[Intro Anne Goßler] In this episode, Ross Beveridge, co-founder of our podcast and guests discuss the topic of digital cities and democracy. Digitalization is transforming cities, urbanization, and urban life. But how is it changing urban politics? What issues of justice and democracy are at stake in the advance of digital technologies? What are the power implications of the unending rise of corporate digital platforms like Amazon? How are social media platforms reconfiguring the ways we live in cities and the ways we conduct politics? And what does the future hold?
Ross discusses these questions with four scholars who have recently published important books in this field. Myria Georgiou, who is a professor of media and communications and head of the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. She is the author of the book *Being Human in Digital Cities*, published by Polity Press. Rob Kitchin, who is a professor in the Social Sciences Institute at Maynooth University. He's the author of *Critical Data Studies and A to Z Guide to Concepts and Methods*, published by Polity Press. Yu-shan Tseng, who is an anniversary research fellow in geography at the University of Southampton. She's the author of *Liquid Democracy A Comparative Study of Digital Urban Democracy*, published by Wiley and Sons. And lastly, Justus Uitermark, who is professor of urban geography and the academic director of the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Amsterdam. He is – together with Peter Thunberg – the author of *Seeing Like a Platform An Inquiry into the Condition of Digital Modernity*, published by Routledge. And now let us dive into the episode.

[Ross Beveridge] Just to get our conversation started: I was thinking about this question of digital cities and politics and digital cities and democracy and I realized that I have a rough idea of what digitalization is and what it's doing. I haven't really considered it in my own research ever. And I kind of reflected on the stuff that I read and often the stuff I read about urban politics and democracy doesn't always or, or hardly ever, really engages with these questions. One of the reasons to bring you guys together as a group.
But to get us started, it would be really helpful to just have a sort of definition of what the digital city is, a simple kind of nuts and bolts type definition. It somehow brings together that relationship between the digital and the urban, and how it's been changing how the city has been changing in relation to digitalization.
And Rob, I was wondering if you could kick us off on that before we move on to some of the other guests?

[Rob Kitchin]. Okay. I had a think about this question and I started with a potted history of the work that I've been doing on this. The first time I kind of wrote about this was probably about ‘97/’98. I had a couple of books out around then. One on mapping cyberspace, which was thinking around how the emerging internet was changing the economy, politics, policy, that kind of stuff. Thinking around e-government and participatory democracy through early forms of communication, through web platforms and so on. So it's an empirical work.
Probably first really started around open data movements and the idea about open data facilitating citizen participation in local politics, policy making, and so on. I did quite a lot of work on sharing data across the border into Northern Ireland, based around the emerging peace process in the early 2000s. Though I guess, most of the work would have really started with the code space work in the mid-2000s. We were really starting to think around how digital technologies were shaping urban governance. And that culminated in the *Code Space* book in 2011, and we developed this notion of automated management. So, this is really around governance rather than democratic politics, although they're obviously interlinked. So, automated management is about systems that are automated,

autonomous and automatic. These are kind of human off the loop systems that were moving around the city, for example. They might be controlled by an intelligent transport system that just works in autonomous kinds of ways. And looking at things like data shadows, data footprints, changing nature of governmentality, particularly the idea of switching from discipline to control.
That's developed further in the data revolution book. So, looking at open data, citizen participation, citizen science, data surveillance and governance, particularly notions of anticipatory governance. These are systems that try to predict what's going to happen and act on the future before the future happens. So predictive policing, for example, would be one system. And another idea is around control creep. Systems designed to regulate one form of behaviour being used to regulate others. Like technology creeping across into domains for which it wasn't initially rolled out.
And then in the second edition of that book, we expanded it a lot more to think around ideas of governmentality again, data ethics, data justice, data sovereignty, notions of citizenship, impacts of data capitalism back into the public domain as well. Corporatization of city systems. What does it mean when corporations start to run public services? It was really examining the programmable city project that ran from 2013-2028. It was really around smart city technologies. And I saw from Paola Cordella, we revisited Sherry Arnstein's ladder of participation and map that onto smart city technologies, looking at the extent to which citizens can have a say in what's happening with the smart city. Looking at citizen resistance, bottom up initiatives, repurposing of tech rather than abandoning it; looking at alternative political framings such as technological sovereignty in Barcelona, and the shift to try and move to open source alternatives to the big proprietary systems.
We have a couple of chapters in the *Timescapes* book on how digital technology is transforming temporalities of politics and policy, and also governance and governmentality. Things like altering time rules. What happened? What's the effect of 24/7 news media cycles? The effect of social media shifting political currents rapidly. Things like the Arab Spring. The Me Too Movement and so on. Shifting how elections are fought. And we all know about Musk buying Twitter to effectively influence a political campaign and issues around governance. So things like altering policy cycles, fast policy, fast activism and so on. The *Slow Computing* book is just looking at how we take control ourselves, personally, but also collectively try to push back against some of these things. How do we challenge and organize? Whether that's slow movements or the right to disconnect and all of those things. So that's a very positive history of different things. And hopefully it's tapped on to different kind of elements of this.
As you probably picked up, this has been shifting over time. Shifting from the kind of internet onto platforms and different forms of technologies and different deepening of what the technologies are capable of doing. This is a gradual transformation as different technologies are embedded within others.

