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Piotr Rutkowski
Civitas University
Piotr.rutkowski06@gmail.com

DEMOCRACY AS TELECRACY?

Bernard Stiegler on the Erosion of Democracy[1]

ABSTRACT: This paper examines Bernard Stiegler's concept of *telecracy* as a structural threat to democracy, analyzing its epistemological, political, and ontological consequences. Stiegler argues that modern democracies are increasingly dominated by media and algorithmic perception management, transforming active citizens into passive consumers. Drawing on classical political thought – from Plato's critique of democracy's susceptibility to demagoguery to Aristotle's emphasis on civic virtue – the study highlights how contemporary information systems undermine deliberation and participatory governance. The shift from citizen to consumer, driven by *drive-based capitalism* and *psychopower*, erodes democratic engagement, reducing politics to a market-driven spectacle rather than a space for rational discourse. The paper further explores how *noetic entropy*, the decline of critical thinking, results in a political landscape shaped by algorithmic control rather than informed decision-making. Ultimately, it argues that democracy's survival depends on reclaiming the public sphere from media-driven manipulation through an 'ecology of attention' – restructuring digital and educational institutions to promote reflective political engagement. Without such reforms, democracy risks degenerating into a technocratic system where sovereignty is nominal and political agency is merely a symbolic gesture. The study contributes to political philosophy and media theory by critically evaluating the contemporary transformation of democratic subjectivity under telecratic conditions.

Keywords: democracy, telecracy, Bernard Stiegler, citizen, consumer

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy and telecracy represent two opposing models of political and social organization. Democracy is founded on active citizenship, reflection, and concern for the common good. Telecracy, on the other hand, as Bernard Stiegler argues, is a system in which media and algorithms govern perception, reducing individuals to mere information consumers. As Stiegler elaborates, telecracy names not simply the dominance of television but a regime in which the temporalities of broadcast and digital media structure political life, colonizing attention and reshaping the very conditions of democratic practice.[2] One may interpret this less as a mere pathology than as a mutation of democracy – its institutions remain, but their orientation drifts toward spectacle and market logics.

A citizen is conscious, capable of deliberation and political co-creation, whereas a consumer is driven by short-term impulses, passively absorbing narratives constructed by the media.[3] Contemporary informational and market mechanisms increasingly restrict the space for reflective civic participation, replacing it with the logic of political marketing and emotional mobilization.[4]

This study adopts an interpretive and philosophical methodology within political science. It is worth emphasizing at the outset that the author's approach does not pursue explanatory regularities or causal laws; rather, it situates itself in the hermeneutic and critical tradition, in which concepts are analyzed as historically mediated, discursively contested, and politically charged. In this sense, the very notion of 'method' must be treated cautiously. Gadamer reminds us that understanding is not reducible to technique, but unfolds as a hermeneutic event, conditioned by historically effected consciousness (wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein) and by the dialogical nature of interpretation.[5]

From this perspective, political realities – democracy, telecracy, citizenship – are not objective entities existing independently of our interpretive practices, but phenomena disclosed through language, history, and institutionalised forms of meaning.[6] Thus, what follows should be read less as an attempt to 'measure' the erosion of democracy than as an interpretive interrogation of how its meanings are transformed under contemporary technological conditions. To put it differently: the aim is not to produce empirical generalizations in the positivist sense but to interpret the shifting semantics and practices of democracy in light of critical theory and hermeneutic philosophy.

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2 B. Stiegler, *La Télécratie contre la Démocratie*, Paris 2006, pp. 11-25.

3 B. Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, Stanford 2010.

4 Z. Bauman, *Consuming Life*, Cambridge 2007.

5 H.G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London 2004, pp. XX-XXIV; pp. 291-306.

6 S. Filipowicz, "O fundamentalnej roli interpretacji," *Politeja*, vol. 12, no. 4 (36) (2015), pp. 191-204; M. Kassner, "O pierwszeństwie interpretacji przed ontologią. Przyczynek do krytyki realizmu w filozofii nauk społecznych," *Teoria Polityki*, no. 3 (2019), pp. 123-145.

As Horkheimer argued, critical theory refuses the neutrality of 'traditional theory' and insists on the situatedness and partisanship of thought.[7] In this spirit, the present analysis acknowledges its own normative horizon: concern for democracy as an unfinished project, vulnerable to new forms of domination but also open to reinterpretation. The interpretive orientation of this study thus entails a double gesture: diagnosing the structural transformations of democracy through concepts such as psychopower and drive-based capitalism, while also interrogating the adequacy of these very categories for grasping our present condition.

It may be asked whether such an approach risks excessive abstraction. The answer is twofold. First, interpretive political science – as emphasized by Bevir and Rhodes[8] and developed further in methodological debates[9] – sees political inquiry as inseparable from narratives, beliefs, and traditions. Second, the philosophical register is not detached from political practice but allows us to discern the deep grammars of contemporary power. In this sense, hermeneutic analysis becomes a critical resource for understanding how democracy is reshaped by media infrastructures, algorithmic governance, and consumerist logics.

The methodological stance, then, is interpretive rather than explanatory, critical rather than descriptive, hermeneutic rather than positivist. It situates itself within a tradition of political thought that treats interpretation as prior to ontology,[10] while acknowledging the risks of relativism by engaging normative concerns with democracy and its possible futures. Ultimately, the method employed here is less a fixed procedure than a philosophical attitude: a willingness to confront inherited concepts, to question their limits, and to read them against the grain of contemporary technological transformations.

Integrating these perspectives with interpretive political science, this study examines how media-driven telecracy restructures democratic engagement, transforming active citizenship into passive consumption. Under this governance, political agency is increasingly shaped by pre-constructed narratives rather than deliberative participation, blurring the distinction between citizen and consumer. While Gadamer's hermeneutic insight suggests that individuals co-create political meaning, Horkheimer's critique warns that media hegemony suppresses this autonomy, embedding structures of domination. This study, therefore, interrogates whether democracy is still possible in contemporary societies or has been subordinated to telecracy. Can an individual simultaneously be a citizen and a consumer, or are these roles inherently contradictory? This analysis confronts the classical ideals of democracy with their contemporary

7 M. Horkheimer, *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*, New York 2002, pp. 163-167; pp. 188-243.

8 M. Bevir, R.A. Rhodes, "Interpretive Theory," in D. Marsh, G. Stoker (eds), *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, Houndmills 2002.

