Francesca Bria

episode 12

The Culture & Technology Podcast

Episode 12: A New Digital Humanism
Francesca Bria

INTRODUCTION

What does a European approach to innovation look like?

When thinking about digital innovation and policy around technology we often view it either through the lens of Silicon Valley surveillance capitalism or Chinese digital authoritarianism. We don't often think about what a European approach to innovation might look like. Francesca Bria on the other hand spends most of her time thinking about just that. In our conversation, Francesca offered insight on Europe's role in digital innovation, how culture informs technology and how citizens can get active in the area of digital innovation and policy.

GUESTS

Francesca Bria is the President of the Italian National Innovation Fund. She is an information technologist, innovation economist and digital policy expert, working at the intersection of technology, geopolitics, economics and society.

HOST

Severin Matusek is an editor, producer and strategist who has spent the last decade researching how technology transforms culture, communities and society.

IDEAS AND PEOPLE IN CONTEXT

- **Nesta** is an innovation foundation intended to promote innovation across a broad range of sectors through investment, policy and research. https://www.nesta.org.uk/
- **The Italian Innovation Fund** is an initiative by the Italian government to help fund innovation within the country and boost the Italian start-up ecosystem. https://www.cdp.it/sitointernet/it/homepage.page
- **The New European Bauhaus** is a creative and interdisciplinary initiative, convening a space of encounter to design future ways of living, situated at the crossroads between art, culture, social inclusion, science and technology. https://europa.eu/new-european-bauhaus/index_en
- **GAFAM** is a name given to the four or five largest and most dominant companies in the tech industry. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Big_Tech
- **D-CENT (Decentralised Citizens Engagement Technologies)** was a Europe-wide project helping citizen-led organisations in developing the next generation of open source, distributed, and privacy-aware tools for direct democracy and economic empowerment. https://dcentproject.eu/

CREDITS

The Vienna Business Agency supports businesses, the economy and the city in developing the Austrian capital's creative industries and shaping its future trajectory. viennabusinessagency.at

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Theme Music by Zanshin.

TRANSCRIPT

Francesca Bria

Great to be here.

Severin Matusek

Great to have you. From where are you joining us right now?

Francesca Bria

I'm in Rome this morning. I'm in Rome today. I'm now based in Rome.

Severin Matusek

Great. Actually, tell us the story of how you got to Rome, because I understand you're originally from Rome, then you studied in the UK, became Chief Technology Officer of Barcelona and now you're back in Rome. What's the story?

Francesca Bria

Yes, it's a long journey. I'm super from Rome. I am super Italian. I actually live next to the Colosseum. So Roman as it gets, yes. I got back to Rome last year, just before the pandemic, in January. I was nominated by the Italian government to be leading the newly created National Innovation Fund at the GDP, which is our investment bank, Italian public bank. So I started this job, which is very exciting, because we have 1.5 billion euros to invest in innovative startups in all different sectors. To really create a 'from the ground up' innovation ecosystem for Italy. Obviously, it has been very difficult because I came back to my country just before the pandemic, and we started this big fund, just before the pandemic. It has been crazy and busy and strange and new but anyways, now we're really kicking off and the work is going very well.

Before Rome, I was in Barcelona, as you said. So the last four years, I was the Chief Technology and Digital Innovation Officer for the city of Barcelona. That's where I experimented with lots of policy and projects related to data democracy, data sovereignty and also digital democracy in general. I also started to work as Senior Advisor for the United Nations on digital cities and digital rights. This obviously was a kind of title they gave me because they were inspired by the Barcelona work on redefining the smart cities putting digital rights at the centre and putting people first.

As you said before Barcelona, I was in London, I was at the UK innovation agency Nesta. That's when I started to work with digital democracy tools and cryptocurrencies and doing lots of the experimental work that I think set the ground to scale it up in Barcelona. I still work on these kind of topics, even as the president of the Italian Innovation Fund. I'm advising the European Commission on a lot of things related to digital sovereignty and just to finalise all the things I'm doing, I'm advising president Von der Leyen, in a very, very interesting new programme, which is called the New European Bauhaus. I think it's a really visionary project because it wants to couple the EU Green Deal, that of course is our ambitious, inclusive, and sustainable growth strategy.

Europe wants to become the first Climate Neutral continent by 2050. It wants to couple that with a cultural and artistic movement. At the moment we are building a real movement, working with architects, urbanists, designers, artists and technology experts to rethink the future. To reshape the sustainable future, putting at the very centre, the concept of sustainability, and we'll make it work for everyone because we need to really shift.