[Ross Beveridge] Thanks, Rob. It's very helpful also to have that sense of progression in your work and through the debates over time. Myria, when I was reading your recent book *Being human in digital cities*, it really struck me how you set it up in a very political way and a very normative argumentative stance. If you could say a little bit about the constellation of politics as it relates to the digital city that you engage with and mention some of the key players? I was struck also how closely you relate developments to ongoing crises over the last ten to 15 years. And, and how that links to the idea of post-neoliberalism. You mentioned a number of points in your book. Can you describe that constellation of politics that you set up in relation to your recent book?

[Myria Georgiou] Thank you. It's interesting hearing Rob's introduction to how he conceives and how he applied the digital city to see also how differently many of the people that work in that space engage with the concept of the digital cities. How do we approach it in different ways? I should say, in dialogue to Rob's introduction and also as an introduction to my answer: I think that my origins and

the way that I approach the digital in relation to the to the city has to do with the fact that I am a communication scholar. I'm a scholar that has been interested for a long time in what's happening in cities. Cities as lived in political spaces. In my first book that engaged with cities, *The Media and the City*, it was a book back in 2013. I tried to understand how process of mediation shapes the cities, spaces of inclusion and exclusion.

And as we see cities becoming more and more digitized, I built on this work to think about how digitization is a new form of communication, rather than primarily, or merely as an infrastructural process. That has to do with the politics and the technocratic intentions of efficiency and order. How the process of digitization actually shapes the city as democratic or non-democratic space as a space where different actors have the possibility to be recognized, misrecognized or expelled from the city. My approach in *Being Human in Digital Cities*, the book that you refer to, is to start with a provocation in discussing digital cities. And what I'm arguing is that perhaps we should not start from technology, but start from the human, if we are to understand how cities are actually shaped digitally. And I'm doing that for different reasons, this goes to the heart of your question: What are the claims made in cities through the mobilization of technologies? We are going through a specific moment that I identify as a moment of compounded crisis, crisis of capitalism, a crisis of the neoliberal economic and political order. Cities do not only become spaces where we see the expression of those crises in the same way as the nation, but we see the cities as a space where those crises are particularly faced, understood, and contested within the ecology of cities.

I'm looking at the ecology of very different cities across the world. So from places like London to Athens, all the way to Havana to see how the urban ecologies allow certain negotiations of the crisis through digitisation. The claim that I make is that we see digitisation being mobilised to promise a better future, a future outside this crisis, where different actors from the very powerful actors of the city's digital corporations policy makers all the way to the inhabitants of the city and the protesters and the social movements are mobilizing digital technologies very differently. But they are all mobilizing digital technologies to try to find ways to this better future outside those crises of liberal democracy and neoliberal economics.

[Ross Beveridge] Thank you very much, Myria. Justus, I see some links between Myria's and Rob's work, of course. How do you approach that entity, the digital city? And what kind of arguments are you making about it in your in your recent work? In particular, thinking of this idea of digital modernity.

[Justus Uitermark] I should maybe start by saying how and when I became interested in the digital in the first place. This was around 2010/11. You may remember, there was a time of mayor crisis. It was also a time of major protests. I remember seeing the news headlines when WikiLeaks was having their releases day after day. And at some point there was this group called *Anonymous* that had sabotaged websites. It had basically knocked out websites by Visa-/Mastercard. And I was amazed. I was so surprised to see this because I had no idea about these technologies at the time. I didn't know exactly what was happening, but I was very much intrigued. And so that's also the moment that I became very interested in the literature, on social media, on politics, on democratisation and so on. And I think at that moment in time, many people still felt that social media, digital platforms were, by and large, emancipatory.

One key figure here is Manuel Castells, who argued that social media allowed activists to create horizontal networks to bypass media. I became very interested in the relationship between digital platforms, on the one hand, and politics protest on the other hand. I started doing some research into this. I became very interested also in computational methods, and I started doing what many other people were doing at the time, which is to say: Oh, there's a protest. Now I take a hashtag and I look at all posts related to that hashtag, and then I sort of map out the protest space." So I became very

interested in this. And I indeed concluded that social media were heavily implicated in protest. However, I also realized early on that I was sort of sampling on the dependent variable. Like if there was a protest, then I would look at the hashtag. I became interested in trying out a more agnostic approach.

With John D. Boy, I started studying Instagram. I didn't know Instagram at all at the time. He introduced me to it. And the reason he introduced me to it was that we were able, at that moment in time, to download all geotagged messages posted in Amsterdam. So here we were able to track protests over time and through space. We were absolutely fascinated by this idea. And then we started looking at the data and we found that, actually, people didn't use Instagram at all for protesting. People were showing pictures of beautiful sunrises. They showed pictures of trees. They were showing off their new sneakers. And so when I tell this to my students, they say: "Well, what do you expect? Instagram isn't for protest." So maybe, I was a bit naive, but I was naive in part because of what the literature had led me to expect. I expected people to use social media to protest, so, I also expected that cities would become more contentious as a result of social media. And this isn't at all what we found.