9 M. Kułakowska, "Interpretive Theories in Political Science," *Teoria Polityki*, no. 4 (2020), pp. 31-41; S. Filipowicz, "Idola Theatri. Interpretacja i zagadnienie realizmu," *Teoria Polityki*, no. 3 (2019), pp. 103-121.

10 M. Kassner, "O pierwszeństwie...".

transformations, as exemplified by Stiegler's notion of telecracy, which replaces the citizen with the consumer at its core.

It seems also necessary to note that what follows does not aspire to describe democracies or telecracies in their empirical detail. The analysis works with models, with heuristic figures that dramatize tendencies rather than mirror statistical realities. In that sense, the 'rational citizen' or the 'affect-driven consumer' are not sociological types but conceptual devices.

This is hardly unusual. Plato's wary account of democratic excess or Rousseau's ideal of the general will were themselves abstractions – orientations, not portraits of everyday practice. One might even say that democracy has always been theorized in this way: through ideals illuminating its aspirations and failures at once. Telecracy, as Stiegler deploys it, belongs to the same register. It sharpens a critical contrast, rather than cataloguing media usage.

Of course, such abstraction invites objections. No citizen is purely rational, and no consumer is wholly irrational. But that is precisely the point. The models exaggerate to reveal. They disclose how democratic participation mutates once emotions are no longer dispersed and occasional, but captured and modulated by algorithmic infrastructures.

AT THE ROOTS – THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

From its very inception, democracy has evoked both enthusiasm and skepticism. In ancient Greece, it was based on the direct participation of citizens in governance, yet even then, its susceptibility to political and social degeneration was recognized. Plato regarded democracy as one of the lowest forms of government, in which incompetent individuals gained power by manipulating the emotions of the masses.[11] His critique centered on the idea that excessive freedom leads to anarchy, paving the way for tyranny. According to him, a democratic society inevitably descends into chaos, as the dominance of opinion over knowledge allows demagogues to prevail over competent individuals.[12]

Aristotle adopted a more pragmatic approach. He argued that democracy can be stable if its citizens adhere to political virtue and make decisions oriented toward the community's interests. However, he also observed that if institutional mechanisms fail to ensure the quality of decision-making, democracy degenerates into ochlocracy – a form of mob rule in which short-term interests and emotional reactions replace rational deliberation.[13] For him, democracy required a balance between freedom and a hierarchy of competence. Contemporary systems, in which media shape political

[11] Plato, *The Republic*, Cambridge 2018, pp. 555-557.

[12] Ibid., pp. 562-564.

[13] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R.C. Bartlett, S.D. Collins, Chicago 2011, pp. 113-125.

preferences, may be interpreted as a realization of these concerns. Rather than genuine citizen participation in debate, we often witness passive reception of political messaging and the subordination of democratic processes to market logic. In this light, Aristotle's insistence on civic education and safeguards against the dominance of populist rhetoric retains its force.[14]

Modern reflections on democracy have shifted the focus to the relationship between the individual and the state. Drawing on natural law, Locke defined democracy as a means of protecting individual liberty, emphasizing the separation of powers and representative institutions. His conception rested on the belief that governance by elected representatives allowed for effective state management. Yet contemporary representative democracy increasingly faces the challenge of citizen alienation, manifesting in declining voter turnout and decreasing social engagement.[15]

In contrast to Locke, Hobbes saw democracy as a threat to state stability. In *Leviathan*, he argued that in the state of nature, individuals pursue their interests at the expense of others, leading to chaos and violence. His remedy was a strong, sovereign state capable of ensuring peace and order, even at the cost of restricting individual freedoms.[16]

Rousseau offered a counterpoint to Hobbes. In *The Social Contract*, he emphasized that true democracy requires the active participation of citizens in decision-making processes rather than mere formal representation.[17] Delegating power to representatives, he argued, weakens civic spirit and alienates society from authentic political influence.[18]

Contemporary democratic systems, shaped by media and informational control, increasingly diverge from these classical ideals. Deliberative processes are displaced by algorithmic perception management, making rational decision-making more difficult. In this sense, media-driven democracy – where public debate is subordinated to market mechanisms – can be read as a realization of concerns voiced already by Plato and Aristotle: the erosion of citizen competence and the growing sway of populist rhetoric simplify and commercialize politics.

TELECRACY AS A CHALLENGE TO DEMOCRACY – BERNARD STIEGLER'S PHILOSOPHICAL DIAGNOSIS

Contemporary democracies are increasingly subject to the influence of telecracy – the dominance of media over deliberative processes. Bernard Stiegler, drawing on the philosophies of Simondon, Derrida, and Deleuze, argues that media not only manipulate

[14] Ibid., pp. 148-153.

[15] J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and a Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. and introd. I. Shapiro, New Haven 2008, pp. 102-115.

[16] T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Oxford 2014, pp. 218-225.

[17] J.J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, Cambridge 2019, pp. 58-62.

