Digital Society is a Choice

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In November 2022, I started as Editor-in-Chief of *Digital Society*, following in the footsteps of Luciano Floridi. *Digital Society* has been set up under the initiative of Luciano Floridi and the strenuous support of Ties Nijssen at Springer. There could not have been a timelier journal to start in the early 2020s, a moment in which 'the digital', more than ever, is part of our daily lives, health, science, policy decisions, or education.

Digital Society had been conceived as the place where academia meets the world of policy and regulation, offering a space to publish not only cutting-edge research papers on the ethics, governance, or legal aspects of digital technologies, but also white papers, review articles, commentaries related to said aspects of digital technologies. Since its beginning *Digital Society* also wanted to be an academic space *open to non-academics*, to foster interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral exchanges. Quite an ambitious plan. To face the grand challenges that digital technologies pose in front of us, we need equally grand ambitions.

The grand ambitions that I see for the journal are couched in its two key terms: *digital* and *society*.

'The digital' is not exclusive. We need to understand *digital* society, but this does not mean that its non-digital aspects become unimportant or irrelevant. Analogue vs digital, offline vs online is a false dichotomy – we live *onlife* (Floridi, 2014). Studying *digital* society thus means to delve deep into the ways in which our lives (daily, in a lab, in policy task force, …) blend online and offline, analogue and digital aspects. It means pondering the benefits and potential pitfalls of both aspects and *deciding* which steps we want to take. Technologies are not an inevitability; they are a *choice*. And while we feel we don't quite choose to live in a *digital* society, there is still quite a lot we exercise choice over – exactly what, how, when, why, and under which circumstances is precisely what we need to understand.

'The society' is more than people and norms. We need to understand digital *society* in its multiple aspects and perspectives. Digital technologies are discussed

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for their obvious impact on social life (think of social media), on international relations (think of cross-border e-Commerce), on law (think of GDPR regulation), all having clear ethico-political implications as well as assumptions. But a digital *society* also encompasses techno-scientific practices in a fundamental way. Technologies are part and parcel of the scientific process, with technologies we co-produce knowledge about health, bio-chemical processes, physical entangled particles, behaviour on social media (Russo, 2022) – anything we try to understand about any portion of the world uses, in various ways and degrees, technologies. But science – techno-science – is not separate from society, it is part of it. The kind of techno-science that we conduct in universities and other kind of research institutes is simultaneously the effect of certain societal choices (think of the political decision to establish something like the European Exposome Initiative) and the root cause of certain societal phenomena (think of how the use of social media impacts voting behaviour). Thus, we cannot dissociate society from science, let alone *digital* society from science.

In a similar vein, understanding digital *society* also means delving into questions about *education*. My generation *adapts* to digital society, but millennials *are born* in digital society. And yet, while using a touch screen is more intuitive for young kids than for an elderly people, it is still the responsibility of *my* generation to form, educate, train, *future* digital citizens. How is education facing these new challenges? The Digital Society is already here, but the shape it will take is still our *choice*.

We are facing grand challenges, and we need grand ambitions. I see *Digital Society* as the place in which we critically assess where we are, but mostly and foremost, where we discuss what we want it to be. We face the grand challenges posed by digital technologies because, as it often happens, technological innovation is not accompanied with sufficient reflection on why we'd want it. To live up to a digital society, we need to engage in the difficult exercise of self-reflection, individually and collectively. Self-reflective practices are important to make conscious decisions about our individual behaviour on social media, about our choices to pursue some research lines rather than others, and to identify and react to new forms of power of regulators, individuals, companies, etc. in a measured, considered, and conscious way.

Technology is a choice, and I hope *Digital Society* is a place where these choices are discussed and pondered, a place where utopian and dystopian views of (digital) technologies are replaced with the awareness that being onlife comes with responsibilities, epistemic and normative (Gopal & Russo, 2022), and that while the challenges are unprecedented, so are the opportunities to shape our digital society for the better.

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