So for me, there was a reason to start rethinking digital platforms and to think about how they were shaping the spaces of possibility within cities. I won't go into all the details, but I do want to give you the conclusion from the book I wrote with John Boy which is specifically on Instagram. We found that actually we don't find polarization at all. This is just what the literature led us to expect. We actually found that these Instagram networks were tightly integrated. Relatedly, we didn't find a lot of extremism. In fact, we found a lot of conformity. And also we didn't see these horizontal networks that Castells was talking about. Instead, we saw extremely uneven distributions. This was a very hierarchical, tightly integrated conformist space, which isn't at all what we expected. This then led me to rethink the role of platforms, the role of politics. It also led me to think: "Oh, I'm just at the very beginning of trying to understand the relationship between digital platforms and politics."

I'm sorry I didn't answer your question about the book I did with Peter, but I had to say this first because this sort of set me up to dive deep into digital modernity.

[Ross Beveridge] Wonderful. Thank you. There's no problem. You can come back to that idea. So you just wrote a really great book, *Liquid Democracy*, quite recently. How did you approach this thing, the Digital City? One thing I was struck in your book was, the way in which you really approached it as a sort of an epistemological question. How can I know these politics of the digital city? I wonder if you can position the composition of your work in relation to some of those ideas.

[Yu-Shan Tseng] Thanks for the great introduction. I'm the most junior researcher in the room, so I just recently published a book entitled *Liquid Democracy*. It has nothing to do with the model of liquid democracy, which people delegate a vote to algorithm or other elites. But it is to use liquidity as a metaphor to rethink democratic politics in digital society. To start off with, I'm building on my understanding of digital city upon great words from Rob and many, many geographers who have done a lot of work, in digital city and also as scholar. In general, the common sense is: Yes, digital technology and platforms change the way in which cities are governed, and specifically, they change the way in which political decisions, actions and procedures are made. So, for example, they're no longer made by humans. Now you don't know who is making decisions. It's a combination of algorithm or human or purely AI, which is possible.

Also, they no longer follow normative procedures embedded in liberal democracy. So therefore, I would think of technology as intervening and infiltrating into whichever has been considered as normative politics. So, what I want to highlight in my book is that the everyday technology has reshaped how we conduct and how we are going about everyday life practices. A lot of digital politics are inseparable from the decision we make in everyday life. The fact that how we decide to post or like

on Twitter (or now X), or decide not to do something on X… all these choices are political and have implications on democratic politics.
These digital spaces have become very, very fluid, meaning that things are being shaped quite contingently, but also contextually. And that opens up possibilities and challenges for democracy. I'm a geographer. So I think if you you're taking a very theory driven approach, you're only looking for a certain type of urban politics from certain places and spaces. But if you look at democratic politics just from the very fluidity of what's happening, what things have been changing in digitally mediated, everyday life, then you're going to find different kinds of democratic politics playing out.

[Ross Beveridge] Just the last bit of the question made me think of… I think, there's a line in your book where you're talking about how you're going to research. You say something like you're going to look for democracy as it exists in the field. It really struck me as quite daring in a way. I mean, there is that tradition of looking for democracy, not reading it off of high theory, and rather looking at it through practices of everyday life in the city. That's something that's really innovative and powerful about your book.
When you were talking about that space of the everyday, I was thinking a little bit about your more recent book, Myria. You talk about critical humanism as this kind of space of the demos or something or demotic humanism as the space where there's a possibility for publics to emerge. For collective interests to emerge and for these contests we associate with democracy. So, I wonder if you could say a little bit about how you relate your work to the bigger questions of democracy? What kind of hopes and fears do you have in relation to the work you've been doing?

[Myria Georgiou] Thank you. I mentioned earlier in my response that I'm exploring, in this book, different cities in relation to each other. I engage with different actors, from the technocrats all the way to refugees and migrants and the racialized minorities of cities. I'm exploring how digital technologies might be mobilized differently for those different actors to promise or to attempt to find pathways out of the current moments of compounded crisis. Part of the argument is: In response of to those compounded crises, we see rise of claims to human dignity, freedom and autonomy, which are claims that different actors make differently. You asked me to speak about demotic humanism. The way that I talked about demotic humanism is very much related to what Yu-Shan just said about the politics of everyday life and the spaces of possibility, but also of limits. Thinking of the democratic possibility, democratic politics, which are actually connected to the politics of dignity, freedom, and autonomy not for the few, but for the many. I'm looking at different sites of ordinariness in cities to find out the different ways through which different actors of the city try to envision ways to autonomy, dignity, and freedom. And I try to do that primarily by starting from the margins. I'm very interested in populations in the margins, transnational and urban margins. I'm more interested on how the urban humans who are experiencing constant and long standing marginality try to find their space to the public space. How they try to find voice and recognition.
I come up with this concept of demotic humanism, which reflects this idea that there is a process that happens in everyday life where the demos, literally the people, are trying to set forward those ideals through everyday practices, the ideals of humanism.
I looked at everyday practices such as sharing Wi-Fi among different neighbours, all of them having limited resources. In Athens, for example, in more impoverished neighbourhoods of the city, someone buys Wi-Fi and everybody shares the expense. So we see examples like that where there's a demotic attempt to claim a space within that digital space. I mentioned examples such as those in Havana, where, again, access to the internet is scarce and very expensive. Residents of Havana are hacking the WiFi systems of expensive hotels so that they can claim their space into the transnational space of the internet where they can speak, but also have access to information that is otherwise restricted to them. I give other examples of how refugees try to hack the system that constantly monitors them. They