[18] Ibid., pp. 72-78.

social perception but also limit the capacity for reflective thinking, transforming democracy into a system of perception management.[19]

A key aspect of this diagnosis is the concept of psychopower (psychopouvoir) – the ability of media institutions and corporations to control attention and shape public opinion.[20] Stiegler defines psychopower as the capacity of industrial media to seize consciousness itself, by modulating attention, memory, and desire through technical systems of transmission.[21] In this sense, psychopower radicalizes Foucault's account of biopower: it no longer regulates bodies but penetrates the psychic apparatus, producing what Stiegler later calls a proletarianization of the mind.[22] Rather than supporting democratic deliberation, modern digital media subordinate individuals to algorithmic marketing mechanisms, leading to polarization and the erosion of collective reflection.[23]

This phenomenon is further exacerbated by drive-based capitalism, which directs social attention toward the immediate gratification of impulses, thereby eliminating the ability for long-term reflection on the common good. For Stiegler, contemporary capitalism degenerates into what he terms *capitalisme pulsionnel*, an economy no longer sustained by sublimated desire but by the incessant stimulation of drives and compulsions. This shift entails a systematic short-circuiting of libidinal investment, producing subjects whose horizons collapse into instant consumption and whose capacity for political reflection is eroded. As a result, populism and affective reactions increasingly replace rational decision-making.[24]

In a world dominated by telecracy, knowledge becomes a commodity, and reflexivity gives way to passive consumption of media content. Media distort public opinion and weaken society's capacity for critical self-reflection, a phenomenon Stiegler terms noetic entropy – the gradual exhaustion of the collective ability to think critically.

Stiegler argues that telecracy is not merely a political threat but also an epistemological and ontological one. It distorts democratic mechanisms by transforming citizens into passive content consumers rather than active participants in public debate.[25] As a result, democratic procedures cease to function effectively, as voters lack the conditions necessary for making informed decisions.

To counter these processes, Stiegler proposes the reconstruction of an ecology of attention – a transformation of the media system to support critical thinking rather than weaken it. He calls for turning media into a space for reflective deliberation

[19] B. Stiegler, "Democracy, Consumerism and Industrial Populism," in D. Dwivedi, V. Sanil (eds), *The Public Sphere From Outside the West*, London 2015.

[20] B. Stiegler, *Taking Care...*, pp. 12-15.

[21] Ibid., pp. 83-98.

[22] B. Stiegler, *States of Shock: Stupidity and Knowledge in the 21st Century*, Cambridge 2015, pp. 135-145.

[23] B. Stigler, *Taking Care...*, pp. 20-23.

[24] Ibid., pp. 12-16, 49-53.

[25] B. Stiegler, *La Télécratie...*, pp. 110-132.

and reforming educational institutions to counteract the erosion of citizens' cognitive competencies.[26]

Stiegler's reflections align with the tradition of democratic critique dating back to Plato and Aristotle, but he extends this critique to the realm of technology and media. While Plato feared the influence of demagogues and Aristotle emphasized the necessity of political virtue, Stiegler identifies digital media as a new power instrument destabilizing democracy. Contemporary political systems increasingly diverge from the deliberative ideal, with algorithmic perception management becoming the primary force shaping public opinion.[27] Telecracy, then, is not merely a symptom of democracy's crisis but also a challenge to its future. If democracy is to survive, decisive action must be taken to reclaim spaces for reflective deliberation and limit the influence of media over political mechanisms. Without such efforts, democracy risks transforming into a system controlled by technocratic elites, where the notion of rule by the people becomes a façade.[28]

Contemporary cases illustrate how telecracy materializes in practice. Consider the Cambridge Analytica scandal, in which psychographic profiling techniques were applied to harvest the personal data of up to 87 million Facebook users without consent to tailor micro-targeted political messages.[29] What is at stake here is not merely a breach of privacy but a reconfiguration of the public sphere itself: what once was a shared political discourse became fragmented into opaque, personalized streams. One may interpret this as a paradigmatic expression of psychopower – the management of perception and desire through algorithmic infrastructures. Yet the question lingers: was Cambridge Analytica an exceptional scandal, or merely the visible symptom of a systemic shift in political communication?[30]

Social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter/X function as laboratories of attention. Their architectures facilitate emotional mobilization, often privileging outrage and affect over reasoned argument. The so-called 'pseudo-public speech'[31] in these environments exemplifies how political utterances appear simultaneously public and private, eroding the distinction between open deliberation and targeted persuasion. This erosion resonates with Stiegler's warning of noetic entropy: a depletion of society's critical capacities through overexposure to modulated stimuli. Still, one might ask: are these platforms inevitably corrosive to democracy, or do they retain the potential to host new forms of digital deliberation? The ambiguity remains constitutive.

The role of artificial intelligence further complicates this picture. Campaigns increasingly deploy automated chatbots capable of simulating interaction with voters.

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[26] Ibid., pp. 145-173.

[27] Ibid., pp. 195-219.

[28] B. Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, Cambridge 2011, pp. 10-35.

[29] J. Heawood, "Pseudo-public Political Speech. Democratic Implications of the Cambridge Analytica Scandal," *Information Polity*, vol. 23, no. 4 (2018), pp. 429-434.

[30] M. Hu, "Cambridge Analytica's Black Box," *Big Data & Society*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2020).

[31] J. Heawood, "Pseudo-public...".

In some contexts, these bots function as digital canvassers, delivering personalized arguments at scale. The practice raises unsettling questions about authenticity: can one speak of deliberation when one's interlocutor is not a citizen but an algorithm? Moreover, the rise of deepfakes – synthetic videos capable of placing political figures into fabricated situations – introduces new risks of epistemic destabilization. Such artefacts may not only misinform but corrode the very trust in evidence and testimony upon which deliberative democracy relies.

At the same time, one must resist technological determinism. The same techniques can, at least in principle, be redirected: AI could facilitate citizen assemblies, aggregate dispersed voices, and support participatory budgeting. Whether these possibilities remain marginal or become central depends on political will, institutional design, and public literacy.

The problem, then, lies not in technological sophistication alone but in governance. Cambridge Analytica thrived in a grey zone of regulatory neglect; social media platforms continue to operate under the logic of extraction and monetization, and AI applications consistently outpace ethical oversight. Each case exemplifies the structural dynamics of telecracy, in which political communication is increasingly shaped by opaque algorithmic processes. And yet, one might interpret these same dynamics as a call to reimagine democratic infrastructures, to reclaim spaces of collective reflection. In this sense, empirical examples serve less to confirm Stiegler's dystopian tone than to open a horizon of critical interrogation: can democracy absorb and transform these techniques, or is it fated to be hollowed out by them?

