



30TH BSPC: SECOND SESSION

Democracy in a changing media landscape

Speaker: ***Prof. Dr. Jeanette Hofmann***, Weizenbaum Institute Berlin

- reported speech to the presentation -

Chairwoman Stålhammar introduced the next speaker, Prof Jeanette Hofmann, who was a political scientist specialised in internet policy and digital society. She was the founding director of the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society as well as professor for internet policy at the FU Berlin. At the international level, Prof Hofmann had participated in the UN World Summit on the Information Society and the Internet Governance Forum. Her current research focused on digitalisation and democracy as well as the emergence of the internet policy in Germany.

Speech by Prof Jeanette Hofmann, Director Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society, FU Berlin

Prof Hofmann said it was a great honour for her to address this important conference and to share her thoughts on digitalisation and democracy. In the short time allotted to her, she wished to address two points. The first concerned the question of how digitalisation and democracy were actually connected. The second was about current tendencies regarding the regulation of platforms.

When looking at how the public discourse was talking about digitalisation and democracy, a recurring pattern could be seen. Usually, digitalisation was regarded as the driver of democratic change. It was held responsible for the decline of mass media, for the increase of disinformation campaigns, for phenomena such as hate speech and populism. It seemed that the internet was being blamed for anything threatening democracy at the moment. In her view, this interpretation was looking in the wrong direction because technology – particularly digital technology – was not something acting on its own. It had been invented by human beings, and more importantly, it was used by human beings. Prof Hofmann suggested that they look at the relationship between digitalisation and democracy in a different way, namely as two entities that were shaping each other. The way digital technology was used shaped how engineers further developed it, and the way it was used created new ways of institutions that then shaped who people were and how they perceived the world. It was this interaction between the people using technology and engineers further developing technologies that was so interesting, in her view, when discussing digital democracy.

A closer look at how democracy had developed over the past decade would show how democracy as a practice introduced certain demands towards technology. Over the decades, it could be seen that democracy had been changing quite a bit. Even if their constitutions were fairly stable, even if the democratic rule and institutions seemed to stay quite the same, as a practice, a lot had been changing. Two lines of change could be distinguished. One had to do with aging institutions, the other with expanding institutions. Considering the first, she noted that certain types of political participation that had used to be at the core of democracy were losing in terms of attention and value for the people when they were looking at democracy. Young people were not becoming members of political parties anymore, they did not think voting was the most important aspect of democracy. Moreover, US parliamentarians were surely aware that the relationships between voters and representatives was changing. That shift was occurring in many ways. For example, the core electorate of political parties was shrinking. People were making short-term decisions these days about the political parties they voted for. The respect for members of parliament was decreasing as well.

At the same time, trust in parliamentary institutions was clearly declining in many countries. That did not mean that democracy as such was in decline. Prof Hofmann believed that democracy was changing. New institutions were emerging that gave them a lot of hope. For example, lots of people wanted to participate in new ways, such as many social movements springing into being. Young people wanted to express their concerns in movements, for instance Fridays for Future. Political participation nowadays was more oriented towards specific issues, i.e., people did not commit to long-term engagement, through unions and political parties, for example. Young people expressed their concerns in non-institutional, more informal ways geared towards what specific issues they cared about. Climate change was one of these issues, immigration politics another of concern to many young people. That was one type of change, she noted: political participation outside of political parties.

Another significant change was the growing importance of the public sphere and digital media. Even before there had been platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, it could be seen that the public sphere was changing in many ways. People were expressing their political opinions instead of just reading the newspapers. The public sphere over the last decade had become much more interactive, and new ways of expressing one's opinion were emerging. Platforms such as Facebook facilitated people's urge to comment on political actions, observing what governments were doing and also criticising governments. Voting for or against a government every four or five years was not the only way of expressing one's democratic rights as there were other ways now. The public sphere was playing a truly important role in this. Democracy, even within the constitution, was changing in what could be called daily practice. This shift was what Prof Hofmann saw as creating certain impetuses and demands on digital tools. People used digital tools to express their new way of participating in democracy.

