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Conceptualising Digital Democracy—From Technocracy and Populism to a New Concept of Democratic Authority and Participation?

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Abstract

According to the rather pessimistic diagnoses dominating in contemporary political research, the digitisation of information and the digital transformation of modern society tend to both a new form of (post-democratic) technocracy and a resurgence of populist democracy. These two main perils posed by the digital era can be confirmed by an in-depth theoretical approach eliciting that the practice of digital democracy generates a couple of threats that could eventually outweigh all available options offered by digital technologies in terms of facilitating democratic participation and deliberation. However, the focus on existing risks of digital democracy must not neglect the inherent opportunities. Hence, this article demonstrates how the corresponding debate benefits from an overarching theoretical foundation contributing equally to a systematic and well-balanced analysis. By applying the theory of democratic antinomies, it becomes possible to manage the difficult traverse between the requested openness to new technological developments and the indispensable defence of classic democratic principles. On this path, an adequate reflection on the conceptual change to which the notions of authority and participation are exposed in the age of digitalisation is crucial.

Keywords: AI governance; antinomies; democratic authority; digital democracy; disinformation; legitimacy; online participation; platform regulation; political theory

1. Introduction

Theorising or conceptualising digital democracy faces the main problem that the social, economic and political transformation associated with the new digital information and communication technologies (ICTs) includes a wide range of heterogenic phenomena for which the concept of digitisation provides a rather amorphous, unspecific umbrella. Therefore, the digital network infrastructures converging the audio-visual with computer networks as well as local-area with wide-area communication has not only decoupled modern computing and storage capacities from traditional restrictions imposed by time and space but also increased labour- and capital-saving production processes or created artificial intelligences and new virtual realities in the cyberspace. Politically, this development significantly changes the characteristics of public communication, enables the self-organisation of civil society and makes social media, digital platforms, big data and algorithmic or automated profiling and filtering both resources and objects of democratic decision-making. At the same time, in the digital world of algorithms, learning machines, artificial intelligences and condensed cloud data, the authors of, and those responsible for,



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political statements, actions and decisions are becoming increasingly uncertain and opaque (Amoore 2020; Moats and Tseng 2024).

This diversity and complexity of ‘democracy meets digitisation’ processes obviously lead to quite contradictory assessments of what could be expected for (or from) democratic procedures in the digital age. Moreover, it seems to be very difficult to grasp the idea of digital democracy as a whole, instead of discussing only its fragments and isolated aspects. Consequently, in the context of the debate on digital democracy, the diagnosis of ambivalent or even opposing effects is inevitable, depending on one’s point of view. While, for instance, ICT, social media, e-voting software or different types of cyber-activism and online campaigning apparently increase the opportunities for political participation, these theoretical potentials of digitisation are immediately undermined by empirical problems at the levels of action and structure. Since the internet is driving the formation of monopolies, cartels, and the profit of elites (Hindman 2018; Garcia Canclini 2021), it should be evident that it tends to work against equality and therefore against one of the most important principles of democracy. Accordingly, further democratic principles such as plurality and people’s sovereignty are essentially endangered by the political power of multinational companies such as *Google*, *Facebook*, or *Amazon* which are not only able to escape from national governments’ decision-making but also to violate the diversity of opinions, interests, and values (Taplin 2017). Moreover, the fragmentation and polarisation of the public space provoked by a selective diffusion of information via hashtags, echo chambers, filter bubbles and social divisions are opposing both the formation of a commonly shared public forum and people’s engagement for the public good. In contrast, the probable outcome of such a ‘divided’ republic (Sunstein 2017; Arora et al. 2022; Kreiss and McGregor 2023) seems to be the rise of radical oppositions and extreme political positions, whereas the chances of deliberation and solution-focused participation must be estimated to be rather low.

It can hardly be denied that digital technologies at least partially disrupt and undermine traditional democracies, even more since authoritarian governments, moneyed elites and fringe hackers are exploiting the digital infrastructure of democratic systems and thus revealing their vulnerabilities (Alfarez and Hall 2010; M. Moore 2018). However, there are also studies which prove a positive influence of *google search* or alternative online-tools to support the expansion of direct democracy in Western societies as well as the internet-based improvement of knowledge citizens show along with their political behaviour (Richey and Taylor 2018). And although the former prognosis that it is the theory and practice of deliberative democracy (Benkler 2007; Dryzek 2012) along with its main principles of inclusion, political equality, reasonableness, and publicity (Rishel 2011), which will benefit from the digital revolution, seems rather obsolete (cf. Benkler et al. 2018; McKay and Tenove 2021),¹ there is the alternative model of agonistic democracy (Mouffe 2005) which might actually become the main beneficiary of digitisation in view of a new digitalised protest culture in Western democracies incited by information warfare (M. Moore 2018) and predominantly launched against neoliberalism and capitalism (Roberts 2014; Celikates 2015; Tufekci 2017).

Proceeding from this, a differentiated view on the risks and chances the digital age implies for democracy, is necessary. Nevertheless, an expedient reflection of this issue must go beyond any simple comparison of advantages and disadvantages, as well as beyond the classical judgement that technology is neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’ but always neutral and therefore adequate for ambivalent purposes. Additionally, a theoretical examination of the subject is burdened by the fact that both critical and affirmative approaches to digital democracy often share an obvious problem: they predominantly proceed from a rather classical idea of democracy insisting on the established communication channels between government and citizens, e.g., agenda setting, policy preparation, decision making,

policy execution and policy evaluation (cf. [van Dijk 2013](#)), without considering that the new functional logics of digitised democracy can hardly be grasped with the traditional concepts from the pre-digital era ([Borucki et al. 2020](#); [Simons 2023](#)). Thus, the main task for democratic theory in the digital age is to adapt both an innovative and appropriate concept of popular government without denying its essential roots and principles.

Consequently, the core point of this article is to provide a theory-based approach to systematically capture and structure the wide range of research questions and problems that arise in connection with digitalisation and democracy, without claiming to be able to discuss or even clarify all problem areas in detail at the same time. The main goal is a matter of fundamental orientation as to which different, interlocking aspects must be taken into account in the theorisation of digital democracy, in order to not always only reflect partial problems but the subject as a whole, together with its main risks and chances.

In this respect, the article uses the contemporary state of research on digital democracy in a cursory manner to identify the most important theoretical challenges lurking on the way to an elaborated conceptualisation of digital democracy. It starts with a recapitulation of several theoretical innovations and shortcomings which have previously attempted to give the digital democracy a theoretical foundation and to identify the political danger that democracy in the digital age is transformed either into a kind of populist government or into a technocracy (Section 2). Afterwards, the theory of democratic antinomies ([Hidalgo 2014](#); [Hidalgo 2019](#)) is presented as an adequate approach to understand democracy as a discursive framework that connects its process-oriented and value-based dimensions, as well as its specific practices of decision-making and political involvement at different levels. On this theoretical basis, the balancing act between openness to new technological developments and defence of the normative essentials of democracy is performed and illustrated (Section 3). In this vein, the aim is to demonstrate that the still immature idea of digital democracy is primarily based upon two alternative concepts of authority and participation beyond the former distinction of direct and representative procedures of democratic decision-making (Section 4). Proceeding from this, we will gain a benchmark in how to mobilise digital innovations in favour of strategies to defend the idea of democracy without underestimating the risks posed by big data, platforms, digital divide, algorithms, bots, filter bubbles and AI governance (Section 5).