THE EROSION OF DEMOCRACY IN THE AGE OF TELECRACY

Classical conceptions of democracy emphasize active citizen participation, deliberation, and decision-making based on rational discourse. Telecracy – the dominance of media over the political sphere – fundamentally alters this model, subordinating political processes to market and algorithmic logic.[32]

As Stiegler notes, telecracy weakens citizens' capacity for reflective political participation, replacing deliberation with manipulative mechanisms of perception management. Democracy transforms into spectacle: citizens assume the role of passive consumers of media narratives while real power shifts to those who control the informational sphere.[33]

The core threat lies in the redefinition of the citizen – from a conscious political subject to an individual susceptible to emotional modulation and algorithmic filtering. This shift fosters polarization and erodes public debate. Stiegler terms this phenomenon noetic entropy: a decline in society's collective ability for critical thought.[34]

[32] B. Stiegler, *La Télécratie*..., pp. 17-32.

[33] B. Stiegler, *Taking Care*..., pp. 17-23.

[34] Ibid., pp. 110-132.

Modern technologies amplify the effect by creating closed informational bubbles that reduce the confrontation of diverse viewpoints, simplifying discourse and fostering radicalization[35]. Telecracy thus distorts opinion formation and contributes to the gradual disappearance of collective reflection on the common good.

It also blurs the boundaries between the public and private spheres. Emotions, beliefs, and lifestyles become raw material for media engineering aimed less at truth than at maximizing engagement.[36] Political decisions are increasingly shaped by impulses rather than reflection. Power under telecracy no longer engages citizens in genuine deliberation but subjugates them to mechanisms of psychopolitical influence.[37]

As a result, the very notion of sovereignty is redefined. In a democratic model, popular sovereignty implies genuine political participation. In a telecratic system, sovereignty is formally maintained, yet in practice, control rests with those who govern the flow of information. The system increasingly resembles a modern oligarchy in which citizens lose the capacity to shape decisions.[38]

The solution is not rejection of technology but its reconfiguration toward reflection and deliberation. Stiegler calls for an ecology of attention – a reform of media systems to support conscious debate rather than manipulation.[39] The survival of democracy in the age of telecracy demands new forms of participation rooted in media literacy and institutions that cultivate reflective citizenship. Without such measures, rule by the people risks being supplanted by algorithmic governance and media-driven control.

TWO CULTURAL-POLITICAL MODELS – BETWEEN ACTIVE PARTICIPATION AND PASSIVE CONSUMPTION

The concept of citizenship has evolved throughout history, shaped by political systems and prevailing social values. In ancient Greece, the citizen was identified as an active participant in political life, with their role defined by engagement in communal affairs. In *The Republic*, Plato argued for the necessity of subordinating citizens to the rule of philosophers, whom he regarded as the only individuals with access to absolute truth.[40] Excessive freedom, he warned, leads to chaos and, ultimately, to tyranny.[41]

Aristotle offered a more pragmatic vision of the citizen – as an individual capable of rational participation in public life and guided by political virtue. Yet he also warned that if democracy fails to ensure the quality of political decisions and the moral competence of its citizens, it degenerates into ochlocracy – mob rule driven by emotional

35 B. Stiegler, *States of Shock...*, pp. 42-66.

36 Ibid., pp. 145-170.

37 Ibid., pp. 195-215.

38 Ibid., pp. 45-83.

39 Ibid., pp. 110-135.

40 Plato, *The Republic...*, pp. 473-480.

41 Ibid., pp. 562-568.

impulses rather than rational deliberation.[42] It is worth recalling that in classical Athens, democratic participation was fueled not only by rational deliberation but also by collective passions – fear, pride, resentment. Plato's anxiety about demagogues and Aristotle's concern with ochlocracy illustrate that the emotional dimension of politics has never been absent.

In modernity, the concept of the citizen shifted toward an individual whose fundamental rights should be protected by the state. Locke viewed the citizen as the beneficiary of a legal system that guarantees liberty and property.[43] Hobbes, by contrast, emphasizing humanity's natural tendency toward conflict, portrayed the citizen as a subject who must submit to sovereign authority to maintain order and security.[44] In The Social Contract, Rousseau stressed the necessity of active participation in shaping laws and policies, warning against the dangers of social alienation in representative democracy.[45]

Despite these theoretical differences, a common thread emerges: the citizen is both a bearer of rights and a participant in communal responsibilities. The ideal model is a conscious citizen who combines institutional loyalty with a commitment to civic engagement. A fully realized citizen cannot be merely a beneficiary of political rights or a passive participant in electoral processes; rather, their role encompasses an active commitment to the common good and continuous engagement in communal affairs. The classical philosophical tradition, beginning with Aristotle, defined the citizen as an individual whose moral and political excellence is fulfilled through active participation in the *polis*.[46] Rousseau expanded upon this ideal, emphasizing that a truly free citizen must actively partake in formulating the general will, the foundation of legitimate authority.[47]

The contemporary model of citizenship, however, is increasingly threatened by a shift from civic engagement to consumer-driven participation. The transformation of the public sphere, analyzed by Bauman and Baudrillard, reveals a decline in civic virtue and a growing tendency to perceive citizenship through the lens of personal consumption rather than collective responsibility.[48] Stiegler takes this argument further, contending that modern capitalism systematically undermines the cognitive and deliberative capacities necessary for responsible political engagement, reducing the citizen to a reactive consumer manipulated by media and economic impulses.[49] Modern reality fosters the model of *Homo consumens*, in which the individual is defined primarily

[42] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*..., pp. 110-115.

[43] J. Locke, *Two Treatises*..., pp. 103-110.

[44] T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*..., pp. 208-215.

[45] J.J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*..., pp. 56-62.

[46] Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. by M. Deslauriers, P. Destrée, Chicago 2013, pp. 39-43.

[47] J.J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*..., pp. 62-66.

[48] Z. Bauman, *Consuming Life*...; J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society. Myth & Structures*, London–Thousand Oakes–New Delhi 1998.