Digital democracy in her understanding took part at the intersection of the changing democracy and digital tools allowing individuals to enact their rights as citizens out of a desire to participate. While it was true that in most democratic countries, only about ten per cent of the population were very active while others were more passive observers of what was going on, these ten per cent of active people were driving the development of digital networks. They were driving it by using it for new ways of engaging in democracy. As an example, Prof Hofmann mentioned a new phenomenon called "platform parties". Parties were set up in a much speedier way, often even without formal membership, using off-the-shelf platform software to create new organisations in the hope of interacting more horizontally and less hierarchically. The speaker was a bit sceptical whether this would work out in the long run, yet there was an attitude towards experimental organisational structures to change politics in the everyday setting. Instead of the hierarchical, large organisations, people were giving new ways of interacting a try and also finding consensus. Therefore, democratic change was also a driver of technological change as well, the professor emphasised. People wanted to have less hierarchical, less bureaucratic and more spontaneous ways of working together, and they were using the internet for that purpose, for example. They desired methods of instantly expressing their concerns, their criticism but also what they wished to see happen. Particularly for the young generation, this was an important issue. They were impatient and thought that there had been no change. They wanted to see action right at this moment, and the internet was their way of expressing it.

Prof Hofmann suggested that they should talk about and see the current situation as a digital constellation where new phenomena such as user-generated content served as an alternative to media representation of politics. It was an alternative in the sense that the media did not control the public sphere any longer. One could see both media reporting but also people commenting and discussing their political realities. This situation amounted to a thorough transformation of the public sphere. Said transformation called for new rules, she underlined.

Starting perhaps in Germany, new laws had been enacted that were geared towards enforcement of existing laws – such as the Network Enforcement Law – but also the Digital Services Act on the European level. These shared a few items. They dealt with the takedown of illegal content, which was really important not because there had been no illegal content before but because of the lack of forms of enforcing existing laws. Both the Network Enforcement Law and the Digital Services Act set strict deadlines for platforms to remove illegal content, and they imposed heavy fines for platforms which did not follow these new laws. What was equally important, they imposed new rules for platforms and social networks to report what they were doing, called transparency reporting. The platforms had to issue reports about complaints but also about the algorithms they were using. The ambition of the Digital Services Act was to ask platforms to tell the public about the algorithms in use and the principles behind them for filtering content but also for the advertisements they showed to their users. There would be new forms of complaint management as well as, in the long run, data sharing. As an academic, Prof Hofmann considered it very important that they got access to all the data gathered by platforms about their users and about societies.

So far, so good, she commented. The emphasis of these new laws was on enforcing existing laws. In her view, they must not forget that it was not only about law enforcement, but that user-generated content demanded that one look at the change of human rights, its changing role. Some of these human rights, she hoped, would extend their scope towards digital platforms. Human rights usually regulated the relationships between citizens and governments. These platforms, though, had become so powerful and were affecting the exercise of human rights to such a great extent that Prof Hofmann believed that in the long run, they would need to ask platforms to not only respect human rights but also to help people exercise human rights. That seemed to her a very important step that all of them had to take. Second, forms of institutions for citizens' right to appeal were needed. When platforms filtered content, citizens had to be able to appeal when their content had been taken down even though users believed they had the right to publish certain things. She explained that algorithms did not understand irony, they did not understand citation or other forms of rightful ways of expressing oneself. So there had to be powerful rights to appeal. Furthermore, the speaker believed that support for victims of disinformation and hate speech had to be institutionalised. Not enough was being done at the moment to help people who were victims of hate speech. In the long run, she envisioned the goal as heading towards a public-private infrastructure for protecting human rights online. People could now speak up, use their human rights in new ways that also called for new environments to be created that would support the people making use of these human rights.