Hence, the bottom line is to present the theory of democratic antinomies as a coherent and consistent approach that not only does justice to the complexity of digital democracy and the need for a balanced assessment of its risks and opportunities but also manages to anchor the necessary conceptual development of democracy in the digital age in the continuum of intellectual history.

2. Theoretical Approaches to Digital Democracy: Between Populism and Technocracy

In respect of the relationship between democracy and digitisation, we can proceed from the basic assumption that the notorious four v's of the big data era—volume, velocity, variety and (lacking) veracity (or more precisely the scale, speed, different forms and uncertainty of data)—are changing modern societies fundamentally. In this shadow, the theory and practice of democracy are undergoing a serious transformation process. At first glance, this topic requests a new model of democracy integrating the options and restrictions of digital information and communication technologies. However, the theoretical prospect of a technological refurbishment of democracy has not created the general impression that democratic societies are really on a way forward to an essentially participatory type of democracy, which will successively overcome all limits and boundaries of time and space and facilitate the government of, by and for the people in the true sense of the word. In

contrast, pessimistic voices, who term the idea of digital democracy a “myth” (Hindman 2009), dominate the contemporary debate.

For example, Evgeny Morozov argued in his bestseller *The Net Delusion* (Morozov 2011) that internet and digitisation are fostering the existence of previously unknown and incredible opportunities for censorship, surveillance, propaganda and manipulation, whereas all alleged options or potentials for greater political participation by citizens actually mean a veneer of democracy. In his following book, *The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (Morozov 2013), Morozov continued his sceptical view with a strong critique on the belief in technology and the possibility to solve complex social and political problems with the help of hard- and software. Another crucial point diagnosed by authors like Pariser (2011) and Sunstein (2017) is the fragmentation of the public space, as the most expectable political outcome of digitisation, hampering a well-balanced democratic decision-making process and provoking the rise in political populism and radical parties.

Nevertheless, the probably most important objection against the possible realisation of digital democracy is launched by Hindman (2009, 2018), McChesney (2013) and many other sceptics arguing that—via digitisation—capitalism may have the opportunity to undermine all political communication and therefore even to destroy democracy. In this regard, we can identify both the ‘digital divide’ provoked by expensive licences, information shortage or censorship and the extreme information overload by junk data, advertising, sales promotion, data espionage as economic strategies to overcome all privacy rules and to enforce higher social inequality.

Significantly, that pessimism gets a lot of support from classical authors who actually stand for the principles of participatory democracy. For instance, Barber (1997, 2002), who had originally underlined the possibly decisive contribution of television to realise his idea of “strong democracy” (Barber 1984), gave a rather negative statement concerning the potentials of digital democracy stressing that exactly the “virtues” of the new information and communication technologies such as speed, simplicity and the social atomism of users might act against democracy’s need for patience, community and complex problem solution. Moreover, Habermas (2008) denied that the internet is able to provide a mechanism for creating a collective will or to serve as an instrument for opinion formation between basically isolated nodes, a scepticism which is shared by a couple of authors who are committed to classical republicanism in the wake of Hannah Arendt (cf. Buchstein 1997; Bohman 2004, 2008; Pettit 2008; Schwarz 2014).²

Indeed, this brief outline does not represent the entire spectrum of how the theory and practice of deliberative democracy is involved in the phenomena of social media and digital communication. Nevertheless, the majority of contemporary democratic theorists rather emphasises that the threats and perils of digitisation prevail against all possible chances to facilitate digital opportunities of participation and democratic deliberation. On the other hand, the theory of democracy must be open to new and innovative perspectives which are able to reflect such technological and social transformations changing the basic conditions under which democracy has to be realised or, if necessary, renewed. Hence, the aim of the following remarks is to identify theoretical ingredients that a concept of digital democracy well-balanced between adaptation and normative distance to the technical achievements of the *Zeitgeist* has to take into account.

- (1) As the model of “liquid democracy” (Blum and Zuber 2016) suggests, the still immature idea of digital democracy must be based upon a concept of authority and participation beyond the classical distinction of direct and representative procedures of democratic decision-making. Since, at least in theory, this new technology-based liquid democracy combines the advantages of direct and representative government (i.e., participation and expertise), the creation of a ‘truly’ democratic voting system

that empowers voters to either vote on issues directly or to delegate one's voting power to a trusted party or competent person seems to be technically conceivable. The same applies to the digital reconstructing of political parties and campaigns that has been observed during the last decade and could lead to a new type of political organisation in the future (Chadwick and Stromer-Galley 2016; Gerbaudo 2019; Dommert et al. 2020). Thus, today, every theoretical approach of digital democracy is encouraged to overcome the dichotomy between the institutions of direct and representative democracy and to incorporate the potentials of relevant hybrid forms into its own considerations.

- (2) As the study of Papacharissi (2010, chap. 6) pointed out, the liberal fiction of (strictly) separated private and public spheres becomes more or less obsolete in the digital age, since people are able to participate in public discussions without leaving their private desk. Hence, there are several emerging new "civic habits" installing a "networked self" within the interspace of private and public realms leading, for instance, to a culture of remote connectivity, blogging, permanent satire and subversion of all political formations, news aggregation and spreading via social media and the various styles of collaborative filtering and, finally, to the political and social reality of agonistic pluralism. Such new forms of the citizens' "privacy in context" (Nissenbaum 2009) must not be confused with a total destruction of any privacy, although the tendency towards a total transparency of one's personal life constitutes one of the main challenges of the digital revolution. Nevertheless, the protection of privacy must be established precisely under the conditions of the dissolved boundaries to the public sphere.³
- (3) In contrast to the amalgamations of direct and representative institutions, and the private and public sphere, there is a significant theoretical distinction the digital revolution does not resolve but impose: the "logic of collective action" according to Olson (1965) and the different "logic of connective action" as Bennett and Segerberg (2014) describe the typical form of political agency in the context of digital media. This kind of differentiation helps to understand the specific challenges of arranging political participation in the pre-digital and digital era: while the main obstacles of 'collective action' once were the hierarchical organisation of membership groups, the motivation to engage politically and the problem of (rational acting) free riders, 'connective action' can be shaped fast and easily since it does not require the symbolic construction of a united 'we' but only a vague idea of inclusion using personal frames and individual lifestyles as a basis for emotion-based protest and contentious activity.⁴ Hence, connective and digitally networked actions effortlessly overcome motivation problems, rational risk and cost calculations, and free riding, which means their strength corresponds to collective actions' weakness. However, connective actions have huge difficulties in evoking persistence, permanent commitment and, most of all, a kind of collective identity. Simply spoken: while collective actions face the biggest problems at the beginning, connective actions threaten to evaporate very quickly.
- (4) The idea of digital democracy can also be figured as a variety of "monitory democracy". With this concept, Keane (2009, part 3; 2011; 2013, chap. 2; 2018) outlined the dramatic change in the language, ideals and institutions of democracy today. While, for the first time in history, democracy has grown familiar to people from most regions of the world, this process of 'indigenisation' is responsible for an explosion of many different understandings of democracy. Following Keane, many people, especially in poorer countries, take democracy as a synonym for justice, social welfare, technical progress, electricity, sanitation and other public goods. This leads to a strong theoretical focus on the output and a neglect of the input side of democracy, particularly in the sense that the electoral legitimacy of political actors and organisations becomes rather irrelevant

