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## WHO CONTROLS THE BUTTONS?

### Algomorphic Society, Technocracy, and Italian Politics<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** The integration of artificial intelligence and predictive algorithms into political processes marks a profound transformation of governance and democracy. In Italy, the adoption of digital tools by political parties and institutions – such as the Rousseau platform of the Movimento 5 Stelle and La Bestia of Lega – demonstrates how politics is increasingly shaped by algorithmic optimization logics, reducing the space for traditional democratic deliberation. This study examines how AI's role in politics is not always driven by genuine needs but often by external pressures and the imperative to conform to technological modernization models and it explores the risk of a digital technocracy, in which decision-making power progressively shifts from representative institutions to predictive systems. The reflection concludes with the metaphor of the 'control room' questioning who truly controls decision-making today: elected representatives or the invisible architectures of algorithms? The article critically examines the future of democracy in an era where society is becoming increasingly algomorphic, shaped by automated systems and post-reality dynamics.

**Keywords:** artificial intelligence, digital technocracy, organizational myths, post-reality, Italian politics, algorithmic governance

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## INTRODUCTION

The generative process of the social constitution of the individual, both in private and public spheres, as well as the spaces in which socialization practices take place, is fundamentally shaped by technology-related paradigms and practices. As technology spreads, the institutions and grammars that regulate shared expressions and interactions undergo transformation. The use of any tool – let us take the example of a fork – automatically conveys a wealth of information beyond what one might initially assume: cultural belonging, as it serves as an indicator of dietary practices and behavioral norms; historical dimension, as its material and design position it within a specific temporality; socio-economic aspects, since the quality of the utensil may reveal the purchasing power, social class, and context of the user; and identity-related and symbolic meanings, as its usage can reflect aspects of one's upbringing and the internalization of shared behavioral patterns.

The introduction and diffusion of a technological device are never neutral; they invariably entail an adaptation of collective habits, a reorganization of everyday life spaces, and a reshaping of the institutions that regulate both individual and communal dynamics. Similarly, the processes of digitalization and the subsequent integration of artificial intelligence-driven algorithms are redefining the architectures of social life, bringing about significant transformations in socio-political existence. Just as the fork marked a shift in eating practices, digital technology is rewriting the ways in which we understand and engage with society. Social media platforms, predictive analytics systems, and information-personalization algorithms are reshaping the very concept of reality, creating both spaces and counter-spaces for social aggregation, while also introducing new forms of control and resistance.

In an era where the boundary between the human and the artificial is increasingly blurred, the adoption and incorporation of these technologies into daily life cannot be regarded as merely technical matters; rather, they constitute a social phenomenon that influences the construction of everyday representations. From simple objects like a stick or a rope to sophisticated artificial intelligence algorithms, technology is never neutral. It is embedded within specific value-driven dimensions of human progress, acting as a co-constructor of connections between human and non-human entities. Technology not only reflects but also shapes the cultural context in which it develops, influencing institutions, power dynamics, and perceptions of reality. From this perspective, it becomes crucial to examine not only how artificial intelligence is deployed in political and economic processes but also to critically assess the ethical and social implications of its growing integration into public life.

In recent years, artificial intelligence has assumed an increasingly central role in democratic processes, transforming the way politics is conducted, communicated, and perceived. From the optimization of electoral campaigns through microtargeting<sup>2</sup> to

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<sup>2</sup> Z. Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas. The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*, New Haven 2017.

the automated management of electoral data,<sup>3</sup> and even the manipulation of public opinion through advanced algorithms,<sup>4</sup> AI is redefining the global democratic landscape. While these innovations present unprecedented opportunities to enhance political participation and institutional efficiency,<sup>5</sup> they also raise critical questions regarding transparency, regulation, and their impact on the fundamental principles of representative democracy.<sup>6</sup>

The Italian context fits into this dynamic with distinct characteristics. The growing adoption of digital tools and AI in the communication strategies of political parties has introduced new practices of digital propaganda, including the extreme personalization of electoral messages based on big data. However, this approach raises ethical concerns related to privacy and the risk of electoral manipulation. Additionally, the use of bots and deepfakes to spread disinformation has undermined the integrity of public debate, fostering polarization and distrust in democratic institutions. Like many other nations worldwide, Italy is engaged in an ongoing debate on the regulation of these technologies, balancing the need for innovation with the protection of civil rights.

