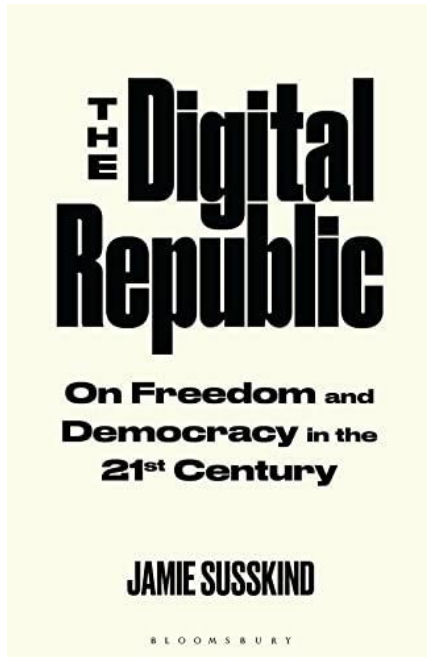


THE DIGITAL REPUBLIC: ON FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Susskind, J (2022) *The Digital Republic: On Freedom and Democracy in the 21st Century*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.



In *The Digital Republic*, Jamie Susskind, a lawyer specialising in commercial, public and information law, argues that digital media needs greater regulation. Moving beyond merely pointing out the increasing power of tech corporations, Susskind argues that the digitalisation of everyday life affects politics very fundamentally, influencing how we conceptualise and enact justice, democracy, equality, property and liberty. Today's defining political relationship lies between the corporations who design and control digital technologies and individuals who have little choice but to live with these commercial

technologies, which exert dominating power (Susskind, 2022: 29). 'Digital republicanism' is the proposed response, with 'republicanism' as the alternative to individualism.

This book is quite long at 400 or so pages, but it is readably written and clearly laid out in ten shortish chapters. The first five chapters outline some problems with digitalisation and sets up the case for digital republicanism. Republicanism is presented as a political ideal to resist technological domination, which comes in the form of permanent supervision, analytics, computational ideology, and the consent trap. Digital technologies are insufficiently governed in the ‘mild West’, with regulation mostly left to the tech giants themselves, while relying on individual users’ consent. The second five chapters present quite familiar regulatory principles and solutions, highlighting expansive European regulation offered by General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), but also some measures that might counter digital tech’s power. Susskind calls for more openness and transparency, suggests that antitrust measures may restrain giant monopolies, and highlights threats posed by runaway algorithms and uncontrolled social media.

Digital information systems should be regulated because they have become just as fundamental as any other economic, legal or political institutions. Giant commercial tech companies like Facebook profit massively by collecting user data, intrusively monitoring individuals’ lives and influencing people using targeted information. Digital media filters and shapes our knowledge and habits, decides what is publicly said or unsaid, incubates popular memes and clichés, moulds our interests, and influences our preferences and desires. Digital media influence through both presence and absence, promoting desirable images, while filtering out ‘the ugly, the chubby, the old, and the shabby’ (Susskind, 2022: 47).

Some of the material reprises arguments advanced in a previous book (Susskind, 2018), particularly those surrounding the ‘consent trap’. Technically speaking, consent is needed for corporations or states to gain access to individuals’ personal data. However, consent is a trap because a great imbalance exists between huge media corporations (or states) and the individualistic nature of consent. Consent is a trap because clicking ‘I agree’ fails to protect individuals. Nobody can possibly understand or remember everything they have agreed to, and ‘meaningful consent would still be

impossible even if every consumer were a highly trained lawyer with an insatiable lust for reading boring legal documents’ (Susskind 2022: 109). Imbalances of informational power are further complicated by the increasing intelligence and autonomy of digital technology itself. Meanwhile, the power of virality reinforces majority rule ‘by fostering thumbs up/down culture’. Minority and inconvenient truths are relegated to irrelevance by algorithms that will not show us what we do not want to see (Susskind 2022: 28). We aren’t simply being grumpy when we find the digital world unpleasant. Digital media amplifies unpleasantness because of negativity bias - unpleasant things capture our attention more intensely than neutral or positive things (Op.cit: 49). Artificial intelligence automates and exacerbates inequalities, baking them in and deepening them.

Susskind correctly observes that digital corporations currently enjoy too much of a free pass with the prevailing reliance on self-regulation. They will resist greater control, since they profit hugely from current practices, even when these spread disinformation, hate and terrible ideas. Hence, more transparency, control and regulation are needed. The digital is indeed political, and politics should drive technology, instead of technology determining our politics (Susskind 2022: 231). Susskind’s discussion of politics compares libertarian coders with digital oligarchs, before discussing the merits of European-style technocratic regulation. Digital republican regulators might experiment with ‘deliberative mini-publics’ to improve public policies. They could introduce some checklists of do’s and don’ts to try to improve practices, or resort to fines or disqualification. Corporate lobbying can be exposed and prosecuted (Op.cit: 243). In the United States (US), in particular, the abuse of lobbying and ‘Political Action Committees’ are clearly scandalous and not something to be emulated (Ibid.).

