

## **Is the application of artificial intelligence in citizen participation in urban transformation good or bad for democracy?**

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### **Shanghai, August 2019, World Conference on Artificial Intelligence.**

The organizers managed to secure the baton of the most celebrated and talked about auto and space industry in America, Elon Musk, and China's most admired and envied technology entrepreneur, Alibaba founder Jack Ma, shortly before the its thunderous fall.

According to Jack Ma, 99% of the predictions humans make about the future are wrong.

*"I am happy that AI understands humans better. I'm quite optimistic. I don't think AI is a risk, I don't think it's something terrible, humans are smart enough to know that. Computers may be smart, but humans are smarter. As humans we invented the computer, I've never seen a computer invent a human. I think AI will open a new chapter in our societies where people will try to understand the world better."*

Only four years have passed since these statements by Jack Ma and we already realize how short-sighted they were. Indeed, we already noticed it in 2019, live. Jack Ma has always been overrated by his countrymen.

*"The biggest mistake I see in Artificial Intelligence researchers is assuming they are intelligent,"* Musk retorted, *"so many of them cannot imagine anything smarter than themselves."* Musk stated that future protagonists of artificial intelligence will be much smarter than humans. So one wonders, what do one do in such a situation? *"I'm not sure, I hope they are nice, understanding"*.

When he talks about Artificial Intelligence, Musk has a vision of decades, centuries. Computers are getting smaller, more powerful, more responsive. If we extrapolate the last 40 years to the next 40 and then beyond, we can think of humanity as a biological trigger for a digital superintelligence, as bits of code without which computers won't boot.

*"Artificial intelligence may have difficulty evolving, circuit by circuit, and will need biology to get there."* Very open debate between the two: Jack Ma expressed all his confidence, Elon Musk all his concern (1).

### **Turin, August 2000. Porta Palazzo Project Committee**

A little over twenty years ago in Turin one of the most important European participatory planning projects took place, one of the first of a long successive series.

*The GATE* was an Urban Pilot Project promoted by the City of Turin in the Porta Palazzo area and financed by the European Union ERDF, among the 26 best European urban practices.

The Porta Palazzo district constitutes a portion of the fabric of historic Turin, the fulcrum of urban traffic, colorful commerce and social relations. The octagonal Piazza della Repubblica, of 51,300 square meters, is the largest square in Turin which hosts the largest open-air market in Europe every day. The project was divided into actions (sub-projects) to cover most of the critical aspects of this surprising and conflicted Turin district:

the neighborhood economic incubator; the safety net for social and cultural integration; sustainability and environmental values; the quality of life and living; communication and mobility (2).

Many tools were experimented in an extraordinarily extensive way to share design choices, to facilitate decision-making processes, to communicate and involve all

the categories of users of the project, including the inhabitants of the neighbourhood. It is not difficult to argue that the entire possible set of new decision-making tools and methodologies was contained in *The Gate* project. *The Gate Porta Palazzo* project has made school and today becomes a test to put Artificial Intelligence to the test. We know all the implications of the project, its intimate complexity and we will adopt it as a reference for our investigation.

### **Turin 2023. Artificial Intelligence and participation**

By asking an Artificial Intelligence the simple question of whether it is preferable to set up a strategy for the urban regeneration of Porta Palazzo in Turin by asking for suggestions and paths from the same Artificial Intelligence, or from real stakeholders, in fact citizens, through a process of participation, the answer of IA (3) is rather peremptory:

*"When it comes to deciding the strategy for urban regeneration, it is essential to consider both artificial intelligence and real stakeholders/citizens through a participatory process. Each approach brings valuable perspectives and insights to the table."*

That is, AI does not claim that the human experience in participation is far more motivated, capable of grasping problems, suggesting solutions, involving visions. On the contrary, it tries to find space for itself, it tries to "have a role". It is as if in its algorithm there were an obligation to find space because its "intelligent" life requires space, otherwise it dies.

Artificial Intelligence believes it can offer data-driven analytics and predictive modeling to inform decision-making. Indeed, it can help analyze large amounts of data relating to demographics, infrastructure, transport and environmental factors, providing valuable insights into potential strategies for urban regeneration. Artificial Intelligence can help identify patterns, optimize resource allocation and simulate different scenarios, helping to make informed decisions based on evidence and data.

Very shrewd, in this way the AI limits itself to the technical aspects, i.e. to support in the analysis and evaluation. AI does not replace us, it complements us. It is a very refined technique to convince us that we are not losing control, that we are in any case the ones who have the vision, the project, the management of the participatory processes. In essence, the AI accompanies us, remaining in the background.

We are reminded of the book *Parkinson's Law* (4) which was very popular in the 70s of the last century: "do you want to replace your boss? Pretend to be a bit stupid and obliging, wait for the right moment and, when the opportunity presents itself and you find it defenseless, put your superiority to good use and bite!".