This article aims to analyze the relationship between digitalization, information, and democracy in Italy, exploring both the opportunities and challenges associated with the adoption of these technologies in the political sphere. It presents two case studies on the political parties *Lega* and *Movimento 5 Stelle*, critically examining issues such as the risks of public opinion manipulation and potential strategies to ensure a balance between technological innovation and the safeguarding of democratic principles.

This analysis is situated within a constructivist and interpretive epistemological framework, which conceives social reality as a dynamic and symbolically mediated construction. Knowledge is not understood as an objective reflection of reality, but rather as the outcome of discursive practices, cultural dispositifs, and technological infrastructures that shape perception and narrative. In this perspective, the concept of post-reality employed in the text functions as a critical lens through which to observe the progressive replacement of reality by its algorithmically constructed and mediated representations. From a methodological standpoint, the contribution adopts a qualitative and theoretical approach, centred on the interpretive analysis of emblematic cases in recent Italian politics, considered not as empirical objects to be quantified, but as symbolic configurations that reflect broader transformations in the forms of power, communication, and subjectivity. The cases of the Lega's Bestia and the Rousseau platform are thus explored not through functionalist lenses, but as paradigmatic examples of an emerging technopolitical rationality, analyzed through the interpretive tools of sociological, media, and political-philosophical theories.

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<sup>3</sup> P. Howard, *Lie Machines. How to Save Democracy from Troll Armies, Deceptive Robots, and Fake News*, New Haven 2020.

<sup>4</sup> S. Zuboff, *Il capitalismo della sorveglianza*, Roma 2019.

<sup>5</sup> C. Summerfield, L. Argyle, M. Bakker et al., "How Will Advanced AI Systems Impact Democracy?," *arXiv*, 27 August 2024.

<sup>6</sup> S. Kreps, D. Kriner, "How AI Threatens Democracy," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 122-131.

## ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND ITALIAN POLITICS IN THE ERA OF POST-REALITY

In contemporary society, marked by the progressive weakening of the coercive power of educational and cultural capital<sup>7</sup> and the rise of conspiracy grammars<sup>8</sup> that serve as tools for constructing alternative forms of political and social consensus, we witness the structuring of neoconservative architectures and totalizing dispositifs<sup>9</sup> embedded within the technocratic system.<sup>10</sup> Within this framework, one of the most pressing epistemological challenges concerns the ability to distinguish between factual reality and the artificial production of fiction – an issue that becomes crucial in today's hyper-technologized media ecosystem. The capacity to acquire information about an event, distinguishing it from its media narration and subjective construction, is increasingly undermined by a communicative dynamic in which factual data is continuously reshaped and overwritten by processes of digital hyperreality,<sup>11</sup> thereby compromising the very possibility of an epistemic affirmation of objectivity.

The advent of radical digitalization and the immanence of artificial intelligence have inaugurated a historical and anthropological discontinuity, generating an irreversible transformation in communicative syntax and knowledge-construction processes. On one hand, we are immersed in an environment of hyper-propagation of information, accessible at any moment and seemingly limitless; on the other, we are witnessing a progressive epistemic discrediting, where the absence of verification constraints and the replicability of content enable the construction of political and social narratives in which even the nonsensical becomes credible.<sup>12</sup> This dynamic has repercussions not only on the management of consensus and the formation of public opinion but also on the very configuration of reality itself, which becomes a battleground between antagonistic visions, shaped by algorithms of amplification and cognitive segmentation.<sup>13</sup>

This transformation demonstrates that digital communication and the social media ecosystem are not merely neutral tools of interaction but rather dispositifs that reorganize meaning and collective perception.<sup>14</sup> They serve as clear symptoms of a broader cultural and value-related malaise, rooted in an informational and consumerist bulimia, in which technology is not merely a medium but a structure that reinterprets the relationship between the human and the non-human. In this sense, technology-augmented

<sup>7</sup> P. Bourdieu, *La distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*, Paris 1979

<sup>8</sup> M. Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories. Secrecy and Power in American Culture*, Minneapolis 2008

<sup>9</sup> M. Foucault, *Surveiller et punir. Naissance de la prison*, Paris 1975; G. Agamben, *Stato di eccezione*, Torino 2005.

<sup>10</sup> F. Antonelli, *Tecnocrazia e democrazia*, Roma 2019.

<sup>11</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Ann Arbor 1994.

<sup>12</sup> N. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death. Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, London 1985; L. McIntyre, *Post-Truth*, Cambridge 2018.

<sup>13</sup> E. Pariser, *The Filter Bubble. What the Internet is Hiding from You*, London 2011.

