



Democracy needs an upgrade says Jamie Bartlett

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**Democracy needs an upgrade says Jamie
Bartlett**

Intro [00:00:05] Welcome to OECD Podcasts, where policy meets people. You're listening to our special World in eMotion series highlighting the topics and speakers at the 2019 OECD Forum.

Clara Young [00:00:17] Hi, I'm Clara Young, and today I'm talking to Jamie Bartlett. Until last year, Jamie ran the Centre for the Analysis of Social Media at a think tank called Demos. His most recent book is *The People versus Tech*, which came out last year. So, hello, Jamie.

Jamie Bartlett [00:00:38] Hello.

Clara Young [00:00:39] Good old fashioned democracy is in need of help these days. For one thing, young people are beginning to have a take it or leave it attitude about democracy. The *Journal of Democracy* found that only 30 percent of millennials in the U.S. agree that it's essential to live in a democracy, compared to 75 percent of those who born in the 1930s. Mainstream politics in many countries is giving way to extremism and populism, and people distrust their government. A survey the OECD carried out last year revealed that people feel ignored by their government and they don't trust their government will take care of them when they fall ill lose, a job or have trouble paying their bills and getting by. So, Jamie, how much does digitalisation in the Internet have to do with our current disenchantment with democracy?

Jamie Bartlett [00:01:25] Well, my analysis of all the things that you just described is that it has a lot to do with it. In fact, it's probably the principal driving force beneath these sort of varied trends. I think it is sort of a huge mismatch of expectation between how people experience ordinary life now in the age of digitalisation and smartphones and increasingly smart machines, which is ever more personalised, and governments and democracies, which are still essentially sort of large scale, very slow, nothing ever changes, you never really get your way. And the two things are just constantly clashing. And I think many of the problems that we see today are essentially a result of that incompatibility.

Clara Young [00:02:11] I think in your book, you call it that democracy is analogue, but everything else is digital.

Jamie Bartlett [00:02:17] Yes. Exactly. And the question for many of us is, I mean, how long can a system of government survive when it is so incredibly out of sync with the main technology of the day?

Clara Young [00:02:31] It seems like we need to have a Democracy 2.0 or something like that. I that makes me think of Estonia, which is a country that is very optimistic about what digital technologies aimed blockchain can to do for democracy. Yeah. And in 99% of their public services are open, transparent and online. And they've been using an Internet voting system for their national elections since 2005. Is civic tech a way of fighting fire with fire? When I say fire, I mean all the negative effects of digitalisation, the fake news and the bubbles, the tech bubbles.

Jamie Bartlett [00:03:16] It's definitely one, which is definitely part of it. And I think we often experimentation on this comes in smaller places where it's easier to do. It's definitely easier for a country like Estonia to experiment with putting all public services on a blockchain than, say, the United States, where I mean, it's just frankly, it's not really possible. I'd like to see it, but I don't think it's going to happen.

I think I think to me the answer is really speaking broadly to two-fold. And yes, we have to experiment with new ways of integrating these technologies and the expectations that come with it and how people use them into our democratic systems. To me, I am really worried that there's going to be a push towards more and more direct democracy because people will say, well, for the first time ever since at least since the ancient Greeks, thanks for this small device I carry around in my pocket. We can finally have a pure, direct democracy again and everyone can vote on everything. And I think that's a terrible, disastrous idea. I think it's almost unstoppable as a force. But I think the task is to improve representative democracy through using new technology. That's my thinking. And Estonia certainly try is trying to do that. And we should experiment, too. But also, we're going to have to work out ways of regulating technologies that do not respect national borders, because that's the core problem here, isn't it? Whether it's about where you plunk yourself as a business to pay taxes, how far you respond to legal warrants, the extent to which the police are able to investigate certain crimes that happen online, that's not just going to be solved by putting your public services on a blockchain through civic tech.

Clara Young [00:04:57] It needs cooperation. It needs as many countries as possible.

Jamie Bartlett [00:05:02] Precisely. And even if you can't. Managed that, for example, U.K. police and people don't think about the police as being an important part of democracy, but if you can't enforce the law, you don't really have much of a democracy to speak of. The police, for example, even just in the UK, still operate on a, you know, 50 or so, region constabulary system, which is not really how crime works anymore. But even within the country, there's things that we could do better. And a lot of the answers here might actually also come from the private sector who are going to develop products for us.

