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**REVIEW ESSAY:
UNRAVELLING DEMOCRACY'S ANTI-
DEMOCRATIC MACHINE**

Nick Couldry^a

ABSTRACT

This review of two recent books, with further discussion of a third, addresses questions of the direction of democracy and the impacts of media circulation and data extraction on democratic culture. The reviewed books are Selena Nemorin (2018); *Biosurveillance in New Media Marketing: World, Discourse, Representation*, and Dipankar Sinha (2018); *The Information Game in Democracy*, with discussion also of Peter Csigo (2016); *The Neopopular Bubble: Speculating on "the People" in Late Modern Democracy*.

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^a London School of Economics, United Kingdom.

What is there in democracy itself, which tends to subvert its core ideals from within' (Sinha, ix)? That is the question with which Dipankar Sinha, Professor of Political Science at Calcutta University, begins his searching and deeply thoughtful book. The answer, he contends, lies in information, and already here Sinha moves far beyond most mainstream political science. For Sinha is that rare political scientist who reads and takes seriously the communications literature, and the causal significance of 'mediation'.

The irony, Sinha notes, is that we have independent, large literatures on 'information society' and the development of democracy, but relatively little work on the fate of information *in* democracy – until perhaps the past few years when concerns about social media platforms have become strident. Sinha's book, written before the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke and before the recent scandals over WhatsApp usage by populist politics in India, can be seen as a broad harbinger of this recent shift in debates, but one from which there is still a great deal to learn.

Sinha's core argument in the first two-thirds of this richly theorized book is that the workings of information in democracy have lain largely unexamined in mainstream political science, and in particular the shaping of information by power relations whose 'exclusionary politics' undermines the 'inclusionary promise of representative democracy' (xiii). Too often, he says, the flow of information needed, as Robert Dahl long ago argued, for anything like democracy has been taken-for-granted, in part because the very word 'information' appears to be neutral. It is all too easy therefore to neglect the *politics* of information, which is highly misleading, since 'such politics is based on steep asymmetrical relations' (5). Here lies the oligarchic engine at the core of democratic politics. Sinha's concept for this struggle over information is 'the information game'. This game is becoming both more extensive and ever more in need of disguise, lest the legitimacy of democratic systems starts to collapse.

Sinha's major contribution is to see that the politics of information is a deeper and more intractable problem than the problem of 'representation' that is standardly regarded as the weakness of democracy institutions. But the problem of information is worsened by academia's generally defective approaches to analysing practices of information themselves. As a political scientist, Dipankar Sinha is visionary in insisting on the need for a *socially grounded* approach to the production of information and, just as important, the production of the *trust* needed for quality information to flow effectively. Trust is an 'invisible institution', that is difficult to sustain and constantly liable to negative feedback loops, made worse by the increasing commodification of information and the growing dominance of corporate power in information's production.

Sinha pursues these concerns in three central chapters which unpack how inadequate standard treatments of information in democracy are. His first target is the discourse, so pervasive from the 1990s, on ‘governance’: remember that Sinha writes from India, where development discourse is something still regularly imposed on local understandings. Drawing on Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ deep critique of neoliberal logics, Sinha shows how ‘governance’ discourse, while *appearing* to democratize the policy-generating practices of centralized states, always lacks a practical model for how communication might actually include citizen populations. This discourse ignores persistent inequalities in access to information and communication skills, and, even more dangerous, ignores the need, always, for effective *local* processes of access to, and participation in the production of, information. Rhetorics of ‘information’ and ‘networks’ won’t help us, Sinha insists, when we fail to ask ‘whose society is it’ that is being described (55). But Sinha is no default pessimist: he sees potential ways forward in new digital forms of connection that, in principle, could generate ‘dynamic, pluralistic, reflexive, and democratic [forms of] governance’ (58).