<sup>14</sup> G. Debord, *La société du spectacle*, Paris 1967.

reality does not simply enhance sensory experience; it becomes an epistemic paradigm, a new grammar of social reality that redefines the ontology of knowledge and truth.

This perspective aligns with the theoretical horizon in which the hybridization between the human and the non-human necessitates a redefinition of modern ontological categories.<sup>15</sup> The construction of postmodern identity can no longer be understood as an exclusively human process but rather as a phenomenon emerging from the interaction between humans, animals, machines, and other non-human entities. From this standpoint, the predictive dynamics of artificial intelligence – capable of influencing political decisions, economic models, and individual choices – raise fundamental questions not only regarding algorithmic governance<sup>16</sup> but, more importantly, about the ethical and philosophical implications of the growing symbiosis between technology and cognitive processes.

The crucial element that emerges, therefore, is the necessity of a critical reflection on the role of artificial intelligence in mediating reality. AI does not merely function as a technical support for political and social communication; rather, it actively participates in shaping collective perception, manipulating information, and defining the epistemic boundaries of truth. This demands a radical reconsideration of the very concept of cognitive and democratic autonomy, in an era where the boundary between truth and fiction is no longer determined by rational and verifiable processes but by algorithmic dynamics driven by power structures, market logic, and statistical prediction.

Within the outlined framework, the concept of post-reality<sup>17</sup> emerges to describe a condition in which the construction and representation of an event precede its actual occurrence, rewrite it, or even bring it into existence according to logics that distort its original meaning. Beyond the symbolic and media dimensions, post-reality becomes an epistemological paradigm in which truth is rendered a malleable construct, adaptable to the narrative needs of those who produce and disseminate it. This reflects the progressive detachment of individuals from reality, facilitated by the pervasive spread of technologies based on artificial intelligence systems. In this context, truth is no longer an objective datum to be examined through scientific criteria but rather a reconstructed product shaped by political and media manipulation: what matters is not what actually happens, but how it is narrated and perceived. From this perspective, post-reality constitutes a space of permanent simulation, where individuals retreat to avoid confronting the complexity of reality, relinquishing critical agency in favor of constant media distraction. Within this landscape, digital infrastructures and non-human entities function as ontological filters, constructing reality anew.

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<sup>15</sup> B. Latour, *Disinventare la modernità*, Milano 2008.

<sup>16</sup> K. Yeung, "Algorithmic Regulation. A Critical Interrogation," *Regulation & Governance*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2018), pp. 505-523.

<sup>17</sup> E. Grassi, "La costruzione del sociale nell'epoca della postrealtà," *Società Mutamento Politica*, vol. 13, no. 25 (2023), pp. 185-194.

Italy, with its long tradition of political communication rooted in spectacle and the narrative construction of consensus<sup>18</sup> has witnessed technological development as an amplifier of pre-existing dynamics. The extreme personalization of political communication – enabled by psychographic profiling tools and data mining – has ushered in an era where public discourse is increasingly fragmented, shaped by digital echo chambers and a growing difficulty in distinguishing truthful information from algorithmic disinformation. The risk is that politics ceases to be a space for debate grounded in objective data and shared democratic principles, becoming instead a continuous redefinition of reality, tailored to individual perceptions and manipulated by increasingly sophisticated predictive systems.

In recent years, the Italian political landscape has undergone a significant evolution in digital communication strategies, with an increasing use of data-driven tools to shape public consensus and implement digital-based political devices. One of the most emblematic cases is *La Bestia* (The Beast), the sophisticated digital communication system adopted by Matteo Salvini's Lega, developed under the direction of Luca Morisi, the party's former communications chief. This digital infrastructure was designed to maximize online engagement and optimize the dissemination of Lega's political messages through social media. The system relies on advanced algorithmic analysis, psychographic profiling techniques, and microtargeting strategies to tailor political communication based on voters' reactions. Its creation was inspired by models successfully tested abroad, such as Donald Trump's 2016 election campaign (the Cambridge Analytica case), which played a crucial role in shaping political consensus. Over time, *La Bestia* was progressively refined by Lega's communication team as the party strengthened its social media presence, eventually evolving into a full-fledged digital propaganda apparatus capable of controlling and steering political debate online.

