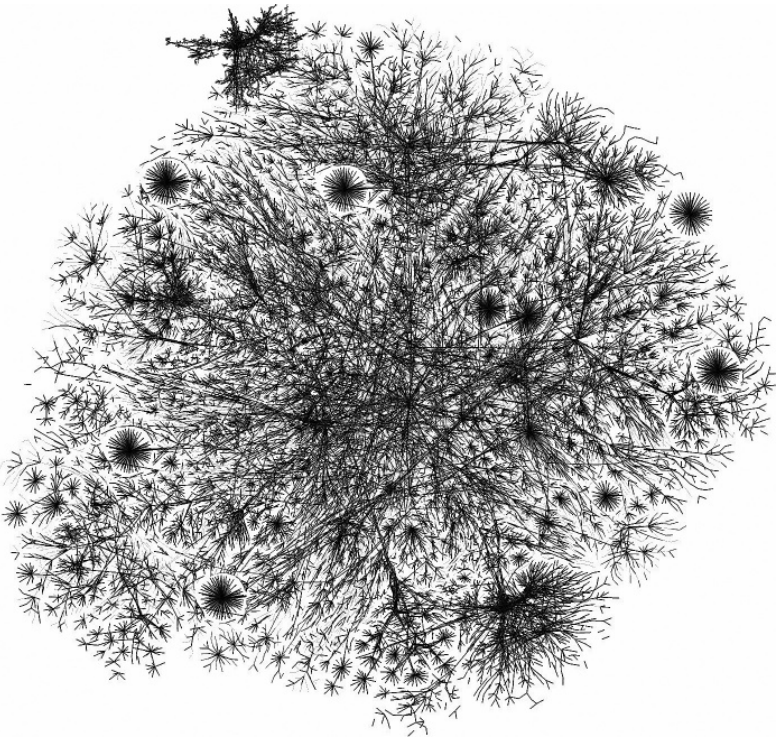# 1 | *Communicative abundance*

In the beginning there was the first ever worldwide satellite television broadcast featuring the Beatles, Maria Callas, Marshall McLuhan and Pablo Picasso, all live, watched by an estimated 400 million people. Mountainous mainframe computers and host-based systems for sending messages by multiple users from remote dial-up terminals were already in use. Then along came electronic mail, fax machines, photocopiers, video recorders and personal computers. Now there are electronic books, cloud computing, scanners, smart watches and smart glasses, tweets and cell phones converted into satellite navigators, musical instruments and multi-person video chat sites. It is unclear even to the innovators what comes next, but these and other media inventions, commercially available only during recent decades, have persuaded more than a few people that we are living in a revolutionary age of communicative abundance.

In the spirit of the revolution, as in all previous upheavals in the prevailing mode of communication, fascination mixed with excitement is fuelling bold talk of the transcendence of television, the disappearance of printed newspapers, the withering of the printed book, even the end of literacy as we have known it. In the heartlands of the revolution, there is widespread recognition that time is up for spectrum scarcity, mass broadcasting and predictable prime-time national audiences, and that they have been replaced by spectrum abundance, fragmented narrowcasting and less predictable 'long tail' audiences.[1] Symbolised by the Internet, which is often portrayed through images that strongly resemble snowflakes (Figure 1.1), the revolutionary age of communicative abundance is structured by a new world system of overlapping and interlinked media devices. For the first time in history, thanks to built-in cheap microprocessors, these devices integrate texts, sounds and images in digitally

---

[1] The best-known work is Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail, or Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More* (New York, 2006).

1

Figure 1.1 Computer graphic ('splat map') of global Internet traffic, shaded by ISP addresses, by Giovanni Navarria.

compact and easily storable, reproducible and portable form. Communicative abundance enables messages to be sent and received through multiple user points, in chosen time, either real or delayed, within modularised and ultimately global networks that are affordable and accessible to several billion people scattered across the globe.

The transformative potential of this new mode of communication is staggering, but its disruptive force and positive effects should not blindly be exaggerated. Communicative abundance does not bring paradise to Earth. Most of the world's people 'participate' within the global communications revolution on its sidelines. The cruel facts of communication poverty should not be ignored: a majority of the world's population (now totalling nearly 7 billion) are still too poor to buy a book; at least one-third have never made a phone call in their lives; and only around

one-third have access to the Internet, whose distribution patterns are highly uneven and are marked in turn by great divides between those who have access to its tools and techniques and those who are 'Internet savvy'.[2] Within the most media-saturated settings, for instance, the societies of Iceland, South Korea and Singapore, digital divides based on differences of age, gender, class, ethnicity and disability are plainly observable. Even among young people, supposedly the most digitally sophisticated stratum of the population in wealthy societies, social inequalities of access and patterns of use of digital media are striking.[3]

These points should be sobering. Yet the fact remains that the communications revolution of our time is a worldwide phenomenon that defies simple talk of rich–poor and North–South divides. Many different regions witness the breathtaking growth of information flows. Measured globally, an estimated 2.5 quintillion bytes of new data are generated daily; some 90 per cent of the data that now exists has been created during the past two years; and in the years leading to 2020, thanks to the spreading use of smartphones, tablets, social media sites, email and other forms of digital communication, the global volume of digital information is expected to double every two years. Gripped by such dynamics, some local trends veer towards the perverse: for instance, more Africans now have access to mobile phones than to clean drinking water; while in South Africa, among the continent's most vibrant, but still deeply class-divided economies, with a high proportion (approximately 40 per cent) of its people living in poverty, aggregate mobile phone use has rocketed during the past decade by more than four times (from around 17 per cent in the year 2000 to 76 per cent in 2010), to the point where more South African citizens (when they can afford them) rank their use of mobile phones above their listening to radio, or watching television or using personal computers.[4] Elsewhere, in countries otherwise as different as India, the

---

[2] See the various data sets and figures cited at: www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm, accessed 10 January 2012.

[3] J. C. Witte and S. E. Mannon, *The Internet and Social Inequalities* (New York, 2010); L. Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis, MN, 2008); Sonia Livingstone and E. Helsper, 'Gradations in Digital Inclusion: Children, Young People and the Digital Divide', *New Media & Society* 9 (2007): 671–96.

[4] Estimates of the growth of information flows are based on recent studies by IBM and the International Data Corporation, as reported in 'Technology Revolution

United States, South Korea and Brazil, and in the European Union member states, evidence is growing that many people routinely sense sideways motion and forward movement in the way that they communicate, even in the little things of life. Whether they like it or not, old media broadcasting habits are dying, or are already dead and buried. India is a striking case in point: until 1991, the country had only a single state-owned television channel, but the subsequent rapid expansion of independent satellite channels has resulted not only in multiple news channels, but a plethora of other genres, ranging from regular talk-shows focusing on political issues and the political satire of cartoons and puppetry, to daily opinion polls via SMS messages and the rise of 'citizen journalists' who send in video clips through computers and mobile phones.[5] In India, as in other democracies, radio, television and chit-chat continue to be the principal sources of news and entertainment for many citizens; in various parts of the world, these are the only media available to people. Yet in the heartlands of communicative abundance, mass audiences with pricked ears and wide eyes predictably glued to radio and television broadcasts have become exceptional. In their place, multiple audiences of many different shapes and sizes are flourishing, helped along by dispersed multimedia communications that radically multiply choices about when, how and at what distances people communicate with others.

The communications revolution that brought the world the telegraph and the telephone sparked tremendous excitement. The Boston Library feature panels, painted by the famous nineteenth-century artist Puvis de Chavannes, depicted the telegraph and telephone as two female figures flying above electric wires, adding the inscription: 'By the wondrous agency of electricity, speech flashes through space and swift as lightning bears tidings of good and evil.' Communicative abundance exudes the same feverish sense of ferment and fire captured in that image. The present seems charged with radical uncertainty about future trends.

Consider, to take a few brief examples, developments within the commercial music sector, where for some time copyright arrangements

---

Moves Mountains of Data', *International Herald Tribune*, 10 June 2013, pp. 1, 8; the data from South Africa is drawn from Jan Hutton, 'Mobile Phones Dominate in South Africa', 2011, http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/global/mobile-phones-dominate-in-south-africa, accessed 22 September 2011.

[5] Nalin Mehta, *Television in India: Satellites, Politics and Cultural Change* (London and New York, 2008).

(it is said by industry figures) have been ransacked by simple reproduction techniques and by freely available electronic download methods that threaten to erode music company earnings. The cassette tape replaced the eight-track, only to be replaced in turn by the compact disc, itself now being replaced by MP3 players. Or look at what has been happening within the field of electronic books. Despite reassurances that the 'book is like the spoon, scissors, the hammer, the wheel. Once invented, it cannot be improved,'[6] manufacturers of tablet reading devices and online retailers of hard-copy and e-books are putting heavy pressure on the prices and distribution methods of traditional book publishing business models. As with free or cheaply downloadable music, books delivered in digital form raise profound questions not just about the future role played by traditional book publishers, but also much fretting about whether books in any form and selective 'reading for the sake of reading' remain a powerful way of constructing meaning from life's experiences, the best and most pleasurable antidote against the anaesthetics of boredom and vacuity in an age of multimedia distraction.[7] Unsettlement and restructuring equally grip the newspaper world, where a combination of plummeting advertising revenues, takeovers and mergers, independent citizens' journalism, competition from digital devices and shifting public definitions of news and entertainment has prompted profound unease about the future of hard-copy, mass circulation newspapers. Some observers even predict their eventual disappearance from street news stands, cafés and kitchen tables.

The uneasy excitement triggered by the coming of communicative abundance is often hard to interpret; the predictions of pundits are equally difficult to assess. Yet with some certainty it can be said that the myriad disturbances in the field of communications hail an historic shift away from the era of limited spectrum radio and television broadcasting. Gone are the times, during the 1950s, when on American television an episode of the sitcom *I Love Lucy* was watched by over 70 per cent of all television households, or when even more households (nearly 83 per cent) watched Elvis Presley's appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. The days are behind us (I recall) when children played with

---

[6] Umberto Eco, in conversation with Jean-Claude Carrière, in *This is Not the End of the Book: A Conversation about the Past, Present and Future* (London, 2011), p. 4.