[49] B. Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth*..., Stanford 2010, pp. 85-90

by purchasing power and market participation. Bauman describes consumer society as a space where identity is shaped by market mechanisms rather than communal bonds.[50]

Stiegler highlights the role of drive-based capitalism, which, through mechanisms of psychopower, restricts individuals' ability to reflect and think autonomously.[51] He identifies a process of noetic entropy – the decline of critical thinking due to the dominance of affective impulses over rational deliberation.[52] Baudrillard deepens this diagnosis, arguing that consumer society constructs hyperreality, where symbolic values are commodified and stripped of their original meaning.[53] The consumer exists in permanent uncertainty, forced to continuously adapt their identity to shifting market rules.[54]

From a cultural perspective, *Homo consumens* emerges as a figure shaped by media and digital technologies, which govern perception and influence individual choices. Consumption ceases to be merely an economic transaction and instead becomes a mode of existence dictated by market strategies.[55] This shift affects social relations by replacing traditional forms of community participation with transactional interactions. Stiegler argues that telecracy amplifies this mechanism by reducing individuals to passive recipients of media and consumer content, weakening social bonds and eroding the public sphere.[56]

This analysis suggests that the modern citizen increasingly assumes the role of a consumer whose primary engagement with society is through the market rather than active participation in communal affairs. The dominance of market values over public deliberation leads to the fragmentation of society and the marginalization of civic engagement.

This transformation has given rise to a new dominant figure: the consumer as an atomized individual whose primary motivation is the relentless pursuit of personal gain, accumulation of wealth, and expansion of possessions. Unlike the classical citizen, embedded in communal responsibilities, the consumer exists in a self-referential cycle of desire, driven by an insatiable need to acquire more. As Baudrillard observes, consumption is no longer about fulfilling basic needs but about maintaining social position through the endless accumulation of status-signifying goods.[57] Bauman extends this critique, emphasizing that *Homo consumens* is shaped by a market logic that detaches individuals from collective obligations and directs them toward private pursuits.[58] In

[50] Z. Bauman, *Consuming Life...*, pp. 52-83.

[51] B. Stiegler, *La Télécratie...*, pp. 45-67.

[52] Ibid., pp. 110-132.

[53] Z. Bauman, *Globalization. The Human Consequences*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 55-82.

[54] Ibid.

[55] P. Rutkowski, "Homo Cōnsūmēns. Kulturowy model człowieka w epoce zglobalizowanego kapitalizmu kognitywnego," *Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis, Studia Politologica*, vol. 22, no. 297 (2019), pp. 38-50.

[56] B. Stiegler, *La Télécratie...*, pp. 150-173.

[57] J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society...*, pp. 49-54.

[58] Z. Bauman, *Consuming Life...*, pp. 75-92.

such a model, individuals cease to engage in meaningful democratic deliberation as their interactions become transactional, motivated by personal benefit rather than solidarity or concern for the common good.

Stiegler links this phenomenon to the mechanisms of psychopower, which hijack cognition and replace reflection with market-driven impulses. Rather than shaping the world through political engagement, the consumer merely reacts to external economic stimuli.[59] This shift erodes the foundation of civic responsibility, replacing the active participant with an individual whose only stake in society is dictated by market forces, reducing political agency to an illusion of choice within consumer capitalism.

Ultimately, the emergence of the citizen-consumer marks a transformation in the nature of political participation. Instead of shaping the community through conscious engagement, individuals passively consume pre-packaged narratives and media-constructed representations of reality.[60] This model stabilizes consumer capitalism and telecracy, eliminating critical reflection and genuine social involvement from the public sphere. Deliberative democracy gives way to market-driven mechanisms, and the citizen is reduced to a consumer of reality – one who, rather than participating, merely consumes ready-made narratives and symbolic gestures of politics.

CITIZEN OR CONSUMER? TRANSFORMATIONS OF SUBJECTIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACY

The distinction between citizen and consumer is not merely a terminological issue but a fundamental question concerning the structure of contemporary democracies. Classical political theories defined the citizen as an individual engaged in public life, capable of rational deliberation and committed to the common good. Participation was both a right and a duty, ensuring the stability of the democratic system.[61] Yet under consumer capitalism and mediocracy, the model of the citizen has gradually been displaced by that of the consumer – an individual oriented toward market-driven choices rather than active political engagement.[62]

The contrast between the rational citizen and the affect-driven consumer is presented here as an analytical model rather than an empirical description. From antiquity onward, democratic life has always involved a combination of reason and emotion. The aim is not to deny that emotions were present in Athens or in modern democracies, but to stress how their weight and systemic integration change under conditions of algorithmic governance.

The dominance of consumerist logic leads to a redefinition of democracy itself. In the classical model, the citizen made political decisions based on rational reflection and

[59] B. Stiegler, *Taking Care...*, pp. 85-90.

[60] Ibid., pp. 200-219.

[61] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics...*, pp. 112-122.

[62] B. Stiegler, *La Télécratie...*, pp. 20-36.

communal deliberation. Today, however, mediocratic and market mechanisms reduce politics to a product, and the citizen to a consumer of political services who selects between pre-constructed media narratives. What matters is less actual influence over decision-making than loyalty to political brands and superficial identification with lifestyle choices.[63]

This shift is reinforced by telecracy. Mass media and digital algorithms replace political decision-making with immediate affective responses, weakening the foundations of deliberative democracy.[64] In this context, telecracy is not a neutral communication tool but a mechanism of domination that subordinates politics to marketing principles and the logic of capital.[65]

The transition from citizen to consumer has far-reaching implications for democracy. The classical concept of politics assumed that the citizen not only exercised rights but also actively participated in shaping social norms.[66] In the consumerist model, however, these norms are no longer the result of deliberation but are produced within the political marketplace – decisions made not by citizens but by corporate and technocratic elites who define the boundaries of available choices. Stiegler describes this as psychopower, emphasizing that media and information technologies do not merely inform society but actively shape its perception of reality and its ability to act.[67] Consequently, political decisions become responses to emotional stimuli provided by media and market structures.

