

Safeguarding Democracy in the Aftermath of COVID-19 through Digital Technologies: A Critical Perspective

Damilola Victoria Oduola

Email: oduoladamilola774@gmail.com

Department of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

The world recently witnessed an outbreak of a disease identified as SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 which has resulted in a pandemic. Consequently, many political leaders have taken drastic measures such as the restriction of citizens' personal and civil liberties to counter the pandemic. These restrictions pose serious challenges to democracy as elections and citizens' political participation have been negatively affected in a number of countries. Although the recent development of vaccines and decline in infection rates may suggest an end in sight, yet, democracy may not remain the same after COVID-19. Hence, in this paper, I explore the prospects and limitations of digital democracy as a tool for safeguarding democratic rights and public safety simultaneously. I further argue that since democracy may not remain the same after COVID-19, there is the need for democratic states to leverage on digital technologies to enhance democratic participation in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Public Health, Democracy, Digital Democracy

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic, which is considered as the largest public health crisis of the twenty-first century, has put many governments in a difficult position as many countries of the world have been forced to adopt unprecedented measures in an effort to curb the spread of the virus. However, a number of the measures that were adopted by most governments contradict fundamental democratic principles as most governments were confronted with the dilemma of weighing public health against the practice of democracy [Engler et al, 2021: 1078]. Although some democratic governments were unable to successfully handle the trade-off, Taiwan was able to record a significant success in the protection of public health and the practice of democracy due to her use of digital democracy [Yen, 2020: 456]. Taiwan's successful response to COVID-19 through the use of digital democracy suggested digital democracy as a plausible response to the "democracy-public health dilemma" that confronted most democratic governments during the early days of the pandemic.

Nevertheless, although the development and global administration of the COVID-19 vaccines in recent months may suggest an end in sight [Zhang, 2020], yet, democratic participation may not return to "normal" as the strength and resilience of democracies had been put to test [Berlin and De Maio, 2020: 1]. Hence, there may be the need for democratic governments to explore the tool of digital democracy to ensure citizens' participation in the democratic process and the protection of public health in the aftermath of the pandemic.

This paper is divided into three sections. It discusses the prospects and limitations of digital democracy as a tool for safeguarding democratic rights and public health in the aftermath of COVID-19. The first section examines the coronavirus outbreak; the undemocratic measures adopted by democratic governments in response to the pandemic and the democracy-public health conundrum that confronted a number of democratic states in the early days of the pandemic. The second section evaluates the prospects and limitations of digital democracy as a viable tool for enhancing democratic participation. The third section discusses the state of democracy after COVID-19 and proposes digital democracy as a viable response to the democracy-public health conundrum that may confront democratic states in the aftermath of the pandemic while citing Taiwan as an example.

COVID-19 Pandemic and the Practice of Democracy

In December 2019, a novel disease identified as SARS-CoV-2/COVID-19 broke out in Wuhan, China [Zhu, Wei and Niu, 2020: 1]. This novel virus has resulted in a pandemic with over 400 million infected cases and over 6 million deaths across 188 countries and territories as at March 2022 [WHO 2021a]. However, in July 2020, vaccines such as the Pfizer/BioNtech, the Astrazeneca/Oxford and the Moderna were developed and over 10 billion doses have been administered globally as at March 2022 [WHO 2022]. Yet, in late 2020, new variants of the virus were identified and they have continued to pose increased risk to