[7] See Alan Jacobs, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* (Oxford, 2011); the continuity between hard-copy books and e-books is emphasised by Andrew Piper, *Book Was There: Reading in Electronic Times* (Chicago, 2012).

makeshift telephones made from jam tins connected by string; or the evenings when they were compulsorily flung into the bath and scrubbed behind the ears, sat down in their dressing gowns and instructed to listen in silence to the radio. There are still moments when live-event television coverage (of sporting events, political dramas, catastrophic accidents and singing competitions) binds together splintered audiences, but memories of the age of mass broadcasting and its various tools of communication are fading fast.

In the heartlands of today's revolution, people no longer own telephone directories, or memorise telephone numbers by heart. Most people have had no direct experience of the nervous excitement triggered by making a pre-booked long-distance call. Old documentaries featuring interviews with people looking with nervous hostility at the camera are no more; once seen as an invasion of self, cameras are considered enhancers of self. Everybody chuckles when mention is made of the wireless; nobody thinks of the bakelite tube radio as the source of a retronym now used to describe cord-free connections among stationary and portable tools of communication, large and small. Typewriters belong in curiosity shops. Pagers have almost been forgotten. Old jokes at the expense of television, said to be chewing gum for the eyes, or called a medium because it is neither rare nor well done, now seem flat. Even the couch potato seems to be a figure from the distant past. Few people think twice about the transformation of the word text into a verb. Writing and receiving hand-written letters and postcards have become a rare, nostalgic pleasure, and such formal valedictions as 'Yours truly' and 'Yours faithfully' have long ago been supplanted by 'Best' or 'Thanks' or 'Cheers' – or a blank space.

For many busy, well-equipped people, dead time, the art of doing nothing while contemplating the world out of a window, is on the skids; the same fate, at least for those who can afford it, is suffered by the ancient pleasure of curling up with a good book, or taking a quiet stroll in the park, without a Samsung in hand, or an iPod plugged into an ear. Soon after the publication of this book, the examples it cites will seem dated, replaced (for instance) by mobile phones with laser keyboards and holographic displays, or by tiny computers worn like wristwatches, which will have the effect of confirming the underlying trend. In contexts as different as Seoul, London and Mumbai, many office workers meanwhile admit that they spend their lunch hours snaffling a snack while checking their email or browsing the Web, rather than taking a

physical break from their desk; family members say that watching television in the company of others, except for sport and live reality shows, is now no match for the magnetic pull of mobile phones, tablets and desktop computers; and the younger generation, determined to prove the point with an iPod plugged into one ear, spends many hours each day and night online, often connecting through mobile applications with others, elsewhere in the so-called virtual world.

One key marker of the broad trend towards multimedia saturation is the perceived transformations taking place in the content and delivery of news.[8] Communicative abundance stirs up public disputes about the future of newspapers in hard-copy form. In their defence, some observers insist that while newspapers are bleeding revenues to online destinations, newspaper journalists working in well-equipped and well-connected newsrooms remain the 'content engines' (as American journalists say) of talkback radio, television news shows and blogs and tweets. The point is well made, for newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *El País* and *Yomiuri Shimbun* (the Japanese daily usually credited with having the largest circulation of any newspaper in the world) are probably not dinosaurs due for extinction. There is undoubtedly scope for their reinvention and ongoing redefinition in online form, for instance, using combinations of subscriptions and advertisements to deliver news to tablets.

Yet, in the age of communicative abundance, the ecology of news production and news circulation is undergoing rapid change.[9] News sources and streams diversify and multiply. Symptomatic is the way many media-savvy young people in countries otherwise as different as South Korea, Singapore and Japan are no longer wedded to traditional 'bundled' news outlets; they do not listen to radio bulletins, or watch current affairs or news programmes on television. 'Reading the morning newspaper', Hegel famously wrote in his daily journal, 'is the realist's morning prayer. One orients one's attitude toward *the* world.'[10] Digital

---

[8] See, for example, Leonard Downie Jr and Michael Schudson, 'The Reconstruction of American Journalism', *Columbia Journalism Review*, 19 October 2009.

[9] Michael Schudson, 'On Journalism and Democracy: Tocqueville's Interesting Error', public lecture delivered at the Centre for the Study of Democracy, London, 3 February 2010.

[10] *Miscellaneous Writings of G. W. F. Hegel*, ed. Jon Bartley Stewart (Chicago, 2002), p. 247; for the exodus of young people from conventional newspaper culture see Pew project for Excellence in Journalism, *The State of the News Media: An Annual Report on American Journalism* (Washington, DC, 2008).

natives, as they are sometimes known, are doing things differently. They refuse the old habit of mining the morning newspaper for their up-to-date information, as four out of every five American citizens once did (in the early 1960s). Internet portals have instead become their favoured destination for news. It is not that they are uninterested in news; it is rather that they want lots of it, news on demand, in instant 'unbundled' form and delivered in new ways, not merely in the mornings but throughout the day, and night.

Not surprisingly, pressured by such changes, plenty of observers, even from within the newspaper industry itself, have warned of the coming disappearance of newspapers. They point to mounting evidence that conventional newspaper business models are reaching crisis point, dragged down by online competitors (such as real-time sharing of YouTube and Twitter feeds) and the dramatic decline of classified and display advertising revenues.[11] Other observers make deliberately outlandish comments, designed to shock, for instance, through reminders that in the two years to 2009 the newspaper readership market in the United States fell by 30 per cent, more than 160 mastheads disappeared, along with 35,000 jobs; and through predictions that on current trends newspapers in the United States will no longer be printed after 2043.[12] More measured observers point out that although there are worrying developments (fewer than 20 per cent of Americans aged between 18 and 34 read a daily paper, for instance), overall trends are considerably more complicated; but, nevertheless, they agree that compared with the now-distant era of representative democracy, when print culture and limited spectrum audio-visual media were closely aligned with political parties, elections and governments, and flows of communication took the form of broadcasting confined within state borders, our times are different. The shift towards multimedia platforms and user-generated communication involves many more people listening, watching and talking directly to other people, rather than to traditional media sources. Or so most commentators now suppose.

[11] James Fallows, 'How to Save the News', *Atlantic Magazine* (June 2010); Hal Varian, 'A Google-Eye View of the Newspaper Business', *The Atlantic*, 10 May 2011.
[12] Compare Philip Meyer, *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age* (Columbia, MO, 2009) with Charles M. Madigan (ed.), *The Collapse of the Great American Newspaper* (Lanham, MD, 2007) and the two reports by the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, *Life in the Clickstream: The Future of Journalism* (2008; 2010) at www.alliance.org.au/documents/ foj_report_final.pdf and www.thefutureofjournalism.org.au/foj_report_vii.pdf.

Novelties

As in every previous communication revolution – think of the upheavals triggered by the introduction of the printing press, or radio, film and television – the age of communicative abundance breeds exaggerations, false hopes, illusions. Thomas Carlyle expected the printing press to topple all traditional hierarchies, including monarchies and churches. 'He who first shortened the labor of copyists by device of movable types', he wrote, 'was disbanding hired armies, and cashiering most kings and senates, and creating a whole new democratic world.' Or to take a second example: D. W. Griffith predicted that the invention of film would ensure that schoolchildren would be 'taught practically everything by moving pictures' and 'never be obliged to read history again'.[13] Revolutions always produce fickle fantasies – and dashed expectations. This one is no different, or so it seems to wise minds. Yet, when judged in terms of speed, scope and complexity, the new galaxy of communicative abundance has no historical precedent. The digital integration of text, sound and image is a first, historically speaking. So also are the compactness, portability and affordability of a wide range of communication devices capable of processing, sending and receiving information in easily reproducible form, in vast quantities, across great geographic distances, in quick time, sometimes instantly.

Technical factors play a pivotal role in the seismic upheavals that are taking place. Right from the beginning of the revolution, computing hardware has been undergoing constant change, with dramatic world-changing effects on the everyday lives of users. The number of transistors that can be placed inexpensively on an integrated circuit is doubling approximately every two years (according to what is known as 'Moore's law'[14]). The memory capacity, processing speed,

---

[13] Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (London, 1833); the D. W. Griffith quotation is from Richard Dyer MacCann, *The First Film Makers* (Metuchen, NJ, 1989), p. 5.

[14] The law takes its name from the co-founder of Intel, Gordon E. Moore, whose classic paper on the subject noted that the number of components in integrated circuits had doubled every year from the invention of the integrated circuit in 1958 until 1965. Moore predicted (in 1965) that the trend would continue for at least another decade. See his 'Cramming more Components onto Integrated Circuits', *Electronics* 38(8) (1965): 4–7.

sensors and even the number and size of pixels in smart phones and digital cameras have all been expanding at exponential rates as well. The constant revolutionising has dramatically increased the usefulness and take-up of digital electronics in nearly every segment of daily life, and within markets and government institutions as a whole, to the point where time–space compression on a global scale is becoming a reality, sometimes a functional necessity, as in the transformation of stock exchanges into spaces where computer algorithms (known as 'algobots') are programmed automatically to buy and sell equities, currencies and commodities in less than 200 milliseconds. Cheap and reliable cross-border communication is the norm for growing numbers of people and organisations. The tyranny of distance and slow-time connections is abolished, especially in such geographically isolated countries as Greenland and Iceland, where the rates of Internet penetration (over 90 per cent of the population) are the highest in the world. The overthrow of that tyranny provides a clue as to why, in the most media-saturated societies, people typically take instant communications for granted. Their habits of heart are exposed by the curse uttered when they lose or misplace their mobile phones or when their Internet connections are down. They feel lost; they wallow in frustration; they curse.

The historical novelty of quick-time, space-shrinking media saturation is easy to overlook, or to ignore, but it should in fact be striking. When four decades ago Diane Keaton told her workaholic husband in Woody Allen's *Play it Again, Sam* (1973) that he should give his office the number of the pay phone they were passing in case they needed to contact him, it was a good frisky gag. But jest soon turned into today's reality. Growing numbers of people are now familiar with real-time communication; as if born to check their messages, they expect instant replies to instant missives. Their waking lives resemble non-stop acts of mediated quick-time communication with others. In the space of an hour, for instance, an individual might send several emails, text or twitter a few times, watch some television on- or offline, channel hop on digital radio, make an old-fashioned landline telephone call, browse a newspaper, open the day's post, and even find time for a few minutes of face-to-face conversation.

