

**PENNE, ITALY
4-7 FEBRUARY 2020
1ST INTERNATIONAL EVENT**

**"IS IT ALREADY A DIGITAL DEMOCRACY?" - ON TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS
AND HOW THEY SHAPE DEMOCRACY**



**SUMMARY OF THE INTERVENTION**

**SPEAKER:** **Mrs Nina Celli – Responsible of ProVersi Platform**

**Pro \ Versi, an educational tool for the era of digital democracy**

The spread of the network and the increasingly widespread use of digital tools have profoundly and irreversibly changed the relationships between people and between them and the institutions, redesigning links and spaces, creating new audience areas of information, communication and debate. This has also significantly influenced political relations, exponentially expanding the traditional places and tools assigned to it. On the other hand, as Stefano Rodotà wrote, "politics has always used the techniques gradually available for communication, organization and control purposes". Thus information and communication technologies are redefining relationships within the system of representative democracy; the space of politics - no longer confined to buildings - becomes potentially infinite. Previously, and not only in politics, there was a vertical type of communication, where the communicator represented the authority and the audience accepted his message passively. Today this picture has changed, communication has become horizontal, equal, equal between the involved subjects, and the need for representatives and mediators is less and less felt.

There is an almost unanimous agreement in considering it necessary to rethink, in the light of the new context briefly outlined, the very concept of democracy and recalculate the mode, depth and extent of participation, in order to adapt it to the new demands of the technological era and to be able to give a response to the growing disaffection of citizens towards politics. Just as - for about twenty years - there has been unanimity in believing that the network is the indispensable tool for creating a form of democracy in step with the times, since it gives the possibility of creating a government from below, offers greater transparency and sharing, promotes collective knowledge, insofar as it is shared, superior and more exact (since subjected to greater verifications) with respect to the knowledge of the individual; popular involvement increases. From this interventions can arise as close as possible to the real needs and interests of citizens, new and wider spaces of political communication; a strengthening of the public debate, an improvement of the decision-making processes and thus filling the democratic deficit perceived above all in the European context. In this context, the concept of digital democracy was born in its various meanings, in particular the "direct" one, in which citizens participate in the legislative process without delegating political representatives, and the "participatory" one, which does not necessarily provide for the reduction of the role of political representatives, but rather the increase in the participation of all citizens in the development and general direction of politics. The citizen, called to participate directly in the political choices, not only in the application phase, but also in the decision-making one, feels empowered and is led to learn more about political issues.

However, if we have been talking about the great aspirations linked to the expansion of the use of the network in the political exercise for some decades, with all the excellent purposes described above, it cannot be said that these have been fulfilled, neither at national level nor European. As we read in the study of the year 2018 *The perspectives of digital democracy in Europe*, “Compared to a decade ago, the high expectations and optimism of considering the Internet as a panacea/remedy for political disenchantment and as a way to create new transnational spaces for political communication 'from below' have waned ”. There is still a lot to do, especially by the world of politics. The study also reads: “One criticism commonly addressed to EU-wide digital participation practices is that they are a successful civic tool, but not a convincing political tool. The theme that seems to reappear is that projects that involve digital participation could bring personal added value to the participants and could favor the strengthening of the community's capacities, but they are lacking in terms of direct or even indirect political impact ".

In more general terms, there are several critical issues affecting digital democracy, the resolution of which would benefit its affirmation both from a social and political point of view. There is, at least in Italy, a widespread mistrust of information systems, for their possible vulnerability, which could result in the manipulation of votes, the violation of the right to secrecy of the vote and user privacy. Some argue the inadequacy of these tools for making complex decisions, both for the lack of competence that some may have on certain areas and for the lengthening of times. Furthermore, it is probable that not all citizens can devote yourself the necessary time and commitment and this would **risk** the efficiency and adequacy of the legislative measures that could result.

Among the critical issues, the so-called digital divide persists, which is not only structural and of the access, but above all cultural and digital literacy, for which there would be a segment of population more vulnerable to manipulation and control processes and the exercise of power by small groups. Freedom and manipulation in this area are extremely close. It is difficult to identify systems that can protect the network from these pitfalls. Alongside technical interventions to guarantee the efficiency and security of IT systems, therefore, it becomes necessary to promote a critical approach to the network. The choices made in the context of direct democracy can have consequences for an entire community, therefore it is absolutely necessary that citizens are properly informed, but this represents another problematic aspect: in most cases there is no guarantee regarding the quality of the on-line information, since anyone can insert unverified content, avoiding the principle of responsibility. In addition, we are all exposed to the risk of manipulation, since the application of censorship or filtering by those who manage the information can have wide effects in shaping opinions. The same abundance of data and the consequent difficulty of discerning and selecting sources, in terms of reliability and credibility, represents a risk not secondary to that of manipulation of information and participation systems. Precisely from the awareness of these critical issues in the world of digital information, the ProVersi web site (**the platform**) was born in the year 2015.