The fundamental opposition between the citizen and the consumer is best understood through their relation to the public sphere and the notion of responsibility. The classical citizen, rooted in Aristotelian thought, is defined by active participation in shaping the collective order, where politics is seen as essential to human flourishing (*eudaimonia*).[68] By contrast, the consumer, as conceptualized by Baudrillard and Bauman, operates within a framework where individual satisfaction and material accumulation supersede communal obligations.[69] This divergence is evident in their approaches to the common good: while the citizen ties well-being to the community, the consumer treats society as a marketplace of transactional relations. Stiegler argues that this is not merely an ideological shift but a structural reconfiguration of cognition, in which psychopower shapes individuals to prioritize immediate gratification over long-term civic engagement.[70] As a result, while the citizen cultivates a sense of duty toward the collective, the consumer disengages from political life, reducing democracy to pre-packaged options rather than a space for deliberative agency. As Bauman suggests, this leads to

63 Z. Bauman, *Consuming Life...*, pp. 52-82.

64 Ibidem, pp. 42-63.

65 Ibidem, pp. 72-83.

66 J.J. Rousseau, *The Social Contract...*, pp. 54-58.

67 B. Stiegler, *States of Shock...*, pp. 40-60.

68 Aristotle, *Politics...*, pp. 35-41.

69 J. Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society...*, pp. 47-52; Z. Bauman, *Consuming Life...*

70 B. Stiegler, *Taking Care...*, pp. 83-88.

the erosion of solidarity, subordinating collective goals to private consumption, undermining the fundamental structures of democratic life[71] and strengthening telecracy.

What is historically novel is not the presence of emotions in politics, but their algorithmic capture and modulation. Telecracy does not invent affective politics; it industrializes it, transforming dispersed passions into calculable, manipulable variables. In this respect, the citizen–consumer opposition highlights not only different normative models but also the historical mutation of affect itself into a programmable resource.

This transformation of the citizen into a consumer also alters the functioning of democratic institutions. Instead of spaces for deliberation and negotiation, democracy becomes a marketplace of political offerings, where parties compete not through substantive debate but through marketing strategies designed to maximize voter support. As a result, political choices increasingly resemble consumer decisions – voters respond to emotional impulses and media narratives rather than an informed analysis of social issues. From a philosophical perspective, this shift signals the gradual degradation of deliberative democracy. Mediocratic mechanisms exploit short-term impulses, weakening society's ability to formulate a shared political vision.[72]

The citizen and the consumer are not merely different social roles but antagonistic models of subjectivity that shape contemporary democracies. Political consumerism displaces deliberation, replacing it with a media-driven spectacle that erodes political agency and reduces democracy to a system of perception management.[73] In this way, democracy forfeits its core function as a mechanism of participation. The citizen is recast as a consumer of political products – defined by symbolic identity markers but deprived of real agency. If left unchecked, this process risks pushing democratic societies toward systems governed by algorithms and corporate mechanisms of influence, eliminating genuine pluralism and civic subjectivity.

BEYOND STIEGLER: CRITICAL REMARKS AND FURTHER CONCERNS

Stiegler's notion of telecracy – formulated in 2006 in the context of television – has only gained urgency in the age of smartphones, social networks, and algorithmic infrastructures. He argued that contemporary media short-circuit political processes and effectively *ruin democracy by short-circuiting the normal mechanisms of politics and destroying the foundations of citizenship*.[74] In other words, real-time streams of televised and digital content turn politics into spectacle, an endless just-in-time adjustment of politics to public opinion. Citizens are assimilated as a passive audience rather than an active polity. One may interpret this as a condition in which laypersons can no

[71] Z. Bauman, *Globalization: The Human Consequences...*, pp. 57-62.

[72] B. Stiegler, *La Télécratie...*, pp. 145-170.

[73] B. Stiegler, *The Decadence...*, pp. 5-32.

[74] B. Stiegler, *La Télécratie* ..., pp. 23-27, 204-205.

longer meaningfully engage the cultural and political spheres that shape their lives. Stiegler's term *telecracy* names this regime of spectatorship. The diagnosis – provocative in 2006 – seems sharper today. But it raises a fundamental question: who governs in a telecracy?

The intuitive answer points to corporate media owners, economic giants, or political spin-doctors. Yet the machinery of algorithms and data-driven platforms is diffuse, functioning through opaque feedback loops rather than top-down commands. Perhaps no single actor orchestrates the whole. As Zuboff argues, the hidden 'puppet masters' are the imperatives of surveillance capitalism, not the code itself. Profit maximisation and behavioural control generate a form of automated governance, a power operating through non-human decision-making processes[75]. Telecracy may thus be understood less as the rule of moguls than as the rule of machines – algorithms tuned to capture attention and monetize every moment. But the answer should lead the other way. One is tempted to ask: is anyone in control, or is capital's axiomatic logic the true sovereign? Deleuze and Guattari illuminate this: capitalism functions as a global axiomatic, subsuming forms of life into a single market logic.[76] Indeed, the notion of capitalist axiomatics offers a sharper lens: the logic of capital codes every channel, such that form (instantaneity, ubiquity, monetisation) outweighs content.[77] The critique thus shifts from media barons to structural programs of a hyper-industrial society. The unsettling thought is that reality is mediated by an algorithmic megamachine pursuing its own expansion. Resistance proves elusive because to contest telecracy is to contest a system of desires and techniques on which we ourselves depend. The media and algorithms recalibrate ceaselessly to commerce, often without a guiding human hand. Telecracy, then, is not a conspiracy of barons but an emergent property of hyper-industrial society, where marketing has become *the central function of social development*.[78] The unsettling answer to 'who governs?' is that a system governs – everyone and no one at once. The networked character of digital telecracy means influence is dispersed, modulated by corporations, state agencies, political opportunists, and fringe communities alike – all within an ecosystem where signals rather than narratives drive reactions. Seeking a 'prime cause' is perhaps futile.

Still, it would be one-sided to depict new media only as tools of domination. Smartphones and personalized feeds colonize every idle moment, constraining imagination and exploiting archaic drives.[79] Infinite scrolls, autoplay videos, and algorithmic recommendations cultivate addiction by design. Yet the pharmakon, as Derrida reminds us, is both poison and remedy. Stiegler himself conceded that the same technologies that

[75] S. Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, New York 2019, pp. 3-17, 376-397.

