Digital Democracy

By Margrethe Vestager, European Commission

From the Greek agora to universities and public squares, democracy thrives in open spaces. In places where people can discuss, disagree, contradict each other and find compromise. This is as true today as it has always been. Only the places changed, from between walls to behind screens.

Today, technology gives us possibilities to pursue the many goals of our democracy. The goal of an inclusive society where people are not left out even though they are not well off or if they live in deserted areas. The goal of having access to world-class education or healthcare.

But with the technological opportunities also come huge risks, that very concretely materialise in our lives. One of the most obvious is the risk of our democracy being privatised and fragmented into our own little spaces, our own social media feed, without contradiction or fact-checking. The risk to think that the world is just as large as what you see online. Or small, rather. And turn away from the plurality of opinions that keep our democracy alive.

This is the background which underpins our work to develop a European way to digitalisation. Across all digital policies, we work to ensure trust, humanity and fairness.

With the GDPR, we set the course for democracy to catch up with technology. It underlined the logic that we as citizens have as much rights online, as we do offline. The right to be forgotten, to own and control our data, to choose if we want to be tracked or not.

More recently, our Digital Services Act states our right to a free yet safe online space, where we are protected from illegal content while having our freedom of speech preserved. It makes platforms responsible for taking down illegal content - like incitement to hatred. It still obliges platforms to notify users when removing posts with a chance to complain if they disagree.

Strong democracies are also built on strong, open and fair marketplaces. Because with every choice that we make as consumers, we have a say. Protecting this choice is exactly the purpose of the Digital Markets Act that we also proposed a few months ago. It sets clear obligations for the large digital platforms to keep the gates of the online marketplaces open. So we as customers still have choices.

Preserving our democracy online is also core in our work for a secure, trustworthy and human-centered Artificial Intelligence. Our proposed legal framework suggests to ban all uses of AI that go against our fundamental rights and values. For instance, AI systems that would use subliminal techniques to cause physical or psychological harm to someone. Or any form of social scoring app that would rank people based on their social behaviour.

Together, all our proposed initiatives contribute to shape our European digital citizenship. Today, European citizens share common digital rights. Our idea is to go one step further and make all European citizens have access to the same type of digital identification. A single trusted and secure online “ID card” that would make it easy for any of us to enroll in a university, open a bank account or access healthcare in an EU country that is not our own. All this, ensured that our data will not be misused.

One thing is certain: offline just as online, democracy needs open public spaces where everyone can engage whilst respecting our common rules.

Technology gives us the chance to participate in our democratic debate as never before. As long as we keep the online space open for free dialogue and multiple choice. And as long as we keep in mind that there is so much more to life than what we can see online.

Margrethe Vestager is the Executive Vice President of the European Commission for a Europe Fit for the Digital Age. This article was first published in the Greek newspaper "Real News," in collaboration with the Greek Representation to the European Commission and the Democracy & Culture Foundation.