create different social media profiles so that they find spaces of freedom within that very restrictive space where they exist in European cities.
I see that space of demotic humanism as that space of hope - again, as Yu-Shan just said - of democratic politics. But I also see that space of the demotic humanism as a space that always comes with limitations, precisely because the everyday politics of solidarity and everyday resistance are not directly contesting the order. The order that very much reproduces monitoring of refugees, reproduces the exclusion of the Habaneros from having full access to transnational internet… and this is where my proposal of critical humanism comes in. As more of a politics, a praxis, and a commitment to more transformational politics through digitisation.

[Ross Beveridge] Thank you, Myria. How do you, Justus, approach this question of the democratic implications of digitalisation in the city and the work that you've done? In your most recent book on platform (which is not only about cities) you talk a lot about power and power of knowledge. I was really struck at one part of the book where you talk about lots of new developments and there's a new epistemology in the digital modernity, but it's also reinforcing existing power relations. There isn't always as much change as we think there is. And some of the changes are also quite problematic. So without trying to put words into your mouth, - which I probably already have - could you just open up a little bit the possibilities as well as the danger zones for democracy in relation to digital cities?

[Justus Uitermark] Thank you. Ross. In the book, *Seeing like a Platform* we talk about epistemologies of power. How are societies imagined? To make this very specific, very concrete, we can think of a classical confrontation in cities between Robert Moses on the one hand and Jane Jacobs on the other. Robert Moses viewed the city as a sort of complicated system, like a clockwork. And he could reorganize it to make it more efficient. And then Jane Jacobs saw it more as a complex system with emergent qualities with fine grained webs of relationships. It's very interesting to see that many people who are very enthusiastic about the possibilities of digital technologies now talk about Jane Jacobs and celebrate her as a complexity theorist. And I think it's fair to say that all planning and complexity theorists agree that Robert Moses got it all wrong and Jane Jacobs got it all right.
However, I think this idea that the city is a complex system also comes with certain limitations. For one, it naturalizes what happens in the city. So, if you see a city as a self-organizing system, then you also come to accept the ground rules. For instance, segregation, gentrification. They come to be seen as natural processes that then policy makers should guide towards just that. And so this is very interesting because before we had Robert Moses, who was a very violent, brutal man. But we did know he is creating the city that he wants. And now, when you listen to policy makers, when you listen to complexity scientists, they say that we need to accept bottom up principles of organisation. This can also mean that you accept bottom up principles of gentrification and segregation. So in the book, we talk a lot about how cities are seen and what is seen as natural and what is seen as acceptable. For me, this is something I'm struggling with now, which I find very interesting.
So we don't have Robert Moses anymore. Instead, we now have a much less open, much less brutal, but also much more profound and disturbing development. So we don't have the industrial modernity of Robert Moses, but we have the digital modernity being brought by companies like Google, like Meta. And they're not changing our cities completely. They're not imposing their views from above. Instead, they're trying to sort of harness complexity. Digital technologies woven into the urban fabric. And so this isn't as brutal, but the effects are rather profound.
One thing that I see over and over for different platforms, say for Google Maps or for TikTok, is that it makes the city more predictable. Google Maps' product vision is to give you an immersive sense of place while you're not there. This is very interesting because it means that places have to conform to the expectation of platform users. I talked to many restaurant owners, for instance, who feel very much disciplined by the reviews they're constantly getting. They have to provide services. Another example

is TikTok lines, which we have in the centre of Amsterdam. So people come for a very specific cookie and they come in very, very large numbers. And so we see here in cities that people are looking for this very, very specific thing. That's exactly what they want. And so what I'm thinking about now is how these digital technologies are changing. Also what makes cities interesting and democratic. Because I think one thing that makes cities democratic and interesting is that they're incomplete, that they're unpredictable, that there's serendipity. And these digital technologies, they're now making cities more predictable, and they're sort of programming space for very specific functions. This isn't as brutal as Robert Moses once was, but it is a very profound impact that in the end, I think, also erodes the city as a as a democratic space.

[Ross Beveridge] Rob, do you want to come in on that effect of digital technologies on the political and social life of the city? And what that means for the prospects of the city as a democratic space?

[Rob Kitchin]Yeah. I guess most of my work really has been around the smart city technologies that are not really communicative platforms. They're your intelligent transport systems and your dynamic routing of bin garbage trucks and all this kind of stuff. I think the interesting thing around democracy is really the tension between executive and reserve functions. So, this is basically the tension between politicians and bureaucrats or representative democracy versus technocratic intervention. That's definitely shifting.