as long as they remain committed to the common good. In addition, monitory democracy includes the ongoing public and media scrutiny and control of political decision makers and their exercise of power. In return, a 'real' participation of citizens in decision-making processes mutates into a secondary feature of democracy. And while transparency, surveillance, and public pressure to reduce corruption become main principles of democracy, the question about representing the plurality of interests is rather out of bounds. Similar to liquid democracy, monitory democracy is settled beyond the usual representative and direct institutions, even if the representative forms of government do not simply disappear.

- (5) Finally, nudges (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) are an essential part of using new digital information and communication technology in political processes, particularly in AI governance. 'Nudging techniques' can be defined as ways to influence the behaviour and decision-making of individuals and groups via positive reinforcements or indirect suggestions. In contrast to alternative options to achieve obedience, compliance and conformity, such as violence, coercion, the force of law, education or direct persuasion, a nudge makes a particular choice or behaviour more likely by altering the specific context or environment in which a decision is made. Therefore, nudges are inserted to trigger automatic cognitive processes to produce a desired outcome, for instance by making the favoured alternative rather more visible and accessible than the unfavoured one. For democracy, nudges have a special meaning, since they support the rationality of individual and collective choices and bridge the potential gap between individual and collective rationality, self-interest and common goods. In the digital age, the judgmental heuristics being used to achieve both individual and collective advantages (e.g., by stimulating the motivation to take out health, life or old age insurances) apparently benefit from the support of big data-based knowledge and the application of online communication tools. However, nudging techniques obviously tend to support the implementation of a liberal *and* paternalistic political system by promising to influence people's behaviour only with soft power and hidden manipulations and without any strong power or physical violence. Hence, in the age of digitisation, nudging techniques could finally lead to a Foucaultian kind of rational technocracy and governmentality.

In sum, these five innovative approaches to a theoretical re-conceptualisation of digital democracy suggest a quite ambivalent result: on the one hand, the probable political impact of digitalisation is the rise in populist democracy. Since transparency and permanent scrutinising of government power (Keane), the enduring intertwining of the private and public sphere (Papacharissi), and the logic of connective action (Bennett/Segerberg) strengthen agonistic pluralism, the cultivation of protest and a general suspicion against all established authorities, elites and decision-makers, the confidence in representative institutions is almost inevitably harmed. Moreover, the empirical observation that digital transformation and automation are leading to unemployment in several branches (McChesney and Nichols 2016), to the dissemination of fake news and to a lack of professionalism in the media can also be interpreted as very favourable conditions for a selective perception of populist agendas and the popularity of demagogues with their simple promises and strict friend-enemy-distinctions, even if the influence of filter bubbles and echo chambers is not overstated (Bruns 2019). In this respect, the use of automated software codes, bots, fake accounts, et cetera, suggests the existence of a strong but unreal power base, which simulates civic engagement and manipulates online debates (for instance by provoking a spiral of silence effect). Therefore, populist agendas can be promoted by the (self-)imagination of encompassing and representing a much larger social movement than they actually are. To grasp this new phenomenon, some authors speak about "astroturfing" (Schill 2014; Keller

[et al. 2020](#); [Zerback et al. 2020](#); [García-Orosa 2021](#)) in order to define the virtual antagonism to the concept of grassroot-democracy.

On the other hand, the very opposite to a popular or populist democracy—a digital technocracy—is apparently not a less probable outcome of digitisation ([Bartlett 2018](#)). This is not only about the digital divide and the growing gap between the rich and poor (Hindman) or the trust in technological solutionism (Morozov), but also about the things just mentioned—e.g., the possibility of delegating political power via the institutions of liquid democracy, with nudging techniques as a guide in the face of exuberant complexity and confusion, or the consequence of expected disenchantment with politics if all online activism, protest and agonism remain in vain—which could undermine the conditions for political participation and checks and balances, and thus become catalysts of such a technocracy. Perhaps these two ambivalent developments even reinforce each other: due to the evident technological potentials of digitalisation, a (post-democratic) lack of people's participation is becoming extremely problematic. However, a resurgence of populist democracy motivated by this (cf. [Mouffe 2005](#); [Moffitt 2016](#); [Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018](#)) and particularly enabled by digitisation (cf. [Baiocchi and Ganuza 2017](#); [Mounk 2018](#), pp. 137–50; [Baldwin-Philippi 2019](#)), could conversely serve as an argument for the installation of a new kind of (digital) expertocracy (cf. [Brennan 2016](#); [A. Moore 2017, 2018](#)). Indeed, this oscillation between a post-democratic technocracy and a populist version of democracy is definitely not caused by digital information and communication technologies but gets a new dimension from them. Accordingly, the concept of digital democracy is threatened from two different extremes. To this ambivalence, the theory of democracy has to react.

3. The Theory of Democratic Antinomies

The obvious political ambivalence of digitisation or digital democracy raises the question of the constitutive contradictions of democracy itself. In this respect, the theory of democratic antinomies ([Hidalgo 2014](#)) can quite coherently and systematically clarify and illustrate the problems and risks of digital democracy/politics on the one hand and its potentials and opportunities on the other.

Applying the concept of democratic antinomies, it can be emphasised that the idea of democracy basically combines a couple of irresolvable contradictions. Following Immanuel Kant's definition of "antinomy" as a "conflict of laws" leading to equally justified theses and antitheses which cannot be essentially resolved by a compromise or synthesis ([Kant \[1781\] 1911](#), pp. 426–61), the identification of democratic antinomies stresses the capacity of democracy to mediate between obviously opposing but equally legitimate principles. Such opposing principles integrated by the idea of democracy are first and foremost liberty vs. equality (antinomy I), representation vs. popular sovereignty (antinomy II), the principles of quality and quantity concerning democratic decision-making (antinomy III), plurality vs. social unity (antinomy IV), individual rights vs. collective claims (antinomy V) and, finally, universality vs. particularity (antinomy VI). All of these antagonistic principles and values include an 'authentic' side of democracy, even though a permanent clash of them is bound to occur. Rather precisely, it is due to its antinomies that democracy shapes an infinite number of disagreements, disputes and conflicts since there is never the one and only 'democratic' position but always a number of alternatives.

