

Citizenship

in a Networked Age



TEMPLETON WORLD
CHARITY FOUNDATION



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

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Authors

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Background

The report is the product of a two year research project at the University of Oxford, generously supported by Templeton World Charity Foundation. The report was published in 2020.

Consultation process

The research for this report benefited from an extensive international consulting process with leading experts of technological change and human flourishing. In addition, a local advisory group convened multiple times in the University of Oxford to refine the report's scope of inquiry. We are grateful to those who gave generously of their time at consultations conducted in the Expanded Reason Congress in Rome, Italy, in September 2018, at a group of selected education leaders attending the OECD 2030 Future of Education meeting in Paris, France, in October 2018, at the Global Innovations for Character Development conference in Nairobi, Kenya, in October 2018, and at the Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, in October 2018. We also convened a dedicated conference on science, philosophy and religion, from the perspective of the Abrahamic faiths, in Aiyia Napa, Cyprus, in November 2018. We are additionally grateful for consultation meetings held during the writing of the report. These were hosted in the Cyber Policy Center of Stanford University, USA, the Legatum Institute, UK, the Abigail Adams Institute and Harvard University, USA, and the Center for the Study of Statesmanship, Catholic University of America, USA, all in 2019. A detailed review of the research ideas gathered through the initial consultation phase is available in the publication, 'Promoting Human Flourishing through the Best of Scientific Insight and Spiritual Wisdom: A Global Engagement' (2019).

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An Agenda for Rebuilding Our Civic Ideals



Executive Summary

THE CHARACTER OF CITIZENSHIP IS CHANGING IN THE NETWORKED AGE. Citizenship is not just a legal nicety—it encompasses the relationship between an individual and the society of which they are a member. It entails a spirit of public service, justice, neighbourliness, democratic participation, and moral reasoning. Participation in decision-making is central to our collective citizenship, both as a privilege and a responsibility. Digital networking, however, is irreversibly changing how we interact with each other, and in turn machine learning is becoming inseparable from its development. *Search optimisation*, for example, has evolved into *influence optimisation*. Learning what a user's preferences are has changed to targeting what a user's preferences should become. Machine learning is moving from learning how to *classify* to learning how to *decide* and *optimise*. And yet in the midst of all this, human participation in decision-making endures as a necessary and core feature of civic engagement, and therefore our citizenship itself. Citizen involvement in collective decisions remains essential to progress, both because progress requires principles of justice, and because it needs the kind of shared commitment that can only be earned through our civic engagement.

HUMAN LIFE IS CIRCUMSCRIBED BY MORTALITY IN A WAY THAT MACHINE LIFE IS NOT, AND HUMANS ARE SELF-AWARE OF THEIR MORTALITY IN A WAY THAT MACHINES ARE NOT. This, together with our conscience, gives humans a distinct capacity for moral decision-

making which no machine can replace. Mortality is an end point that is hard to reconcile with the deeper human aims of happiness or living a life well-lived, which means humans have developed a way of detecting moral fundamentals even though they might die at any time. Machines lack this tension of seeking deeper goods while knowing one is going to die. They do not develop moral reasoning as such. In this networked age, the challenge is to protect and nurture existing human methods of moral decision-making, something that can benefit greatly from machine optimisations of technical aspects *insofar as they are in service of human judgment of the moral whole*. For the pursuit of human flourishing in the networked age, the choice is not between citizens and machines. It is about identifying and protecting human uniqueness for moral decision-making.

