Between Critique and Determinism: Democracy, Power, and Digitalisation in Byung-Chul Han's Book "Infocracy: Digitization and the Crisis of Democracy"

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Abstract: This book review critically examines Byung-Chul Han's "Infocracy: Digitization and the Crisis of Democracy" (2022), focusing on his analysis of digital capitalism and neoliberal power. Han conceptualises contemporary society as an information regime in which data extraction, algorithmic governance and psychopolitical surveillance replace industrial forms of exploitation, fostering self-exploitation under the guise of freedom. The review highlights the book's strengths in articulating the links between neoliberal subjectivity, platform economies and democratic decline. At the same time, it addresses key limitations, including the absence of a clearly defined democratic model, a deterministic view of digital subjects and the lack of empirical evidence, while situating Han's arguments within broader debates in critical political economy and media theory.

Keywords: digital capitalism, neoliberalism, neoliberal subjectivity, information regime, platform power, democracy, critical theory

1. Summary of the Book's Content

Infocracy: Digitization and the Crisis of Democracy, published in 2022, is one of the recent books by Byung-Chul Han (born in 1959). A South Korean philosopher based in Germany, he is a professor of Philosophy and Cultural Studies at the Berlin University of the Arts (UdK). In his current book, he addresses the process of digitalisation in society and its social, political and economic consequences, with a special emphasis on democratic aspects.

Han (2022) divides the book into five chapters, each of which delves into a consequence of the democratic system resulting from digitalisation. In the first chapter, he begins by arguing that the progressive digitalisation of society has led algorithms to exert enormous influence over all social structures. Furthermore, instead of exploiting bodies and energy, they exploit information whose access is crucial, according to Han (2022, 1): "Power depends not on the possession of the means of production but on access to information that is used for psychopolitical surveillance and the control and prediction of behaviour". From this, in the second and third chapters, he explains that current digital media possess a rhizomatic structure in which the public sphere lacks a centre and fragments into private spheres, transforming our community life.

Consequently, democracy disintegrates into an *infocracy*, where politics utilises media dynamics that prioritise entertainment and isolate people in filter bubbles.

In the fourth chapter, Han (2022) added that, from the perspective of *dataists*, the use of algorithms could transform into a *postmodern democracy*, in which algorithms would possess digital rationality, predict and control society's behaviour, making politics and politicians obsolete:

> "It will give way to *infocracy, a digital postdemocracy*. Politicians will be replaced with experts and computer scientists who will *administer* society without relying on ideological assumptions or advancing particular interests. Politics will be replaced by *data-driven systems management*, with decisions taken on the basis of big data and artificial intelligence. There will still be some political discourse, but it will be of secondary importance. More data and more intelligent algorithms – not more discourse and more communication – is what will allow us to optimize the social system, even to achieve the *happiness of all*" (Han 2022, 39).

Finally, in the fifth chapter, the author argues that we are facing a new nihilism due to the disintegration of discourse into mere information. "Donald Trump is not a typical liar – someone who intentionally distorts things. He is, rather, indifferent towards factual truth. Someone who is blind to fact and reality poses a greater threat to truth than does a liar" (Han 2022, 46). Likewise, from a macro-perspective, in digital media, facts lose their material references because information is produced additively, cumulatively, and ephemerally. In contrast, according to the author, truth is exclusive, narrative and enduring. For this reason, Han (2022, 53) claims that "the crisis of truth is always a crisis of society".

2. The Premise: To Tackle Complexity

It is worth discussing the book's strengths and weaknesses, paying special attention to the postulates of communication and capitalism it presents. First, it is remarkable that Han (2022) follows a communication strategy. As Marshall McLuhan (1967) stated, the *media is the message*, and in the fact that all of Han's books are brief pieces of work, there is a message. In an interview with the Korea JoongAng Daily[1], he expressed his opposition to dense philosophical works, citing lengthy and dry paragraphs as a particular concern. He believes that philosophers should contribute to society's well-being, and he pursues this goal in his projects. Hence, this book, as most of Han's (2022) works, seeks to explain current events in a straightforward manner, a pertinent and relevant strategy within current discussions about the disconnection between academia and knowledge for society and its citizens (Kubota 2023). Therefore, one of its