As a consistent implication of this approach, democracy may also be understood as a discursive framework in which different political choices are available by pursuing either liberty or equality, quality or quantity, unity or plurality, or individual rights or collective claims. As long as these one-sided political demands show respect for the (normatively equivalent and only temporarily neglected) other side of the antinomian opposition, the 'democratic' character of a particular political process, system or polity is preserved. The

latter is the case if a political demand or decision does not abolish the antinomy by pursuing extreme objectives while denying the general legitimacy of opposing views. Democracy thus means, not least, a permanent struggle to bring or to keep its divergent poles in dynamic balance, as well as an oscillation of democratic decision-making between its opposing principles.⁵ In this respect, Claude Lefort's conception of democracy as a system characterised by both the institutionalisation of conflict within society and the maintenance of an "empty space" of political power might be a helpful illustration for the antinomian character of democracy (Lefort 1988). In return, the possibility of a process of 'sublation' in the sense of Hegel that unites and keeps both sides by reproducing the contradiction on a higher level must be rejected from this perspective.

Due to the democratic antinomies, several empirical trade-offs concerning evidently antithetic structures and institutions are predestined within democratic societies (Hidalgo 2019, p. 268f). Concretely, the first antinomy between liberty and equality pre-eminently leads democracy to evoke essential affinities to both the free market and social state, whereas the second antinomy between representation and popular sovereignty is translated into the normative equivalence of parliamentarism and popular referenda, elections and public debate in respect of legislative processes. Moreover, the parallelism of influential power and lobby groups and the reverse validity of the classical principle *one person, one vote* is an expression of the first two democratic antinomies. In terms of the third antinomy between quality and quantity as contradictory principles of all methods of democratic decision-making, there is a further antithetic coexistence of majority rule and the rule of law to be noticed. And while the fourth antinomy provokes a salient clash of pluralistic opinions and lifestyles as well as an efficacious collective identity of the people, the fifth antinomy finds its trade-off in the simultaneous validity of civil rights and the duty of solidarity. Last but not least we can conclude from the sixth antinomy between universality and particularity that an analogous collision occurs between the national interests and global responsibility of a democratic association. In addition, this last antinomy includes as a further paradox that every democracy is inevitably both similar and dissimilar to all other (empirical) democracies because they all reflect a particular will of the people, although they also have a substantial affinity to universal claims and values such as human rights.

Against the theoretical background of democratic antinomies, we are able to reconstruct political populism as a very biased form of democracy strictly denying the necessary trade-offs between its opposing principles.⁶ Therefore, populist democracy can be characterised by

- a sweeping defamation and condemnation of established political classes, elites and active political professionals in the name of democratic equality, often accompanied by a strong vindication of social security (antinomy I);
- the advocacy of a rather limitless sovereignty of people which is emplaced against representative institutions, political elites and corporations (antinomy II);
- an unleashed and destructive rule or even a tyranny of the majority preventing a possible self-containment of democracy by the rule of law (antinomy III);
- the enforcement of a homogeneous collective identity of the people due to nationalist, culture-specific, or religious matters at the charge of pluralistic or multicultural requirements (antinomy IV);
- the rigorous superiority of the community over individual rights (including harsh polemics against liberal achievements in modern democracies, particularly in the field of anti-discrimination of women, homosexuals, religions, foreigners and coloured people) (antinomy V).

In total, populist reason tends to override these sides of democracy having an affinity with universal values. Conversely, it emphasises all opposite sides of the antinomies that

can be instrumentalised to guarantee the particular national interest of a certain democracy (antinomy VI).

Table 1 summarises the reconstruction of populist democracy with regard to the democratic antinomies approach. Moreover, it confirms that democracy usually needs a balance of its liberal or constitutional pillar on the one hand and its republican or popular pillar on the other (Mény and Surel 2002). Thus, the democratic antinomies approach underlines that democracy always involves two effects: first, a substantial alignment with populist strategies whenever only one side of its conflicting principles is accentuated; and second, an effective resistance to such one-sided manifestations of populist democracy by simultaneously cultivating its non-populist counter-principles.

Table 1. Biased populist democracy with lacking trade-offs between democratic antinomies.

Democratic Antinomies	Imbalance/Lacking Trade-Offs
I Liberty and equality	Defamation of established political classes and politicians
II Representation and popular sovereignty	General critique of elites, corporations, and institutions
III Quality and quantity	Tyranny of majority
IV Plurality and unity	Anti-pluralism and strict friend–foe-distinction
V Individual and collective claims	Anti-modernism (including gender- and homophobia)
VI Universality and particularity	Radical nationalism/chauvinism

Source: (Hidalgo 2019, p. 271).

Proceeding from this, it becomes evident why a technocracy or post-democracy is not only the opposite but an appropriate response to populist reason and therefore a plausible reaction to the challenge of populism.

As Table 2 elucidates, a (neo-)liberal and post-democratic technocracy in the sense of Crouch (2004) or Mouffe (2005, chaps. II and IV) and a populist democracy in the sense of Table 1 have in common that they both lack the necessary trade-offs between the antinomian poles of democracy. Thus, a post-democratic technocracy and a populist democracy signify two very biased forms of a democratic order, not by directly attacking the liberal or populist sides of democracy but by overemphasising or absolutizing its populist or liberal counterparts. In contrast, any functioning democracy must remain able to balance its inherent populist and liberal elements. This is also why the populist side of democracy can act as a corrective to liberal democracy, renewing it against post-democratic and technocratic tendencies (e.g., Laclau 2007; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012; Mouffe 2018) and why both tendencies—a populist and technocratic degeneration of democracy—comprise the main features of democracy in the digital age (Deseriis 2017; Manow 2020).

Table 2. Technocratic post-democracy as provocation of populist reason.

Post-Democracy	Imbalance/Lacking Trade-Offs
I Liberty w/o equality	Neoliberalism and extreme gap between rich and poor
II Representation w/o popular sovereignty	Veneer of democratic institutions and people's impotence
III Quality w/o quantity	Rational technocracy and lack of political participation
IV Plurality w/o unity	Lack of social cohesion and superficial diversity
V Individual w/o collective claims	Disenchantment with politics and disintegration
VI Universality w/o particularity	Globalisation and lack of political identity

In this vein, Table 3 shows what is really at stake with democracy and digitisation. As we have seen in Section 2, digital democracy tends to be both a populist democracy and a neoliberal technocracy. This means that, at best, the antinomies of democracy are still kept in balance (perhaps even better than before). However, the worst case could

also occur if digitisation attacks both pillars of democracy—the liberal–constitutional and the populist–republican—or even each pole of the six antinomies at the same time. This would be the case if the legitimate but conflicting democratic principles each get out of hand—for example as soon as freedom is thwarted by extreme acceleration and, simultaneously, equality by extensive social conformity that may be enforced by nudging techniques (I). The same applies to the democratic principle of individuality, which could be replaced by the digital reality of social atomism and the self-alienation of lonely nerds, while the necessary commitment to the community is eventually connoted with a kind of technological totalitarianism (similar to the social credit system that has recently been installed in China) (V). Another pattern of that worst-case scenario would be if digitisation provides a form of output-technocracy or monitory democracy based upon a pseudo-democratic tyranny of majority (III) or if a post-democratic fragmentation of the public space reinforces right-wing populist agitation for the formation of an ethnically homogenous nation (IV).⁷ Finally, the overall confusing synchronicity of countless perspectives in the ‘global digital village’, moving across all traditional boundaries of time and space, might provoke the particular desire for a radical culturalist and nationalist backlash (VI).