Severin Matusek

Yeah, it's incredible how busy you are and how active you are on many levels. I would say from what I observed, somehow throughout your career, first at Nesta in the UK, then in Barcelona, now in Italy, as well as your work in Europe, on a European level, I feel like you are always at the link between digital development and technology and governments or institutions that form national bodies or European bodies. I find this very interesting because I know you're very active as well, on being critical about big tech and private companies owning so much of our data. I wonder, for all the experiences that you've made so far, why is it that countries, governments or the European Union, are often a little bit behind when it comes to digital innovation or digital democracy?

Francesca Bria

Yes, I wouldn't say that states and the public - if when you say countries you mean the public sector - politics, states, I wouldn't say they are behind. I would say that Europe is behind when it comes to leading on digital technologies and innovation but I would say that we are catching up. At the moment, there is a real change in the dynamic of these topics in Europe, but also, these issues are becoming much more central to the policymaking field. They are being finally discussed as central political matters in Brussels.

As you know, I am really convinced that who will own data and artificial intelligence in the future - but also critical infrastructures such as, AI, quantum, microprocessors - we're seeing that it's more and more important to set the standards of future institutions. Technology is not just the gadget, the technological revolution and technological infrastructures are creating new institutions, new platforms, that today are very central to running essential services. We are seeing this during the pandemic. I think during the pandemic, somehow the pandemic has become a big accelerator of destruction of processes. It's not the cause but it's accelerating those processes very much, which I think are two folded. On one side, they made it clear for all of us, somehow spreading digitalization very rapidly into the population because we had to do smart working distance education, food delivery, all kinds of e-commerce apps, even contact tracing apps, to monitor the virus. So the population got really digitalized very quickly.

For example in Italy, we pushed the digital ID and digital payment system to everyone. I mean, we were lagging behind and all of a sudden millions of Italians have a digital ID. Many people in society realise that connectivity, access to the internet and to those platforms are essential infrastructures because they mediate the access to our essential services, in education, in work, in health care, and so on. So it is really the foundation of our welfare state.

So I think on one side it is positive, because of course it can offer us new opportunities and also it puts high on the agenda the fact that, for example, access to the internet and access to connectivity can be seen as a human right, as a constitutional right of citizens. So this kind of debate, for instance, was very much on the agenda of the President of the European Parliament. On the other side, it shows us how much we are dependent on very few companies, the digital oligarchy that governs those infrastructure. So if you go to look at the data in the market, during the pandemic, those companies, Big Tech, the GAFAM, so US Big Tech; Amazon, Google, Alphabet, Apple and Facebook, and for the Chinese equivalent, which are growing very much like Baidu, Tencent, Alibaba and Huawei, it was a positive shock the pandemic. For all the rest of the industry, it was a negative shock, but for them, it was a positive shock, and they increased their revenue of more than 1 trillion US dollars. So at the moment, their market capitalization is more than 8 trillion US dollars. So the kind of Big Tech market capitalization is bigger than the entire European stock market value for the first time on record.

I think this poses a very strong question when it comes to concentration of power, concentration of the market, but also concentration of social power, because we see how this is linked to democracy. It is not only a question of national security, and industrial competitiveness, it is also a question of Democracy, of really being able to

preserve our fundamental rights, the rule of law, human rights, and so on. I think that because of these questions, Europe has had to wake up.

We're seeing that in these Big Tech companies, we have the Silicon Valley GAFAM, we have the Chinese equivalent, which are growing, but none of these companies is European. So Europe is being left behind and of course, Europe has been seen as the kind of super regulatory power of the digital age so we are doing things like the GDPR. We have the ePrivacy stuff, we are setting a ePrivacy standards for the old world. We are very good when it comes to antitrust and competition law. We're finding those companies, we are trying to see what's the link between privacy, data ownership and market dominance. We have antitrust cases going on. Well, in both sides of the Atlantic, I would say actually, and then, of course, we are pioneer and we're pushin forward at OECD level and now the Biden administration is also doing that. A reform of taxation.

We want digital giants to pay taxes so we have the digital tax, but also we are talking about a minimum corporate tax globally, which was proposed by the Biden administration. So those kinds of reforms and regulation are very good but at the same time, we understand this is not enough. We also need to compete on innovation, and our technological and scientific capacity in Europe. And we need to do it on our own ground. We cannot copy the US model, the Silicon Valley surveillance capitalism and we can talk a little bit about that.

We also cannot copy the big state, Chinese digital authoritarianism model, we have to come up with our model, which I call digital sovereignty, a new type of humanism, that combined dynamic innovation, with the protection of our fundamental rights, our digital rights, citizen participation, protecting data and the environment. I mean, this should be the European model for our digital future and I think we have to work very, very hard to make sure that this is not what you said, that we are having late. We should be there and we should, as a society, not just the private sector, as a society, we should be able to set the standards for this future.