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[1] Byung-Chul Han, interview by *Korea JoongAng Daily,* "Restoring the Fragrance to Our Fast-Paced Lives," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, March 31, 2013, accessed January 7, 2026, https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2013/03/31/artsDesign/Restoring-the-fragrance-to-our-fast-paced-lives/2969373.html

strengths lies in this attempt. The absence of dense paragraphs and short sentences allows for the transmission of clear, direct and concise ideas.

Another element that helps substantiate his proposal is the use of illustrative arguments and updated examples. For instance, one of his theoretical arguments is that democracy is in danger due to a crisis of communicative action caused by filter bubbles. Every time someone accesses the internet, algorithms suggest content based on previous searches, thus reinforcing their existing ideas. In Han's (2022, 29) words: "The longer I surf the internet, the more my filter bubble becomes filled with information that I like and that reinforces my convictions […]. All other information is kept outside the bubble". However, it is important to mention that he does not explain anywhere in the book which model of democracy he is referring to, whether it is liberal, deliberative or republican, among others (Held 2006). This is relevant because, depending on democratic principles, filter bubbles can affect things differently. From a general perspective, they can influence "the loss of autonomy, the decrease in the epistemic quality of information, losing the ability for effective contestation or losing effective channels that display the performance of the governing bodies" (Bozdag and Van Den Hoven 2015, 263). Although he does not specify the model he theorises about, Han (2022) demonstrates acuity in his arguments regarding filter bubbles and democracy.

3. From Industrial Capitalism to Digital Capitalism

One of the most interesting approaches in this book, as well as in all of Han's works, is how he clearly addresses the evolution of today's society in terms of technological issues, namely the transition from *industrial capitalism* to *digital capitalism*. Likewise, Han (2022) states that we are now in an *information regime*, in which, instead of exploiting bodies and energies as in old factories, information and data are exploited. For this, he connects the *information regime* with *information capitalism*; here, the business is centred on data, and power is in controlling information. Related to this point, Han (2022) writes:

> "Information capitalism uses communication and interconnectedness, rendering obsolete the disciplinary techniques of spatial isolation, the strict regulation of work, and physical training. The ideal of the information regime is not 'docility', with the compliance and obedience it implies [...]. This subject produces itself and performs itself" (Han 2022, 1).

That is why, even though he does not mention it, he attempts to describe the new society within the post-Fordist economic model. Society has undergone significant changes, largely due to shifts in production models (Brand & Wissen 2024). For instance, Han (2022) writes about *influencers*, who represent a new type of job resulting from more flexible boundaries, such as between work and life, work and hobbies, or privacy and intimacy. It is in these blurred boundaries that the power of the new capitalism resides. "The influencers on YouTube and Instagram have internalized the

neoliberal technologies of power. Whether they peddle travel, beauty or fitness, they constantly invoke freedom, creativity and authenticity" (Han 2022, 7). For this, he connects the *information regime* with *information capitalism*. In the latter, the business is centred on data, how much information you can control, and how much power you can have. Although this is not a new concept – for example, even during the Napoleonic Wars, it was known that having power consisted of controlling the flow of communication, hence the importance of propaganda leaflets (Taylor 2013) –, the new and powerful characteristic is the exponential increase in information and the easier access to it.

It is important to note that other authors have theorised about this field as well, such as Manuel Castells in *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (1996) and Armand Mattelart in *The Information Society: An Introduction* (2003). From another sociological perspective, Han's (2022) book aligns with Ulrich Beck's (1994) concept of *reflexive modernisation*. The general assumption is that democracies and countries are acting more like global businesses, seeking to exert greater global influence. Consequently, as Zygmunt Bauman (2000/2001) argues, citizens are treated as consumers rather than individuals in a democracy. This perspective, and the ones mentioned above, can be seen in the book; in this sense, for instance, Han (2022) also refers to people on the internet as cattle: "Information regimes are tied to information capitalism, which develops into surveillance capitalism and reduces human beings to consumer cattle that provide data" (Han 2022, 1).