The other area there is the neoliberalisation of city. There's increasing marketization, privatization, outsourcing, public private partnerships. So, the corporatization of city services that used to be decided through city councillors and representative forms of democracy are becoming more technocratic, mediated, and decided by bureaucrats and non-elected corporations. So for me, that's a big shift.

And it's also shifting the governmentality within the city. From more disciplining forms of governance to some more control forms. Remediating, reshaping people's behaviour rather than getting them to self-discipline. This is a very different kind of space to people bottom up self-organising through social media or through civic media projects. They might well be doing those in relation to what's happening in the city to try and push back and resist against them. I think Myria was pointing towards, kind of, DIY-activism, data activism, community hackathons, civic, citizen science and so on. Which is not necessarily a communicative thing. It's more an action of doing building, making interventions…

I guess the other thing that I've just started to get interested in around possibility of democratic politics is this notion of authoritarianism in the digital age. I've just started to edit a special issue which exceeded my expectations on the call for paper. We had 178 abstracts for this special issue. So this is definitely a moment. And I think we've commissioned fifty two. We're limiting people to two 2000 words, but it's covering nearly thirty countries. What's interesting there in the relationship to which the digital is being used in governance and in policing, and in the ways in which people are being marked out and controlled and disciplined in very explicit ways. The ways in which the digital is altering media narratives, political discourse, shifting rhetoric… shifting the way in which populationsthink. The digital itself is becoming highly regulated and also becoming ever more corporatised. You only have to think of the highly regulated countries, if you think of countries like China or in the Middle East or wherever it might be. And then the tech industry itself is becoming politically active. So, the heads of these corporations in the US are very clearly lined themselves up behind the political regime there and are using their technologies. The actions of Doge, and so on, which clearly have corporate actors behind it. They're actively financing and supporting particular political positions. That seems to me like a very direct line where democratic politics is definitely being reshaped by this shift to the right and the drift into aspects of authoritarian regimes. We'll have to wait to see the extent to which some of them drift that far over or to the extent to which there will be push backs.

But even in cases like in the US… at the weekend, there were massive protests. If you were to look at the New York Times, you would never know that they'd happened. I think the protests in the US were the twelfth or 13th story on their website, even though there's over ten million people on the streets, it's a non-event. It never happened. The media never covered it. So I think that's interesting, the way in which digital technologies are maybe eroding and undermining principles and practices around expected forms of democracies and how that might be changing over time.

[Ross Beveridge] Thanks for that, Rob. I think might be good to come back to you, Yu-Shan. Is there a particular constellation of digital democracy platforms? How does this relate to your understanding of the possibilities of democracy, which you call liquid democracy? I wonder if you want to say a little bit more about what arguments about the possibilities of democracy come out of Europe, come out of your book? And that study that did, I assume was your PhD.

[Yu-Shan Tseng] Thanks. I think back to the understanding of democratic politics as an epistemological problem. In my book, I try to look at how democracy can be without buying immediately into the democratic theories and how democracy is supposed to be in a liberal democracy. I've done in-depth ethnographic fieldwork in Taipei, Helsinki and Madrid the past almost ten years. These cities have interesting trajectories of democratization, which have undergone certain forms of authoritarianism. The transition is somewhat peaceful, non-violent, to democracy. That does say something about the character of these three cities, how the city becomes an urban place. Activist - from civil hackers to citizens or people who work in the government - embrace technology in different ways that perhaps might not be available in more usual suspects in smart cities like New York, Los Angeles, Hong Kong. These cities do digital politics differently. This leads to a different kind of argument, different kind of engagement with democratic politics. The fact that I ask to better understand the terrain in which democratic politics play out indigenously is supposed to be a fluid one. That means we should not deny the possibility that technology might really and very likely amplify the crisis of legitimacy, all these problems and challenges we are facing now, in platformisation, I'm not denying that.. but to understand how to open up the space for possibility is to engage and to directly work with the negatives emerging in specific cities, right?

Because, as you just said, polarisation might not even happen on Instagram in Amsterdam. So, how can we assume polarisation is happening everywhere? I'm trying to kind of have a more situated and contingent, but also fluid account of what democratic politics are happening in these three cities. I am hoping that when we are understanding technology, we don't put it into these binary and almost oppositional position, which is that it's either against or anti democracy. In this fluid terrain, negative and positive might happen all together. To reorient some of the challenges and problems towards a better city, meaning making a difference to those who suffer and are marginalized in everyday life, we must engage the negative.

When I looked at this remote community, the elderly wanted something from this participatory budgeting platform. They went on learning how to use QR code. They know much more about how to do democracy than me. They ended up getting the cultural heritage renovated, got the money from the government. Or in Taiwan, it is even happening at the national scale where the Uber and taxi drivers would be able to negotiate for a better and transparent payment to relocalise Uber company in conformity with what's happening at the local regulation.

What I am saying is that if I am biased towards certain theories and certain locations in thinking democracy, then there are other things I will never come about. And therefore the book is trying to think democracy otherwise and more fluidly to engage with the alternative. But of course, there's always a limitation. The limitation always comes in when politics are grounded in the urban world and delineated by the regulation, by the infrastructures. Things are happening in cities.