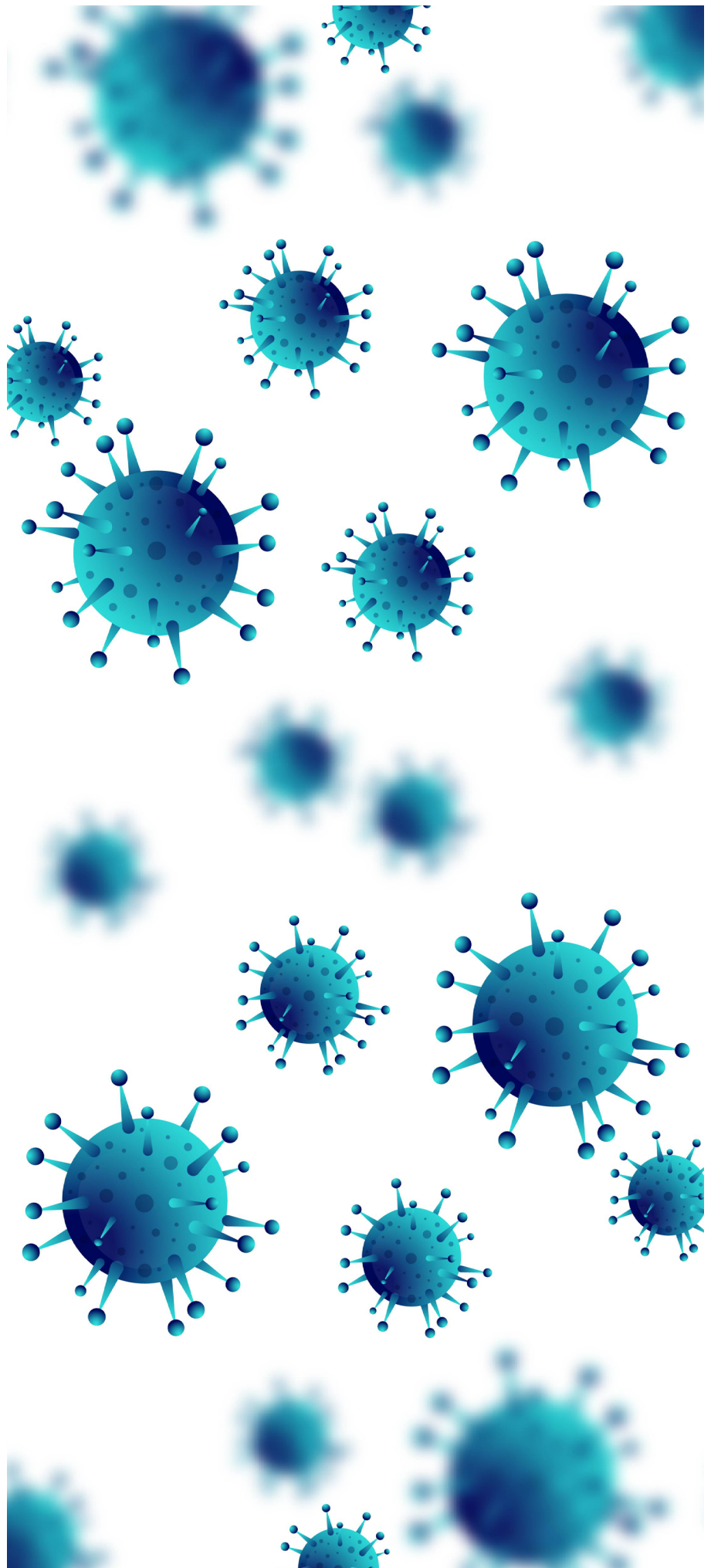
global health [WHO 2021b; WHO 2021c]. SARS-CoV-2, otherwise known as coronavirus or COVID-19 is a viral infection that is responsible for respiratory illness and it is basically transmitted from one person to another through contact with a droplet of an infected person. Although most people can easily recover from the illness without specialised treatment, people who are older and with underlying medical conditions such as cancer, chronic respiratory infections, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases are more likely to experience severe illness and death due to the virus [Omaka-Amari et al, 2020: 88]. The virus is mostly diagnosed with symptoms such as shortness of breath, dry cough, fever and loss of smell and taste among others [Omaka-Amari et al, 2020: 88].

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), coronavirus is ordinarily difficult to prevent and control because of its high rate of infection and its potential to cause hospitalisation and death of so many persons within the shortest time frame. Thus, the best way to combat the virus is to adopt preventive measures that will reduce human exposure to the virus [WHO 2020a]. WHO advised that, "all countries must take a whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach, built around a comprehensive strategy to prevent infections, save lives and minimise impact" [WHO 2020b].

