

THE ONLIFE MANIFESTO: RETHINKING THE HUMAN CONDITION IN A HYPERCONNECTED ERA

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Summary

The digital transition, defined as the process by which society generates, uptakes, resists and appropriates information and communications technologies, brings about a reality by which some key assumptions underlying our worldview, since Plato, and the current policy frameworks, lose ground insofar as they simply stop being efficient². The digital transition projects us into a world where nature is pervasively intertwined with sensors, information devices and machines; we thus increasingly experience a reactive nature, where it becomes more and more difficult to distinguish between what is given and what is fabricated, a distinction which is used to be instrumental to depart realms of responsibility from realms of fate. Furthermore, the digital transition creates the worldly conditions for the actual dissolution of the objectivity standpoint: indeed, we "touch" the fact that the abundance of information does not give access to an omniscient/omnipotent posture, but rather that accumulation of knowledge pushes ever further the remit of what is to be known. Like the sea recovering from the wave behind a boat, reality is thick and dense and recomposes itself, undermining any possibility to acquire or sustain a posture of omniscience and omnipotence.

Yet, as policy-maker in the European Commission, I witness that policy-making continues to rely on an omniscience/omnipotence utopia, i.e., the implicit assumption that that perfect knowledge would lead to perfect action, as if policy-makers could act in the world with the certainty of the engineers in a manufacturing process. It is going too far in "*substituting making for acting*", as put by Hannah Arendt in "*The Human Condition*"³. By bringing us to the point where the omniscience/omnipotence utopia cannot but be seen as a chimera, the digital transition, in a paradoxical gesture, calls for re-endorsing the fact that human action, as defined by Hannah Arendt, is precisely characterized by its irreversibility and its unpredictability, and that this is not necessarily for the worse. Rather, I argue that Hannah Arendt, with her notions of natality and plurality, offers a sound basis for balancing the omniscience/omnipotence utopia and for making use of what I suggest we call "an Arendtian axiomatic reset" in policy framing in a hyperconnected era. Indeed, for Arendt, natality is the full recognition that the human condition is characterized by the fact of birth at least as much as by the fact of death; plurality is, with natality, another fundamental of the human condition: it is this situation whereby each human is (i) equal to the others (i.e., not in a control position), (ii) unique (i.e., not reducible to his/her attributes) and (iii) in need of the presence of others to experience his/her own identity (i.e., his/her who is revealed through speech and action in the public sphere). These two notions of natality and plurality undermine, and even dissolve, the omniscience/omnipotence utopia. Reclaiming these notions in a hyperconnected era allows for revisiting the distinction between the private and the public (suggesting mapping it against the fundamental distinction between necessity

¹ The opinions expressed in this contribution are personal and do not represent those of the European Commission, nor anybody else. They are deeply inspired both by my professional experience, as policy maker, and by Hannah Arendt's work.

² For more details about the fundamental shifts brought about by the ICT uptake, see <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/sites/digital-agenda/files/Background.pdf>

³ Arendt, Hannah. (1958/1959). *The Human Condition*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, hereafter referred to as HC.

vs. freedom), and between agents and artefacts (suggesting mapping it against the fundamental distinction between beings experiencing plurality vs. beings engaged in functional relationships). The Arendtian axiomatic reset allows us to challenge the currently hegemonic place of the “growth and jobs” rationale and its excessive reliance on claims to knowledge and control, and to embrace also the need for discerning new meanings and ways of thinking in the context of policy-making. Specifically, it follows from such a reset that a new extended digital literacy cannot emerge in a landscape where social sciences and humanities are restricted to simply identifying risks and assessing impacts. Rather, social sciences and humanities can most contribute to innovation, if the need for reconfiguration, which is at the core of this conference, is indeed acknowledged in policy-making circles. Otherwise, policy-making will suffer by missing opportunities to partner with society in an efficient and intelligent way.

Methodological approach and theoretical underpinnings

My day job being policy-making at the European Commission, and my academic background being inherently multidisciplinary (physics engineering, operations research, economics and philosophy), the methodological approach to this research is basically being inspired from concepts arising in each of these disciplines, applying reflexivity to my own experience, and analysing the policy process in light of the work of Hannah Arendt, which I consider as a key reference for rethinking politics and the public spaces today.

From that basis, I have set up the Onlife Initiative⁴, which has gathered 12 scholars⁵ for a one-year collective thought process, around a background note⁶ calling for the need to re-engineer the concepts on which policy frameworks rely. This process has been chaired and steered by Luciano Floridi, University of Hertfordshire and fellow of St Cross College, Oxford. The process was structured around 5 two-day workshops and led to the adoption of a joint statement of the group, the Onlife Manifesto⁷, accompanied by individual contributions of the scholars and myself, who bring 12 genuinely distinctive perspectives to the reading of the Manifesto. These individual contributions further provide a wealth of reconfigurations of notions such as identity, privacy, responsibility and governance. This paper presents a synthesis of the process, the global outcome and my own personal contribution, which is focused on the actualisation of the human condition in a hyperconnected era, and its concrete consequences for policy-making, in particular at the EU level.

Conclusions

Reclaiming the Arendtian notions of natality and plurality in a hyperconnected era provides a basis for alternatives to approaches indexed on predictions, fears and control. It enables approaches based on reconfigurations and literacy, by which policy-making, instead of “parenting society” as it does in risk-based approach, positions itself as “partnering with society”, by being responsive to the societal intelligence as it is expressed through the use of technologies and the appropriation processes. In line with one of the key messages of the Onlife Manifesto, which is to recommend focusing more on dualities (*both/and*) rather than on dichotomies (*either/or*), the proposal is not to shift from one to the other, but rather to avoid the hegemony of the parenting attitude and make room for the partnering attitude.

⁴ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/onlife-web-output>

⁵ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/workshop-members>

⁶ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/sites/digital-agenda/files/Background.pdf>

⁷ <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/sites/digital-agenda/files/Manifesto.pdf>

By doing so, policy-making would nurture a wider and more inclusive understanding of the rationale of its action: besides interests, costs and benefits, optimisation and trade-offs, a key purpose of policy-making in a hyperconnected era is to adapt the regulatory framework to meanings, norms and values as they emerge and crystallise in a hyperconnected world, and to maintain and foster a vivid sense of natality and plurality.

This standpoint leads to concrete consequences for reconfiguring policy challenges, notably by highlighting the following three needs: (i) to crystallise and stabilize a political notion of the self as a relational self, (ii) to focus on the generation of new meanings of notions such as identity, privacy, responsibility, respect and fairness, as these underpin the emergent digital literacy, and, last but not least, (iii) to care for and protect our attentional capabilities, as they are a critical enabler of our capacity to experience plurality and freedom.

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