**Pro \ Versi, comparing opinions**

The infinite availability of information on the web has produced progress and accelerations in many areas, but has also opened the doors and given visibility to opinions and theories not always characterized by rationality and truthfulness, facilitating the phenomenon of fake news and post-truths. Knowledge has lost its filters of relevance, accreditation and authoritativeness. Before the web, knowledge was less "democratic", the availability of information and knowledge was more limited and selective, but there were scales, sometimes implicit, that assigned value to theories and opinions born from academies, institutions, research environments. In the era of horizontal communication, these scales of values have jumped, the traditional judgment parameters have dissolved, the references have taken on a secondary value. On the web it is possible to find confirmation to any opinion, even the most extreme, even if "suspended" and not very referenced. Thus, if on the one hand the network has proved to be a powerful incentive/leverage for democratization and cultural growth, on the other hand a sort of "tribalization" of knowledge is underway, no longer certified or organized, which tends more to flatter the expectations of the user, its assumptions and values, which send it to reflection and discernment, keeping it away from confrontation with contrary opinions, in a sort of intellectual comfort zone.

The ProVersi site was born precisely as a response to this need to give credibility and authority to information on the net. It is a tool aimed at stimulating the dialectical confrontation and the user's critical spirit, invited not only to correct information, but also to actively contribute to the improvement, enhancement and research materials. In this way, we would like to restore value to dialogic and collective research, because we believe that opinions thus gained can allow better decisions closer to the public interest. So we hope to contribute to giving strength to an obsolete value: critical capacity, and to make the web the tool that will allow us to catch the enormous potential of collective knowledge construction.

In ProVersi we only deal with particularly controversial public interest topics, on which there are favorable and opposite positions. The reader finds the most authoritative opinions on the topic debated, with a mirror comparison between the pros and cons. There is no winner, there is no opinion that prevails over another. We provide a sort of mapping of the topic, so that the user can get a personal idea, starting from the subjective and rational processing of the information acquired, all referenced and accompanied by sources. Our web site also offers a calm and rational space in which authors with public or scientific representativeness, or their reviewers, can intervene directly and improve the quality, precision and depth of the dialectical comparison that our editorial team reconstructs for each theme. In fact, our texts are not static: after publication, third-party authors can intervene with new contributions and additions. These interventions aim to improve, update and further articulate the debates exposed, enriching them with new points of view.

**Pro \ Versi: the debate written at school**

The call for a critical approach to information technologies, research, dialogue and correct and referenced information, to stimulate selective and discerning skills is all the more important when we talk about young people. From this inclination towards discussion, debate, and thanks to the many requests received from the teachers, who are a substantial part of our readers, the idea arose to promote education projects for debate in schools. Thus was born the Pro \ Versi project: the debate written at school. The heart of this new section of the site is a declination of the debate methodology in line with our nature: the written argumentative debate, a form of debate that is not a substitute, but a complementary one and if we want to be preparatory to the oral one. This teaching method is capable of encouraging access to knowledge among young people, the acquisition of a greater awareness of civil responsibilities, active participation in democratic processes, usually welcomed with enthusiasm by students because of its playful-competitive key. The argumentative debate written between schools is a comparison between written texts presented by two different teams that express themselves on a specific theme, one team supporting the Pro arguments and the other the Cons arguments, with the help of the software offered by the Pro \ Versi web site . We believe that the use of this technological tool is an added value of the project, since it allows you to exploit a dimension more suited to the habits of young people and at the same time helps them to approach critically to information and communication technologies. The project invites students to make a different use of digital writing (usually linked to social interactions), making it a regulated literary form, which stems from research, from the selection of literary and iconographic sources, from interpretations and reworkings, in a collaborative way. Thus they develop the ability to argue and counter-argue within a project that has primarily a didactic-formative value. It is, for the students, a precious opportunity for democratic confrontation, in which one competes in full compliance with the rules, expressing their own ideas without overriding those of others; creativity and the ability to work in a team are developed. We believe that promoting young people debates on topics of public interest, but also on issues such as citizenship, equality, tolerance, respect, increases the capacity for democratic participation, the spirit of initiative and of enterprise, which among other things are objectives to be pursued in all disciplinary areas, as recalled in some European documents, such as the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of the year 2006, relating to key competences. The need to introduce similar projects in schools arises from multiple considerations, ranging from strengthening students' skills to creating a strong link between civic issues and school curricula. This can stimulate interest in issues concerning the community, preparing young people to take an active role in decision-making processes and, why not, in future politics, finally equipped with dialectical tools suitable for constructive confrontation. In the certainty that this would benefit immensely the impact and effectiveness of digital democracy in the decade that has just begun.

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