[Ross Beveridge] Just a quick follow up question to listen to a concluding session. So I think about what the future holds. Given the pace of change with AI and other technologies you've shown, where do you think, will we be in five to ten, 20 years? Can liquid democracy save the city?

[Yu-Shan Tseng] I think in my book, I'm pretty modest about liquid. I never make a universal claim that if we understand democracy from these fluids to contingent situation, then technology is going to save or transform urban governance per se. But I think it is changing how we think, right? Then perhaps they might change how we act as a scholar and maybe slightly influence how we understand the world. So, in answering your question, yes, I have a few qualifications going on with AI and democracy. I'm not sure I've got the grant, so I'm not sure I would be able to tell you the answer. I'm really influenced by Donna Haraway. Personally, I think AI and technology are unlikely and uncontrollable, yet powerful actors. They can potentially become an ally for democracy if you don't use AI for the sake of democracy, but to re-orientate towards democratic possibility that other people are going to use it for other purposes. So it depends on how we use AI.
And it's also important not to say AI is inherently democratic or anti-democratic. What is more important is to see how AI is acting. What AI is doing in in everyday life. So for example, Google DeepMind, they have this new thing called *Machine*. They think they can automate deliberation to find common ground across differences. I think, it requires evidence based investigation to see what is actually happening in the real world. There are also some SME-companies in the UK. They try to re-innovate the democratic platform, use large language models to find these commonalities across different opinion groups in a presumably polarised sector discussion. I think, to really embody this really strong democracy as a long lasting effect, there's a need for strong institutionalisation, a change in political culture. And that's really beyond like: Let's install an AI and everything will be solved. It is to open up the space for possibility. And that requires a lot, a lot of work from different kind of human actors to really reorient technology towards a better future that really make a difference for the marginalized in the everyday life.

[Ross Beveridge] Thank you for that. I thought if you Rob want to come in? When you look into your magic ball, what do you see in five, ten years? What are the prospects for the city with the pace of change and the type of politics we have at the moment?

[Rob Kitchin] I'm hesitant about these kinds of questions because trying to forecast the future is doomed to failure. Stuff always happens that you're not quite expecting or things veer off and whatever. I think, the first thing to say is that the digital isn't going to go away. It's very firmly entrenched. And we're on a path of things becoming ever more digitally mediated. So the key questions really are normative. It's not do we want a smart city? It's what kind of smart city do we want? And what kind of politics and what kinds of forms of governance? Do we want to ensure that the demotic city is possible? Crises come along. So, it'll always be inflected by other kinds of crises, whether that's going to be climate, environmental or social, political or economic, financial or war on terror or… that's always going to shape the future. And we're never quite sure. Think about how Covid-19 led to quite significant shifts in things like work patterns. It normalised certain forms of governance in terms of lockdown and monitoring. It fuelled all kinds of conspiracy theories; has pushed politics in certain directions in relation to health and other kinds of things.
I mean, it's really to keep alive the normative and to keep continually having these conversations about what kinds of cities and societies we want to live in. Being able to resist and push back on that open for people to do. Depending on where you are, things seem to be on a certain kind of path and it's about trying to knock that kind of path out so it doesn't become some kind of path dependency. If there's one thing I think that we really needed to do, it would be to dismantle billionaire news media, social media platforms and recast back to public service broadcasting. Because I think it's going to be

pretty difficult to shift things back to more progressive lines while that's in place. It's going to be an uphill battle.

[Ross Beveridge] Think of sort of the near future, five years, maybe twenty years. Optimistic, pessimistic? Glass half full, glass half empty? What things need to change? As Rob suggested, how do you think about the future in the current times?

[Myria Georgiou] I also got nervous when you asked the question to predict the future. It is very risky to predict the future. There are two things to say. First of all, it's like the future is always now. And the future is always now, especially when it comes to digitization. Because ironically, everything that changes now and in many ways that project of smartness is very much always promising something for the future. Many of the decisions that are being made around digital transformation of cities are about the promise of the future to come. So, there's a certain kind of future that we're being promised in five, ten, 20, 100 years through the logic of smartness. Especially in smart transformation. That is very much a pessimistic future, I think, from where we stand as a group. It's a future of prediction, modelling, and order where technologies will do wonders so that everything in the cities can be ordered, controlled. And all the risks that come with the life of the city can be at least controlled, if not eliminate them. This, I think, is a very dangerous future, especially because we see an investment in logics and technologies where we see the same kind of models and the same kind of predictive modelling being applied to everything, from sanitation to policing to democratic process and access to citizenship. And this is the future we have to be afraid of.
I want to speak about the two alternative futures. One is the normative. I will just acknowledge what Rob said, that it's very important to keep normative ideals of the kind of future that we want. I think those values and this commitment to advance transformative politics and transformative politics come with challenging the overconcentration of power. For example, in Big Tech. But also the acknowledgment of responsibility, or more precisely, the lack of democratic responsibility for those that are actually causing all the crisis within cities and across.
And I want to finish also with that other dimension, the demonic dimension of the alternative future. That to me, and I hope that's not just my naiveté, is that the future is not only digital, but it's also urban. Cities are not facing the challenges of attempt for full control autocracy and authoritarianism for the first time. Justus mentioned, of course, the example of Moses. The archetypical symbol of urban control. And cities have always proposed different ways of living and managing and resisting, sometimes more successfully, sometimes perhaps less successfully. All these historically reoccurring attempts to fully control and order cities. I have to hold on that hope because our future is urban.