Its system operates on four main levels:

- Real-time monitoring of voter sentiment: Using semantic analysis algorithms and machine learning, the system continuously collects and analyzes data from social media, identifying which topics generate the most interest and reactions among the public.
- Production of highly targeted content: Once the most resonant topics are identified, the communication team creates specific content (posts, videos, memes) tailored to different segments of the electorate, employing emotional engagement strategies to maximize the message's emotional impact.
- Dissemination and amplification through digital networks: By leveraging bots and coordinated profiles, political messages are systematically amplified, exploiting the principle of virality and creating an echo effect that reinforces the perception of consensus around the party's narrative.
- Continuous adaptation based on audience reactions: The communication team adjusts content in real time, emphasizing or downplaying specific topics depending on the engagement levels recorded on digital platforms.

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<sup>18</sup> U. Eco, *Il costume di casa*, Milano 1976.

The primary objective is to shape online public discourse and consolidate electoral consensus through a hyper-personalized and highly emotional communication strategy. This approach focuses on the polarization of debate, employing highly divisive messages that generate strong emotional engagement and encourage active participation (comments, shares, reactions); the creation of a media-savvy leader, in this case, Matteo Salvini, who – until the rise of Giorgia Meloni – was one of the most skilled Italian politicians in using social media to construct an image of a leader close to the people, through live broadcasts, informal posts, and a constant online presence; attacks and delegitimization of opponents, characterized by systematic criticism of other political parties. Due to its pervasiveness and lack of transparency, *La Bestia* has been the subject of numerous criticisms, particularly regarding source manipulation and data handling. Moreover, its use raises critical questions about the future of digital democracy, the transparency of political information, and the balance between technological innovation and the protection of truth in public debate.

If Lega's case has demonstrated how digital innovations can be strategically employed to shape consensus and amplify political discourse, it is essential to question why such technologies are being integrated into political and institutional processes. In this regard, institutionalist theory on organizational myths<sup>19</sup> provides a relevant interpretative framework: technological innovations are not always introduced out of genuine operational necessity but are often adopted in response to external, symbolic, and cultural pressures. A clear example of this can be seen in public administration digitalization projects, which are frequently launched to align with European Union standards or to project an image of modernization within the state apparatus – without necessarily being driven by a genuine innovation strategy. Similarly, the use of algorithmic tools in electoral campaign management has become a standard practice not necessarily because of their proven effectiveness in improving the quality of democratic debate, but rather to keep pace with political competitors who have already adopted them.

Another case study is represented by the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement) and the Rousseau platform. Designed by Davide Casaleggio and introduced in 2016 as a revolutionary model of digital direct democracy, Rousseau was adopted more as a symbolic representation of a new political paradigm than as a truly effective tool for enhancing democratic participation. The platform's main functions included online voting for political candidacies, the proposal and discussion of laws, political training, and internal organization through digital systems, envisioned as a precursor to a future model of digital direct democracy. In 2021, following the M5S's departure from the Casaleggio ecosystem and the party's internal crisis, Rousseau was abandoned, marking the failure of the model that had characterized the party in its early phase. The Movimento 5 Stelle represented Italy's first major experiment in digital politics, based on a utopian vision of online direct democracy and an innovative use of digital systems for managing political communication. However, it demonstrated that a purely digital system is not sufficient to ensure the stability of a political party and that a lack of

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<sup>19</sup> G. Westerlund, *Organizational Myths*, New York 1979.

transparency in algorithmic governance can turn participatory tools into mechanisms of vertical control. This case highlights the need for a balance between technological innovation and democratic principles, ensuring that digital politics does not evolve into a closed and opaque system governed by a few actors controlling the algorithms. This conception of politics also reflects the vision of Gianroberto Casaleggio (Davide's father and co-founder of the Movimento 5 Stelle), who saw the internet as a form of collective extended mind, capable of surpassing traditional structures of power and political mediation. His vision was based on the idea that the internet would progressively replace political parties, governments, and the media, establishing a system of global direct democracy in which every individual would actively participate in political decision-making through digital tools. Drawing inspiration from the theory of the extended mind,<sup>20</sup> he envisioned a future where traditional institutions would be replaced by a digitally driven collective intelligence; citizenship would engage directly in political decisions without intermediaries, enabled by advanced platforms; the concept of the nation-state would be superseded by a global network of distributed governance; the use of artificial intelligence systems would optimize power management. However, this vision ultimately failed, and the idea of a digital collective mind remains a visionary model that collides with the challenges of algorithmic manipulation, data security, territorial infrastructure availability, and citizens' digital literacy. The utopia of digital direct democracy risks evolving into an algorithmic post-democracy, raising critical questions about who truly controls decision-making processes in contemporary digital politics.