Table 3. Digitisation as gravedigger of democracy? A worst-case scenario.

Liberal Poles of Democracy	Populist/Illiberal Poles of Democracy
I Freedom (extreme acceleration)	Equality (enforced conformity, Gleichschaltung)
II Representation (neither)	People’s sovereignty (nor)
III Quality (technocracy w/o checks & balances)	Quantity (tyranny of majority, populist democracy)
IV Plurality (fragmentation of public space)	Social Homogeneity (anti-pluralism, racism)
V Individuality (social atomism, alienation)	Community (technological totalitarianism and surveillance)
VI Universality (total complexity, confusion)	Particularity (nationalist and cultural backlash)

In such a worst-case scenario, in which digitalisation brings about a strange coexistence of neoliberal epistocracy and populist democracy, neither a well-balanced representation of plural interests nor the respect for popular sovereignty is guaranteed (II).

Thus, read through the lens of democratic antinomies, the digital revolution is definitely attacking the core values and principles of democracy. Nevertheless, this should not lead to a one-sided pessimistic diagnosis, but instead to a complex problem analysis.

4. New Concepts of Democratic Authority and Participation?

During the last decades, the theoretical and empirical reflection of digital democracy has undergone a profound transformation. Instead of weighing and comparing the advantages, disadvantages, risks and chances of digitalisation or answering the question whether digital democracy is a curse or rather a blessing, it has become more and more accepted that digital technologies and new social media are nothing but a kind of “destiny” of democratic procedures (Chester 2007). Therefore, a future of democracy beyond online participation and campaigning, cyber-activism, e-voting, smart cities and new transparency (Sorice and De Blasio 2019; Hennen et al. 2020; Jungherr 2020) is hardly imaginable. In contrast, it is rather suggested that, in the 21st century, democracy can only be “secured” if “its practices and institutions” become “compatible with the communications technology of the internet, especially social media” (Lutz and du Toit 2014, p. 1). Such an unbiased “renewing” (Smith 2017), “rethinking” (Margetts 2019) or “managing of democracy in the digital age” (Schwanholz et al. 2018) does not only focus on social media effects on fostering civic engagement, the increasing use of digital tools in parliament or the general digitisation of the public space but also on the regulation of the internet and cyberspace and on data protection (Glen 2017). Furthermore, attention is shifting away from the question whether

the internet strengthens or weakens democracy and towards the question of what kind of democracy can and must be created with the help of digitalisation (Coleman 2017)—of course while being aware of the fact that populist democracy and (post-)democracy are the two main challenges in the digital age (ibid., p. 87ff). In this context, a new awareness is also emerging: digital democracy should no longer be overburdened with expectations that analogue democracy has already had to fail at fulfilling—e.g., in terms of reducing social inequalities and hierarchies (Pagallo 2017),⁸ trusting in the rationality of voters (B. Caplan 2008) and avoiding disenchantment with politics among the population (Bayamlıoğlu 2017). On the other hand, the theory and practice of digital democracy will be measured by its ability to master the new dangers posed by digitalisation (see Table 3) and to provide significant progress compared to the analogue past.

In this context, the democratic antinomies approach is suitable to provide a conceptual framework showing digital democracy not only as a technical, political, and legal project but mainly as a social psychological challenge (Boehme-Neßler 2020). To overcome mental obstacles, fear of contact, and ingrained habits with regard to participation in the tools of digital democracy, intellectual orientation is required. For this purpose, the idea of balancing democratic antinomies can serve either as a negative (Table 3) or positive reference point (Table 4). Since the democratic antinomies approach in Section 3 made clear that—and why—democracy is in danger of being attacked by digital technologies from two sides, it is obvious that the reverse is true as well and digitisation is capable of strengthening both pillars of democracy, i.e., the liberal and the populist.

Table 4. Digital democracy as new utopia? A best-case scenario.

Liberal Poles of Democracy	Populist/Illiberal Poles of Democracy
I Freedom (full emancipation)	Equality (just redistribution, new horizontal accountability)
II Representation, combined with	People's sovereignty
III Quality (technical, legal, political progress)	Quantity (permanent participation)
IV Plurality (rich diversity)	Social Unity (e-citizenship)
V Individuality (virtual identity and privacy)	Community (solidarity, social justice)
VI Universality (global democracy)	Particularity (multi-level-democratic system, subsidiarity)

Table 4 illustrates this nexus by designing an optimistic best-case scenario of digital democracy that is the exact mirror image of the disaster case in Table 3. Here, it is suggested that digitisation can, at least in theory, be beneficial to all the identified normative principles of democracy. For instance, digitisation can contribute a lot to the emancipation of people from labour-intensive production processes, which is certainly in favour of democracy if, in return, the redistribution of the gains in prosperity is technically possible (I). Apart from that, it can be interpreted as a new and positive dimension of plurality as well as of human individualisation that the digital revolution enhances the opportunity to speak with whomever one wants to communicate, regardless of where, at what time and over which channel. This does not only offer the chance to form and to live out various aspects of one's own identity but also to become connected with a large number of people and, therefore, to feel as a part of a whole whose members encounter each other with a sense of solidarity (IV and V)—possibly even on a global scale where territorial borders lose their former meaning, even if several subsidiary levels will always intertwine there (VI). Of these relevant topics, only two salient features of digital democracy will be examined here in more detail: the changing concepts of authority and participation.

As a look at antinomy II in Table 4 confirms, digital democracy can be figured as a kind of fusion of direct and representative institutions. The theoretical background to this perspective is a fundamental shift concerning the ideas of authority and legitimacy. Whereas

analogue democracy had configured authority primarily as a top-down and legitimacy as a bottom-up process, digital democracy is characterised by a momentous parallelism of top-down and bottom-up. This parallelism is due to the characteristic of digitalisation to separate the roles of producers and consumers, and senders and receivers of political arguments, information and even decisions more diffusely than in traditional representative democracy. Indeed, there were also isolated elements of direct participation in political debates and decisions, but these were clearly distinguishable from the constitutive elements of representative democracy—elections, government decisions and the professional media as a mediating authority. However, in digital democracy not only professional politicians and journalists but also bloggers, influencers, youtubers, et cetera, are able to reach a larger audience and thus to step onto the political stage. Moreover, political communication in the digital world no longer concentrates on election campaigns but rather on permanent interactions between politicians and citizens. Finally, concepts such as representation, subsidiarity and accountability, which have so far been primarily characterised by a vertical logic, take on a new horizontal dimension in the digital age.⁹

Following this argument, the idea of authority as such loses (or at least relativises) its traditional link to a hierarchically structured political and social order and manifests rather as communicative or network power (cf. Castells 2009a, 2009b, 2011). At the same time, the authority of expertise is transformed away from the idea of the intellectual superiority of certain individuals towards the Aristotelian-deliberative summation thesis,¹⁰ i.e., the advantage of the aggregated knowledge of the crowd (keywords: Wikipedia, Linux, artificial intelligence) (antinomies III and V). In addition, this new concept of digital authority includes a special affinity to plurality (antinomy IV), since authority, particularly in the transparent digital information age, cannot be shaped by an impossible (final) consensus but only by the acceptance of the relativity of all democratic alternatives.¹¹ Thus, “authority” in the digital era cannot be claimed by the political opinion, position or decision that everyone can agree on or that terminates the democratic discourse in the sense of Carl Schmitt, but conversely by that which challenges and allows dissent, protest and the permanent search for political alternatives. In this respect, it has to be admitted that digital democracy seems to get closer to a ‘real’ balance between the antinomian principles of consensus and conflict, unity and plurality (IV) than has been the case for analogue democracy.