This however takes us to Sinha’s second target, which is our broader understanding of the practical role of information in digital societies. He grounds this critique in a review of early theories of the ‘information society’, siding more with the later scepticism of Scott Lash than with the apparent optimism of those early theories. He also is sharply critical of what once seemed radical attempts to develop a policy framework for democratizing the ‘information society’: The WSIS (World Summit on Information Society) meetings of 2003 and 2005. The problem, Sinha plausibly argues, is that their discourse never went far enough, always leaving unquestioned ‘the privatization of information and communication’ (84). In a strikingly pessimistic conclusion to chapter 3, Sinha argues: ‘information as the captive component of the ICT-led Information society is thus the gateway to . . . the high-tech and highly technocratic notion of the Network Society and, on a broader scale, to the reductionist and corrosive vision of democracy’ (86).

This, in turn, sets up the boldest chapter of the book (chapter 4) which not only offers a trenchant critique of Manuel Castells’ theory of the network society (and informational capitalism), but also provides its own rich account of how information works in democracy. Although early critiques noted Castells’ causal reductionism (giving overwhelming prominence to technological change, while trying to deny this), they have not stopped its wide influence. Sinha’s book therefore is salutary for insisting, once again, on the technocratic nature of Castell’s argument, for example, in how it reads political resistance. For it ‘not only subscribes to technotopia, but also goes on to strengthen it by [its] way of explaining information generation, processing and transmission’ (96). True, critiques

of Castells' general argument are easy to make, but Sinha goes further, noting how Castells fails to pay attention to the actual complexity of information dynamics and how information endures socially through processes of 'reality-creation' (96). The reason is that Castells ignores the 'epistemological dimension' of practices which not only disseminate information, but *construct* ways of thinking and acting. Sinha's initial example is Amazon's construction of new digital market-places, which appear *prima facie* to democratize market functioning, but actually are deeply exclusionary (99). The result of the practices of Amazon and many other platforms is not only that market processes are massively intensified, but that non-commodified communication becomes ever more difficult (here Sinha endorses much of Jodi Dean's (2009) analysis of communicative capitalism).

So what are the implications of this enriched political science approach for our understanding of contemporary politics? This is where I found the book a little disappointing. It would perhaps be too much to expect a book published in 2018 to offer a detailed deconstruction of the politics of information in Modi's India (Narendra Modi having been elected as Prime Minister only in 2014); in any case, it seems that Sinha's intention is to write a book for a general international audience, rather than for analysts of Indian politics. But I had expected Sinha to offer a more fully developed account of the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary information politics (which he calls the information 'game-in-game'). The broad moves of the final chapters are valuable: to go beyond general capitalist critique and challenge the specific problems of 'digital rationality'; a suspicion of proposals simply for more transparency or for crude 'digital' solutions to democracy's long-term problems. But Sinha's concept of 'programmed democracy' (our irredeemably digital democratic world) needs, I suggest, more expansion, even if I agree with his insistence on the enduring importance of face-to-face elements. Similarly chapter 6 on Mediatization stays perhaps too close to existing debates on the mediatization of politics, though Sinha does make one important point: that recent arguments for the overwhelming importance of social media in democratic decline may underestimate the continuing importance of traditional media in countries such as India where traditional media still command very high levels of trust.

Nevertheless, it is Sinha's final question that resonates most powerfully, when he asks 'to what extent . . . [often digital] popular mobilizations . . . are capable of reorienting the highly asymmetrical information order in a democracy' (191). Without serious attention to the costs *for voice* of today's 'asymmetrical information order', 'democracy', Sinha concludes, 'can have no arrival' (195). This, by itself, is enough to

unsettle the standard debates on digital democracy in the West which assume so often that democracy is something that has already arrived.

Deepening the democratic puzzle

To extend our understanding of the puzzle of democracy's anti-democratic elements, it is worth turning briefly to a book published just over a year before Sinha's: Peter Csigo's *The Neopopular Bubble*, one of the most brilliant and original books on political communication of recent years. Csigo like Sinha starts from the question of what is undermining democracy from within, but in a way that challenges the assumptions of the mediatization of politics literature that Sinha assumes as a reference-point. For Csigo challenges the assumption, deep within the mediatization literature, that politics *really is* being transformed by an increasing pressure to *conform* political practice to what political consumers (and the media that represent them) want. But what if no one knows what political consumers want, and what mediatization practices respond to is not any reality, but the image that political actors have of what other political actors think about people want?