[Ross Beveridge] Awesome, keep the optimism, keeps the faith. Justus, what are your thoughts on what the future holds for the city and digitalisation?

[Justus Uitermark] I love the responses so far because there are also way more optimistic than I'm going to be. I fully agree with Rob that we should resist predicting the future, but I like the exercise because I think by predicting the future, we sort of say: “Okay, these are the trends that are dominant, these are the forces that are dominant.” And then we can see 5, 10 years from now, whether we were right or maybe there were things that we were overlooking. So, I hope I'm going to be wrong.
First of all, to respond to Myria directly: Yes, the future is not just going to be digital. It's also going to be urban. But I do think that the very idea of urbanity is being hollowed out by digitalisation. So, as I mentioned earlier, urbanity depends on serendipity, on encountering strangers on surprise. And these qualities of cities are being undermined by digital technologies. And I think this erodes the very foundation of an urban democratic politics. So I'm not optimistic at all in this respect.

Another thing that I think we're seeing already and we will see more is that power is becoming increasingly opaque. So in the book with Peter, we also discuss redlining. Redlining in the United States was a horrible practice, but it was clear who was doing it. The maps were there on the wall. We know who developed the indicators. We knew the effects. If we now look at AI, if we now look at algorithms, we don't really know how they decide on who gets a mortgage or not. And so I expect that it will be increasingly difficult to hold power accountable. That transparency will be greatly reduced. So, I'm not optimistic on that count either. And I'd love to be wrong.

And so another thing that I would expect, it's something that we can't really see yet, but I think it's incipient is a social differentiation between - on the one hand - people who still are able to rely on face to face contacts and people who need to rely on AI. And so you see this, for instance, already somewhat with people who are lonely and who are turning to AI to look for friends, to look for companionship, to look for advice. Whereas other people still rely on humans. And so, Randall Collins sort of predicts a world where people who are powerful increasingly rely on face to face contacts, whereas people who are subordinate or dependent rely on AI. And we can see this already, with technology companies making all sorts of plans to replace teachers with AI. They won't do this at Harvard, but they will do it further down the educational hierarchy. So I'm not optimistic about it either.

There is one last thing that I think is going to be a major trend is a different type of modelling of cities. In the past, cities were modelled through blueprints. There was one model of a city. Sometimes also people build models like Schelling segregation model, very simplified model. These models were potentially quite violent in the sense that they impose order on the city. But they were obviously wrong. So they were very simplistic. And I think we're seeing increasingly sophisticated models of cities. So it's already possible to ask AI agents to fill in surveys. It is possible to ask them to participate in experiments. This is quite important, I think, because what we will see in the future is that AI agents will increasingly do a lot of work that was before done by humans. It is potentially detrimental to cities, in part because these technologies are being used for manipulation and especially the sale of advertisement.

I am going to end on a positive note though. I really agree that you should study contingencies, that you should do this situationally. But I also think that we shouldn't underestimate the immense power, the immense investments that are behind the current AI trend. And these investments are made with very specific ideas in mind, with the idea that it will be revenue in the future, with the idea that it will be controlled in the future. And so, very powerful people staked their money on this type of predictable future. And I think that doesn't bode very well for democracy. So, the positive note is that indeed, predictions are very often wrong. And in that sense, I really hope also that cities will be a place where these AI technologies will fail to achieve their predictive power, and that cities will, in a way, speak back to these corporations and will be a counterforce to the increasing control of social life and democracies.

[Ross Beveridge] Thank you, Justus. Does anyone want to respond? Justus is generally more pessimistic, although he finished on an optimistic note.

[Rob Kitchin] There is this idea of this immense power that is congregating there and what that means for trying to resist it or trying to change it. I think, there are kind of moves in Europe and there's definitely moves in the Netherlands for trying to disinvest from some of the tech corporations that you're talking about. And it might well be that Europe takes a different path to what's happened in China or what's happening in the US and other parts of the world. So I think that'll be interesting to see what happens with legislators and politicians and regulators in relation to how they interact in the space.

I saw this morning on the news, for example, that one of the northern German federal states has said that the whole of the public sector will be off of Microsoft and onto open source alternatives within three months, and that all the schools and teachers will follow within six to nine months afterwards. And I know, for example, in some of the Dutch universities, you're looking to get off of the Microsoft and Googles and the Amazon cloud and onto a German cloud provider, isn't it? A lot of the Dutch universities seem to be thinking of moving towards it. In some parts of the world, there is a kind of regulatory shock to move away from reliance on some of these very large proprietary companies. Again, in the Netherlands, I think you've set up your own national AI training data centre, for example. So that you're not reliant on open AI and some of the American corporations. You're in control of your own models and so on. That'll be interesting to see whether national governments or others see national security threats or threats to their autonomy over their digital sphere. What kind of response will the EU or EU nations make, particularly in relation to AI?