In sum, the main challenge of digital democracy in respect of authority can be seen as the necessity to provide for the new, horizontally oriented forms of networking—knowledge exchange, discussion culture and the common capacity to act—an effective influence within the vertical structures of decision making in representative democracy. In other words, the basic goal of future democracy must be to link digital public inputs with institutional outputs (Coleman 2017). It only remains to make a few remarks on the new phenomena of digital participation. As has been suggested before, democratic participation in the digital age is no longer shaped by the classical distinction Barber (1984) once made between political elites, media professionals and experts on the one hand, and ordinary people and amateurs on the other, since the distinction itself is losing persuasiveness (Barber 2002, p. 5ff). Instead, digital participation basically has to be understood in a broader sense. With regard to the democratic principle of quantity (antinomy III), it seems to be clear that the empirical increase in online consultations of citizens, e-petitions, e-campaigning, the expansion of referendums through e-voting, the offer of e-government services (with participatory user design), the establishment of online complaint and protest forums (e-complaints) and also in evaluative citizen surveys and quality panels indicates a significant expansion of participatory options in democratic systems worldwide (Luppiciini and Baarda 2017).¹²

The fact that this obvious dynamic has not created the general impression that digital democracy has basically long been a reality can be explained with the complementarity of old and new communication channels. The new opportunities for participation have not simply replaced the traditional communication and decision-making structures, but at best complemented and expanded them. Nevertheless, it is to be expected—not least in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis—that, successively, there will be a substantial digital transformation of participation (Fung et al. 2013; Bernholz et al. 2021; Chen 2024; Puspasari et al. 2024), whereby offers of hybrid participation and artificial intelligence could possibly cure digital divides (Borucki et al. 2020). Apart from that, a new understanding of participation in the digital age could also follow the proposal to anchor lotteries extensively within the framework of democratic procedures (Smith 2017; Wimmer et al. 2018).¹³

In the context of participation, too, the democratic antinomies approach sensitises us to new paradoxes and dissolving or reversing distinctions. For example, digitisation is apparently changing the meaning of absence and presence in the public space. As Asenbaum (2018) pointed out, it is due to the digital tools and platforms of participation that the notion of anonymity is no longer unambiguously related to privacy, which is dispensed, in traditional representative democracy, at best in the rare moments of casting a secret ballot. In contrast, anonymity in digital democracy advances to become an ambiguous feature of political presence affording both inclusion and exclusion, as well as subversion and submission, and honesty and deception. Hence, the evident dark side of anonymity in online forums, internet groups and social media that easily provokes hate speech, insults, and mobbing is accompanied by a political meaning according to which the absence of personal identity can become synonymous with the presence of a political relevant identity (Asenbaum 2023). In such a paradoxical public space oscillating between absence and presence, the concepts of participation and representation are merging as well. The same can be said about politically influential “cyber-activism” (Vromen 2017) and mere “slacktivism” (Morozov 2013), which is instead an alibi for political disinterest. In a digital society, these two phenomena can hardly be distinguished.

As the concept of liquid democracy suggests, being ‘absent’ from the public space and remaining in one’s own private or intimate sphere in digital democracy can also be the consequence of a genuine political decision, namely the delegation of one’s vote. According to the idea of monitory democracy, however, it is rather the permanent online presence of participating citizens which can exert a kind of control that holds political representatives accountable.

Last of all, as the theory of connective action shows, it should be emphasised that the new (digital) concepts of (horizontal) authority and (broad) participation ultimately share a cardinal problem: in order to become an integral part of digital democracy, digital public inputs must be connected with institutional outputs.¹⁴ How far we have already come on this difficult path will become clear, especially after the state of emergency of the COVID-19 crisis has been overcome. Then we will see whether digital democracy will advance to the status of a ‘normal case’ or remain just a supplement during a severe crisis situation.

5. The Theoretical and Empirical Contribution of the Democratic Antinomies Approach to Current Debates on Digital Democracy

Three key advantages can be associated with applying the theory of democratic antinomies to the subject of digitalisation and digitalised democracy.

- The theory provides an overall perspective that encompasses both the diverse facets and aspects as well as the complexity of digital democracy, thereby making them accessible for theoretical and empirical reflection. In this respect, the approach aims to

contribute to the development of a truly coherent theory of digital democracy and not to get lost in individual phenomena of digitalisation with a democratic impact.

- The conceptual framework of digital democracy presented here enables an empirical and normative assessment of relevant developments in the sector of digital information and communication technologies and the broad field of artificial intelligence. Depending on whether the observable effects of digital processes and practices and the use of AI tools lead to the maintenance or undermining or, in the worst case, even the elimination of the identified democratic antinomies, the theoretical approach allows a favourable or unfavourable prognosis to be made for the development of democracy as such. In most cases, however, the best-case and worst-case scenarios established here must be broken down into individual phenomena or antinomies for concrete research analyses.
- Since the theoretical approach presented here is based on the genealogically reconstructed derivation of democratic antinomies from the controversial discourse on democracy in the history of ideas, it becomes clear why the existing alternative approaches and discourses on the conceptual understanding of digital democracy can be largely or even completely subsumed under it. The impression that may arise that the theory of democratic antinomies acts as a template overlaid onto familiar digital democracy concerns rather than generating fresh analytical insights is therefore partly understandable. However, the reason for this is more likely to be found in the fact that these well-known concerns of digital democracy have already addressed aspects of democratic antinomies and the danger of their lack of balance without really grasping the underlying fundamental claim of democracy to resolve insoluble contradictions. The theoretical approach of democratic antinomies can therefore be used for metatheoretical reflection on alternative concepts of digital democracy.

