

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION
AS DEMOCRATIC MOMENT

UNITOPIA

May 12–14

2022

CALL FOR PAPERS

COLLECTIVELY EXPLORING
THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL
TRANSFORMATION

We work for
tomorrow



CALL FOR PAPERS

UNITOPIA

COLLECTIVELY EXPLORING THE FUTURE
OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AS DEMOCRATIC MOMENT

New forms of information technologies have always been tightly linked with the development of political systems. Even before the emergence of what we call “IT” today, the distribution, selection, and forging of information has been an important element of democratic societies. The emergence of mass media is closely linked to the (in)formation of democratic societies (Marres, 2007).

This is just one way in which contemporary democracies are shaped and influenced by modern technologies. Digitization poses a grand challenge, as it questions and challenges the ways how democratic systems and its institutions are working to this day. New possibilities of reaching voters, enforcing laws, and enabling rights through algorithmic means, but also new forms of potentially overarching state power, e.g. through mass surveillance, call us to investigate the way how digital technologies impact and shape democracy at large. Personalized advertisement and voter information threaten the common public sphere, polarization hampers democratic discourse, algorithmic forms of social sorting create unequal treatment and infringe basic rights.

But the question is not only how digital technologies are threatening or damaging modern democracies (Sunstein, 2009). Rather we want to ask how we can shape digital technologies and the innovation systems that ‘make’ them in a way that could actually benefit our democratic societies. This goes beyond a traditional understanding of politics, raising the question of what processes, infrastructures, and institutions are necessary to enable and foster democratic systems in the digital age.

At the upcoming UNITOPIA conference we therefore aim to open a discussion about the risks, but also the potentials that digital transformation brings for our democracies. What forms of regulation, or governance are necessary to align digital technologies with a common good? How would we envision future digital democracies? Which political theory concepts of democracy need to be adapted to the technological development and vice versa? How can we sustain and further develop central premises of democracy in a new socio-technical order? And how could we enable processes to build socio-technical institutions and orders for our future democracies? These are just some questions we want to tackle at the conference. We understand the digital transformation as a democratic moment. It forces and enables us to rethink and reconceptualize how we understand democracy in the digital age.

HOW CAN WE SUSTAIN
AND FURTHER DEVELOP
DEMOCRACIES CENTRAL
PREMISES IN A NEW
SOCIO-TECHNICAL ORDER?

CALL FOR PAPERS

UNITOPIA

COLLECTIVELY EXPLORING THE FUTURE
OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

UNITOPIA 2022 IS STRUCTURED IN THREE THEMATIC THREADS

Participation in technology design & values

Value by design is a longstanding concept in the discussion on IT and social values (Nissenbaum, 1998). The design of digital infrastructures and algorithms influences how social interactions are played out. This goes from interface design to the inner workings of machine learning applications. At the same time, participation in technology design has been identified as an important factor in democratizing technology (Nowotny, 2003; von Schomberg, 2014). This raises questions how participation in building the digital structures of contemporary democracies can work, and what pitfalls there are. How can we translate knowledge into digital tools, and how can we communicate the workings and impacts of digital technologies to a broader audience?

Digital infrastructures & democracy

Democracies and democratic processes are not detached from their material and technological infrastructures. Contrary, digital infrastructures are at the very core of democratic institutions such as public broadcasting, the legal system, or citizen engagement. Filter bubbles create severe challenges for the public media system (Pariser, 2012), sentencing decision systems are raising the question of how to mathematically encoded concepts like fairness or justice (Angwin et al., 2016), and predictive models in the health sector are becoming a basis for political decisions (Barton et al., 2020). Yet, digital infrastructures can also become tools for better, and more democratic decision processes. We want to explore how democratic institutions are or could be changing based on the ongoing digital transformation and what this means for our understanding of democracy at large.

Envisioning the future and policy of digital transformation

Technology is not only changing our understanding of contemporary democracies, but also evokes imaginaries of a potential future (Jasanoff, 2005). As such, asking how the future of our (digital) democracies is envisioned on a macro level becomes important. Different forms of AI regulation, for example, show different ideas of democratic values and futures. How do we want to regulate, i.e. restrict and enable, digital technologies? How do we envision governance through digital technologies? Foresight processes of possible development paths (Schot & Rip, 1997), but also the analysis of existing imaginaries are important in regard to answer these questions.

UNITOPIA 2022
WANTS TO COLLECTIVELY
EXPLORE CHALLENGES
AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR
DIGITAL DEMOCRACIES
ALONG THESE LINES.

We welcome contributions from various disciplines and fields, such as, but not limited to, political science, computer science, law, sociology, economics, science and technology studies, information science, etc.

CALL FOR PAPERS

UNITOPIA

COLLECTIVELY EXPLORING THE FUTURE
OF DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

INFORMATION

UNITOPIA 2022 will be hosted as physical event at the University of Graz from May 12-14, 2022.
If it should not be possible to hold the conference as a physical event, the conference will be postponed.

The conference language is English.

Please send an abstract (500 words max., indicate which track) to: unitopia@uni-graz.at.

Deadline: March 3, 2022

You will receive information on the acceptance of your contribution until April 13, 2022.

All contributions will be published in the online proceedings of the conference.
Selected contributions will be offered to participate in a special issue/edited volume of the conference.

Abstract guidelines

The abstracts should contain:

- a short introduction to the topic
- the central question tackled in the contribution
- the theoretical background
- applied methods (if applicable)
- results and how it contributes to an ongoing discussion

Since the conference understands itself as an interdisciplinary event, these are just some guiding bullet points.
However, we highly encourage you to keep a diverse audience in mind when formulating the abstract.

Further information: <https://unitopia.uni-graz.at/>