Related to the latter point, according to Han (2022), *information capitalism* relies on the *interconnection* and *communication* to function; consequently, it renders "obsolete the disciplinary techniques of spatial isolation, the strict regulation of work, and physical training" (Han 2022, 1). To develop this assumption, he uses the term *disciplinary regime,* which is built from Foucault's conceptualisation of power. In this concept, power is productive, in the sense that it can be exercised by anyone, it is not located in a single place or class/group, and it works through meaning and consensus (Foucault 1972), something much more powerful than violence which makes more noise but has less long-term effect. This approach has also been influenced by Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. In the critical argumentation against economic determinism within historical materialism, Gramsci theorises about hegemony through consent, the people's meaning:

> "He slackened the grip of economic determinism, finding that the position of power of the ruling class could not be explained by an economically determined ideology alone. He applied the concept of hegemony to explain the processes in the superstructure that play a part in the creation of people's consciousness [...]. To secure their position, the dominant classes have violence and force at their disposal. But more importantly, the production of meaning is a key instrument for the stabilisation of power relations. Through the production of meaning, power

relations can become naturalised and so much part of common-sense that they cannot be questioned" (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002, 32).

Consequently, according to Han (2022), visibility is imposed under the current disciplinary regime, but not through coercion. On the contrary, people seek visibility: "[...] the information regime relies on the fact that people seek to be visible. They voluntarily enter the limelight. Whereas the inmates of the disciplinary panopticon try to avoid visibility, the subjects of the information regime actually desire it" (Han 2022, 5). He provides the example of YouTube *influencers*: they create content, believing it is free, but they are actually controlled by algorithms, and the fact that algorithms control "communication on social media is neither free nor democratic" (Han 2022, 26). Being an influencer currently is a job based on creating content, content that must be seen. Algorithms prioritise the constant flow of content; if it is not seen, they cannot be influencers or earn money to pay their bills.

At the same time, it is not about any content or *influencers*: as mentioned before, in the *information regime*, no biological agenda is pursued; this means the body is not interested in it, but a psychopolitical agenda is followed. Likewise, as Han (2022) states: "At least in Western information capitalism, the body has for the most part been liberated from the disciplinary power that drilled it to become a labouring machine. The body has instead been seized by the beauty industry" (Han 2022, 3). In other words, *influencers* should have bodies that are visible, aesthetic, and fit, and, most importantly, they should desire them to be this way. This is when the philosopher points out that "when freedom and surveillance coincide, domination becomes complete" (Han 2022, 5).

4. From Exploitation to Self-Expliotation

In addition to the transition from *industrial capitalism* to *digital capitalism*, Han (2022) postulates that there has been an evolution from exploitation to self-exploitation. However, as underpinned, it is not technically true that exploitation now occurs only towards oneself. As Han (2022) establishes at the beginning of the book, it is the capital logic, the current *information capitalism*, that shapes the dynamics of neoliberal power: "Information capitalism appropriates neoliberal technologies of power. Where the power technologies of the disciplinary regime worked with compulsion and prohibition, the neoliberal ones work with positive incentives" (Han 2022, 7). However, it becomes exponentially powerful because by creating meaning, it makes people believe they are free, when in reality, it is a response to current capitalist demands: "The influencers on YouTube and Instagram have internalized the neoliberal technologies of power" (Han 2022, 7).

To reinforce this assumption, it is illustrative to consider what Pierre Bourdieu postulates about the *habitus* in *The Logic of Practice* (1990): through the *habitus* that people occupy, they also occupy structured and structuring structures; that is, they infiltrate established practices and, unconsciously, through their actions, reinforce those

structures. In other words, power resides in all bodies, and they are constantly exercising it. This is also reminiscent of how Berger and Luckmann (1991) theorised about the construction of people's daily lives and how they take for granted an objectivity created by accumulating subjectivities:

> "The sum of linguistic objectifications pertaining to my occupation constitutes another semantic field, which meaningfully orders all the routine events I encounter in my daily work. Within the semantic fields thus built up it is possible for both biographical and historical experience to be objectified, retained and accumulated" (Berger and Luckmann 1991, 56).

