Digital technology is a culture, according to Dominique Cardon

Column by
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In *Culture numérique*, published in 2019 (Presses de Sciences Po), Dominique Cardon examines how the internet and recent technologies are transforming social, political and economic relations. His essay in the field of digital humanities analyses technological disruption, which is sometimes compared to the third industrial revolution, through a lens that is more cultural than technical. 'The intellectual, religious and psychological changes are as significant as the economic and political ones. That's why it's useful to say that digital technology is a culture,' he writes, keen to decode 'the all-encompassing dimension of the great digital transition' using social science methods.

While tracing the major phases in the development of the internet, from the birth of Arpanet in 1969 digitally linking the research centres of the Universities of Los Angeles and Stanford, up to the appearance of the first web browser in 1993, Dominique Cardon highlights the activist roots of digital culture formation. With the help of new information technologies, pioneers turned their backs on a straightjacketed and 'cramped' society, giving rise to communities based on interaction between individuals. Their mantra was 'to change society without taking power' by distilling a utopian and egalitarian spirit, and bypassing the real world to invest in a virtual sphere where identities and social relationships would be more vibrant and freer.

Starting from these historical roots, Dominique Cardon explores the links between democracy and digital technology, touching on more contemporary issues such as the economic model of platforms and the GAFAM tech companies (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft), and the impact of artificial intelligence. Is digital technology really in the hands of the citizens who use it as a platform to express themselves? Has the web shifted the centre of gravity of democracy from the state to society? Is 'electronic democracy' in the process of deposing representative democracy? The author goes beyond the tension between representative democracy and participatory democracy to study how digital tools are transforming the ways in which politics is conducted and the links between representatives and the represented, without destroying our institutional mechanisms. And yet, he notes, some technophiles 'tend to forget that television and the mainstream media [...] remain by far the most important forums for debate during election campaigns'. As a counterpoint to the optimism of web pioneers, steeped in the ideals of openness and unity within collectives, Cardon's essay calls for nuance. Doesn't aiming for such an ideal of consensus through digital technology devitalise politics, which also consists of conflict and sometimes heated debate?