In practice, for reasons of wealth and income, habit and shortage of time, only a minority of people perform so many communication acts in quick time. For most individuals, 'ponder time' has not

disappeared. Their mediated acts of communication are sporadic, unevenly distributed and snared in processes of constant change. The available data covering the trends, understandably, tends to be unreliable; it suffers from blunt-edged indicators, lack of historical nuance and built-in obsolescence. Yet, when examined carefully, and especially through the lens of broader trends, the aggregate figures suggest a long-term cumulative growth of personal involvement in the multimedia process of communicative abundance. Except for the invention of human language, described by Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the 'first social institution',[15] no previous mode of communication has penetrated so deeply, so comprehensively, so dynamically, into daily human experience. Newspapers circulated through parlours, coffee houses and kitchens, but still they could be ignored, or set aside, or used to line drawers and wrap meat and fish or to light fires. The telephone had its fixed place, in the office, kitchen or living room; while it had definite halo effects, in that it altered the daily habits and expectations of its users, they were always free to avoid its ring, often for reasons of cost.

The digital media tools that service the architecture of communicative abundance are different. They lie beyond the famous distinction drawn by Marshall McLuhan between 'hot' and 'cool' media (Figure 1.2).[16] McLuhan rightly saw that different media engage their users in different ways, and to different degrees. Some media (he gave printed works as an example) are 'hot', by which he referred not to their temperature or topicality ('hot off the press'), but to the way they involve users, yet keep them detached, as if at arm's length. They favour such qualities as logicality, linearity, analytical precision. Other media, television, for example, are 'cool' (McLuhan took the term from the jazz world) in the sense that they substantially depend upon user participation. The distinction between 'hot' and 'cool' media dovetailed with his thesis that all media invest our lives with artificial perceptions and arbitrary values, and that to a varying degree communication media extend our bodily and sensory capacities, some at the expense of others, so that in a

---

[15] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, in *Collection complète des oeuvres de J-J. Rousseau, citoyen de Genève* (Geneva, 1782), vol. 8, ch. 1, p. 357.
[16] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, 1964).
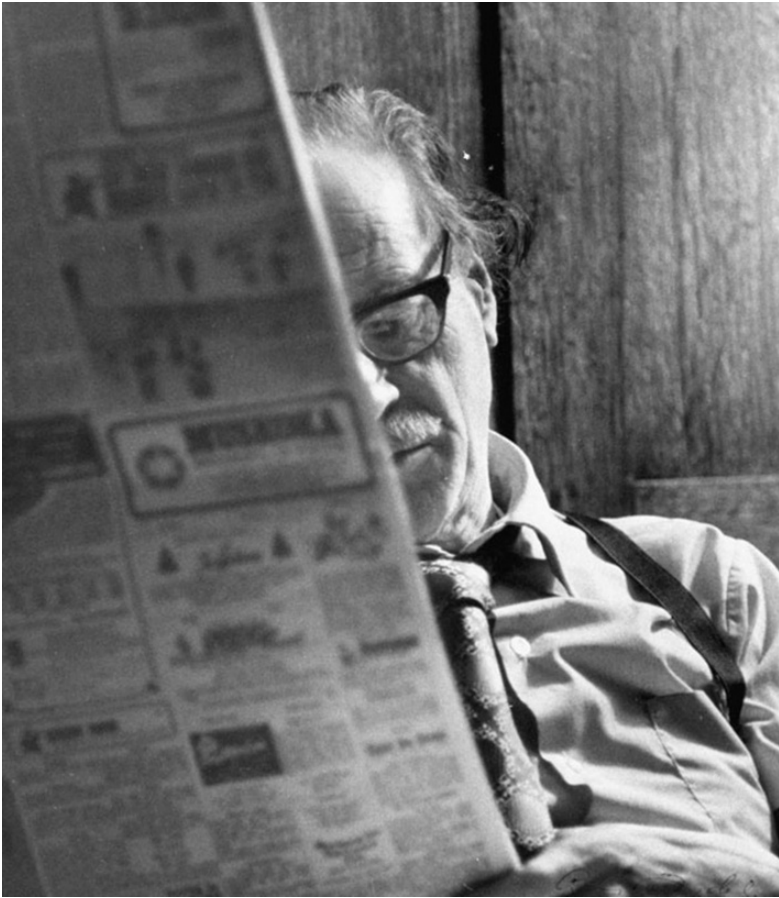
Figure 1.2 Marshall McLuhan: 'People don't actually read newspapers. They step into them every morning like a hot bath' (1972).

visceral sense they deliver 'amputations and extensions' to our sensory apparatus.

The thesis remains important, but striking is the way communicative abundance sweeps aside the distinction between 'hot' and 'cool' media. Communicative abundance in fact involves a double combination. By fusing, for the first time in human history, the means of communication centred on text, touch, sound and image, the era of communicative abundance draws together and stimulates *most* human senses (fortune and fame awaits the person or group who masters the art of

communicating taste and smell). And it involves a second combination: in some circumstances (reading a novel or newspaper on a tablet) the new mode of communication fosters reflective detachment, whereas in other settings (using Skype or messaging a friend on the other side of the planet, or wearing smart glasses) it requires the deep participation of its users and stimulates their various senses, in different combinations.

In the age of communicative abundance, vision is no longer (as many claimed it was in the age of film and television) the principal medium of power and politics. Scholars who insist that democracy based on public debate, and therefore on 'voice', is now obsolete, superseded by a type of 'spectator democracy' in which citizens are mostly passive and 'relate to politics with their eyes',[17] are exaggerating. Talk and text are not fading from political life. The eyes do not always have it. In the unfinished revolution of communicative abundance, democratic politics is a multi-sensual business. Various multimedia techniques and tools of communication draw on text, touch, sound and image. They enter every nook and cranny of daily existence. They touch and transform people's inner selves. Unsurprisingly, communicative abundance triggers constant disputes about the blurry line between 'free communication' and personal insult and criminal blasphemy. For instance, the difference between what can legitimately be said about a person, particularly someone with a public reputation, and what can be said to a person, becomes publicly controversial. The wall separating, say, speaking from an old-fashioned soapbox and making threatening telephone calls is swept away. Twitter posts fuel charges of defamation, hacking of Facebook accounts stirs up cries of felony identity theft, while students who bombard teachers with emails are accused of disturbing the peace or cyberstalking. Such disputes are due partly to the compactness, user-friendliness, cheapness and portability of the new communication tools; they are equally an effect of their multi-sensual and multi-interactive qualities (their enabling of one-to-many and many-to-one communication) and the decision of users to deploy the new means of communication deep within the territories of their personal lives, and within the lives of others.

The historic novelty of these deep transformations is strongly evident in many global settings, including the United States, perhaps the most media-saturated of the old democracies. There communication with

---

[17] Edward Green, *The Eyes of the People* (Oxford, 2010), p. 4.

others forms the second largest category of action after paid work, and it is certainly the predominant household activity, whose patterns are distributed quite unevenly. Daily communication preferences are structured by income and wealth; they are also age- and gender-dependent, as suggested by figures (from January 2005 to September 2010) for SMS usage, which show, for instance, that women talk and text more than men do, and that 13–17-year olds do so more than any other age group.[18] The high density of daily communication is reinforced by the tendency of each formerly separate medium to merge with others, to become 'hybrid' media. Contrary to earlier predictions, the new digital media in the United States show no signs of cannibalising old media, such as television, radio and books. Two decades ago, according to one report, the average American household had the television set on for about 7 hours a day, with actual viewing time estimated to be 4.5 hours daily per adult; radio listening averaged 2 hours per day, most of it in the car; newspaper reading occurred for between 18 and 49 minutes daily; magazine browsing consumed between 6 and 30 minutes; and book reading, including schoolwork-related texts, took up around 18 minutes per day. The implication was that American society was firmly in the grip of its television sets, and would remain so. More recent evidence suggests a more complex trend, in which overall mediated communication grew, along with ever more complex and 'hybrid' patterns of usage. America's love affair with televisions continues unabashed, but in altered, multimedia form. The average number of televisions per US household is 2.5; nearly a third of households have four or more televisions. Each week, Americans watch roughly 35 hours of television and 2 hours of time-shifted television via DVR. In the last quarter of 2009, however, simultaneous use of the Internet while watching television reached 3.5 hours a month, up 35 per cent from the previous year; nearly 60 per cent now use the Internet while watching TV. Internet video watching is rising fast; so is the preference for watching videos on smart phones. The overall effect of these various trends is to transform households into media-saturated spaces. In 1960, there were typically 3.4 television stations per household, 8.2 radio

---

18 Roger Entner, 'Under-aged Texting: Usage and Actual Cost', 27 January 2010, available at: http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/under-aged-texting-usage-and-actual-cost, accessed 10 February 2010; and 'Factsheet: The U.S. Media Universe', 5 January 2011, available at: http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire.
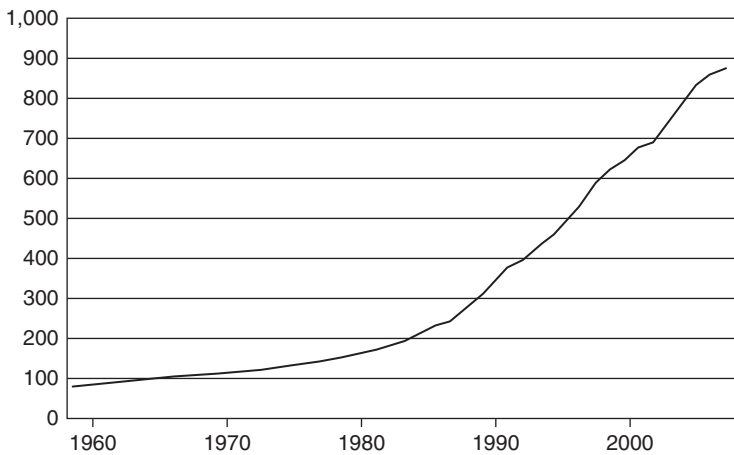
Figure 1.3 Ratio of media supply to consumption in minutes/day per household in the United States, 1960–2005, after W. Russell Neuman *et al.*

stations, 1.1 newspapers, 1.5 recently purchased books and 3.6 magazines; the ratio of media supply to actual household media consumption was 82:1 (see Figure 1.3). By 2005, that figure had risen to 884:1, that is, nearly 1,000 minutes of mediated content available for each minute available for users to access content of various kinds.[19]

The shift towards high-intensity, multimedia usage within the daily lives of people, or communicative abundance as it is called throughout this book, are by no means restricted to the United States. The Asia and Pacific region is arguably the laboratory of future patterns. Quite aside from its robust oral cultures,[20] the region currently accounts for

---

[19] W. Russell Neuman, Yong Jin Park and Elliot Panek, 'Tracking the Flow of Information into the Home', *International Journal of Communication* 6 (2012): 1022–41.