The result would be not a political process closer to popular instincts, but rather an unending speculative expansion that continuously chases the unknowable, while telling itself that it is getting ever closer to satisfying 'the people's' desires. There is, perhaps, an echo here of Slavoj Žižek's deconstruction of 1990s Balkan nationalism (Žižek 1990) as a Lacanian fantasy whose subjects compete in circling around an object of desire that can never be defined. However, Csigo's theoretical reference-points are not psychoanalysis, but economics, in particular John Maynard Keynes' explanation of market speculation where traders speculate not on what will be popular, but on what other traders' *believe* will be popular. Csigo's great originality is to propose that such speculative bubbles, which are unmoored from any underlying reality, have taken over mediated politics as well as economics.

What Csigo and Sinha have in common is to bring out the epistemological issues that underlie the problems of information flow in democracy. For Sinha, it is a matter of a corporate-driven reconstruction of the types of information that matter in economy and society. For Csigo, it is matter not so much of epistemological construction, as of error, a false assumption that populism addresses what 'the people' actually want, but with the added subtlety that academics compound that error by taking mainstream political actors' beliefs about their relation to the popular at something like face value.

From these perspectives, the problems of digital democracies are becoming ever more difficult to disentangle: there is a convergence, for

sure, of many deep underlying issues of inequality, representation, and uneven information flow, but each are crossed by powerful new discourses that claim to speak for deep political interests, or, as Sinha discusses, to reconfigure the terrain of economy and society in ways that reshape people's interests.

At this point, enter stage right a new form of business discourse that claims to have direct access to consumers' and voters' brains and minds.

Neuromarketing's Motivated Fantasies

Neuromarketing attacks the problem of information in liberal democratic societies – indeed all societies – from a radical new angle. In direct opposition to Sinha's socially grounded approach to how meaning is made through information, the industry discourse of neuromarketing offers a top-down technique for bypassing the human subject's informational processing and knowing *directly* how the consumer – and potentially also the citizen – will act. Even more alarmingly, it claims to have on its side both technical neuroscience and the latest thinking in psychology (Kahneman) and philosophy of consciousness (Damasio). While some of neuromarketing's claims might seem outlandish, they are becoming normalized in everyday business practice. The task of deconstructing those claims before they become fully dominant is what motivates Selena Nemorin's excellent book.

As she makes clear at the outset, neuromarketing is not just a technique for nudging responses to ads through neuroscience, but the project of 'extracting marketing-relevant information from the consumer's subconscious' (Nemorin, 3). Why? Put bluntly, because of neuromarketing's belief that 'people often do not know their own minds' (Clint Kilts of the Brighthouse Institute, quoted 4). In the hands of a malevolent dictator, such claims would seem obviously dangerous and self-servicing; so too in the hands of a populist politician who appeared a friend of democracy, the type of politician that both Sinha and Csigo are worried about. But from the mouths of marketers, playfully working, it seems, at the edges of imaginative technologies of persuasion, few alarm bells have rung outside debates in specialist articles. That is why Nemorin's thorough expose of neuromarketing as a practice is of exceptional importance.

Nemorin takes care to build her critique on three foundations. First, a thorough analysis of texts from the neuromarketing industry over two decades (1998-2018), including conference speeches, papers, and patents. Second, a sophisticated theoretical model for interpreting the frameworks through which neuromarketing makes sense of the world and for comparing these frameworks with those that normally guide how we interpret human action. Third, close attention to the important debates in

economic psychology and brain science on which neuromarketing seeks to build its claims.

The result is a compelling case for limiting the role of neuromarketing in public and daily life. It works because Nemorin takes, as seriously as does Sinha for informational discourse, neuromarketing's project for reality creation or, as she puts it, its project of creating 'a cultural media environment within which realities are shaped and revealed by those in power' (7). To grasp that project, we must take seriously neuromarketing's epistemology: its goal of building 'a new epistemic knowledge that ultimately instrumentalizes consumers for material gain' (15) (again the parallel with Sinha's argument is clear). The criticism of marketing is of course not new, nor is it new to criticise marketing for extracting consumer data (see eg Turov 2011). But neuromarketing represents something more concentrated and sophisticated, and so requires a more particular critique. For Selena Nemorin, neuromarketing is a form of 'biosurveillance' that extends the Foucauldian notion of biopower within a specialized bioeconomy focussed on generating what she calls 'biovalue', that is, value direct from life itself (27).

