought by the new social media and digital communication technologies?

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