[20] The BBC's chief reporter for two decades in India, Mark Tully, notes the continuing importance of word-of-mouth communication within a society increasingly structured by various other means of communication: 'Anyone who has joined a group of villagers huddled over a transistor set in the dim light of a lantern listening to news from a foreign radio station knows that the spread of information is not limited to the number of sets in a village. Go to that village in the morning, and you will learn that the information heard on that radio has reached far beyond the listenership too' ('Broadcasting in India: An Under-Exploited Resource', in Asharani Mathur (ed.), *The Indian Media: Illusion, Delusion and Reality. Essays in Honour of Prem Bhatia* (New Delhi, 2006), pp. 285–6).

the highest global share of Internet users (more than 40 per cent of the total). Its telecommunications markets are rapidly expanding; and with cheaper, more reliable and faster connectivity rapidly becoming a reality throughout the region, the penetration of daily and institutional life by new tools of communication and user-generated information seems bound to grow, especially in democratic countries such as India and Indonesia, whose young people show a remarkable capacity for experimentation. Japan, whose citizens on average watch television 4 hours a day, is the country with the most avid bloggers globally, posting more than one million blogs per month. Each of its well-entrenched social networking sites and game portals – Mixi, Gree and Mobage-town – has over 20 million registered users. Everywhere in the region, the take-up rate of new media is striking. Micro-blogging (Twitter use in India, for instance) and social networking is all the rage. Australians spend more time on social media sites (nearly 7 hours per month) than any other country in the world. Every month in South Korea, the leading social networking site, Naver, attracts 95 per cent of Internet users. The trend is not confined to single territorial states; throughout the region, despite barriers of language, there are signs of rapidly thickening cross-border connections, with many global cross-links (Figure 1.4). The patterns of regional and global interconnectivity are helped along by many interesting and important trends, including the fact that three-quarters of the world's Internet population has now visited Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube or some other social network/blogging site; that Internet users spend on average almost 6 hours per month on these sites in a variety of languages; and that some of these sites are now fully multilingual, as in the case of Wikipedia, which (by late 2012) contained more than 23 million entries, less than a fifth (4.1 million) of which were in the English language.

Wild thinking

Pushed here and there by such trends, it is unsurprising that the developing culture of communicative abundance stokes political visions. With more than a million new devices – desktop computers, mobile phones, televisions and other gadgets – hooked up each day to the Internet, the current revolution is said not only to have upset standard

Figure 1.4 Patterns of Facebook usage in southeast Asia (December 2010).

business models, but also to have generated unexpected wealth and changed the lives of millions of people. Sometimes seen as a bulldozer or likened to a great flattener of the world, the new mode of communicative abundance is rated as a challenger of all settled hierarchies of power and authority.[21] It fuels hopeful talk of digital democracy, online publics, cybercitizens and Wiki-government. Some speak of a third stage of democratic evolution, in which the spirit and substance of ancient assembly democracy are reincarnated in wired form. 'Telecommunications', or so runs the argument, 'can give every citizen the opportunity to place questions of their own on the public agenda and participate in discussions with experts, policy-makers and fellow

---

[21] Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* (New York, 2005).

citizens.'[22] Others promote visions of a 'connected' digital world where 'citizens hold their own governments accountable' and 'all of humanity has equal access to knowledge and power' (the words used by former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during an address at Washington's Newseum).[23] In the spirit of the revolution, some pundits venture further. They draw the conclusion that the 'advent and power of connection technologies', with their ever faster computing power, their accelerating shift from the one-to-many geometry of radio and television broadcasting towards many-to-many communication patterns, implies that there is something like a 'natural' affinity between communicative abundance and democracy, understood (roughly) as a type of government and a way of life in which power is subject to permanent public scrutiny, chastening and control by citizens and their representatives.[24] Communicative abundance and democracy are thought of as conjoined twins. The stunning revolutionary process and product innovations happening in the field of communications fuel the dispersal and public accountability of power, or so it is supposed.

There is much to be said (it seems) in support of the claim. There are indeed positive, important, exciting, even intoxicating things happening inside the swirling galaxy of communicative abundance. So let us look more carefully at the details. In examining the affinities between communicative abundance and democracy, a term that, so far, has been used loosely, several strictures need to be borne in mind, beginning with McLuhan's prudent warning: since every new communication medium tends to cast a 'spell' on its users, in effect imposing 'its own assumptions, bias, and values' on the unwary, seducing them into a 'subliminal state of Narcissus trance', a measure of analytic detachment and diffidence is necessary when analysing and evaluating its social and political impact.[25] The need for detachment implies something positive: the cool-headed analysis of a new historical mode of communication can

[22] Lawrence K. Grossman, *Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age* (New York, 1996).

[23] Former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, 'Remarks on Internet Freedom', an address delivered at the Newseum, Washington, DC, 21 January 2010, available at: www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm, accessed 20 March 2010.

[24] See Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen, 'The Digital Disruption: Connectivity and the Diffusion of Power', *Foreign Affairs* 89(6) (November/December 2010): 75–85.

[25] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, 1964), p. 7.

alert us to its novelties, make (more) visible what previously was less than obvious, so alerting us, in matters of democracy, to its many positive and negative dynamics. That is not to say that interpretations of communicative abundance can 'master' its elusive qualities. Mastery is reserved for the deities; just as any speaker of a language can never comprehensively follow and practise its rules and anticipate and control its past and present and future effects, so the dynamic contours of communicative abundance will retain a measure of elusiveness. Hence, this book attempts nothing like what Germans call a *Gesamtdarstellung*, a complete picture of communicative abundance and its dynamics. Nor does it suppose that in future, in some other shape or form, a comprehensive account might be possible. There is much too much dynamic reality for that to happen. The complexity of communicative abundance is too complex, too elusive, to be captured in smooth or slick formulae, in propositions based on statistics extracted by using blunt-edged criteria, in hard-and-fast rules, in confident predictions based on the supposed truth of things. We could say that communicative abundance is a modest mistress. She prefers to keep more than a few of her secrets close to her chest.

When it comes to mediated communication with others, we live in a strange new world of confusing unknowns, a thoroughly media-saturated universe cluttered with means and methods of communication, whose dynamic social and political effects have the capacity to hypnotise us, even to overwhelm our senses. These puzzling novelties and unknowns are not easily decoded, partly for epistemological and methodological reasons. Put simply, the facts of communicative abundance do not speak for themselves; they do not reveal their riddles spontaneously, of their own volition, without our help. Contrary to those who think of the study of political communications as an empirical 'science', the confusing novelties of communicative abundance cannot be deciphered purely through 'objective' empirical investigation, that is, by cross-referring to so-called brute facts and the corresponding data sets that function as ultimate arbiters of what we do know and what we do not know about the world of communicative abundance. The so-called 'facts' cannot rescue us by guiding and putting right our heads from a distance. This is not just because there are just too many available 'facts' to be grasped as such, so that selective biases (the setting aside of certain 'facts') are inevitable in each and every effort to produce 'objective' knowledge of our media-saturated world (this was the

conclusion famously drawn by Max Weber[26]). The problem runs
deeper, for 'facts' are always artefacts. How the 'facts' of communica-
tive abundance appear to us, and what strategic and normative signifi-
cance they have for us, very much depends upon a combination of
forces, including the language frameworks through which people who
communicate see themselves and express their own situations, and
through which the analysts of communicative abundance and its com-
plex dynamics also structure their own research goals and methods. In
the age of communicative abundance, 'thick' descriptions, with as many
details of the context and the motives and moves of actors, are man-
datory. Yet thick descriptions are themselves artefacts. They are always
and inescapably structured by frameworks of theoretical interpretation.
The key point is this: in efforts to grasp and make sense of complex
realities, perspectives are not 'detachable' from empirical methods.
Interpretative frameworks do not have a secondary or subsidiary status.
They are not barriers to 'adequate' descriptions of 'objective realities' or
dispensable luxuries. They are, rather, vitally important conditions of
making sense of the webs of communicative abundance within which
people interact, more or less purposefully and meaningfully, for multi-
ple ends using multiple means. In matters of communication, the prin-
ciple sketched by Einstein is about right: not everything that can be
counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.

Since the age of communicative abundance brims with puzzling novel-
ties, many old ways of thinking and interpreting media, power and politics
are now rendered suspect. Sentimental longings for imaginary better times,
when life supposedly was shaped by high-quality national newspapers and
BBC-style public service broadcasting, are not an option, not even when
accompanied by understandable complaints about how the age of commu-
nicative abundance fails to overcome language barriers, racist and nation-
alist hatreds, untamed corporate power and other ills of our time.[27]
Awareness of the novelties of our age should not be drowned in outpour-
ings of nostalgia or pessimism. We need as well to be aware that extrap-
olations from current trends and predictions about the ultimate uses of new
communications technologies are fraught, especially when sustained by

[26] Max Weber, '"Objectivity" in Social Science and Social Policy', in *The
      Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1949), p. 110.
[27] James Curran, 'The Internet: Prophecy and Reality', public lecture, Justice and
      Police Museum, Sydney, 21 September 2011.

analogies to the past. When faced with unfamiliar situations, it is always tempting to suppose that new media will carry on doing familiar things (enabling us freely to communicate with others, for instance), but in more efficient and effective, faster and cheaper ways. Just as the railway was called the 'iron horse' and the automobile the 'horseless carriage', or telephones were viewed in terms of the telegraph, as tools for communicating emergencies or important news, rather than tools for other, more casual purposes, so it is tempting to interpret the new dynamics of communicative abundance through terms inherited from our predecessors. The enticement should be resisted. Presumptions that have outlived their usefulness must be abandoned. What is needed are bold new probes, fresh-minded perspectives, 'wild' concepts that enable different and meaningful ways of seeing things, more discriminating methods of recognising the novelties of our times, the democratic opportunities they offer and the counter-trends that have the potential to snuff out democratic politics.