In response to this directive, most countries of the world adopted various preventive and control measures such as lockdowns, quarantines, curfews, contact tracing and mass testing to contain the spread of the virus. Also, most countries developed their COVID-19 task forces to coordinate and oversee

their states' inter-governmental efforts to contain the spread and impact of the pandemic as well as reflect and update new information and research emerging on the disease and its impact on populations [IMF, 2022]. For instance, in March 2020, the United States of America adopted COVID-19 control measures such as school and workplace closure, restrictions on gathering size, closure of public transport, local and international travel restrictions, contact tracing, emergency investment in healthcare and production of vaccines and vaccination [Hallas et al, 2021: 8-9]. Similarly, in the United Kingdom, stay at home orders were implemented, schools and workplaces were closed and restrictions were introduced on internal movement [Tatlow et al, 2021:6-7]. In Nigeria, the Nigeria Centre for Disease control (NCDC) and the Presidential Task Force (PTF) also introduced international and intranational travel ban, border closure, mandatory institutional quarantine and testing, stay at home orders, cessation of non-essential movements and activities, closure of schools and workplace, curfews and religious and social gathering ban among other socio-economic measures [Dan-Nwafor et al, 2020: 5-6].

These measures have had significant effects on democratic practice. Fundamental democratic principles that border on personal and civil liberties such as the freedom of movement, freedom of association, and freedom of assembly were severely restricted [Belin and De Maio, 2020]. In some countries, elections were postponed and parliamentary works were suspended. According to a research report by Repucci and Slipowitz [2020], between January and August 2020, natio-



nal elections in nine countries, and many more subnational votes, were postponed, or disrupted. Even though with the outbreak of the pandemic and the health risks it posed to voters, postponement of elections was not necessarily out of place, the postponement of elections during this period failed to meet democratic standards as new election dates were not scheduled promptly, and those who scheduled new dates did not make adequate preparations for safe and secure voting [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 9]. A case in point was the postponement of elections in Ethiopia and Bolivia [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 9]. Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed had taken power in 2018 through an internal party process, and his Parliament's term had been set to expire in October 2020. However, his government saw the pandemic as an avenue to declare an indefinite electoral delay which led to political unrest and fears of a return to authoritarian rule [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 9].

In Bolivia, although the former president Evo Morales had fled the country in November 2019 after protests against a flawed election, the incumbent government that was meant to serve on an interim basis postponed the special election that was meant to bring in the new government into power three times ostensibly due to the coronavirus [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 9]. The interim president, who is also a presidential candidate herself, was criticised on the note that the postponement of elections was politically motivated. Similarly in Belarus, the government authorities, having done nothing to stop the spread of the coronavirus, used the pandemic as an excuse to limit the rights of citizens during the

election campaign and restricted the participation of international and local observers [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 10].

The COVID-19 prevention measures did not only affect the running of elections and parliamentary works but also reinforced the abuse of power by political leaders, government officials and security officials. Bosman [2021] reports that "since the start of the pandemic, respect for human rights and democracy has deteriorated in 80 countries across the globe." For instance, abuses of power which include violent crackdowns on protests were experienced in Nigeria [Bosman, 2021]; detention or arrest of government critics were experienced in Zimbabwe [Bosman, 2021] and social media blackouts and media restriction were experienced in Uganda and Tanzania [Bosman, 2021]. Repucci and Slipowitz [2020: 3] noted that during the coronavirus pandemic, security officials violated citizens' rights by detaining citizens without justification, and overstepping their legal authority. Political leaders also used the pandemic as a justification to amass political powers for themselves as they exploited their emergency powers to interfere in the judicial process, impose undue restrictions on political rivals and undermine democratic functions [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 3].