[Ross Beveridge] Anyone else like to jump in there?

[Yu-Shan Tseng] I can totally see where Justus' pessimism comes from. I want to return though, to not just the urban, but also the urban humans. Rob just mentioned optimistic processes that happen on a more institutional level. But I want to return also to the urban humans and what is happening on the urban street that does already happen. Again, the future is always now. And I think we also see a different future or at least a different hope for the future right now on the streets of many, many cities. And this goes from the US to Europe to Indian cities and so on. And I think, uh, there's something deliberate happening there. The fact that the anti-Trump protests are not in the New York Times or the pro-Palestinian protests are nowhere to be seen in the British media reflects that current media and digital order. But they're still happening and they're happening with so much power. Against these politics of invisibility, we must point to the fact that the juxtapositions of differences and the openness of the city are still there. They remain, even though it is clearly taking a hit from many different directions.

[Myria Georgiou] I'll say something really quickly. I agree with what all of us said, because I think nirvara for democracy is really not built by pure fantasy. It's really built by stories and actions that foster unlikely alliances and affinities for the sake of collective struggles in cities. It has been shown to us again, again, so many times throughout history and across different locations. When city undergoes digitalisation or is being controlled, predicted by AI, I think as scholar, it's better to let this city and the urban world speak for itself and the people, whether they are suffering or being marginalised in the city, speak for themselves in terms of how they are going to deal with the AI for the better or for the worse. And as a researcher, you can only do a better work to understand what's going on.

[Ross Beveridge] I just had one final thought there. I mean, I know we're getting towards the end of our time. I was just reflecting on the comments now and some of the differences between what each of you have been saying. There's a real ambivalence about the idea that politics of AI or platform capitalism are engaging in democratic politics in the digital city. They might have very little to do with actually coming together. I mean, you see that differently. I know you were very clear about that, but this idea of people coming together on the street or building organisations might not have the impact… We shouldn't necessarily have the belief in that that form of politics… Given the way that power works in different ways in all these power circuits, you might not be able to control narratives and the sense of how truth is made in places. Even if half a million people go on the street and protest against Trump. I'm generally quite optimistic but that makes me feel quite pessimistic. I don't know if anyone has any final thoughts?

[Rob Kitchin] I think, Myria was right near the beginning that you have to cling on to hope. That there will always be moments where you reach a point where things shift. And there's lots of examples in the past of authoritarian Regimes toppling under people's power, people rising up and reclaiming rights. And you just have to hope that this seesaw or swing back and forward kind of continues. There are lots of examples we can point out, even in the digital sphere. Even if it's just, you know, sidewalk labs pulling out of Toronto. They invested a lot of money and tried to create a smart city and basically the citizens said: "We're having none of this!" It can happen, even if it's outside major news discourse. Although, I think, the way in which the media is controlled is definitely a serious problem.

[Justus Uitermark] Maybe a final thought, at least on my part: My experience is very much that the conclusion you reach is very much determined by the perspective you take. In the book I did with John Boy on Instagram in the city, we're not exactly optimistic, but we could see many different types of layers. And we rejected some of the more pessimistic conclusions. For instance, the idea that people would become self-obsessed or that people would become addicted to social media. This is not at all what we found. Instead, we found people engaging with social media in rather creative, reflexive ways. When you have a various situational analysis, you can see this complexity and you come alive to different potentialities in everyday life. I think, that's also what you are doing. If you look at the more policy level, in case of European policy or Dutch national policy, you may also have some optimism. Then again, if you look at what Peter and I have done in our most recent book on platform companies and the sort of ideas that they have and the resources that they have at their disposal, then I think you would come to very negative predictions about what urban life and digital life will look like in the future. So maybe, for our next project, I should switch perspectives, back to cities. So that I become a little bit more optimistic.

[Rob Kitchin] The only thing I would say back is that people can stop using platforms and there's lots of platforms that have just died. Who remembers his Friendster, who remembers Myspace? I mean, tons of them are dying. Twitter is dying at the minute, you know, except for, you know, a very particular kind of population. But lots of other people have left it. So platforms can die because people just stop using them. If people stop using Airbnb tomorrow, it would die. And if nobody made bookings through it would just curtail. Now it'd be replaced with something else and whatever… right. But something else could be based on a very different kind of platform ideal. So there's nothing intrinsic about a platform being there forever. They can wither and they can be replaced.

[Justus Uitermark] Not a particular platform. No, but the platform economy, as it is presently organized does have some staying power, I think. And if you look at companies, their business models may not be successful in individual instances. But if you take companies like Meta or Google: Essentially, they're advertising companies that try to carve out a big market space for themselves. And yes, they may feel and lose out competition to others. But then it is only because those others are more successful at capturing our attention or selling us advertisements. So this overall logic is very difficult to move away from, at least for the foreseeable future.

[Myria Georgiou] I guess, that's why we need transformative politics and a commitment to that.

[Justus Uitermark] I agree.

[Ross Beverage] I think that's a fantastic way to end on a semi optimistic note. Thank you very much, everyone.

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