To prove and illustrate the outlined theoretical contribution, the following section gives a couple of examples. *Firstly*, it will be sketched out how recent theoretical perspectives on digital democracy (cf. [Smith 2017](#); [Margetts 2019](#); [Hofmann 2019](#); [Deseriis 2020](#); [Berg et al. 2020](#)) might benefit from the democratic antinomies approach. In this respect, [Berg and Hofmann \(2021\)](#) have introduced some domains of the contingent political conditions under which the relationship between forms of democratic self-determination and its mediating digital infrastructures evolves. Then, their main lesson was that democratic self-governance is a profoundly mediated project whose institutions and practices are constantly in flux. Proceeding from this, the concept of democratic self-determination and self-governance can be reformulated with the help of democratic antinomies, particularly antinomy I, II and V (freedom vs. equality, popular sovereignty vs. representation, individual vs. collective acting and decision-making). But although the relation between self-determination/self-governance and its mediating digital infrastructures is indeed a highly relevant aspect for understanding digital democracy, the latter must be supplemented with further aspects (e.g., plurality vs. unity, quality vs. quantity) to gain a theoretical benchmark for institutions and practices exactly while they are in flux.

Moreover, taking into account the book by [Fuller \(2023\)](#), it can be underlined that a theory of digital democracy has to integrate above all the principles of ideation, deliberation and decision-making. However, as the theory of democratic antinomies suggests, the counter-principles and counter-processes to ideation, deliberation and decision-making are equally relevant. Consequently, a theory of digital democracy has to clarify the *literality* of democracy, i.e., how a concept of digital democracy fulfils the literal claim that the people participate in the exercise of power and governmental responsibility (antinomies 1 and 2). Furthermore, as the antinomies 3 and 4 suggest, the democratic principle of deliberation must be balanced against the democratic principle of agonism, which means that any

democratic consensus or law is only provisional and does not alter the fact that conflicts of interest and social divisions remain within the population and that differences of opinion are not only irresolvable but an inevitable part of democracy. Accordingly, as a counterpart to all established democratic decision-making procedures, doubts and criticism of concrete political decisions, trial-and-error processes, and the general revisability of all democratic outcomes are a necessary part of the game as well. And although parts of these democratic counter-principles to ideation, deliberation, and decision-making are certainly reflected by Fuller (2023, pp. 249–82) in the chapters about “feedback loops” and “challenges”, the theoretical necessity of contradictions and counterparts to the identified principles of digital democracy is not covered there.

Secondly, the democratic antinomies approach illustrates in general why technological developments have a fundamentally *ambivalent* effect on democracy. For example, whistleblowing (Olesen 2018, 2021; Munro and Kenny 2023; Cammaerts 2024; Munro 2025), hacking (Braun 2019; Webb 2020; Cordero 2022; Schneier 2023; McLaughlin and Holstein 2023) or platform regulation (van Dijk et al. 2019; Haggart and Iglesias Keller 2021; Kohl 2022; R. Caplan 2023; Davies and Cohen 2025) always have both a positive *and* a negative impact on democracy, as these phenomena affect its antinomian poles in different ways, particularly concerning the democratic trade-offs between freedom vs. security (Hidalgo 2019) and dissensus/conflict/competition vs. consensus/unity/monopolies. Moreover, and against a widespread prejudice (Fuller 2015, p. 371), e-democracy—at least against the backdrop of the democratic antinomies approach—does not mean or include a transition from a representative democracy to a direct democracy facilitated by technology, but a further coexistence between representative institutions and citizens being directly involved in the legislative, executive and judicative functions of the state through electronic means. The same can be said about a theoretical account which places emphasis on decentralised participatory democracy as an adequate option for empowering digital democracy (Fischli and Muldoon 2024). Here, decentralised, direct democratic structures can at best represent one side of the coin, and digital tools that improve the representation of pluralistic interests at the central level must be an equally integral part of a digitalised democracy in practice (Chen 2024).

Above all, however, the theory of democratic antinomies allows for a differentiated assessment of the relationship between capitalism, digitalisation and democracy. Far from viewing the capitalist infiltration of the internet, as outlined at the beginning of Section 2, as the end of all efforts to achieve digital democracy, the antinomies reveal the massive tensions that exist between capitalism and democracy. Accordingly, this tension is also reflected within the antinomies, in that the liberal poles (freedom, representation, the rule of law, plurality, individual interests and universality) clearly lead to a capitalist, market-oriented democracy, while the illiberal/populist poles of democracy (equality, popular sovereignty, majority principle, unity, community and particularity) suggest an affinity with principles critical of capitalism and globalisation, which are reflected in (protectionist) market regulations and social welfare redistribution. Only a one-sided form of digitalisation that absolutizes the capitalist-affiliated poles of democracy could be classified as the destruction of democracy in this respect. As long as the trade-off between capitalist and anti-capitalist, market economy and welfare state elements is maintained, even a continuing increase in the commercialisation and accumulation logic of the internet would not yet degrade digital democracy to a myth.

Thirdly, a separate examination of the complex issues surrounding platform regulation and disinformation further confirms the merits of the theory. In this respect, platform regulation usually aims to address three main issues: dealing with disinformation, preventing or punishing hate speech, and controlling market concentration (Iglesias Keller et al. 2025).

The first two aspects obviously refer to topics that have already been discussed, namely freedom vs. security and the relation between capitalism and digital democracy. Hence, we will concentrate primarily on the problem of disinformation and the possible need for its regulation or even censorship.

In the case of platform regulation, the democratic antinomy approach generally emphasises that there are always contradictory ways to achieve democratic legitimacy—through majority decisions or the principles of the rule of law, civil rights and the protection of minorities, which can be seen as legitimate restrictions on the majority principle; through decision-making by means of referenda or parliamentarianism, direct and representative democracy; and through a focus on universal claims such as human rights or the particular will of the people, which, however, can never be clearly represented (Hidalgo 2022, p. 149). In crisis situations, even anti-democratic instruments and measures could be legitimate in order to protect democracy from itself, in line with the idea of militant democracy. For the democratic legitimacy of platform regulation policies, this means that as long as self-regulation as the most ‘democratic’ option is empirically not reliable (Mündgens and Park 2024), platform regulation by state authorities or international/supranational organisations is available but must strike a trade-off between the components of input, throughput, and output-legitimacy (cf. Haggart and Iglesias Keller 2021) as well as a trade-off between (the paradoxes of) “militant democracy” (Langensteiner 2022) and (the paradoxes of) “radical democracy” (Cammaerts and Mansell 2020).

As for the problem of disinformation (Bennett and Livingston 2020; McKay and Tenove 2021), which, as mentioned, is to be curbed mainly through platform regulation, the democratic antinomies approach allows particularly fresh insights. In this vein, the almost exclusively negative connotations of the term “disinformation” (Weikmann and Lecheler 2022; Bak et al. 2023; Lewandowsky et al. 2023), which is usually associated with the opposite of the classic ideal of informed, empowered citizens, is questioned. Without neglecting that democratic processes of deliberation, participation, and power control require the citizens involved to be as fully informed as possible, the self-contradictions and double binds of democracy, which become evident with the help of the antinomy approach, prohibit us from painting the issue of information and disinformation in a one-sided or black-and-white manner. Instead, the democratic antinomies suggest not only another trade-off between (the) rationality (of liberalism) and (the) emotions (of illiberalism/populism) but also the relationship between information and disinformation rather as a continuum. This (democratic) continuum can be described as a coexistence of entropy and syntropy, i.e., disorder, chaos, lack of information, inaccuracy and decay on the one hand, and order, organisation, flow of information, unambiguity and permanent renewal on the other. At the same time, the democratic antinomies approach identifies information that can be disorienting and thus disinforming (e.g., as intellectual overload, cognitive dissonance, ambiguity, disaster scenarios, etc.) as well as disinformation that has an informative impact or is difficult to dispense from information anyway (e.g., white lies, diplomacy to achieve politically desirable outcomes or deliberate disinformation which contributes to reducing complexity and managing contingencies). When it comes to platform regulation, this information–disinformation continuum calls for increased caution, particularly with regard to censorship measures. However, the goal here is once again to achieve a trade-off that is compatible with democracy and its antinomies.