In a similar vein, independent media outlets were stifled, which invariably made accountability and the dissemination of vital information difficult. Governments exercised control over the media, imposed restrictions on free speech and silenced the voice of opposition parties [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 7-8]. A research report by Freedom House suggested that at least

91 out of 192 countries experienced restrictions on the news media as part of their responses to the pandemic [Repucci and Slipowitz, 2020: 7]. Journalists covering the crisis in these countries were arrested and targeted with violence, harassment, and intimidation. These various restrictive measures adopted by most democratic states pose serious challenges to democratic principles such as elections, and fundamental human rights. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic, the preventive measures adopted by states and their resultant effects on the practice of democracy imply that the pandemic has created a conundrum for democratic governments such as the dilemma of upholding democratic principles during public emergencies and finding a "democracy-human security balance" during pandemics [Bosman, 2021].

Engler et al observed that :

“In fighting the spread of COVID-19, the drastic measures undertaken by governments worldwide demonstrate a trade-off between public health and fundamental democratic principles... Decision-makers are therefore confronted with the dilemma of weighting public health goals against democratic norms, rights and freedoms.” [Engler et al, 2021: 1077-1078]

The question that arises from this "dilemma" then is: how can democratic states that are committed to the principles of democracy safeguard public health and the practice of democracy simultaneously especially in the aftermath of COVID-19?

Exploring the Prospects and Limitations of Digital Democracy: The Taiwan Example

It was not until January 2020 that the news of the coronavirus began to receive global coverage and attention even though there has been a report of an outbreak of severe pneumonia of unknown causes in Wuhan, China in December 2019. By February 2020, the virus had begun to spread rapidly such that by February 19th, about 74, 280 people in the whole of China had been infected and about 2009 deaths had occurred [Zhu, Wei and Niu, 2020: 1]. Yet, with the virulence of the coronavirus, her geographical and economic closeness to China and her massive flows and densely urbanised population, the world expected that Taiwan would be one of the countries to suffer a huge blow from the coronavirus pandemic [Yen, 2020: 455]. Despite the territorial proximity and mutual communications between the two countries, Taiwan was not only able to demonstrate capacity in the face of the pandemic but also recorded maximal success in the management of the pandemic. Statistics show that since the first confirmed case of COVID-19 on 21 January 2020, Taiwan has only recorded 16,255 cases and 844 deaths as at 4th October, 2021 [Worldometer 2021]. Compared with the number of cases in other countries, the number of infected cases in Taiwan had been much lower. Also, when the majority of the countries of the world were on lockdown for most of 2020, economic and social activities, schools, and businesses in Taiwan still remained open even as of late September 2020 [Yeh and Cheng, 2020: 427].

What was responsible for Taiwan's successful response? Yeh and Cheng [2020: 429-432] identify centralised and professional leadership, democratic and accountable political culture, vibrant civil society and broad social participation as some of the factors responsible for Taiwan's successful management of the pandemic. However, Yen [2020: 456] is of the opinion that the notable factors that are responsible for Taiwan's successful response to COVID-19 are the leverages on digital governance infrastructure and big data and the lively democratic regime which provided the demand and supply of transparency, communication and collaboration between the state and the society. In addition, Wu [2021: 1] argues that among the factors responsible for Taiwan's successful response to COVID-19 is the formal and informal social media platforms like Taiwan and Join messaging apps that were employed to facilitate two-way communication between the government and the citizens on a daily basis. He maintains that the combination of democratic governance and technocratic legitimacy facilitated social cohesion and motivated an almost universal level of cooperation between the Taiwan government and its citizens in the midst of the pandemic [Wu, 2021: 1-2]. Also, while describing how Taiwan employed digital democracy in its management of the pandemic, Nabben [2020] explains that as a result of the strong collective narrative of digital democracy and partnership between government and the civil society, Taiwan was able to detect and respond to the virus through the crowd-sourced collective intelligence gotten from online bulletin boards. According to her, civic tech hackers in Taiwan were

able to come up with smart digital tools that enabled discussion, survey and online telepresence for public policy participation. So, Taiwan's culture of civic participation followed the model of open source software communities that involved sharing information, sharing mutual benefit and engaging in participatory collective action in an online space.