### **AI and urban regeneration**

Deepening the investigation, IA continues with an interesting clarification, in the second line, without forcing, as if it were auxiliary or in any case not a priority. IA argues: *"however, it is equally important to engage with real stakeholders and citizens through a participatory process"*.

In short, IA recognizes that urban regeneration involves defining the physical, social and economic aspects of a community and that the perspectives and aspirations of the people who live and work in the area are crucial. Real stakeholders, including local residents, entrepreneurs, social organizations, can provide valuable insights into community needs, wants and challenges.

We note the passage: *"however it is equally important"*, that is, if you really want and have time, it is still important to engage with real citizens.

AI is also understanding of the role humans play. In this further passage, it could be said that IA is very "liberal". According to IA, by engaging *"in a participatory process, yes*

*they can gather diverse perspectives, leverage local knowledge, and foster a sense of ownership and ownership among stakeholders. This process may involve community meetings, workshops, surveys, focus groups and other forms of commitment to ensure that the remanufacturing strategy reflects the aspirations and priorities of the people who will be directly affected by it".* So, thank you AI for this space given to humans!

The most convincing element on the need for AI to find a role and space even in a typically human segment such as the participation of inhabitants in urban regeneration processes is highlighted in the "combination of the power of analysis guided by artificial intelligence with the contribution of interested parties and real citizens. This integration can lead to a more comprehensive and inclusive strategy for urban regeneration."

It enables evidence-based decision making by considering the social, cultural and economic aspects of the community, ultimately creating a more sustainable and livable urban environment.

### **Can AI develop participation?**

In the late 1990s, Europe's largest open-air market square had a vehicular crossing which reduced the functionality of the market and, at the same time, congested vehicular traffic. Building an underpass was a viable solution, but it would have meant economic suffering for the traders and street vendors for about a year, limited in their daily activities.

Is there an alternative to having the street vendors and traders express themselves to decide whether to build an underpass? Is it right for the city to delegate the decision to the operators who live off the proceeds that the market square offers them? What could AI recommend?

One wonders if AI would be able to find a role of "facilitator" in this case as well, or would it retire in good order without suggesting its own intervention? And above all, what kind of intervention or what kind of conditioning could you propose?

Here's how IA puts it about the complex problem of prioritizing the interests of merchants or those of the wider municipality as a whole:

*"While involving street vendors and traders in the decision may seem like a democratic solution, there are some considerations to keep in mind. First, market players may be influenced by their immediate individual interests, which may not necessarily coincide with the city's general interest or long-term vision. Second, operators may not have the skills or experience to fully assess the planning, financial and technical implications of such a decision."*

Up to here everything is very logical and shareable. It is what we would have said if asked on the subject by an Artificial Intelligence, instead of the other way around. So, we may have uploaded this content ourselves.

The continuation of the operational suggestions is even more in line with the current ways of intervention in the participatory processes of urban regeneration. This means that the AI is very well trained and not easily caught out.

According to Artificial Intelligence it is important to involve local stakeholders in the discussion and planning of solutions, organizing public meetings or consultations with traders, street vendors and other interested residents, in order to gather their opinions, concerns and alternative proposals. In this way, the voices of market operators can be taken into account, but at the same time a broader assessment can be made

that takes into account the interests of the whole community. Furthermore, according to IA *"it is essential to involve experts and urban planners in the decision-making process to evaluate the effectiveness of the various solutions and identify any economic, social and infrastructural impacts. This will allow for a more informed and balanced decision taking into account all relevant aspects"*

### **Contribution of AI to urban decision making**

In essence, AI can contribute to the decision process by providing information, analysis and tools to evaluate different options. That is, it limits itself to ways to help, such as:

- Providing information: can offer a detailed overview of the different possible solutions to address the traffic problem in the market place, including their implications, advantages and disadvantages. Share information on similar experiences in other cities or on the results of feasibility studies.
- Data analysis: can analyze traffic data, pedestrian flows and other relevant information to evaluate the impact of different solutions. It can help identify potential consequences, such as the effect on merchant sales or changes in traffic flow, and evaluate the effectiveness of proposed alternatives.
- Simulations and modeling: Using simulation algorithms, it can create virtual models to test different solutions and evaluate their expected results. This can help you understand the long-term effects of decisions you make and make more informed decisions.
- Consultation support: can facilitate the collection of feedback and opinions from market players, residents and other stakeholders. Through chatbots or interactive survey tools, he can collect their opinions, answer questions and provide starting points for discussion.
- Visualizations and presentations: can create visual representations, such as interactive maps or graphs, to help communicate the different options and their impacts in a clear and understandable way. This can facilitate understanding on the part of the participants and promote more informed discussion.

AI *"should be used"* as a decision support tool and not as a substitute for human involvement. Market players, residents and other stakeholders *"should still be involved in the decision-making process"* and the information and analysis provided by AI can be used to guide the discussion and provide a more comprehensive perspective.