Severin Matusek

I think that's totally on point and it reminds me of something that one of our other podcast guests mentioned. It was the author Xiaowei Wang, who actually wrote a book about technology used in rural China. At the end of the book, she says that often we have this conception, that technology shapes our culture and society in many ways but she actually reverted it and said, actually, culture and our communities are much stronger than technology. Essentially, the values that we have in our cultures and societies, ultimately shape the technology that we develop and use, which I believe is in

the direction of what you're saying, that what you argue for, is Europe has to understand its position in the world, its history, legacy and try to foster innovation and technology development based on the values that we have built our societies on. Is that correct?

Francesca Bria

Yes, it's absolutely correct. It should be built on our values, on our principles, for example. It will be grounded on fundamental rights and also it should have a vision about the socio-economic models that we want for our future because as we are seeing those kinds of platforms, they shape education, the future of education, the future of work, the future of our cities. Questions that are the very foundation of our society of our welfare state. So we should have a model for that. Europe is famous for our social market economy, for combining a competitive fair market with a strong safety net, with a strong welfare state, with strong workers rights, with strong citizen rights, protecting the environment, protecting data as a fundamental right of citizens. Those are the principles that we want to see embedded in the technologies and infrastructures that we design, that will be underpinning future institutions. So that's what I say we need to have a jump, a leap in our social imagination. We cannot close our imagination imagining that we have only two digital futures. On one side, the Silicon Valley model. We already know Shoshana Zuboff calls it a surveillance capitalism. We know the benefit of having those big companies to manage infrastructures but we also know the problems and more on the long term. Then we have the Chinese model, which is now becoming very strong, where, you know, obviously they're not going to post questions around facial recognition systems everywhere, the data is centrally collected, you have a kind of state control over personal information that will be very hard to digest for European citizens. So, you know, we have to bet on our own model and this touches also macroeconomic questions, as I'm trying to say, I mean, not only what kind of fiscal policy? What kind of industrial strategy? What is the socio economic models that we want? The geopolitical dimension, as you said, what's the role of Europe in the, in the world? Then, I would like to go back to my idea of digital sovereignty, that is not only state sovereignty, so it's not only top down, state led, digital future, where instead of the Google and Apple it will be the state that's gathering all the data and controlling us. No.

The idea of digital sovereignty that I tried to experiment in Barcelona, it's really giving back democratic control of digital infrastructures and data to people. So it's betting, for example, on data governance and data ownership model. We have been betting on a model where it's the citizens, it's a data democracy. So the citizens are more and more in control of their data through decentralised, privacy enhancing and rights preserving infrastructures. They can decide what data they want to keep private, what data they want to share, with whom they want to share this data and on what terms. So these

terms are set in an accountable and transparent way and in this way we also create awareness, because you know, data is the new raw material of our time. You can define it also as the new currency, because in fact, you know, these services that we are given by the Big Tech are not for free, we pay with our data and also they are able now to consume all this data in their artificial intelligence engines. If we do not take back our sovereignty, we will become a digital colony. Europe really risks to become a digital colony, because these critical infrastructures - at the moment - are in the hands of foreign tech giants. We need to take back some democratic control and I think the Barcelona model, let's say a city, from the ground up model and network of cities, which are in proximity with citizens, where you can experiment with new type of infrastructures, a new model for managing data, for running and scaling up digital infrastructures, at the service of solving the real problems that matter to people; ecological transition, climate change, better education, better and more livable cities. This is the model that I think we have to, now, experiment. I mean, we have a really a great opportunity. We have the next generation EU, we have lots of investment, around 400 billion that Europe will invest in digitalization. I think it's the right moment to scale up those experiments, to make them work; at local scale, at national scale, at a European scale, and show that we have an alternative for our digital and green future. It has to be more democratic, more sustainable, possibly more feminist and so I think it's a little bit in utopia, but a very pragmatic one, that can and should be experimented.

Severin Matusek

If we go 10 years ahead, let's say it's 2030. Where do you want us to be with these plans? What do you think is realistic to achieve in the next 10 years?