Nemorin is herself not the first to analyze the bioeconomy, but she is one of the first to grasp its huge implications for the framing of politics and, as she puts it, for 'the potential of democratic communicative action' (4). The book's other great strength is to detach itself from the anti-normative scepticism that often accompanies Foucauldian approaches: I'll return to Nemorin's normative position shortly. But right away I would argue that her critique is effective only because she addresses head on the potential normative power of neuromarketing's own framework.

First, Nemorin contextualizes the emergence of neuromarketing within a broader 'neuro-cultural turn' of recent decades that has come to 'privilege neurobiological explanations over psychological theories of behavior' (5): compare Rose and Abi-Rached (2013). Here material technologies such as brain imaging (fMRI and EEG) are crucial. So too are new scientific ideas: the massive popularity of Daniel Kahneman's recategorization of human thinking in terms of 'fast' and 'slow' processes', with fast, instinctive thinking shown to have a greater role in economic decision-making than neoclassical economists had ever believed, and of Antonio Damasio's subtle arguments that emotion plays a much greater role in general thinking and decision-making than previously believed. All these developments converge to authorise, or so it seems, neuromarketing's claims both to be able to use neuroscientific techniques to know what consumers want better than they know themselves *and* to seek to influence the consumer brain at the pre-conscious level, bypassing the reflexive and conscious decision-making that neuromarketing indeed believes is less important.

In four central chapters, Nemorin explores the discursive world of neuromarketing in detail, finding at its core some key assumptions that appear to justify its audacious interventions. For example, the assumptions, first, that customers do not know, or have access to, the truth about themselves, not at least through verbal reflections alone; second, that consumers cannot be trusted to behave rationally; third, that algorithms can know consumers better than they know themselves, enabling, in turn, predictive tools that bypass the old marketing technique of asking people what they think about, for example, brands. Yet, this new approach to marketing runs counter to key assumptions of democratic culture, that people can vote based on knowing why they act and why they think what they do; indeed it does so, while apparently also servicing a key freedom (market freedom) that is supposed to be a necessary support of democratic culture.

In her boldest move, Nemorin uses Heidegger's account of how humans frame the world as a world to understand the limits of neuromarketing's own thinking. Through careful analysis, she unpacks how, rarely, neuromarketers treat consumers as having a sophisticated engagement with the economy that marketers must somehow try to work round. More often, they regard consumers as having a limited grasp on what drives their economic decision-making, being like the dumb animals that Heidegger characterizes as being 'poor in world'. And often neuromarketers treat consumers more like the stones that Heidegger called 'worldless'. Although this Heideggerian framework might seem a little top-heavy as a deconstructive technique, it is in fact a very effective way of taking neuromarketing seriously, while revealing its instrumentarian and dehumanizing logic.

Listen, for example, to Christophe Morin, executive at SalesBrain in his lecture 'Is There a Buy Button in the Brain?' which Nemorin discusses extensively:

[neuromarketing provides] cutting edge methods for directly probing minds without requiring demanding cognitive or conscious participation (...) [such methods] do so by removing the biggest obstacle facing conventional advertising research, which is **to trust that people have both the will and the capacity to report how they are affected** by a specific piece of marketing (quoted Nemorin 140, NC emphasis).

So neuromarketing recognizes, but seeks to override, people's possible indifference to marketing, by claiming people's either can't report what they think, or, if they can, they might want to! These however are not the outlandish ravings of wild eccentrics, but the stuff of which many lucrative patents in the field of emotional AI and neuromarketing are built. Nemorin

only hints at the implications when such approaches are applied to the general social media landscape, but she does allude in passing to Facebook's notorious experiment on how misleading material can spread like wildfire on social media networks (169).