### **The vocation of AI for participation**

At this point a question naturally arises to unearth the true vocation of AI, in fact, there does not seem to be anything special in these decision supports. Therefore, why would there be a need for AI if the things proposed can be done with simple software or with codified procedures?

*"You are right, many of the activities I mentioned can be done using specific software, codified procedures or the help of human experts. But AI, like me, can offer some additional benefits: access to a large knowledge base; advanced analytics capabilities; adaptability and continuous learning"*.

But the greatest interest is related to the conversational interaction ability: *"I can communicate through a conversational interface, allowing users to ask*

*questions, express concerns and interact naturally. This interaction can make access to the requested information easier and more immediate and provide personalized support”.*

In essence, while many activities can be performed without the use of an Artificial Intelligence, AI can provide an additional level of expertise, processing speed and analytical capabilities that could be useful in complex situations such as the one described.

Moving on the terrain of the challenge to AI, it is pressed with a provocation on its ability to replace the decision-maker. That is, could the AI or not indicate the final decision instead of just giving support and quick analysis tools?

To this question, AI withdraws into its comfort space: *“as an Artificial Intelligence, I can provide information, analysis and assistance in evaluating the available options, but making the final decision is still up to the people involved in the decision-making process”.*

That is, the final decision should be made by a decision-making committee or competent authorities who carefully consider all relevant aspects, including the interests of market participants, the technical aspects, the financial implications and the general well-being of the community.

### **The limits of AI intervention. for now**

Let's recap the case of participation in the Market Square decision: Artificial Intelligence has the ability to analyze data, provide information and evaluate different options based on certain criteria. However, his ability to make a final autonomous decision is limited by several factors:

- Lack of subjective perspective: as a language model based on GPT-4, it does not possess a subjective consciousness or perspective. She has no personal preferences, values or experiences that allow her to make a decision based on a subjective view.
- Complex and variable context: Complex decisions often require understanding a wide range of information, not just limited to quantitative data or factors. This includes social, cultural, ethical and political elements, which can be difficult to evaluate objectively.
- Risks of bias: AI can be influenced by the quality and representativeness of the data it is trained on. In the event of biases or biases in training data, it may reproduce or amplify those biases in its analyzes and recommendations.
- Ethical and legal responsibility: the ultimate responsibility for decisions falls on human beings who can assume responsibility for the consequences of their choices. The AI cannot be held responsible for decisions made based on its recommendations.

AI can offer input and recommendations based on data and analytics, but it is up to humans to critically evaluate and make the final decision.

In short, we thought we were making AI fall into the trap of substituting the principle of human free will, but AI is already trained to elude it. Whatever the prospecting, decoding, analysis and synthesis of conclusions, AI has an algorithm that stops it from making a solution explicit or indicating it as a decision. Offer alternatives, weigh options, highlight pros and cons... For now.

### **Conclusions**

Artificial intelligence, according to Harari, has appropriated a fundamental characteristic of human beings, language (5).

ChatGPT is now the playmate, colleague, assistant of millions of people and is widely regarded as a successful product. The problem is that it is not a product and its success, at best, will radically change the way we interface with the world of work, while at worst it will radically change everything.

Historically every technological development has had positive, but also negative applications. The last great revolution, that of *social media*, has interconnected the world in an unprecedented way, giving people the possibility, even in remote parts of the world, to communicate with each other, reducing the possibility for governments to convey false information. However, *social media* has also ushered in a new era in terms of privacy, the indiscriminate collection of personal information and the shaping of our behavior and interests based on the content we publish. This has allowed governments and private individuals to use these huge databases (Big Data) to generate content that specifically affects certain segments of the population.

An influence that, at best, is aimed at pushing people to buy a product and at worst at interfering in the democratic process (6).

ChatGPT has appropriated the language, evolutions of this system such as AutoGPT allow you to give your computer to the AI, ask it a goal, see it ask critical questions with the aim of achieving this goal and conclude everything in an impossible time for a human. or for a thousand humans.

Let's do a creative exercise and imagine an AI to which the goal we set is collect data from the main *social media* platforms and create profiles for the users who populate them. The AI, with its exceptional understanding of the text, will easily be able to grasp our interests, our fears, understand what we are most sensitive to, generate a huge and very detailed database which, compared to that of Cambridge Analytica, it could make you pale. When AI is mature and the current text chat interface is a distant memory, the AI designed and trained by OpenAI will be integrated into all the peripherals we now define as smart, making them something more. This process is already underway with the integration of Google's AI (Bard) into Android operating systems which, among other things, will help rewrite messages based on the "tone" we want the interlocutor to perceive. In the coming months and years, AI will become pervasive in our lives. The development will be very rapid and radical, difficult to manage by our societies, but essential to keep in balance that delicate scale which has the market on one side and the democracy (6).

The question that needs to be asked is therefore: will we be able to govern this change?

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