Taiwan's relative success with digital democracy during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that digital technologies may be a viable tool in safeguarding democracy and public health during pandemics. But what is digital democracy? And, what are its prospects and limitations as a tool for enhancing democratic participation? Van Dijk [2000: 51] defines digital democracy as "the pursuit and the practice of democracy in whatever view using digital media in online and offline political communication." Simon et al [2017: 11] also define digital democracy as the use of digital tools to provide information and promote transparency; the ways in which information and communications technologies (ICTs) can broaden and deepen participation; the process of promoting empowerment by enabling citizens to make decisions directly through online tools; and the practice of democracy using digital tools and technologies. They argue that the term "digital democracy" overlaps with notions of citizenship, participation, transparency, accountability, governance, e-government, civil society and the public sphere and so, it includes a range of novel initiatives and policies by which citizens and governments can interact to achieve better outcomes [Simon et al, 2017: 11].



Dijk opines that digital democracy contributes significantly to the practice of democracy in three notable ways namely information sharing, public deliberation and political decision making. According to him, digital democracy improves political information retrieval and exchange between governments, public administrations, representatives, political organisations and individual citizens; it supports public debate, deliberation and community formation; and it enhances participation in political decision-making by citizens [Dijk, 2000: 54]. Through digital democracy, political and government information are provided, retrieved and exchanged on the internet which in turn, enables citizens and voters to be better informed than they used to be. In addition, citizens are able to react to the accessed information and these reactions or feedback can be transformed into actions which would then result in making well-informed decisions [Dijk, 2000: 54-55].

Simon et al [2017: 12] hold a similar view that although political discourses in recent decades have identified deliberation as an essential feature of democracy, however, the clearest link by which democratic states can enable their citizens to deliberate amongst themselves and with public officials is through digital democracy. They argue that Taiwan and other digital platforms such as Podemos, Decide Madrid and Parliament et Citoyens demonstrate how digital tools can be used by parliaments, municipal governments and political parties to engage citizens in improving the quality and legitimacy of their decision-making [Simon et al, 2017: 12]. A healthy democracy requires participation from its citizens and this participation can be made possible through digital technology, which allows citizens not only to participate in decision-making but also to deliberate; to be notified about and/or have increasing access to upcoming debates, votes and consultations; to provide ideas for new, improved or future solutions;

to provide technical expertise; to generate, develop and amend specific proposals individually, collectively or collaboratively with state officials; to share information about specific problems, or to understand individual needs or larger patterns and trends; and to scrutinise specific government policy proposals within the confines of their homes [Simon et al, 2017: 12-13]. Hence, the prospects of digital democracy include easier political participation as citizens are able to express their political views and also contribute to political discussions and decisions without leaving the comfort of their homes and access to information as digital democracy allows citizens to be active and well informed about the democratic deliberative process as illustrated by the Taiwan digital platform.

Despite the attractiveness of these possibilities, many countries, political leaders and policy makers have not been able to come to terms with the dynamics and prospects of digital democracy. There are

some concerns about the issue of trust in the privacy and security of the internet [Goldberg et al. 2016: 2]. For digital democracy to grow and thrive, citizens must be able to trust that their personal information and online activities will be secure and their privacy protected. But the rising perception of identity theft, online tracking, online surveillance, including data collection and tracking by the government, has prompted individuals to alter and limit their online activity [Goldberg et al, 2016: 4]. Hence, citizens are more likely going to be discouraged from sharing their personal information and political opinion – or even embrace the prospects of digital democracy – if they think they are at the risk of being targeted, monitored, or losing their privacy [Goldberg et al, 2016: 5].

Also, some scholars –such as Buchstein [1997], Sunstein [2009] and Margolis and Moreno-Riaño [2010] have argued that the internet does not provide significant opportunity of participation neither does it stimulate political engagement. These scholars argue that internet use may weaken rather than strengthen political participation because the “central features of the internet... generally undermine the sort of public sphere and political interaction that is required for genuine democratic deliberation” [Bohman, 2004: 131]. Bastick [2017: 7] explains that the critics of digital democracy often justify their claim on the limitations of digital democracy on the following premises: Online exchange lacks some of the communicative intricacies of face-to-face interactions; computer-mediated communication does not eliminate socio-economic prejudices but rather supports the development of non-visual

methods of identifying socio-economic qualities and alternative criteria for judging others; social cues that can indicate trust, familiarity, stability, and social pressure are absent from online interactions; and the online world is far removed from the ‘real world’ and so, it threatens people’s awareness of reality. Hence, the internet and digital technologies are unable to provide as rich of an environment as the offline world. Thus, digital democracy which relies heavily on online association and deliberation will necessarily not be effective in comparison to the non-virtual democratic processes of the offline world