Let us discuss the example of *influencers*: they create content, some of which is based on their daily life. One famous example is the so-called *#ThatGirl* trend, which originated on TikTok and has spread to other platforms such as YouTube. In all the videos, the *#ThatGirls* get up early to exercise, have a nutritious breakfast, follow expensive skin-care routines, and engage in introspection by writing in their notebooks. Under this hashtag, we see a dynamic of optimising their own bodies, with the objective of increasing the performance subject's productivity to continue responding to the market system (Han 2014). In addition, if the economic variable is added to this circumstance, that is receiving money for this practice, as it has been mentioned above, the performance subject ends up self-exploiting while believing themselves to be free. Han (2017) adds: "Today's subject is an entrepreneur of the self who exploits himself. The self-exploiting subject establishes himself in a field of work in which he is simultaneously victim and executioner" (Han 2017, 49). At the same time, within the economic variable, the new market values come into play:

> "Social media is a church: *like is 'amen'; sharing is communion; consumption is salvation*. The repetition that influencers use as a dramatic tool does not bore; rather, it gives the whole affair the *character of a liturgy*. At the same time, influencers present consumer products as means of self-realization. We consume ourselves to death while realizing ourselves to death. Consumption and identity become one. Identity itself becomes a commodity" (Han 2022, 8).

Consequently, for Han (2022), the *#ThatGirls* would be prisoners in the panopticon of YouTube in this case; in their routines recorded on video and disseminated online, they subject themselves to the pressure of productivity, a pressure that is seemingly invisible, but no less real. Users embody this watchful gaze, and their online presence, through views, likes, and comments, exerts control mechanisms: the more views, the more successful the video and the greater the financial reward. Related to this aspect, Han (2022) writes: "People are placed 'neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine'. The arrangement of visibility is turned around: it is not the rulers but those they dominate who are made visible" (Han 2022, 3-4). Therefore,

to maintain success, it is necessary to produce popular and frequent content so that the algorithm does not penalise it by ceasing to show it.

5. The Critical Mass Approach

Another element worth noting in Han's (2022) work is the ambiguity of an individual's character. On the one hand, it is easy to notice a slight recognition of the openness in the theory of digital platforms. In the digital society, according to him, everyone can participate (although this is not true in absolute terms, since, as Lythreatis et al. (2022) state, not everyone in the world has the same access to the internet), and traditional media no longer have a monopoly on communication. Nowadays, everyone with internet access can create content; a representative example is the *influencers*. Despite this recognition, Han (2022) argues that access to information is not a necessary good and highlights its negative side, particularly by highlighting two elements. First, the issue explained above: how filter bubbles work and how they damage the quality of democracy by preventing the search for critical information and critical thinking. Second, he writes that in a digital society, people become a docile, obedient, depoliticised mass in a digital swarm:

> "Information is distributed without passing through public spaces. It is produced in private spaces and is sent to private spaces. The internet is therefore not a public sphere. Social media intensifies this *communication without community*. Influencers and followers do not add up to a political public sphere. Digital communities are commodified forms of community. In reality they are *commodities*. They are incapable of *acting politically*" (Han 2022, 26).

This viewpoint aligns with the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, which, through authors such as Gustave Le Bon (whom Han also mentioned), conceives of individuals as lacking identity and control when they become part of the masses (Adorno and Horkheimer 1997). Han (2022) does not consider cultural negotiations or resistance in the realm of digital media. Likewise, Han's (2022) approach is also connected somehow to the *false consciousness* within the Marxist approach. Through this term, historical materialism seeks to explain how the capitalist society works. Within this theoretical approach, society is divided into two classes, the owners and the workers. Everyonebelongs to those classes, whether they are aware of it or not. This is how ideology works, according to the Marxist tradition (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002), and it is an approach shared by Han (2022), who states, for instance, that *influencers* self-exploit without being aware of it:

> "Under the information regime, people do not feel that they are under surveillance. They feel free. Paradoxically, it is the feeling of freedom that secures the rule of the regime. This is the fundamental difference between the information and the disciplinary regimes" (Han 2022, 5).