Finally, one last example: with the support of the theory of democratic antinomies, a well-balanced assessment of AI governance (Bullock et al. 2024) becomes possible. As might be expected, rather one-sided optimistic or pessimistic positions are currently being argued in this regard. While some predict that AI can be used profitably for the public good (Schneier and Sanders 2025) or to improve democratic decision-making against voter

ignorance and epistemic shortcomings (Han 2025), others fear paternalism (Crider 2024), the vagueness of democracy (Powell and McKelvey 2024), the lack of transparency of the algorithms that rule over everything (Buchanan and Imbrie 2022), and last but not least the imminent replacement of human decisions (Garcia Canclini 2021), which would undermine nothing less than the foundations of democracy as such. This means that, even with regard to the political alternatives associated with AI governance today, the extremes of technocratic post-democracy and radical participatory and populist democracy are facing off against each other. In this vein, the antinomy approach insists again on the previously outlined information–disinformation continuum and a trade-off between rational choice and emotions, both in response to a (post-democratic) overestimation of democracy as a pure information system and to a radical populist rejection of all the potential of AI. Furthermore, democratic antinomies 4 and 5 in particular highlight the fact that the increase in collective performance that can be achieved through AI must not come at the expense of individual contributions to democracy. The same applies to a social consensus on the common good, which must not come at the expense of plurality, alterity and dissent if the democratic character of AI governance is to be preserved. Therefore, when Simons (2023) calls for a theorising of AI ethics beyond conventional boundaries to understand how the governance of technology can support the flourishing of democracy, the democratic antinomies approach seems particularly well suited to this task.

6. Conclusions

Digital democracy is still a work in progress. As long as the theoretical idea of digital democracy is far from a corresponding empirical institutionalisation, any conceptualisation of the topic remains speculative to a certain extent (Pierman 2024). Nevertheless, the framework of the democratic antinomies, which identifies the liberal-technocratic and populist poles of democracy simultaneously, can serve as a theoretical basis to explore the different dimensions of digitalised democratic processes and give the concept of digital democracy a more nuanced and cautiously optimistic understanding. Against this background, it is not only possible to integrate the genuinely heterogenic aspects and phenomena the confluence of democracy and digitisation implies but also to demonstrate that for both the liberal and populist understanding of democracy there are a number of ways in which digital technology, growing access to information and new forms of participation are contributing to deepening democratic involvement—under the condition that the concepts of democratic authority and participation are redefined in the digital age.

Nonetheless, the theoretical approach presented here has a limited scope itself. In this vein, our reconstruction of the debate on digital democracy was inevitably fragmented and eclectic and cannot offer a complete, in-depth overview but only re-examines the state of research through the lens of democratic antinomies. For instance, little was said about other relevant topics related to the intersection of digital technologies and democratic theory, addressing questions of democracy mostly through the lenses of procedural fairness, the importance of the quality of outcome, informational conditions of a healthy digital public sphere, and (re-)definition of citizenship beyond the sporadic activation of citizens as voter (cf. Bernholz et al. 2021). Furthermore, it is really a walk on thin ice to show, on the one hand, the necessary openness to new functional logics and concepts of digitalised politics without, on the other hand, ignoring the fact that digital democracy also needs to continue the conceptual history of the root concept and therefore be reflected with the help of categories developed in the pre-digital era. At the very least, the application of the theory of democratic antinomies could be read as an attempt to manage this difficult balancing act. To what extent this attempt can be connected to the current debate on digital democracy's affordances and the rethinking of its theoretical framework remains to be seen.

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Notes

- ¹ An overview of the empirical research on online deliberation is given in (Strandberg and Grönlund 2018).
- ² For a critique on this republican pessimism towards digital democracy see (Thiel 2017, p. 194ff).
- ³ In this respect, Hannah Arendt's famous book *The Human Condition* can serve as a reference point (Arendt 1989). Following Rousseau, Arendt introduces the concept of private intimacy here as a retreat from social pressures which becomes necessary since modern society has specifically destroyed the ancient separation of private and public life. According to this reading of modernisation, the digital revolution only completes a transformation process which had begun much earlier.
- ⁴ For a similar analysis of collective actions without using the term of connective actions, see (Margetts et al. 2016).
- ⁵ This kind of balance of democratic antinomies may not be confused with the golden mean or the desirable middle between two extremes. Instead, the theory of democratic antinomies rather demands the coexistence of the opposing democratic principles without signifying that the extremes are evil and the middle ground is good. For the same reason, democratic antinomies do not configure a web of dichotomies, because democracy is not about an either/or, but a both/and of its opposing principles.
- ⁶ The following prototypical principles of political populism match with the relevant studies by Mudde (2007), De La Torre (2015), and Müller (2016).
- ⁷ In this respect, the concept of ethnopluralism (Spektorowski 2003) proves that the (democratic and antinomian) principles of plurality and unity can also be merged in an undemocratic manner.
- ⁸ For this aspect, see the early (Bobbio 1987).
- ⁹ This is particularly striking with regard to the notion of representation that, in the digital age, is about different options for creating "democratic presence" and "exercising agency" rather than about substituting the will of the people. For this, see (Castiglione and Pollak 2019). In the same volume, Urbinati (2019) claims to distinguish (elective) representation as a form of political decision linked to formal political institutions and hierarchies, and (non-elective) representation as judgement linked to the informal claim-making by ordinary citizens. In this respect, digitisation is associated with the increase of citizens' permanent political presence and, therefore, with a kind of democratic citizenship that breaks down the traditional diarchy of claim-making and decision-making.
- ¹⁰ This thesis thereby corresponds to an amalgamation of the two basically antinomian principles of quality and quantity—not in the sense that antinomy III itself is sublated but that the two conflicting principles coexist.
- ¹¹ Of course, in digital democracy, too, there must be a consensus on the legitimate ways in which the infinite and ultimately insoluble conflicts are dealt with (antinomy IV).
- ¹² The worldwide advance of popular referendums and citizen petitioning through new information and communication technologies is documented, e.g., in (Vayenas 2017).
- ¹³ A plea for the lot as the most democratic device of selection can also be found in (Manin 2010; van Reybrouck 2016).
- ¹⁴ In this context, Bennett et al. (2018) call the processes of citizen interaction with institutions the necessary "interface" of digital democracy shaping both self-government and the quality of public life.

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