But while it is true that citizen’s participation in political deliberations through digital platforms can be hindered by factors such as insecurity, apathy, disillusionment and erosion of trust, yet, digital democracy can avoid these major pitfalls if the processes involved in the development and designing of digital platforms are given utmost and careful consideration. For digital democracy to

overcome some of its perceived limitations and ultimately become a success, some rigorous considerations have to be in place. Firstly, the process of communication between citizens and representatives must be designed to maximise citizens’ interest and engagement. This means that there must be a spelt out clarity over the purpose and methods of engagement such that citizens are very much clear on the aims, objectives, rules and expectation of participation exercises [Simon et al, 2017: 66]. Secondly, citizens’ participation on digital platforms must be useful and substantive in the sense that citizens should not merely be asked to participate in order to legitimise an already made decision but rather, they should be given the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way. As De Zeeuw and Pieterse [2020: 16] note, “digital democracy only works if people are given a real say. If the interactions and exchange have no influence on the final decision making, it makes little sense to participate in the process.” This simply means that digital democracy must



be used as a tool for meaningful engagement between citizens and political representatives, and such engagement should accord citizens a reasonable degree of power to influence government proposals and policies.

Thirdly, the engagement process between citizens and the government must be totally transparent, open and secure. Governments must be ready to provide a safe, secure and transparent digital platform where citizens are made to understand the importance of their contribution and given feedback on how their contributions are being used. Digital platforms must also be strongly encrypted to prevent information theft and online tracking among other online vices, that is, participation tools must be built in such a way that the personal data and data of citizens are safe and cannot be used for commercial or political purposes. Digital platforms must therefore be built according to the principle of privacy by design. Without a safe, secure and transparent communication process, there is the risk that

citizens would lose interest and trust in the platform which would in turn affect their online participation and ultimately defeat the purpose of digital democracy [De Zeeuw and Pieterse, 2020: 68].

Lastly, digital platforms for democratic deliberations must be user friendly and devoid of social prejudices. This means that digital democratic platforms must be easy to access and allow for diversity. The platform should be able to accommodate citizens who hold diverse political opinions without social prejudices. Moderators and facilitators of the platform must also be able to ensure quality contributions and help to limit abusive or offensive behaviour that may reinforce social prejudices. This will in turn ensure more constructive discussions between participants [Simon et al, 2017: 73]. It is, therefore, important to note that the development of a successful digital democratic platform will require multi-stage processes and trusted communication methods such as quality research, knowledgeable population, tran-

sparent stakeholders and necessary ecosystem of support. Having examined how digital democracy can be used as a viable tool for ensuring democratic participation and deliberations, let us proceed to examine how it can be used as leverage for safeguarding democratic principles and public health simultaneously in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Democracy, Public Health and Digital Democracy in the Aftermath of COVID-19

The coronavirus pandemic which began as a worldwide health crisis has also become part of the global crisis for democracy. The pandemic has had a severe impact on the practice of democracy in countries around the world. However, in recent months, discussions have commenced about the reopening of public spaces alongside the production and distribution of vaccines [Radcliffe, 2021]. The development of drugs and vaccines which have proven highly effective against the coronavirus has led to a significant decline in the number of infected cases and death globally. As at 19th October, 2021, the WHO reported a 4% decrease in the number of infected cases and 2% decrease in the number of deaths globally [WHO, 2021]. With the dramatic fall in the number of infected cases and the effective administration of the vaccine, countries are beginning to resume their public activities and international travel bans are being lifted. Although the development of vaccines and decline in the number of infection and death may suggest an end in sight for COVID-19, day to day life will