However, although one can sense *false consciousness* or alienation in Han's (2022) postulates, he does not claim that society has classes or groups as such, or at least not in a specific way. Towards the end of the book, in the subtitled chapters *The End of Communication Action* and *Digital Rationality,* he discusses the digital swarm and the *dataists*, respectively. On the one hand, regarding the first group, he argues that they are the ones who suffer the consequences of digitalisation. In this sense, Han (2022) points out that "citizens no longer pay attention to topics that are relevant to all of society. Instead, they are disenfranchised, treated as *voting cattle* to be manipulated in order to get politicians into power" (Han 2022, 20). Consequently, if they are controlled by algorithms as Han (2022) states, they cannot act politically: "The information regime, by contrast, *isolates* people. When they come together, they form not a mass but a digital swarm; they follow not *one leader* but many influencers" (Han 2022, 9). That statement is connected to what Han (2022) argues about filter bubbles and the loss of democratic quality, namely that they avoid the contrast of different opinions:

> "The disappearance of the other means the end of discourse. It robs opinions of their communicative rationality. The expulsion of the other strengthens the auto-propagandistic compulsion to indoctrinate oneself with one's own ideas. This self-indoctrination produces self-referential info bubbles, which impede communicative action. With the development of the auto-propagandistic compulsion, discursive spaces are increasingly replaced by echo chambers in which the only voice one hears is one's own" (Han 2022, 28).

Hence, Han (2022) uses the notion of *rhizomatic structure* to argue how the digital has transformed the public spaces. Related to this aspect, he writes: "digital media exhibits a centrifugal force that fragments the public sphere. The amphitheatrical structure of mass media gives way to the *rhizomatic structure* of digital media, which does not have a centre. The public sphere disintegrates into private spaces" (Han 2022, 17). This point is reminiscent of the rhizome metaphor proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), which Carpentier et al. (2003) apply to the field of Media Studies to explain how media and communities constantly affect each other in their respective configurations. Within this approach, which is also demonstrated in empirical case studies, the rhizomatic structure of the media connects any point, allowing people to connect in ways that are alternative to hegemonic structures: "As rhizomes, community media tend to cut across borders and build linkages between pre-existing gaps" (Carpentier et al. 2003, 61). This latter approach, from the tradition of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), would provide a more positive understanding of individuals and communities in social networks. In contrast, Han (2022, 26) specifically writes about digital communities: "Information is distributed without passing through public spaces. It is produced in private spaces and is sent to private spaces. The internet is therefore not a public sphere. Social media intensifies this *communication without community*". In this sense, if it starts from Han's (2022) consideration of the rhizome and its consequences of

isolation, together with the dynamics of filter bubbles, any individual agency in the digital sphere is not viable.

In this line, although he does not call them the *masses* by Gustave Le Bon's theorisation – particularly saying that "they form not a mass but a digital swarm" (Han 2022, 9) – he maintains a negative perspective on it. On the other hand, he writes about the *dataists*. He does not specify who these people are, but he explains their proposals: "Dataists believe that the disintegration of the public sphere, the sheer amount of information and the rapidly increasing complexity of the information society make communicative action obsolete" (Han 2022, 34). That is to say, overall, *dataists* believe that society does not need governments and politics, so algorithms could replace arguments and, through artificial intelligence, predict society's behaviours and make better decisions. That stage, according to them, would be called *digital postdemocracy* and would also be the radical solution to the current communication system, which, as *dataists* claim, is obsolete.