Clara Young [00:05:44] What do you mean by products?

Jamie Bartlett [00:05:46] You're more likely to be essentially robbed online or a victim of cybercrime online than you are to be a victim of a crime offline. Hardly any online crime actually gets prosecuted. To me, the answer is going to be ensure in the end we normally resolve these problems of risk through insurance. I think there's going to be an enormous private sector in cyber-insurance rather than just detecting and stopping cyber-fraud. And the private sector rather than governments will be the ones that will develop those products. So, there are certain issues. Another big thing that's coming that's a real direct threat to democracy, obviously, is sort of deep fake technology. What do you trust, Within 10 years I think powerful deep technology, i.e. the ability to make videos look able to say anything you want. It'll just be a cheap app on your phone. Everyone will have one. How are we going to know whether to trust videos or not? There needs to be technologies, commercial technologies that companies buy that can help you verify whether a video is the original video or whether it's a doctored one. I don't want the government doing that. Can you imagine if the government did this? No one would trust it. So it's probably going to be private sector products. So there also needs to be a really vibrant private sector that's going to try to come up with interesting products that will solve some of these problems.

Clara Young [00:07:07] But it seems to me ultimately a little bit unsatisfying to have the private sector come up with all the solutions to these problems. I mean, I think about the EU's general data protection regulation. Is that a model that works that other countries can follow in terms of data privacy and protection?

Jamie Bartlett [00:07:32] Yes, and I'm a big fan of that. And I think it's great. And the reason I think I know I know some small businesses are fed up with it and they're frustrated about the costs that it's imposed on them.

[00:07:40] But when I look at GDPR, I'm thinking ten years down the line, when this law is a bit more mature and we've worked out how to enforce it, we will all be producing exponentially more data about ourselves then, and more personal data and more cross-reference of all data. And it will become vital that there are protections in place. And that's the kind of timescale that these laws sometimes need. So I do think that but the private sector, I think, is going to have a really important role in building products to help people enforce their GDPR rights. And I'm not coming on here to talk about the private sector. I just saw it as a kind of, you know, civic technology's great, but where's all the money going to come from to pay for all of these new products that we need, unfortunately, from the private sector. So GDPR, I foresee that data portability this right you have to go to a company and demand that your data is given to you is going to become the most important right that we have on the GDPR. And citizens are going to need to have ways of enforcing that right very easily. And simply, I want to be able to go to a company and say, hey, company X, can you just go to every single platform, data broker, private sector company that has my data, get it all for me and resell it for me on these terms. I don't want to do that, but I'll happily pay for a company to do that if I take a share of the profits with them. And again, I don't want the governments to do that. I want them to incentivise the private sector to do that. So, I mean, as you can guess, there's so many products and opportunities out here, but I think usually the governments need to help set the rules of the game for that. So, this is why GDPR is good, because I think it potentially sets the regulations up in a way that the private sector can then come in and produce and provide some of these services. But by the way, I do think that ultimately governments are going to have to pass better laws. I mean, if anything, and there's more international cooperation, that's the one thing. But this is going to be part of it.

Clara Young [00:09:48] I want to rewind a bit and go back to a time where the Internet was a source of euphoria for democracy, back in the Arab Spring of late 2010 and 2011. At that time, it seemed like social media was allowing people in Tunisia, Egypt and at the beginning Syria to rise up and organise themselves against repressive regimes. Now, what brought people together seems to divide us now. So, what's changed since then and what can we possibly salvage from that time?

Jamie Bartlett [00:10:28] Nothing's changed. We just we've become less naive about it. I mean, I think there was a certain naiveté in 2010-11 and, you know, in the decades even before that, that the only important thing about democracy that mattered really was the ability to freely associate and free expression. These were the core democratic principles. And therefore, it's obvious that if you create an information platform where people can do this, it's going to be good for democracy. It's a very sort of naive way of looking at it. And I think what we've what we didn't foresee is all the other things that make democracy work, like control, the ability to enforce laws, the ability to enforce election law, for example, the ability to police, the ability to raise taxes are also affected by digital technology. But we didn't think about that. We were just obsessing over free speech. So incredibly stupid of us to not foresee. I think it's not that anything's changed. I think that as digital technology is sort of invaded all these other aspects of how democracy runs, I think we've begun to see that there's so many other bits to this story that we ignore. Not to mention, of course, are probably a very basic naiveté, which was that big, powerful, autocratic, centralised governments would also be able to co-opt this technology and use it to their own ends.