[76] G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis 1987, pp. 452-458.

[77] G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus...*, pp. 454-459; G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis 1983, pp. 248-252.

[78] B. Stiegler, *Taking Care*..., p. 13.

[79] Ibid., pp. 42-43, 54-57, 72-80, 94-100, 124-135.

threaten democracy could also enable new forms of social bond. This remark invites a more ambivalent perspective. If media can induce apathy, they can also facilitate enlightenment. One cannot deny that the internet has opened unprecedented access to knowledge and horizontal communication. Social media, despite its flaws, has also mobilized protests, spread awareness, and challenged authoritarian narratives. There is, then, an emancipatory promise in digital connectivity.

Stiegler's proposal of 'sociation' points to this promise: the reappropriation of networks by citizens to reconstruct a democratic public sphere.[80] This is not techno-utopianism but a strategy of turning tools of alienation into tools of participation. The question, of course, is how realistic such a project is when corporations monopolize algorithmic infrastructures. Can the remedial side of the pharmakon be activated without naivete? A cautious optimism seems warranted. We should neither glorify media as inherently liberating nor condemn them as irredeemably manipulative. But we should be always aware of a threat of deepening telecracy. It seems clear that a pharmacological approach is needed – one that continuously negotiates between remedy and poison. Media remain arenas of struggle, their effects contingent on design, regulation, and use. A balanced view sees digital technologies as contested terrains: capable of domination, but also open to emancipation. This balance is indeed really tough and seems unattainable – people tend to believe rather in fast, attractive and full of emotions news that the truth that demands rationality, critical thinking and more time. In today's world we see that everything that is fast and easily accessible is tempting, other things that need reflexivity and contemplation, time to be settled and known are marginalized.

A stance vis-à-vis Stiegler's diagnosis is set out here. Broadly, his critique of telecracy appears persuasive and – if anything – even more pressing today than at its inception. Nearly two decades after *La télécratie contre la démocratie*, the tendencies the French philosopher identified have intensified and mutated. The 'proletarianization' of minds – the erosion of savoir-faire and critical memory under media saturation – has fused with algorithmic filter bubbles, deepfakes, and disinformation. The early hope that the internet might yield informed citizens has often turned into its opposite. Here again we encounter Derrida's pharmakon: networks that could enlighten also spawn confusion, echo chambers, and the relativization of truth. Even the conscientious seeker of knowledge risks being ensnared in an overload where abundance itself becomes toxic. This dynamic seems to produce a new kind of telecratic consumer: hyperconnected, yet passive and cynical, isolated in personalized infotainment streams. Stiegler's portrait of *homo consumens* resonates uncomfortably with this present.

This failure is nowhere clearer than in the fate of the deliberative ideal. A paradox lies at the heart of our democratic malaise. Even as we lament the corrosion of public reason under telecratic conditions, we cling to the Habermasian ideal of deliberation – an image of rational discourse, trustworthy information, and good-faith argumentation. Under the glare of consumerist media, however, this ideal begins to appear as a mirage.

[80] B. Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption. Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*, Newark 2019, pp. 18-26; B. Stiegler, *La Télécratie...,* pp. 249-250.

Deliberative democracy demands epistemic and normative conditions that the digital public sphere fails to provide. How can citizens engage in rational debate when their informational baselines are poisoned by disinformation and when algorithmic feeds envelop them in 'opaque, personalized streams' of propaganda? The optimism of the early internet – the dream of countless virtual Agoras – has given way to a harsher reality. Research shows that online forums may enable exchanges of political claims but rarely meet the criteria of robust deliberation: reflexivity is thin, respectful listening is rare, fact verification precarious, and discourse dominated by a vocal few reproducing offline hierarchies.[81] Inclusiveness often masks exclusivity: many voices speak, few are heard beyond their silos. As Chambers observes, the digital public sphere is 'excessively inclusive' in form yet fails to foster collective will-formation, instead splintering into enclaves of like-minded talk.[82] What results is a cacophony simulating public debate without reaching deliberation's demanding standards.

This recognition prompts self-reflection: perhaps the deliberative model was always a noble fiction. Habermas's vision assumed an arena insulated from domination, where citizens could suspend inequalities and reason together. Yet, as Dahlberg argue, this ideal glossed over structural asymmetries.[83] Even before social media, mass democracy rarely resembled a town meeting of equals; under telecratic capitalism, the distance between ideal and reality has widened. Empirical studies of early online forums confirmed the problem: reflexivity, equality, and critique required strict moderation. The Minnesota E-Democracy project, often celebrated, succeeded only by imposing rules and facilitation – an island of civility in a wider sea of chatter.[84] In most cases, unregulated discussion tends toward polarization and slogans monetized as content, not toward reasoned critique. Telecracy thus appears as deliberation's nemesis, thriving on the very vices deliberative theory resists: sensationalism, emotion, and personalization. Habermas warns that citizens are losing *access to trustworthy sources of facts and information* and retreating into privatized bubbles where the public sphere's integrative role collapses.[85] Instead of an open contest of ideas, we face fragmentation: echo chambers fortified against critique, algorithms slicing the public sphere into enclaves where dialogue falters. Deliberation risks becoming democratic theatre – invoked in principle, seldom realized in practice. Yet the failure of deliberation is not explained by structural distortions alone; it also stems from the uneasy relation between rationality and affect.

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81 L. Dahlberg, "The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere," *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 4, no. 4 (2001), pp. 615-633.

82 S. Chambers, "Deliberative Democracy and the Digital Public Sphere: Asymmetrical Fragmentation as a Threat to Democracy," *Constellations*, vol. 30, no. 1 (2023), p. 64.

83 L. Dahlberg, "Rethinking the Fragmentation of the Cyberpublic: From Consensus to Contestation," *New Media & Society*, vol. 9, no. 5 (2007), pp. 832-835.