Regarding this characterisation of these two groups and the proposal of the digital society paradigm, at least two issues arise. First, it could also be interpreted as an excessively pessimistic view of reality, with its critical, negative perspective on individuals in the digital world, as mentioned above. Likewise, in the tradition of Cultural Studies (Hall and Jefferson 2006) or in a post-Marxist reading (Laclau and Mouffe 1985), agency or resistance can be more productive for analysis. A pertinent example, which is on the opposite side of Han (2022) in both the book's approach and perspective, is *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (2015) by Manuel Castells. In this book, the sociologist theorises about the internet's potential to mobilise people and counter the established system. He uses concrete cases such as the *Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street movement*, and the *Indignados in Spain* to support his theoretical approaches. In addition to describing them, it provides data to contextualise the scope of these processes, whereas Han's book (2022) offers only theoretical arguments, which are fruitful but ultimately not empirical evidence.

6. Mediatisation Theory

Secondly, another issue that could arise from the characterisation of these two groups and the proposal of the digital society paradigm is the danger of ending up in an absolutely digital-controlled society that *dataists* propose as a solution. On the one hand, the *dataist* approach can be seen as influenced by the domestication theory (Johannessen et al., 2024) or the mediatisation theory (Couldry and Hepp, 2018). In fact, Marshall McLuhan (1967) had already proposed this, claiming that mass media were an extension of the human body. Specifically, within the mediatisation theory, human and technological boundaries are blurring; individuals are no longer creatures who use technological devices as tools; rather, technology itself conveys the current lives of individuals (Couldry and Hepp, 2018). In this radical approach, those authors are influenced by Berger and Luckmann's (1991) sociological postulate on the social construction of reality:

> "Our challenge is in any case quite different from Berger and Luckmann's: it is to build a fully materialist phenomenology that starts out from the fact not just of digital media but also of the new data-driven infrastructures and communications on which today's social interfaces increasingly rely [...]. As a result, the ways in which we make sense of the world phenomenologically become necessarily entangled with the constraints, affordances and power-relations that are features of media as infrastructures for communication" (Couldry and Hepp 2018, 7).

Although the theory of mediatization may seem accurate and convenient, it remains dangerous for society to move towards the scenario proposed by *dataists*. Firstly, decreasing the ability to act politically or to be informed has serious consequences for human rights in democratic systems. Secondly, when they always talk about digitalisation, they implicitly refer to the digital divide (Lythreatis et al. 2022). Likewise, in societies where technology is more deeply integrated, there is a larger digital divide between socio-economic groups, for instance, in terms of access to better connections or high-quality advice, and consequently, greater labour-market opportunities (Van Deursen & Van Dijk 2014). Thirdly, the fact that people pay for internet access with their private data can have significant consequences, such as the monitoring of their personal passwords or the tracking of their addresses. This information, indeed, could be used by *dataists* not only to predict behaviour but also to manipulate it. This is a point that Han (2022) also characterises productively, in the context of the growing development of social networks. However, once again, the approach focuses on the negative aspects and does not propose alternative actions.

7. Conclusion

Infocracy: Digitalization and the Crisis of Democracy (2022) offers a pertinent and timely diagnosis of the transformations affecting contemporary democratic systems amid the progressive digitalisation of societies. Han (2022) clearly and accessibly articulates how information capitalism, algorithmic governance, and the fragmentation of the public sphere challenge traditional forms of political participation, communicative action, and the production of truth. The book's strength lies precisely in its ability to translate complex philosophical concerns into a concise narrative that resonates with current social and political issues. This aspect makes Han's (2022) work particularly relevant beyond the strictly academic sphere.

At the same time, the critical assessment of Han's (2022) arguments reveals important limitations. The absence of a clearly defined democratic model, the lack of empirical grounding, and the predominance of a pessimistic view of digital subjects reduce the analytical robustness of some of his claims. By largely ignoring agency, resistance, and alternative uses of digital media, the book risks presenting a deterministic perspective in which individuals appear primarily as passive victims of algorithmic power. This perspective contrasts with other theoretical traditions, such as post-Marxist approaches, which emphasise the political potentialities of digital networks.

Despite these shortcomings, *Infocracy* is a significant contribution to contemporary debates on digital capitalism, power, and democracy. Rather than offering definitive answers, the book functions as a provocative intervention that invites further debate and critical reflection.

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