Francesca Bria

Well, we need to achieve the scaling up of those systems. I think we want to put in place, those kinds of infrastructures that are made with European technology, democratically controlled by citizens, with privacy, ethics and security at the very core, with a new governance model for data where data can become a public good, that can be opened up to the innovators locally so we have much more capacity to build new science, new technology and companies in Europe as well, to tackle all the big problems that we're facing. With the pandemic we see, we have to deal with the Anthropocene with the climate crisis, with the ecological crisis, we have to transform radically our cities. We have to move to an electrical mobility to a sustainable green mobility. We have to retrofit our buildings, because of the energy we consume it should be radically reduced. Maybe we also want to change now there is this model of the 15 minutes cities, the way we work and move around. We need to build new working

spaces. Those transformations need those technological infrastructures and our capacity, our collective intelligence to be there, and we have to build it ourselves. We cannot rely on a few, five to seven, Big Tech giants that are kind of are going to know better what we need in our neighbourhoods and in our communities, I don't think this is a sustainable model.

There will be a big shift in healthcare systems that are going to be digital, where data is going to be produced about us, and we have to rethink the public healthcare system. Education, as I told you before, is a big is a big topic and now how we are creating a new system curricula, how we are like modernising our education system. As you can see a lot to experiment and do to rethink all those systems and to make them work for the people and at the same time very centrally to my thinking in the future is also democracy.

As you know, I've been experimenting in Barcelona, large scale participatory democracy models, which are hybrid online democracy via actually open source privacy preserving platform. It's called D-CENT in Barcelona. Now it is used by the European Parliament and the Commission and the Council for the Future of Europe Experiments where citizens are asked to give ideas on what Europe should be in the future. I think this hybrid model of more deliberative, participatory democracy, combined with representative democracy will become the norm. For that, we need digital infrastructures that allow us to integrate the collective intelligence of citizens into political decision making, and that are not run on a business model that's based on monetizing and manipulating personal information and data because this is the problem.

This has been at the core of the Democratic problem we have with Big Tech, which is really altering the Habermas and Public Sphere. We cannot allow this to continue because the negative externalities of this business model is fake news, conspiracy theory, anxiety of, you know, people do not control information, artificial intelligence in the hands of very few private players. I mean, these are those are all things that if we leave this to go this way, in a few years, we're not going to be able to take it back anymore. So I think the future of democracy and how that's related to technology is also something that we should be transforming in the in the next years.

Severin Matusek

My final question is, I agree with all of these things, and I know it's gonna be a tough and a long way to get there but what can I as a citizen, as a normal person living in Berlin, do? Should I start a startup with different values in mind? Should I go digital voting? Should I ask my government? Should I get active in my local neighbourhood?

Should I stop using Google. What can I do really to facilitate the change that you envision?

Francesca Bria

Yeah, I think it goes both ways. I think that we should pressure public institutions and governments to give more importance to those issues, to put them at the very centre of the political agenda at all levels; your local level, national level, and in particular European level, because this is how they get done. This is how they get implemented.

Then we want massive investments and I think this we are getting, a lot of it. I know Germany, in particular actually, is investing a lot on also building alternative digital infrastructures, with digital sovereignty in mind. We need both public and private investment. I think also we see we need more VC. I mean, we have even public venture capital funding that could help you know, technology startups to grow with impact in mind, with a different set of values in mind. So you don't need to go into data monetization and scale up in that kind of way. Hopefully we can do, if we enlarge the European market, also risk capital, which I think is a good thing. Then we also want to find alternative models that are not startups, which are, you know, based on this kind of solidarity, civic tech and model that can contribute to create a different knowledge system, that can contribute to tackling climate change locally, that can help public sector to build robust public digital infrastructures, also this should be possible. The startup is one way, but it's not the only way. Then, of course, pressuring the big companies to do their part and I think also European Big Tech.

Large tech companies should help to, for example, create a European cloud, that's not going to be managed by Palantir, or by some Big Tech company from the States or China, but it's going to be managed by a public and private partnership model. We have fantastic research centres University, like in Germany, you have Fraunhofer centres and so on with a lot of capacity to actually be providing those infrastructures. I think there is a little bit of a of job to be done for everybody and I think if you are a talented person working with technology, in the Berlin scene, what you want to do is create space for all of this to happen, and make sure that this is very central in the political agenda, because then these experiments get scaled up in a systemic way.

They can really be transformative. It's not just the me and my neighbourhood and my civic tech community building some interesting tools, but they can really become solutions that are implemented, for example, at city scale in Berlin. Why don't make Berlin the hub, the new centre for sustainable digitization for the kind of data democracy and privacy preserving technology that puts citizen participation at the very centre. I

think, this kind of green digital, democratic city, why don't we make Berlin the centre of that in Europe? I've been working in Barcelona and Barcelona is continuing in this route. There is Amsterdam, which is doing lots of interesting things and Helsinki and other cities all across Europe. This network of city experiments to become really these green, digital and democratic cities. I think it's very, very interesting.

Severin Matusek

Francesca, that was fantastic. Thank you so much.

Francesca Bria

Thank you very much. Thanks. It's been good.