Recommendation 1

Identify and protect human
uniqueness for moral
decision-making

Recommendation 2

Nurture the complementary
skills of humans and machines
for collective decision-making

AT THEIR BEST, THE TECHNOLOGIES OF THE NETWORKED AGE WILL CONTRIBUTE TO BETTER DECISION-MAKING IN PURSUIT OF THE IDEALS OF GOOD CITIZENSHIP. The outcomes will only be as good as the values which motivate the process. Civic engagement is needed because there are few goals worth pursuing on which everyone agrees. The effect of new technologies is generally not to raise new moral and social issues which did not previously exist, but rather to give a new focus and urgency to norms of behaviour which long predate modern communications. It can sometimes look as though the distinction in former societies between citizens and slaves has a modern parallel in the distinction between data companies and consumers. The asymmetry is not absolute, but there does seem to be a shift of influence from those whose data is harvested to those who then make use of this data for their own purposes, whether commercial or political. The economic success of big data industries is bound up with the ownership and privileged use of that data. Regulation will need to be based, however, not on the relationship between corporations and consumers but on the relationship between democratic institutions and citizens. Humans are making rapid progress on the methods of machine learning for multi-objective optimisation. In order to use these methods in support of collective decision-making, there needs to be sufficient agreement about the values that these optimisations are oriented around. This provides a new context and motivation for developing our principles as a society and defining what human flourishing means.

Recommendation 3

*Engage in consensus-building
about civic ideals for a
networked age*

TECHNOLOGY CHANGES HOW PEOPLE INTERACT. If there was once a time when most people knew few others outside their own village, now it is often hard to tell from where in the world a given message comes. The distance between an individual's private persona and public projection can be stretched almost completely. The fear of missing out on the glamorous lifestyle and vast numbers of friends others seem to enjoy can be as overwhelming as it is deceptive. And while these networks seem to encourage a certain togetherness, they are not naturally conducive to the moderation of viewpoints. On any issue where there is incipient polarisation, machine learning can target a user with a news story or opinion slightly more extreme, thereby reinforcing the polarisation and capitalising on bias.

NEW KINDS OF COMMUNITIES AND INSTITUTIONS ARE BEING FORMED IN THE NETWORKED AGE. The pressures are to connect people of the same tastes, the same biases, the same political leanings, and the same generations. Human attention has become a precious resource, and where your attention is, there will your desires be also. In the midst of this new market for attention, we have to realise that giving quality attention to others is the most important form of self-giving we can engage in as citizens. In other words, the civic burden is not so much on being a good speaker but on being a good listener—finding the way to understand others and what they say, and in so doing go against the tide of our polarisation.

Recommendation 4

*Teach listening as a
civic virtue*

PRIVACY PROVIDES A SPECIAL SPACE FOR CITIZENS TO REFLECT ON WHAT MATTERS MOST TO THEM. Privacy is widely recognised as a fundamental human right, based on principles of human dignity. It is linked to other rights such as equal treatment and free expression. The networked age gives unprecedented opportunity and even encouragement for individuals to voluntarily forgo much of their privacy. In turn, the distinction between the private realm and the public realm becomes increasingly blurred. End-to-end encryption gives some protection to individual privacy, rather like not reading other people's letters, but the metadata can still be harvested. Machine learning can help in the fight to filter out fake news, but ultimately the reader must be aware of the need to form their views independently and thoughtfully, often in private first. In developing civic ideals, digital privacy provides space, therefore, for society's moral development. In particular, it protects against the demand for instant response. In private, individuals and groups are able to self-initiate their search for truth, meaning, and purpose.

Recommendation 5

Maintain distance between
thought and speech

Recommendation 6

Promote the value of privacy
for personal moral development

DEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING IS ALL ABOUT AGREEING ON A WAY FORWARD IN THE CONTEXT OF DIVERSE AND OFTEN CONFLICTING INTERESTS. These decisions involve both technical and moral components. Machine learning surpasses human abilities in an increasing range of technical decisions. Democratic decision-making, however, involves so far as is possible building consensus among people as part of the process of deciding what is just and moral. A crucial ingredient in democratic decision-making, which machines will never be able to replace, is the moral basis to society-wide decision-making. At its best, under wise and inclusive leadership, democracy facilitates shared commitment to the agreed course of action. Good democratic decision-making needs to be based on sound technical and moral reasoning, with shared ownership of the outcome.

Recommendation 7

Revalue democracy in terms
of the ability to bring about
social unity and trust



In the conclusion of this report, we summarise how these recommendations build from the evidence and arguments of the report's individual chapters.