most likely not return to “business as usual” [Brosius, 2021]. Also, the practice of democracy may not necessarily remain the same after the pandemic because restrictions on door-to-door campaigns, public voting, public debates and other large social and political gathering, compulsory face coverings, compulsory vaccination and social distancing may still be in place in order to ensure the continued protection of public health [BBC, 2021]. Also, the emergency measures—such as the temporal removal of democratic checks and balances and suspension of civil rights that were adopted by most political leaders during the pandemic—may result in reduced trust in the government, reduced political participation of citizens, serious dent in the performance legitimacy of democratic governments and change in public attitudes and voting patterns of citizens [Rapeli and Saikkonen, 2020: 28]. Democratic states would therefore be saddled with the responsibility of safeguarding public health and also ensuring citizens’ participation in the aftermath of COVID-19.

Democratic states can embrace digital democracy as a viable tool for protecting public health and enhancing democratic participation in the aftermath of the pandemic as digital democracy gives citizens the opportunity to participate in elections and political deliberations without leaving the confines of their homes or gathering en masse. However, to

successfully employ and deploy the tool of digital democracy, democratic states, first and foremost, have to build a trusted relationship with their citizens. Digital democracy aims to build a participatory process in which citizens can trust and feel that their contribution in policy and decision making will be important but to achieve this, government officials have to trust that their citizens are capable of engaging in open, transparent and productive discussions. In the same vein, citizens must be able to trust that the government will provide a safe, secure and levelled platform that will genuinely require their participation and input. As Audrey Tang, the digital minister of Taiwan states:

“The most important principle is by far to put trust in your citizens - and that is it! Everything else follows. We know that if we make our mistakes public, talk to people and show how we adapt to changing situations, we gain credibility, especially online.”

[De Zeeuw and Pieterse, 2020: 42]

Also, democratic states have to initiate a team or committee of experts that would be in charge of developing, organising and designing the digital platforms that would be suitable for users’ easy access and participation. The flow of innovation and knowledge and mass collective gathering of expertise would ensure that digital platforms are designed in a way that is easy to use and navigate. Digital platforms would also have to be designed in a way that people can easily contribute, understand the views of other participants and receive feedback

on their contributions. Therefore, political leaders should embrace the great experiment in digital democracy by creating diverse teams with diverse skills who will build flexible tools that will meet the needs of democracies, citizens and representatives.