84 L. Dahlberg, "The Internet...".

85 J. Habermas, "Reflections and Conjectures on a New Stuctural Transformation of Public Sphere," in J. Habermas, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, Cambridge 2023, pp. 43-45, 54-56.

Here is where deliberation and emotion intersect. Empirical studies show that purely 'rational' discussions – dense with facts and evidence – do not necessarily encourage participation. On the contrary, erudite exchanges may intimidate citizens who feel less informed. A recent experiment found that evidence-rich comments increased factual knowledge but dampened willingness to join the conversation, likely from feelings of inferiority.[86] The sobering lesson is that overly rarefied debate risks becoming a technocratic dialogue among the few. By contrast, emotional appeals – a personal story, a heartfelt concern – often invite broader engagement, signaling shared human stakes.

Still, endorsing Stiegler's critique does not entail fatalism. True, the mechanisms of telecracy are insidious, operating at the sub-symbolic level of affect and neural impulse.[87] And yes, citizens are caught in a hall of mirrors where signals trigger reflexes rather than reflection. But acknowledging this is a necessary precondition for counter-action. Stiegler's later work on the neganthropocene and dissensus points to therapeutics of attention and new circuits of individuation.[88] In practice, this could mean demanding algorithmic transparency, reasserting public oversight of platforms, reinventing education to cultivate digital discernment, and constructing alternative networks oriented toward knowledge and philia rather than consumption. The proper response to telecracy is not despair but an effort to reclaim technics for participatory ends. We must, as Stiegler urged, 'take ourselves in hand' – a call for collective agency that is sober about risks yet refuses one-dimensional pessimism.

One's reflections do incline toward a technology pessimist's tone, justified by the evidence. But to foreclose emancipatory possibilities would be a disservice both to theory and to political hope. Thus, while author agrees with Stiegler that our trajectory is toxic for democracy, I contend that these very technologies harbor unrealized potential for new forms of association. The task is to engage and transform the technical milieu rather than submit to it. A hard task to be done, but without belief and consistent work on solutions, we can only surrender to prevailing tendencies and drift along with the current.

CONCLUSIONS

It seems to me that democracy today is less a matter of gradual erosion at the edges than a reconfiguration at its very centre. Stiegler's 2006 thesis of television as a device that 'short-circuited' democratic life still resonates, but one must ask whether his focus

[86] S. Schäfer, P. Muller, M. Ziegele, "The Double-Edged Sword of Online Deliberation. How Evidence-based User Comments Both Decrease and Increase Discussion Participation Intentions on Social Media," *New Media & Society*, vol. 23, no. 3 (2024), pp. 1403-1428.

[87] S. Baranzoni, "After Politics: Governing through Affect," *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2024), pp. 120-142; A. Rouvroy. T. Berns, "Algorithmic Governmentality and Prospects of Emancipation. Disparatenenss as a Precondition for Individuation throught Relationships?," *Reseaux*, no. 177 (1) (2013), pp. 163-196.

[88] B. Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, London 2018, pp. 46-50.

on broadcast media underestimated the dispersive and recursive power of algorithmic infrastructures. The phenomenon has not only deepened; it has multiplied, ramifying across platforms in ways Stiegler himself could not fully anticipate.

What remains, then, is a procedural framework – elections, representative institutions, juridical rituals – that outwardly sustains the democratic name. Yet the substance animating these forms appears increasingly displaced by telecratic logics of perception management and attention capture. Still, is it right to call this mere substitution? Or should we rather interpret it as a reconstitution of political subjectivity itself—where the citizen is not simply eclipsed by the consumer but reassembled under new conditions of algorithmic mediation?

The mechanisms are more elaborate than those Stiegler first analyzed. Algorithmic targeting, data-driven micro-propaganda, automated persuasion, synthetic media – each intensifies what he called psychopower, the colonization of attention and memory. These are not simply distortions of democratic debate; they constitute new infrastructures of governance. Elections persist, yet outcomes are increasingly shaped by visibility metrics rather than policy arguments. Citizens participate, but as audience members of a political marketplace. Under such conditions, democracy risks becoming an aesthetic performance of self-rule, while real power resides elsewhere.

And yet the diagnosis cannot end here. Stiegler insisted on the pharmakon – that technics are always poison and remedy at once. Modern media indeed accelerate noetic entropy, but they also provide channels for new forms of association: petitions, assemblies, experiments in participatory budgeting, even embryonic e-democratic practices. These remain fragile, often co-opted, yet they testify that digital infrastructures are not univocal. One might interpret this ambivalence as the very condition of politics in the digital age: domination and emancipation entangled, requiring continuous struggle rather than a final verdict.

If democracy is to endure, the task is not to nostalgically defend earlier models of deliberation but to renegotiate its ideals under telecratic conditions. This means rethinking citizenship beyond passive consumption, cultivating capacities of critical attention, and designing institutions that slow down perception rather than accelerate its capture. Whether such efforts can prevail is uncertain. But to resign is to accept that democracy has already been replaced. The pharmakon reminds us otherwise: the poison is real, yet so is the possibility of cure. The responsibility lies in activating it.

The task is truly difficult. The regulatory efforts may bring no effect. It demands fundamental work on human condition in the age of immediacy and telecracy's agents (e.g. algorithms, social media). They all are tempting and addictive. In the end *homo consumens* wants quick, entertaining stimuli. To go back to citizen, one needs to form a new *Homo*. This goes back to the question asked by every generation of Critical Theorists – how to change the system? How to awaken the critical stance in people? Many answers have been given, but with little effect. Maybe we should move towards the answer motivated by Foucault's thought and his epistemological displacement – telecracy is a new democracy of our time, consumer is new citizen of our time, anti-politics is politics of our time.

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Piotr RUTKOWSKI – holds a master's degree in political science from the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Warsaw. He is currently a doctoral candidate at the same institution. His research focuses on political theory, political philosophy, anthropology, and psychology, particularly on critical theories – e.g. Michel Foucault's, Bernard Stiegler's or The Frankfurt School. He is especially interested in the transformations driven by modern technologies and their implications for politics.