Perhaps not surprisingly the weakest chapter (chapter 8) is where Nemorin tries to allow that there might be some marketers who do take the reflective richness of consumers seriously: she seems to find few examples of this, though she has no problem showing the subtlety of writers such as Kahneman and Damasio from which neuromarketing borrows some of its simplified recipes. Nemorin is more comfortable exploring neuromarketing's less respectful ways of addressing consumers, an overall approach she sums up as 'augmented animality' (216).

To her credit, Nemorin does not shy away from the normative conclusions that flow from her deconstruction of the neuromarketing industry. At this point – and this is potentially a disadvantage of her theoretical model – she is not comfortable for obvious reasons with using Heidegger as the source of her normative framing, given the other associations of his thought. Instead, she relies on a combination of political economy (the broad tradition of critiquing the bioeconomy plus more recent critiques of surveillance and datafication) with a Deweyian concept of democracy as free communicative action. Affirming that freedom is a 'primary social value' (220), Nemorin argues that neuromarketing cannot be seen other than as a 'breach of [the] self' that underlies the possibility of freedom. As she vividly writes neuromarketing amounts to a 'breach of self [that] occurs the moment the inward space where we have freedom to choose is wrenched open to disinhibition and external manipulation, rendering our neurophysiological data into biovalue' (225).

But, to conclude, I want to ask: how should we think about Nemorin's explicit normative stance?

Taking a Stand

Nemorin is not alone among commentators in taking an explicit normative stance on the digital social world. Other examples include Sherry Turkle's (2011) work on young people's use of digital technologies, Mireille Hildebrandt's drawing on the concept of autonomy (Hildebrandt 2015), Shoshana Zuboff's (2019) interpretation of surveillance capitalism as a denial of freedom, my own work with Ulises Mejias on how data colonialism undermines 'the space of the self' (Couldry and Mejias 2019), and, just translated into English, Beate Rössler's work on autonomy (Rössler 2021).

How far we have travelled, it seems, from the unease against normative position-taking that for long characterized the Foucauldian

tradition on which Nemorin's analysis frequently draws and which characterized indeed Foucault's own work, as Charles Taylor brought out in an important essay (Taylor 1986)! It is only two decades ago that it seemed radical for prominent Foucauldian Nikolas Rose to write, in his provocatively named book *Powers of Freedom*, that 'one must discard the presupposition that one can criticize regimes of power to the extent that they falsify and distort human subjectivity and utilize the extent of this falsification as a yardstick by which power can be evaluated.' For 'power . . . acts through practices that "make up subjects" as free persons' (Rose 1999: 95). 'Freedom', Rose concluded resoundingly, 'is *the name we give today* to a kind of power one brings to bear upon oneself, and a mode of bringing power to bear upon others . . . freedom is particularly problematic when we demand to be governed in its name' (Rose 1999: 96). Without for one moment minimizing the importance of the critique of neoliberal appropriations of freedom to which both Foucault and Rose contributed, it is clear that Rose's position was intended to go further: to *disarm* freedom as a normative concept for interpreting and challenging social power.

Can such abstinence from normative uses of values such as freedom and autonomy be adequate in our 'today', in a world where, from many directions, explicit projects to undermine or discount human beings' capacities for free action and reflection are under way? Can we safely abandon the term freedom and still address the anti-democratic dynamics of today's 'democracies'? The answer of Selena Nemorin and Dipankar Sinha would seem quite clearly to be 'no'. And that is one wider significance of these two books: as evidence of the normative turn which characterizes critical communications research and critical social science in these deeply troubled times.

BOOKS REVIEWED

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Dipankar Sinha (2018). *The Information Game in Democracy*. London and New York: Routledge. 218 + xviii pp. £33.29: ebook. ISBN: 978-0-429-50766-3.

Also discussed:

Peter Csigo (2016). *The Neopopular Bubble: Speculating on "the People" in Late Modern Democracy*. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press. 409 + xvi pp. Euro 60: hbk. ISBN: 978-963-386-167-7.

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