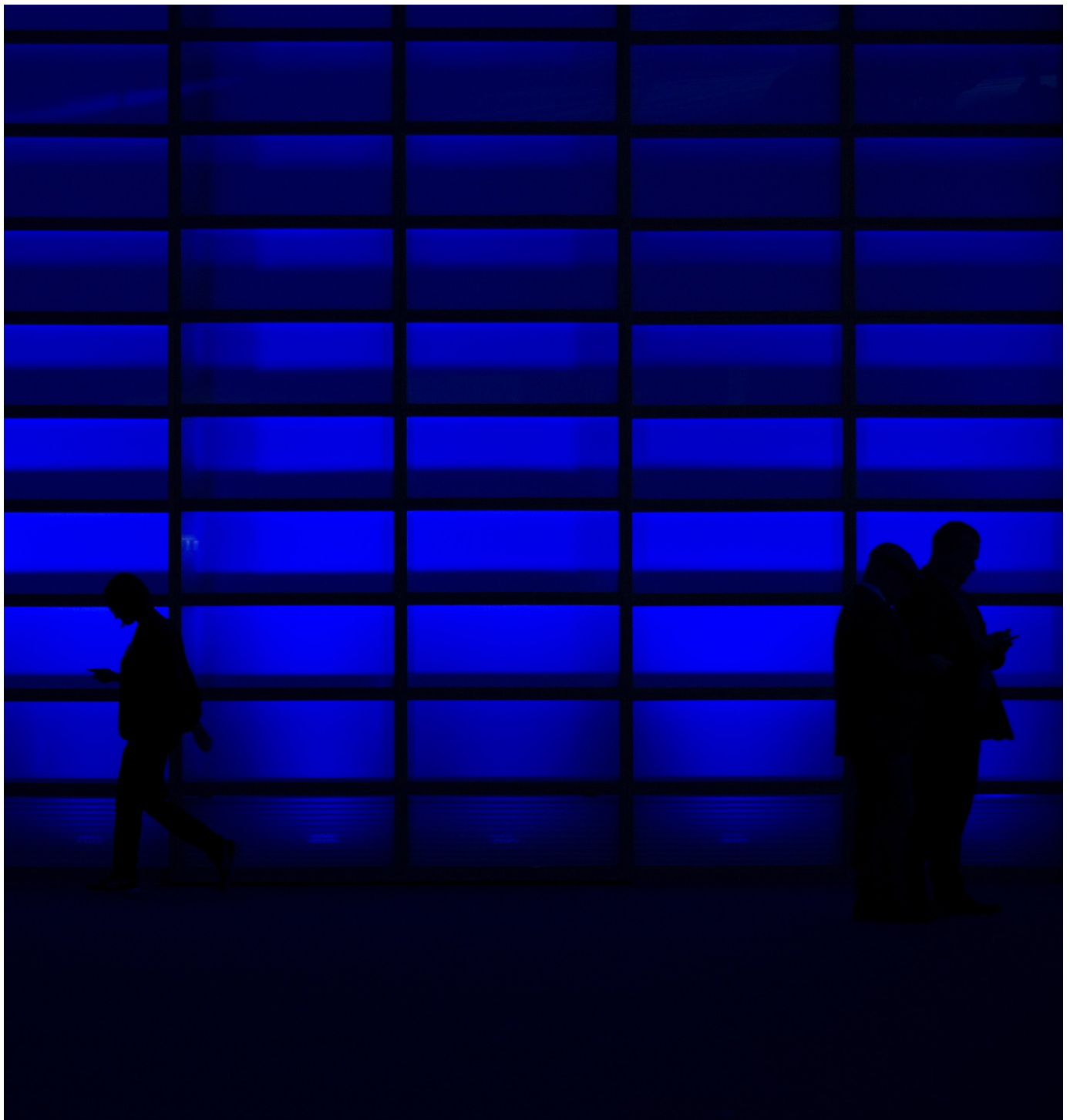
As Beacon [2020] opines, “where initiatives have worked the best is where they’ve been run by a multi-disciplinary committee of individuals, including psychologists, subject-matter experts and policy and technology experts”. But it is imperative that political leaders and public administrators understand that although digital democracy enables citizens to make decisions or play a very active role in the development or scrutiny of proposals, its success depends on its hybridization with offline activity. Digital democracy is an effort to complement and not necessarily to replace physical presence. So, while political deliberations can be moved online, democratic states can still maintain minimal physical parliamentary meetings. Hence, digital technologies can be employed as a tool for protecting public health, safeguarding the practice of democracy and engaging citizens in deliberative democracy. It can also be adopted as a platform for augmenting and improving physical methods of engagements in order to create a more coherent, transparent and accessible exercise in public engagement [Simon et al, 2017: 75].

Conclusion

The coronavirus outbreak which created a monumental challenge for global health and democracy, — has, however, in a way presented countries with the opportunity to explore the potentials embedded in the relationship between democracy and digital technologies. Even though there is the possibility that political leaders and policy makers may be reluctant in embracing the prospects of digi-

tal democracy as compared to the traditional processes of governance, this paper submits that digital democracy does not aim to undermine or replace existing structures of representative democracy but rather aims to complement it. It is imperative that democratic states become open to adopting digital democracy in order to improve the quality of their decision making, policies, legislation and transparency of their decision-making processes. At a time when modern

democracy and its institutions are just recovering from the blow of the coronavirus pandemic and when citizens are feeling disconnected as a result of the increasing mistrust in democratic institutions, it is all the more important that democratic states adopt digital democracy as an inclusive medium that will ensure citizens' participation in democratic processes and their interaction with political representatives in power.



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