Clara Young [00:12:04] So let's talk about that, uh, some recent elections and referendums that have been upended by data science and social media micro-targeting. How did that happen for people who have not followed the ins and outs?

Jamie Bartlett [00:12:22] Yeah, I suppose it happened very slowly and then very quickly. I mean, we've been doing micro-targeting for a long way. More and more data has been collected about people for 50 or 100 years. The difference now, of course, is the scale of that data and the sophistication with which you can target smaller and smaller and smaller groups of people through digital platforms. And without going into so much detail to bore people, what Cambridge Analytica did in 2016. It's not particularly sophisticated, it's not particularly unique. I mean, a lot of different political parties are doing something similar, which is to say collect as much data as you can about people, buy a lot of it from large data brokerage companies, profile them as much as possible, learn about them as much as you can, and then design content to target ever smaller groups of them. Now, I think we've missed the point on this story and the subsequent stories about it. To me this is not about whether they won the election, but Donald Trump. There's not actually any clear evidence about the effectiveness of some of these techniques. What matters more, I think, is that we are at the beginning of a very significant change in how elections are being run. Cambridge Analytica is just the beginning of the story. In 20 years' time, every single voter in this country will receive a different message from everybody else. And it will be dynamic. It will probably be automated. It will be coming through your smart fridge rather than your phone. And we have not worked out how the laws we've set up to govern elections would work in a world where 60 million voters receive 60 million unique, personalised, automated, dynamic messages.

Clara Young [00:14:20] So goodbye, broad-based political discourse, debate.

Jamie Bartlett [00:14:31] Exactly, which is what elections are supposed to be. Broad based political debate, a public conversation. But if everyone receives a completely different message, a completely different set of news, completely different advert to everybody else, what is the common ground on which we discuss politics together? And how do we hold a politician to account if they have made millions of different promises to millions of people, subtly different promises to different people? How does the regulator check 150 million messages properly?

Clara Young [00:15:01] Isn't that where artificial intelligence will be indispensable? The only weapon left to us to ensure the legitimacy of democratic elections?

Jamie Bartlett [00:00:17] [00:15:17] Yes. Ironically, it will be. The defensive systems that will be scanning through these adverts, which is OK if there's a public register of those adverts, if you can't get the data to look at all the ads that people are receiving or you've got no way of monitoring the news feeds of different people because of either privacy concerns or its proprietary, or Facebook doesn't want to share that with the UK government, possibly for good reason, then you can't check it.

[00:15:47] So we got to come up with solutions to this problem, because I just think that this is not about cheating. It's not about one election or another. It's about the direction of travel and how are we going to make sure people trust an election when everyone's receiving a message through their smart fridge or their goodness knows what they're smart car vacuum cleaner? And you bear in mind, in 2038, let's say

2039. So, 20 years from now, people who are coming to vote for the first time in that election, I mean, think about that. Their baby monitor data, they're gurgling age nought to two is going to be part of a data model.

[00:16:35] All the YouTube videos they've watched from the age of three upwards will be part of the data model that they're targeted political advert will be based on. They won't even understand why they're receiving ads, but they'll be based on a lifetime's worth of data. This is why GDPR is so important, by the way, because if we if everyone actually enforces it properly, that won't happen. But. I'm not so sure. There may also be a problem with inequality between the people that rich people that really enforce that and poor people who don't. But that's another question. But to me, that is that is the these are the fundamental questions about democracy and its future and looking 10, 20 years ahead, I find that more useful than rerunning and refighting the elections of 2016 and whether someone cheated or didn't cheat.

Clara Young [00:17:26] Thanks for talking with us, Jamie.

Jamie Bartlett [00:17:28] Thanks very much for having me.

Clara Young [00:17:30] And thanks for listening to OECD Podcasts. I'm Clara Young. To find out more about OECD work on these issues, check out Going Digital at oecd.org and of course, read Jamie's latest book, *The People versus Tech*.

Outro [00:17:46] Thank you for listening to our weekly podcast. For more on this topic, you can join the debate on the Forum Network at www.oecd-forum. To listen to more OECD Podcasts, you can find us on Spotify, iTunes, Google Podcasts and soundcloud.com/oecd.