Bearing in mind that this review is for the development education community, and not legal regulators, I would not particularly recommend this book as a starting point for interrogating digitalisation and democracy, or finding solutions to its ills. It seems quite reasonable to argue that a body of law ought to be developed to regulate the wilds of tech and protect individuals,

but other books with similar scales of intellectual ambition offer more cogent critiques. Examples include Safiya Noble's (2018) critique of digital technology from the perspective of oppression and racialised discrimination, or Shoshanna Zuboff's (2019) lengthy treatise on surveillance capitalism that brings the very status of humanity into question. A similar, though terser offering might be the critical philosopher Byung-Chul Han's short provocation on the 'infocracy' (2022).

Susskind describes his small 'r' republicanism as being opposed to market individualism, but he remains oddly ambivalent about state and public intervention. Digital republicanism's non-market ideal is based on Philip Pettit's theory of republicanism as abstract 'non-domination'. Pettit opposes the idea of a social structure that theoretically enables one group to exercise unaccountable power over others. Following Pettit, Susskind resists domination in principle, judiciously clarifying that he has nothing against Mark Zuckerberg himself, it is the idea of people like Zuckerberg that is problematic (Susskind 2022: 7). But in today's world, economic hyper-inequality means that a few individuals have come to embody structural characteristics. Twenty-six individuals control the equivalent wealth to an entire half of humanity – some four thousand million people (Oxfam, 2019: 10). The latest Oxfam report, 'Survival of the Richest', on global inequality highlights the fact that the two richest people in Ireland command 50 per cent more wealth than the poorer half of the population (Oxfam, 2023). The UK's Cambridge Analytica scandal showed that money can secure the deployment of algorithmic prediction and manipulation, and that these tools have already been misused to secure Brexit, elect Trump and manipulate around 200 other elections around the world (Cadwalladr, 2018; Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison, 2018; Channel 4, 2018).

The political ideal of republicanism has often been used as a façade by elites engaged in authoritarian rule and power hoarding. Susskind approvingly invokes the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, Adam Ferguson's indignant spirit of the republican citizen (2022: 24), yet he admits that the practice of republicanism (with a small 'r') has often diverged from its

own assumptions. What is the ‘indignant spirit of republicanism’ really, if it doesn’t do what it says on the tin? In *Decolonizing Politics*, Shilliam (2021: 7) argues that democratic theory is fundamentally ‘filtered through colonialism’, including its racialised logic. Ferguson’s Enlightenment indignation offered a way for imperial powers to make sense of how to rule over ‘their’ colonies.

Pettit’s ‘republicanism with a small r’ is a theoretical currency that enjoys a robust circulation amongst theorists who theorise from positions of imagined, but not experienced oppression. It is not invoked by poorer, racialised, gender or class-discriminated people seeking liberation from actual forms of domination. More diverse critical voices argue that ‘too much of (US) American democratic thought has gotten divorced from the concrete struggles that citizens face. This will not do. Democratic theory ought to serve democratic actors’ (Brettschneider 2002: 6-8). Brettschneider points to an urgent need to debate how much space democracies should afford to antidemocratic supremacist identity politics and the militias who travel with them, since these forces have become more mainstream and are boosted by digital social media (Op.cit.:14-16).

Farrell (2022) asks what political price must be paid for the theoretical satisfaction of being not-dominated? The US political system, with its absurd reliance on courts, is far from an ideal system for preventing domination. Ferguson’s republicanism was, after all, an exercise in political rhetoric and a paean to global imperial and colonial rule. Non-domination and self-mastery in principle required mastery and supremacy in practice, together with the exploitation of discrimination for profit. Susskind’s digital republicanism fails to free the republic’s citizens from the oppressive social structures questioned by Noble (2018).

Susskind’s ‘politics of non-domination’ rests on choosing ‘European’ norms as a preferable option to the greater evils of unbridled US commercialism or Chinese authoritarianism (2022: 208). Some of the suggestions are quite sensible, but European GDPR legislation is a behemoth

that can hardly be implemented, while remaining grossly inadequate to address what is arguably a greater threat - of global information disorder. This is a practical rather than a strictly ideational or institutional problem, subverting democratic politics in practice. Manipulative 'post-truth' cynicism has deepened public health crises, obstructed environmental and climate action and encouraged the spread of racist, xenophobic and misogynist hatred and violent insurgency. Large technology corporations ought to be regulated, but they are only one major element in a dysfunctional digital information ecosystem, characterised by increasing distrust of government and community institutions and the misuse of journalism and media by a growing number of bad actors and conflict entrepreneurs for cultural, political and financial gain (Couric et al., 2021: 8).

Cynicism and fatalism pervade the inadequacies of liberal, mainstream regulation to control the worst excesses of corporate digital monopolies. Such trends were foreseen, resisted and alternatives built from the very beginnings of digital globalisation. The pragmatic approach to digital non-domination originated not in US republican ideals, but in the practices of global citizenship and digital democracy movements. Civic and non-government organisation (NGO) networks arose in the 1980s, uniting to form the Association of Progressive Communications in 1990. Their vision was shared communications technology for global civil society, to work towards progressive social change on issues of environmental protection, peace and social justice (Hamelink, 1994; Association of Progressive Communications, 2007). Throughout the world, civil society has worked with public authorities, citizens, educational and cultural institutions, within and across both the global South and global North to create and build digital commons as global public goods, to support and nourish democratic life globally. Open Science, Open Education and Open Culture initiatives continue to exist and these deserve far greater recognition and support as essential bulwarks, not only against global corporate monopoly, but many other ills of digital, informational and democratic dysfunction, countering these ills with mutual and democratising empowerment.

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