But what does the call for 'wild' new perspectives actually imply? Minimally, it means abandoning dogmas, clichés and bland formulae, including (to take a short string of examples) the commonplace choice between naive, simple-minded 'cyber-utopian' beliefs in the liberating nature of online communication and the trite mirror-image verdict that communicative abundance is equally a tool of repression, that all techniques and tools of communication, including the Internet, can be used equally for good or bad purposes, and that everything depends upon the context in which they are used.[28]

In matters of method, 'wild' new perspectives certainly imply the need for suspicion of neologisms that have a false-start quality about them. A case in point is the word 'cyberspace'. An artefact of times when computerised digital networks had still not substantially penetrated everyday life and formal institutional settings, the term is not seriously used in this book simply because it misleadingly conveys the sense that things that happen in and through the Internet are not quite 'real', or 'real' in some different way, in a world governed by different principles than those of the corporeal world. Talk of cyberspace radically underestimates the growth of cutting-edge media technologies that are now structuring people's lives. Examples include sensors and microcomputers embedded in objects as varied as kitchen appliances, surveillance

---

[28] Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York, 2011).

cameras, cars and mobile phone apps; and smart glasses that enable wearers, with a touch of the frame or shake of the head or verbal command, to take pictures, record and send videos, search the Web, or receive breaking news or walking directions, without so much as lifting a finger. Other examples include wearable wireless gadgets known as 'sociometers', gadgets attached to the human body or seamlessly integrated into human clothing for the purpose of measuring and analysing people's communication patterns (an example is the name tag device called 'HyGenius', used in hospital and restaurant bathrooms to check that employees are properly washing their hands). And there are wired-up 'smart' cities, such as Korea's Songdu and Portugal's PlanIT Valley, where 'smart' appliances pump constant data streams into 'smart grids' that measure and regulate flows of people, traffic and energy use.[29] In the face of such trends, old-fashioned talk of cyberspace is just that: old-fashioned. It goes hand-in-hand with mistaken questions like 'what effect is the Internet having on democratic politics?' when the priority is, rather, to understand the institutional world from which digital communication networks and tools originally sprang, how they have subsequently taken root within a range of other institutions, and which new power dynamics and power effects their revolutionary techniques and tools are having on the worlds in which they operate.

Wild perspectives imply the need for something more: questioning and abandoning outdated clichés, including all descriptions of communication media as the 'fourth estate', a misleading metaphor that originated with Edmund Burke and the pamphlet and newspaper battles of the French Revolution. Contemporary accounts of communication media that suppose the continuing validity of that metaphor, for instance, analyses of the ideal functions of 'media systems' as 'gatekeepers', independent 'agenda setters', or as 'the fourth branch of government', or even the 'Fifth Estate',[30] are less than persuasive.

---

[29] These various trends are discussed in Stefano Marzano *et al.* (eds), *New Nomads: An Exploration of Wearable Electronics by Philips* (Rotterdam, 2001); Alex Pentland, *Honest Signals: How They Shape Our World* (Cambridge, MA, 2008). For a striking experimental view, using machine vision footage, of how electronic sensors and robots view the world, see http://vimeo.com/36239715, accessed 22 October 2012.

[30] Hannah Arendt, 'Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers', in *Crises of the Republic* (New York, 1972), p. 45; W. H. Dutton, 'The Fifth Estate Emerging through the Network of Networks', *Prometheus* 27(1) (2009): 1–15.

Their sense of the political geography of media is downright misleading. Communicative abundance dissolves divisions between 'the media' and other institutions. All spheres of life, from the most intimate everyday milieux through to large-scale global organisations, operate *within* heavily mediated settings in which the meaning of messages is constantly changing and is often at odds with the intentions of their creators.[31] To say this is not to indulge contemporary talk of 'the media', which is much too abstract and all too loose; in matters of media everything matters, certainly, but not everything connects simply or is distributed in complex ways that can be figured out easily.

   The complex dynamics of contemporary forms of connectivity is a strong reason why disciplinary divisions between political science and communications and other scholarly fields need to be bridged. It is also why democracy and media must be analysed simultaneously, and in new ways, in part by leaving behind worn-out concepts and perspectives that we have inherited from the era of print culture, radio, television and Hollywood cinema. The following pages show, for instance, why talk of 'the informed citizen' has become an unhelpful cliché. Engaged citizens whose heads are stuffed with unlimited quantities of 'information' about a 'reality' that they are on top of: that is an utterly implausible and – yes – anti-democratic ideal that dates from the late nineteenth century. Favoured originally by the champions of a restricted educated franchise, and by interests who rejected partisan politics grounded in the vagaries and injustices of everyday social life, the ideal of the 'informed citizen' was elitist. It remains an intellectualist ideal, unsuited to the age of communicative abundance, which needs 'wise citizens' who know that they do not know everything, or so this book argues. It proposes as well the need to set aside once fashionable presumptions, popular among intellectuals, for instance, that the decline of print culture and the advent of electronic media has been an unmitigated disaster; or the prejudices that all television is children's television; or that the only likeable thing about television is its fleetingness; or that televisions are dream machines that remove citizens, tragically, far from the reality of what is actually happening in the world;[32] or that television-led mass media transform 'the public' into

[31] John Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 34–41.
[32] Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television* (New York, 1996).

an apathetic blob, 'a black hole into which the political efforts of
politicians, advocates of causes, the media, and the schools disappear
with hardly a trace'.[33] This book casts doubt on such presumptions,
which draw silently upon the older, wider prejudice that 'modern'
broadcasting systems breed listless people who live off daily doses of
unreality. It is no longer (if it ever was) accurate to say, as the famous
American philosopher John Dewey once said, that we 'live exposed to
the greatest flood of mass suggestion that any people has ever experi-
enced'. The arts of creating, manipulating and controlling public opin-
ion through media still pose serious problems for democracy. But the
warnings issued during the early years of mass broadcasting, during the
1920s and 1930s, need to be fundamentally rethought. It is no longer
straightforwardly the case, as Edward Bernays, the godfather of prop-
aganda, put it, that 'propaganda is the executive arm of the invisible
government'; or that 'propaganda is to a democracy what violence is to
a dictatorship'; or that if 'the people' want to be 'free of chains of iron'
and in the name of democracy refuse blindly to 'love, honor, and obey'
leaders, then the people must accept the 'chains of silver' produced by
organised seduction and propaganda, what Adorno and Horkheimer
later called the 'culture industry'.[34]

---

[33] Murray Edelman, *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (Chicago and London,
1988), p. 8.

[34] John Dewey, 'The United States, Incorporated', in *The Later Works, 1925–1953*
(Carbondale, IL, 2008), vol. 5, p. 61; Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda* (New
York, 1928), p. 48; Harold D. Laswell, *Propaganda Technique in the World War*
(London, 1927), p. 227; Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's
Attitudes* (New York, 1965), p. 132: 'Governmental propaganda suggests that
public opinion demand this or that decision; it provokes the will of a people, who
spontaneously would say nothing. But, once evoked, formed, and crystallized on
a point, that will becomes the peoples' will; and whereas the government really
acts on its own, it gives the impression of obeying public opinion – after first
having built that public opinion. The point is to make the masses demand of the
government what the government has already decided to do'; Theodor Adorno
and Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass
Deception', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, 1972). Bertrand Russell
('China's Entanglements', in *Uncertain Paths to Freedom: Russia and China,
1919–22* (London and New York [1922] 2000), p. 360) summed up the old view
of propaganda thus: 'It is much easier than it used to be to spread misinformation,
and, owing to democracy, the spread of misinformation is more important than in
former times to the holders of power. Hence the increase in circulation of
newspapers.'

So here is the rub: just as in the sixteenth century, when the production of printed books and the efforts to read codex type required a fundamental shift of perspective, so today, in the emergent world of communicative abundance, a whole new mental effort is required to make sense of how democracies in various regions of the world are being shaped and re-shaped by the new tools and rhetoric of communication – and why our very thinking about democracy must also change.

But how should we proceed? Which are the key trends that we need to note, to interpret, to internalise in our thinking about democracy in the age of communicative abundance? A handful of trends seem pivotal. They cry out for careful analysis with a strong sense of its own historicity.

Democratisation of information

Let us begin with the most obvious political effect of communicative abundance: the democratisation of information. Thanks to cheap and easy methods of digital reproduction, we live in times of new information banks and what has been called information spreading, a sudden marked widening of access to published materials previously unavailable to publics, or formerly available only to restricted circles of users. The democratisation process involves the dismantling of information privileges formerly available only on a restricted basis to elites. It operates simultaneously on three intersecting planes.

One flank involves users gaining access from a distance to materials that were once available only within a restricted geographical radius, or only to users prepared to travel great distances and to foot the costs of living locally for a time, in order to make use of the otherwise inaccessible materials. Symbolised by the online editions of the *New York Times*, *The Hindu*, *El País* and *Der Spiegel*, democratisation in this sense refers to a dramatic reduction of the tyranny of distance, the radical widening of spatial horizons, a dramatic expansion of the catchment area of possible users of published materials. It is practically reinforced by a second sense of information democratisation: a great expansion in the numbers of potential users of materials, so that anyone with a computer and Web access, perhaps using tools such as Kindles, Nooks, iPads, or whatever tools succeed them, can now gain access to

materials simply at the click of a mouse. The online music search engine Grooveshark and Piratebay.org, a Swedish website that hosts torrent files, is representative of this sense of democratisation, which means the enhanced availability of materials to people, often at zero cost, on a common access basis instead of a privileged, private right basis. Then there is a third and perhaps most consequential sense of the democratisation of information: the process of assembling scattered and disparate materials that were never previously available, formatting them as new data sets that are then made publicly available to users through entirely new pathways. Well-known examples include the multi-million entry encyclopaedia Wikipedia; the Computer History Museum (located in Mountain View, California); YouTube, whose users uploaded at least 35 hours of video footage per minute in 2010; the most popular Farsi-language website balatarin.com (a crowd-sourced platform that enables registered users to post and rank their favourite articles); and theeuropeanlibrary.org, which is a consortium of libraries of the nearly fifty member states in the Council of Europe, accessed through a single search engine, in three dozen languages.