If, in classical philosophical thought, reality is conceived as an event manifesting in its objectivity and, as such, can only be interpreted through rigorous epistemic tools, contemporary society has witnessed a progressive detachment of individuals from reality, replaced by a system of digital representations that precede, distort, and rewrite direct experience. The phygital transposition of individuals and their increasing intangibility have become defining features of the human condition in the contemporary era. Users are immersed in a representation of reality structured through the fusion of three interactive levels – real, augmented, and virtual – within which the ultimate goal is no longer the critical acquisition of the world but rather the search for a reflection in which to recognize fragments of the self. The algomorphic dimension,<sup>21</sup> endowed with generative capabilities, permeates the political sphere and, beyond its classical articulation based on dialectics, introduces new expository perspectives aimed at manipulation, spectacularization, and deviation. This involves the structuring of impactful narratives<sup>22</sup> (Green, Strange, Brock, 2002), capable of influencing perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors on both individual and collective levels by modulating, as needed, the

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<sup>20</sup> A. Clark, D. Chalmers, "The Extended Mind," *Analysis*, vol. 58, no. 1 (1998), pp. 7-19.

<sup>21</sup> E. Grassi, *Per una sociologia algomorfica*, Milano 2024.

<sup>22</sup> M. Green J.J. Strange, T.C. Brock (eds), *Narrative Impact. Social and Cognitive Foundations*, London 2002.

subjective experience of public narratives, the narrative environment, and the role of information in the subject's cognitive-behavioral sphere.

From deliberative democracy to the politics of post-reality, contemporary society faces a pivotal transformation, in which it becomes imperative to safeguard the concept of truth and prevent it from becoming yet another negotiable commodity, controlled by institutions and power structures that wield manipulative and coercive systems of control.

## BEYOND THE CONTROL ROOM, INSIDE THE ALGORITHMS

21<sup>st</sup> century politics is grappling with a radical transformation in which decision-making power is no longer exclusively in the hands of elected representatives but is increasingly mediated by advanced technologies, predictive algorithms, and artificial intelligence. This phenomenon recalls the concept of technocracy, a term historically used to describe the rise of ruling classes based on technical expertise rather than democratic representation. While thinkers such as Veblen<sup>23</sup> and Burnham<sup>24</sup> had already theorized a society governed by engineers and scientists in the twentieth century, today we are witnessing an unprecedented evolution of this model: power is no longer merely concentrated in the hands of human experts but is progressively shifting into the logic of non-human entities. Algoagents have become active co-actors and driving forces within digital democracies, reshaping power structures through the automated management of society. The introduction of AI into public bureaucracy, governance platforms, and information regulation is not merely a matter of administrative efficiency but represents a profound mutation of the political sphere, in which human decision-making is increasingly replaced by statistical prediction models, turning AI into a power structure capable of redefining the relationship between governance and citizenship.<sup>25</sup>

This process raises fundamental questions: Who controls the algorithms that regulate institutions? To what extent is political power still an expression of collective will? Is there a risk that decision-making authority will shift from democratic institutions to the large tech companies developing these systems?

These issues recall the speech given by Pietro Nenni in 1962, in which the then-socialist leader spoke of the necessity of entering the 'control room' (*stanza dei bottoni*), referring to the real centers of political power. The phrase evoked the idea of power concentrated in a closed dimension, accessible only to a restricted elite. The metaphor of the control room thus signified not only a political objective but also an

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<sup>23</sup> T. Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System*, New York 1964 (orig. ed 1921).

<sup>24</sup> J. Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution. What Is Happening in the World*, London 2021 (orig. ed. 1941).

<sup>25</sup> K. Crawford, *The Atlas of AI. Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*, New Haven 2021.

epistemological challenge: understanding the mechanisms of governance and asserting the right to participate in the decisions that shape society.

Today, that control room still exists, but it has undergone a radical transformation. It is no longer a physical place but a distributed system of servers, databases, and algorithms that regulate the functioning of institutions and influence collective choices. The issue is no longer just about who enters the room, but rather who designed the buttons, who controls their operation, and what logic determines their use.

## CONCLUSION

The future of digital democracy will depend on the ability to bring politics back into a transparent and accessible decision-making process, preventing technocratic models from replacing democratic debate with automated and incontestable governance. This challenge is not merely technical but profoundly political and philosophical: it is not about resisting technological progress but ensuring that its development is oriented toward the protection of rights, inclusion, and participation. The goal is to prevent artificial intelligence from becoming the new guardian of the control room, stripping citizens of their power to determine their own future.

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