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RESEARCH BRIEF

Putting Flourishing First: Applying Democratic Values to Technology

by E. Kinney Zalesne and Nick Pyati | April 13, 2023

When product design teams gather at the whiteboard in big-tech office parks and startup garages around the world, they ask themselves: How will customers use our technology? Is it better than our competitors'? How much money can we make? But one question that's rarely asked: does our technology advance human flourishing?

It is an essential question. By now, we are used to the lofty and enormously ambitious mission statements of tech companies: to "organize the world's information" or "make the world more open and connected" on a scale of billions of human beings. Over the last few years, we've also gotten used to the gap between those ideals and some of the darker consequences of technology for our civil society, self-worth, and sanity. How will our technology serve us better if we aren't asking whether it advances human flourishing? And, if we do ask the question, how will we find the answer?

In a new white paper by Harvard professor Danielle Allen and her colleagues Eli Frankel, Woojin Lim, Divya Siddarth, Josh Simons, and Glen Weyl entitled "The Ethics of Decentralized Social Technologies: Lessons from Web3, the Fediverse, and Beyond," the authors not only ask this question but offer a powerful framework for answering it. Drawing on the accumulated wisdom of democratic societies, the authors show that the values of democratic governance that have promoted human flourishing can be translated into a rubric for judging new technologies.

In this short research brief, we unpack and comment on the four-step logic at the core of their case. Ultimately, their argument demonstrates the power and the challenge – and above all, the urgency – of placing human flourishing at the center of technology governance.

Assertion #1: The purpose of technology is to advance human flourishing.

The white paper's opening assertion, that the purpose of technology is to advance human flourishing, is both familiar and radical. Our generalized, historical understanding of technology is typically as a force for progress and the improvement of the human condition, a perception perpetuated by those high-minded corporate mission statements. Yet, we also know that the companies that build real products are private and profit-maximizing, and that their commitments to their shareholders generally do not include human flourishing. To assert unequivocally that human flourishing is the purpose of technology is to cut through this dissonance.

This point is foundational. Society can't steer the technology that shapes our lives if we don't first declare its purpose. In this century, the ambition of tech companies is matched by their proven ability to alter every facet of life. With this power, they will accelerate our flourishing or our degradation. It is an indispensable first step to say out loud that we prefer to flourish.

Assertion #2: Human flourishing requires autonomy.

The whitepaper next makes the classical liberal argument that human flourishing flows from individual autonomy. Such autonomy includes both negative liberties, where we are "protected in our person, our property, our conscience, our expression, and our associations," and positive liberties, where we "govern ourselves in our private lives and share in the governance of our public lives." Ultimately, "human beings are creatures who need to chart their own courses in life," the authors write. "Humans thrive on autonomy, the opportunity for self-creation and self-governance." We cannot flourish without it.

This insistence on autonomy has obvious geopolitical significance, as autocrats around the world try to strike a bargain with their citizens: prosperity at the price of freedom. The parallels in technology are the products that offer us effortless convenience and pleasing distraction at the price of our ability to understand what's happening to us or to make a meaningful choice about whether to participate.

But the path to individual autonomy is not always obvious. To use an example from the paper, decentralized social technologies may provide a counterweight to the autocratic, centralizing tendencies of governments and big-tech platforms, but that very decentralization can also splinter users and make them more vulnerable to exploitation. We need tools for understanding whether technologies are more likely to promote and defend our autonomy or to take it away from us.

Assertion #3: Autonomy requires the values of democratic governance.

The third step of the white paper's logic locates those tools in the values of democratic governance, the values forged in the 250-year-old crucible of lived democracy.

Specifically, the authors propose "power-sharing liberalism," which is democracy "renovated" with the adoption of five core values: (1) difference without domination, (2) individual and community self-determination, (3) egalitarian pluralism, (4) connective and coordinating capacity, and (5) collective ownership of the assets needed for shared governance. In the paper and in her forthcoming book, *Justice by Means of Democracy*, Allen expounds on each of these values. Together, they are an elegant distillation of the lessons of democratic practice that goes below the surface features (elections, checks and balances, etc.) to get at the conditions that allow for autonomy and therefore are essential for human flourishing.

Assertion #4: The core values of democratic governance can be used to assess new technologies.

The final logic step is the biggest and most creative. Here the authors translate each of the five core values of power-sharing liberalism to a "techno-normative concept" that guides the design of technologies. For example, self-determination in democratic governance maps to user control, while egalitarian pluralism's equivalent is decentralization. These analogies are essentially the adapter kit that allows us to apply our democratic governance values, and the stores of experience society has gained fighting for them, to the technology-defined space where we increasingly live.

Will the adapter kit work precisely and predictably? Surely not. As Allen and team say, the framework must be refined and strengthened with each test case. But it is a powerful opening bid

in the quest to govern emerging technologies using society's deepest wisdom. We haven't seen any other effort come close.

The real challenge is to get users of technology – which is to say, all of humanity – engaged in the process of refining and applying frameworks like the one the white paper proposes. It is often said that the most important office in a democracy is that of citizen, and if we want technology to contribute to our flourishing, we must take our responsibility as users just as seriously. The longer we don't assert our values in technology, the longer those values will be chosen for us. For all the astonishing innovation and new capabilities we've received from big tech, we've paid a high price in personal privacy, teen mental health, local news infrastructure, public civility, and more. Before we let another set of degrading impacts roll right over us, we must reassert that technology belongs to us; we do not belong to it.

The good news is that we have centuries of hard–earned democratic wisdom to bring to the virtual, digital, augmented meta universes that define our new reality. But the need is now. While governance dithers, new technologies continue to emerge. If we wait much longer, tech will be governing us rather than the other way around.

Authors

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