Do these instances of democratised information have a wider historical significance? They do, but not because they signal the replacement of old-fashioned modern 'narrative' by new computer-age 'databases', as some scholars have proposed.[35] True, the new databases are not normally arranged as intelligible narratives. They do not tell stories structured by a beginning and an end. They are, indeed, disparate collections of 'information', multimedia materials arranged so that within the collection each item tends to have the same significance as all the others. Yet it does not follow that 'database and narrative are natural enemies'. Just the opposite: exactly because the new information sources are not presented as moral sermons, they are more amenable to being used as the 'raw material' of chosen narratives by publics that enjoy access to them. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the contemporary use of digital networks to spread all kinds of informative material to ever wider publics has politically enlivening effects. The democratisation of information serves as power steering for hungry minds previously handicapped by inefficient communication. Some observers

---

[35] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), p. 225: 'database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right.'

even hail the advent of times in which citizens regularly 'stand on the shoulders of a lot more giants at the same time'.[36] Such claims invite comparisons with the Reformation in Europe, which was triggered in part by the conviction of dissident Christian believers that access to printed copies of the Bible could be widened, that there were no spiritual or Earthly reasons why reading its pages should be restricted to a select few who were proficient in Latin, and that those who could read or had ears to hear were entitled to join reading groups and to savour the pleasures of pondering and disputing printed sermons, spiritual autobiographies and ethical guides to life in all its stages and forms.[37] Such comparisons are probably overdrawn, but there can be little doubt that when measured in terms of equal and easy accessibility to materials whose availability was formerly restricted, communicative abundance opens gates and tears down fences separating producers and users of information, some of which is highly specialised, so that new and vitally important information banks become accessible to many more users, often at great distances, more or less at the same time, at zero or low cost.

The trend is for the moment especially powerful in digitally reproduced collections of rare or hard to obtain materials. Some developments affect quite particular user groups. Each year, for instance, the electronic collection known as Romantic Circles distributes around 3.5 million pages of material to users living in more than 160 countries. Art historians now have ready access to the Digital Michelangelo Project, which aims to make available to researchers high-quality laser copies of the artist's three-dimensional works. Scholars and members of the general public from around the world have access to collections such as the East London Theatre Archive of many thousands of theatre programmes, the Catalogue of Digitised Medieval Manuscripts and the Prehistoric Stones of Greece Project. Then there are databanks that, potentially, have wide public appeal because they affect collective memories. Examples include an initiative called American Memory, sponsored by the Library of Congress, which aims digitally to preserve sound

---

[36] William Calvin, 'The Shoulders of Giants', in John Brockman (ed.), *How is the Internet Changing the Way You Think?* (New York, 2011), pp. 66–9.

[37] See Andrew Cambers, *Godly Reading: Print, Manuscript and Puritanism in England, 1580–1720* (Cambridge and New York, 2011).

recordings, maps, prints and images that form part of the history of the United States. Harvard University Library is planning to digitise its vast collection of Ukrainian-language material, the world's largest, much of it otherwise destroyed or lost in Ukraine during a twentieth century of horrific violence. Other examples include the Holocaust Collection of audio clips, maps, texts, photographs and images of artefacts; and the databases built by citizen networks such as the Association for the Recovery of Historical memory in Spain. All these exemplify the importance of democratised information in combating the twin political dangers of amnesia and confabulation. By preserving details of past traumas, publicly accessible information banks keep alive the politics of memory, in effect extending votes to a constituency that is normally neglected: the dead.

Equally impressive are the 'born digital' collections that are being formed to combat the possible permanent loss of certain materials circulated through the Web itself. Its birth and growth has been synonymous with the higgledy-piggledy proliferation of websites, many of which are ephemeral, structured by different and incompatible metadata and often resistant to search engines – hence, prone to easy disappearance into the thin air of what some still call cyberspace. In the United States, where government agencies were using email from the mid-1980s, available evidence suggests that for the following two decades most White House correspondence has been lost (on average 6 million email messages were generated annually by the two Clinton administrations alone). The disappearance of electronic data from lower levels of government, from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as universities and in general from private users of various parts of the Web, has been even more extreme. Alarm bells have rung about the dangers of obliterating memories from civil society and government; and, despite shortages of money and technical and legal difficulties, plans for storing and saving digital material are flourishing, along with initiatives such as the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library's 'Capturing Women's Voices', a collection of postings by women from a wide range of blogs.[38]

---

[38] The background is summarised in Robert Darnton, 'The Future of Libraries', in *The Case For Books: Past, Present, and Future* (New York, 2009), pp. 50–3.

Google

The contemporary democratisation of digital information triggers bitter disputations. Complex and politically difficult issues to do with copyright ownership, and whether, or to what extent, it is legitimate to commercialise information, are fiercely contested. Consider the stalled business venture known as the Google Book Search. The world's boldest attempt (so far) to produce a giant online library of books, much bolder than anything conceived since the ancient library of Alexandria, the venture involved digital scanning many millions of books, to be made publicly available online, either free of charge or via annual subscriptions to the database. Controversial details of the future for-profit mega-library were revealed and amended during several rounds (2005–2011) of legal challenge initiated by a group of authors, publishers and governments, who insisted that copyright laws would be violated by Google's plans to digitise books from research libraries and display snippets of these books online. Critics railed against the hunger for advertising revenues and not-so-disguised profit motives of Google; accused of monopoly practices geared to cornering the online book market, the company was portrayed as hostile to the long-standing not-for-profit principle of libraries committed to the preservation and diffusion of knowledge for the use and enjoyment of reading publics.

Behind this objection stood the understandably embittered realisation of a lost opportunity that first arose in the early 1990s: the potential that had existed at the time for developing a genuinely open-access, public service library, a super-library modelled on the British Library or Library of Congress or Bibliothèque nationale and funded, for instance, by a consortium of government agencies and networks of philanthropic organisations dedicated to serving the principle carved on the entrance stone of the Boston Public Library: 'Free to All'. There were other objections to the Google scheme. Some critics underscored the loss of control by authors of copyright and the royalties to which they are entitled. Others criticised the failure of Google's proposed governing arrangements to extend a voice for either libraries or members of the general reading public. Still others pointed out that Google, through its use of secret algorithmic relevance rankings, could easily abuse the rights to privacy of individual readers; or they worried that just as 80 per cent of silent films and most radio programmes have permanently

disappeared, all texts 'born digital' depend upon hardware and software systems that are vulnerable to the forces of built-in obsolescence.

These and other complaints made their mark in a proposed final legal settlement (October 2008) that saw Google reiterate its mission statement 'to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful'.[39] The lengthy class-action settlement was supposed to confirm Google's right to create and sell access to a digital database comprising many millions of books currently housed within American libraries – primarily out-of-print and copyrighted books. The scope of the proposed settlement was broad. The class-action deal covered the entire category of authors and publishers in the United States (and Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia as well). It also contained a most-favoured-nation clause designed to prevent any potential future competitor of Google from winning better terms for authors and publishers. The deal was thus in effect supposed to be exclusive; even though in-copyright and in-print books were excluded unless their authors choose to make them available for scanning, the deal was to lock all American publishers, authors and readers into a complex four-tiered subscription system. Books already in the public domain, for instance, Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* and Antoine Laurent Lavoisier's *Essays Physical and Chemical* (books all published in the year 1776), would have been available free of charge to online readers, who could also download and print off a copy for their own personal use. Organisations such as universities and private research institutes meanwhile would have been required to pay an 'institutional licence'. Public libraries which paid a 'public access licence' would have gained access to the giant databank, made freely available to library users at a single computer terminal. Individuals who took out a 'consumer licence' were being offered the chance of reading and printing off books from the database, with the added opportunity to explore and analyse books in depth, either through simple word searches or more complex methods of text mining. Access arrangements were to be provided for readers with disabilities. The settlement would have created a body called the Book Rights Registry. Its proposed remit was to represent the overall concerns and

---

[39] The 134-page text of the proposed settlement and the fifteen legal appendices are available at: http://thepublicindex.org/docs/amended_settlement/opinion.pdf, accessed 19 June 2013.

interests of copyright holders and to disburse the revenues generated (37 per cent to Google; 63 per cent to copyright holders). Individual readers among the general public and participating organisations such as libraries would not have enjoyed a right of representation.

The proposed landmark legal settlement was rejected (by the US District Court for the South District of New York, in March 2011[40]) as not conforming to 'fair, adequate and reasonable' standards. The finding pointed to inadequate representation of the rights of copyright owners and authors to grant or refuse their consent; it also underscored concerns that Google would develop 'a *de facto* monopoly' over unclaimed titles (so-called 'orphan works', whose copyright holders are unknown or cannot be found) and online book searches. The court's decision left the door open to a new settlement agreement, so flinging the contending parties into an unexpected state of suspended animation. Only one outcome seemed virtually guaranteed: the world of books, many of them previously inaccessible, will eventually be brought within close reach of citizens who enjoy online access. At the time of the court's decision, Google had digitised less than a fraction of the 550 million books currently housed in American research libraries. That left scope for new proposals to supplement and go beyond the Google scheme. Plans are afoot to develop a 'digital public library of America' that includes the Library of Congress; the national libraries of Norway and the Netherlands are actively digitising their entire collections of books, newspapers, photographs and radio and television programmes; and Google itself has negotiated 'co-habitation' arrangements with several European national libraries.

It is easy to imagine the lateral replication and global conjoining of such cross-border schemes. If that came to pass, then the lattice network universe of books would be brought to many hundreds of millions of people living at various points on Earth by way of participating libraries. It might be thought that there is nothing much that is new in this vision. From the time of Gutenberg, the objection might run, books never knew borders. Books were often compared with bees, carrying the pollen of ideas and sentiments from one reader to another, across vast distances; or

---

[40] *Authors Guild et al.* v. *Google Inc.*, United States District Court, South District of New York, Opinion 05 Civ. 8136 (DC), 22 March 2011, available at: www.scribd.com/doc/51331062/Google-Settlement-Rejection-Filing, accessed 15 September 2011.

(in a common nineteenth-century refrain) likened to compasses and telescopes, sextants, charts and lighthouses vital for helping humans to navigate the confusing and dangerous seas of the world. Houses without books were said to be like rooms without windows. Books were seen as not being bound by linguistic and national differences; authors thought of themselves as bound to other authors by invisible threads, as contributors to an international republic of letters; publishers struck deals with booksellers in different countries; and translators made texts come alive for readers unfamiliar with their original language of publication. All that is true, but early twenty-first century efforts to leverage and popularise digital books uniquely belong to the age of communicative abundance. In support of the worldliness of books, these early experiments harbour an unprecedented vision: the same book (or newspaper or radio and television programme copy) will be available on an open-access basis simultaneously, say, to readers and audiences in the richest cities and poorest townships of South Africa, to students at universities in Hong Kong, Tel Aviv, Chicago and Montevideo, and to bookish types and lovers of pulp fiction in places otherwise as different as the outback towns of Australia, the villages of India and Pakistan and the nested high-rise apartment complexes of Bangkok and Jakarta.

The new publicity

Let us return to the political effects of the unfinished communications revolution, for there is a second salient trend, one so far mentioned only in passing: communicative abundance stirs up disputes among citizens and their representatives about the definition and ethical and political significance of the public–private division. Publicity is now directed at all things personal; the realm that used to be called 'private' becomes publicly contested; and backlashes in defence of the 'private' develop. Under conditions of communicative abundance, privacy battles are constantly fought, lost and won. Awash in vast oceans of circulating information that is portable and easily reproduced, individuals daily practise the art of selectively disclosing and concealing details of their private selves; anxiety about privacy is commonplace; decisions about whether and to whom they give out their 'coordinates' remain unresolved.[41]

[41] Christena Nippert-Eng, *Islands of Privacy: Selective Concealment and Disclosure in Everyday Life* (Chicago and London, 2010).

Whatever is thought of the disadvantages of the whole process, the rough-riding or 'outing' of private life ensures not only that the public–private boundary is the source of constant legal, political and ethical disputes. Controversies about the private have a long-term positive effect: they teach citizens that the personal is political, that the realm of the private, once hidden away from the eyes and ears of others, but still said by many to be necessary for getting risky and dodgy things done in life, is embedded in fields of power in which rogues take refuge and injustices result. Gone are the days when privacy could be regarded as 'natural', as a given bedrock or substratum of taken-for-granted experiences and meanings. More than a generation ago, the Moravian philosopher Edmund Husserl thought in that way about the 'world of everyday life' (*Lebenswelt*). He proposed that daily interactions among people are typically habitual. Everyday life has a definite '*a priori*' quality. It is social interaction guided by acts of *empathy* among people who believe and expect others to behave more or less like themselves. This inter-subjectivity is structured by unquestioned presumptions of mutual familiarity. Actors suppose a 'natural attitude' to themselves and to the world about them; they interact on a bedrock of taken-for-granted beliefs that their own way of seeing and doing things is 'naturally' shared by others.[42]

Whatever its level of former plausibility, this way of thinking about the everyday world is now obsolete. Those who still think in terms of everyday life as a barrier against the outside world, perhaps even as a safe and secluded haven of freedom in a world dominated by large-scale, powerful institutions, are out of touch. The reality is that everyday life is no longer a substratum of taken-for-granted things and people. In the age of communicative abundance, for instance, users of the Internet find their personal data is the engine fuel of a booming Web-based market economy; traditional methods of matching advertising to the content of people's interests is rapidly giving way to a world structured by digital 'cookies', small pieces of software installed on personal computers that function as unique identifiers of what users are looking at, and can store the tracked information, so building up a picture of the

---

[42] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. D. Carr (Evanston, IL, [1936] 1970). Compare the line of analysis of contemporary trends by Phil Agre and Marc Rotenberg (eds), *Technology and Privacy: The New Landscape* (Boston, MA, 1997), especially http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/landscape.html, accessed 16 October 2011.

demographics and interests of users that are of high market value to companies such as Facebook and Google, and to their advertising clients. The 'de-siloing' (as they say) of personal data allows advertisers to track users with precision; a class-action lawsuit settled out of court by Facebook revealed that even the 'likes' posted by its users can be deployed as 'sponsored stories' (advertisements) for marketing purposes.[43] Such tactics are part of a deepening trend in which no private matter or intimate topic is left unmediated, that is, cordoned off from media coverage. The more 'private' experiences are, the more 'publicity' they seem to get, especially when what is at stake are matters of taste and consumption, sex and violence, birth and death, personal hopes, fears, skulduggery and tragedy. It is as if we have entered a twenty-first century version of the court of Louis XVI, a world where the waking (*le lever*) as well as the going to bed (*le coucher*) and other intimate details of the king were regarded as 'public' events that induced a sense of wondrous astonishment among all who witnessed them (Asian court societies, such as that of imperial Japan, whose monarchy is a modern European import, also defined the public realm as the courtly household of the ruler, whose 'private' world, as we would see it, was deemed worthy of display to intrigued and sometimes admiring others[44]).

The comparison of our times with the age of Louis XVI is far-fetched, of course; but there is little doubt that in today's media-saturated societies private life is becoming ever less private. Government agencies create systems of online content filtering; install 'black box' surveillance devices within Internet traffic; build up data mountains and engage in large-scale data-mining of the lives of citizens; and track individuals' exact location, moment to moment, using pioneer techniques known as trilateralisation. Digital identities of individuals are meanwhile mined and tracked by companies. Personal data is big business. Techniques of 'data capture' develop traction. We live in a surveillance economy, in which companies known as data brokers, also called information

---

[43] See Somini Sengupta, 'On Facebook, "Likes" Become Ads', available at: www.nytimes.com/2012/06/01/technology/so-much-for-sharing-his-like.html?_r=0, accessed 3 November 2012; and Dan Levine, 'Facebook "Sponsored Stories" Class Action Settled', available at: www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/22/facebook-sponsored-stories-class-action-settlement_n_1537182.html, accessed 20 October 2012.

[44] T. Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan* (Berkeley, CA and London, 1996).

re-sellers, gather and then market to other companies, including adver-tisers, hundreds or thousands of details about the consumption pat-terns, racial or ethnic identity, health concerns, social networks and financial arrangements of most individuals who go online. Meanwhile, cheap and user-friendly methods of reproduction and access to portable networked tools of communication ensure that we live in the age of hyper-coverage. Everything that happens in the fields of power stretch-ing from the bedroom and bathroom to the boardroom to the battlefield seems to be up for media grabs. With the flick of a switch or the click of a camera button, the world of the private is suddenly public. Unmediated privacy has become a thing of the past.

These are times in which the private lives of celebrities – their roman-ces, parties, health, quarrels and divorces – are the interest and fantasy objects of millions of people. There is, thanks to genres such as Twitter, television talk shows and talkback radio, an endless procession of 'ordinary people' talking publicly about what privately turns them on, or off. We live in times when millions of people feel free to talk publicly about their private fears, fantasies, hopes and expectations, and to act as if they are celebrities by displaying details of their intimate selves on Facebook. We live in an age when things done in 'private' are big public stories. It is the era in which, say, so-called reality TV cuts from a scheduled afternoon programme to an armed and angry man; holding a hostage, he turns his shotgun on himself, or fires at the police, live, courtesy of a news helicopter or outside broadcasting unit. There are moments when citizens themselves take things into their own hands, as when a woman spits racist comments to other passengers on a packed London tram, the incident is filmed and posted online, then after spark-ing a Twitter trend goes viral, attracting 10 million viewers within a week. These are times in which things that were once kept quiet, for instance, the abuse of children by priests of the Roman Catholic Church, are publicly exposed by newspapers and other media, with the help of the abused, who manage to unearth details of their molesters, sometimes quite by accident, thanks to the new tools of communication. And we live in an age when privately shot video footage proves that soldiers in war zones fired on their own side, or tortured prisoners, robbed innocent civilians of their lives, raped women and terrorised children.

The culture and practices of communicative abundance cut deeply into everyday life in other ways. Nurtured by aggressive and prying

styles of journalism, and by easy-to-use portable media tools, communicative abundance destroys the early modern, originally European, supposition that property ownership, market conditions, household life, the emotions and biological events like birth and death are givens, or God-given. All these dimensions of life lose their 'naturalness'. Their contingency comes to the fore; they become potentially the subjects of public questioning and political action. For the same reason, communicative abundance cuts to shreds the older, originally Greek, presumption that democratic public life requires pre-political foundations, the tight-lipped privacy (literally, as the Greeks thought of it, the idiocy) that marks the *oikos*, the realm of household and market life in which life's basic needs are produced, distributed and consumed. In the age of media saturation, the privacy of the realm of the so-called private market economy disappears. The injustices and inequalities it harbours are no longer seen as necessary or inevitable, as being nobody else's business.

Just as the democratisation of information stirs up public controversies, so the de-privatisation and democratisation of the private power of daily life is both a complicated and heavily contested process. It disturbs lived certainties and presumptions that once seemed to be 'natural'. Yet while the supposed *a priori* qualities of everyday life are questioned and challenged, backlashes against the whole process develop. Political objections to the destruction of privacy flourish. Some observers argue, extending and upending an eighteenth-century simile, that communicative abundance robs citizens of their identities, that it resembles not a goddess of liberty, but a succubus, a female demon supposed to rape sleeping men and collect and pass on their sperm to other women. Switching similes, some denounce the mounting pressures to expose the secrets of the private as 'totalitarian'.[45] Other critics express things differently by denouncing the killer instincts of high-pressure media coverage of the private; famously spelled out by Janet Malcolm in *The Journalist and the Murderer* (1990), the accusation of media murder is

---

[45] See the comment of Jacques Derrida, in Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, eds Giacomo Donis and David Webb (Malden, MA, 2001), p. 59: 'I have a taste for the secret, it clearly has to do with not-belonging; I have an impulse of fear or terror in the face of a political space, for example, a public space that makes no room for the secret. For me, the demand that everything be paraded in the public square and that there be no internal forum is a glaring sign of the totalitarianization of democracy.'

sometimes literally the leitmotif of media events, as when intense publicity tracked the death of Princess Diana following a high-speed car chase by journalists dubbed *paparazzi*.[46] Still other critics, sensing that a private life is vital for cultivating a sound sense of self, deliberately choose *not* to send tweets, *not* to purchase a smart phone or *not* to use email. Running in the same direction are calls for journalists to respect others' privacy, to raise their ethical standards and to exercise moral self-restraint as defined by established codes of conduct; challenges to spam and other types of invasive messages; data vault schemes (offered by companies such as Reputation.com) that allow individuals, for a price, to store and manage their private data; and legal cases that aim to prevent journalists from unlimited digging and fishing expeditions, as in the controversies surrounding the 2011/12 Murdoch press 'hacking' scandal and the major (unsuccessful) appeal brought before the European Court of Human Rights by Max Mosley against the British newspaper *News of the World* for its headline story that he had engaged in a 'sick Nazi orgy with five hookers'.[47]

[46] See, for example, Tina Brown, *The Diana Chronicles* (New York, 2007). The ethical dangers of media prying into the intimate lives of others are articulated by Janet Malcolm, *The Journalist and the Murderer* (New York, 1990), p. 1, where the professional journalist is seen as 'a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse. Like the credulous widow who wakes up one day to find the charming young man and all her savings gone, so the consenting subject of a piece of nonfiction learns – when the article or book appears – *his* hard lesson. Journalists justify their treachery in various ways according to their temperaments. The more pompous talk about freedom of speech and "the public's right to know"; the least talented talk about Art; the seemliest murmur about earning a living.'

[47] See the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights (Fourth Section), *Case of Mosley* v. *United Kingdom* (Application No. 48009/08; Strasbourg, 10 May 2011), paragraphs 131–2. Referring to Articles 8 and 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the court recognised the fundamental importance of situations where 'information at stake is of a private and intimate nature and there is no public interest in its dissemination'. It noted as well that 'the private lives of those in the public eye have become a highly lucrative commodity for certain sectors of the media'. The court nevertheless warned of the 'chilling effect' of pre-notification requirements and reaffirmed the principle, which it applied to this particular case, that the 'publication of news' about persons holding public office 'contributes to the variety of information available to the public'. It concluded with a reminder of the 'limited scope' for applying 'restrictions on the freedom of the press to publish material which contributes to debate on matters of general public interest'.

Some critics of de-privatisation meanwhile call publicly for the legal right of citizens to delete all present-day traces of their past 'private' communications with others. Digital communications technologies are seen as double-edged sharp swords: while individuals find themselves taking full advantage of communicative abundance, their lives are potentially harmed by digitisation, cheap storage, easy retrieval, global access and increasingly powerful software, which together conspire to increase the dangers of everlasting digital memory of our private lives, for instance, outdated information taken out of context, or compromising photos or messages accessed by employers or political foes. According to these champions of privacy, whereas the invention of writing enabled humans to remember across generations and vast swathes of time, communicative abundance does something altogether different: it potentially threatens our individual and collective capacity to forget things that need to be forgotten. The past becomes ever present, ready to be recalled at the flick of a switch or the click of a mouse. The trouble with digital systems, runs this line of criticism, is not only that they remember things that are sometimes better forgotten. It is that they hinder our ability to make sound decisions unencumbered by the past.[48] Meanwhile, acting on that point, a new generation of technically savvy privacy activists associated with networked bodies like Privacy International and the Open Rights Group has launched various public campaigns, for instance, in favour of stricter application of expiration dates and the development of privacy-enhancing technologies (so-called PETs), and against publicly available geospatial information about private dwellings, government initiatives to regulate access to strong cryptography, the corporate abuse of consumer databases and unregulated wiretapping and hacking powers of media organisations.[49]

All these developments centred on the 'right to privacy' confirm the point that communicative abundance exposes the contingency and deep ambiguity of the private–public distinction famously defended, philosophically speaking, as a sacrosanct First Principle by nineteenth-century liberal thinkers, such as the English political writer and parliamentarian John Stuart Mill and Germany's greatest philosopher of

[48] Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* (Princeton, 2011).
[49] Phil Agre and Marc Rotenberg (eds), *Technology and Privacy: The New Landscape* (Cambridge, MA, 1997).

liberty, Wilhelm von Humboldt.[50] Their insistence that there are clear distinctions to be drawn between 'the private' (conceived as the sphere of self-regarding actions) and 'the public' (the sphere of other-affecting actions) no longer rings true. In the age of communicative abundance, privacy, defined as the ability of individuals to control how much of themselves they reveal to others, their 'right to be let alone',[51] is seen as a complicated and publicly contestable right. Disputes about privacy and its 'invasion' have a long-term political significance. They underscore not only growing public awareness of the contingent and reversible character of the public–private distinction, which is to say that the distinction is no longer readily seen, as it was seen by many nineteenth- and twentieth-century European liberals, as either a binary opposite set in stone or as having a divine, mysterious validity. Thanks to the communications revolution of our time, the private–public distinction is regarded instead as a precious, but ambivalent, inheritance from former times.

The sphere of 'the private' is seen as a fragile 'temporary resting place'[52] that usefully serves as a refuge from interference by others, but that can function just as well as a refuge for scoundrels. Put differently, communicative abundance exposes deep ambiguities within the private–public distinction. It encourages individuals and groups within civil society to think more flexibly and contextually about the public and the private. Citizens are forced to become aware that their 'private' judgements about matters of public importance can be distinguished from both actually existing and desirable norms that are shared publicly. They learn as well to accept that there are times when embarrassing publicity given to 'private' actions – 'outing' – is entirely justified, for instance, when confronted with mendacious politicians, or with men who are duplicitous about their sexual preference or even leaders (as in Berlusconi's Italy) desperate to confirm that they are men.[53] Finally,

---

[50] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Essays on Politics and Society*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto and Buffalo, [1859] 1977), pp. 213–310; Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Of the Individual Man and the Highest Ends of his Existence', in *The Limits of State Action* (London and New York, 1969), pp. 16–21.

[51] See the oft-cited Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis, 'The Right to Privacy', *Harvard Law Review* 4(5) (15 December 1890): 193.

[52] Richard Rorty, 'Introduction: Pragmatism and Philosophy', in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, MN, 1982), pp. xiii–xlvii.

[53] Confronted by magistrates with evidence of his involvement in an alleged prostitution ring, including wiretap evidence in which he boasted that he was only

citizens come to see that some things are definitely worth keeping private. They learn there are times when privacy – ensuring that certain matters are nobody else's business, that individuals and groups should not freely witness or comment upon their actions – is a precious inheritance. That is why they favour keeping certain areas of social and political life 'private', for instance, through efforts by journalists to protect the identity of their sources, and by means of public campaigns against governments' use of closed-circuit TV cameras and other forms of unauthorised surveillance.

The new muckraking

Aside from the democratisation of access to information and the politicisation of definitions of the private–public distinction, a third democratic trend is noteworthy: high-intensity efforts by citizens, journalists and monitory institutions to bombard power holders with 'publicity' and 'public exposure'. This third trend might be described as muckraking, a charming Americanism, an earthy neologism from the late nineteenth century, when it referred to a new style of journalism committed to the cause of publicly exposing corruption.[54] Writers like Lincoln Steffens, Ida Tarbell and Jacob Riis pictured themselves as public journalists writing for a public hungry for the facts of life in contemporary America. True to their name, they saw nothing sacrosanct about privacy. Publicity must be given to the private lives of the rich and powerful wherever and whenever 'the public interest' was at stake, they thought. To this end, they used new investigative techniques, such as the interview; under hails of protest (they were often condemned as busybodies and meddlers) they took advantage of the widening circulation of newspapers, magazines and books made possible by advertising, and by cheaper, mass methods of production and distribution, to write long

'prime minister in my spare time', as well as complaining that he needed to reduce the flow of women in the face of a 'terrible week' ahead in which he would be seeing leaders such as Pope Benedict, Nicolas Sarkozy, Angela Merkel and Gordon Brown, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi defended himself in a letter published in the Milan-based newspaper *Il Foglio*, whose editor served as minister in one of his former governments: 'I did nothing for which I must be ashamed . . . My private life is not a crime, my lifestyle may or may not please, it is personal, reserved and irreproachable' (17 September 2011).

54 John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London and New York, 2009), pp. 341–7.

and detailed articles, even entire books, to provide often sensational exposés of grimy governmental corruption and waste, business fraud and social deprivation.

Along these lines, the Pennsylvania-born journalist Nellie Bly (1864–1922) (Figure 1.5) did something daring but dangerous: for Joseph Pulitzer's newspaper the *New York World* she faked insanity to publish an undercover exposé of a woman's lunatic asylum. Other muckrakers openly challenged political bosses and corporate fat cats. They questioned industrial progress at any price. The muckrakers took on profiteering, deception, low standards of public health and safety. They complained about child labour, prostitution and alcohol. They called for the renewal of urban life – for an end to slums in cities. By around 1905, the muckrakers were a force to be reckoned with, as William Randolph Hearst demonstrated with his acquisition of *Cosmopolitan* magazine; its veteran reporter, David Graham Phillips, quickly launched a much-publicised series, called 'The Treason of the Senate', which poured scorn on senators, portraying them as pawns of industrialists and financiers, as corruptors of the principle that representatives should serve all of their constituents.

In the age of communicative abundance, the new muckrakers keep these themes alive, and they do so by putting their finger on a perennial problem for which democracy is a solution: the power of elites always thrives on secrecy, silence and invisibility. Gathering behind closed doors and deciding things in peace and private is their specialty. Little wonder then that in media-saturated societies, to put things paradoxically, unexpected 'leaks' and revelations become predictably commonplace. Everyday life is constantly ruptured by mediated 'events'.[55] They pose challenges to both the licit and the illicit. It is not just that stuff happens; media users ensure that shit happens. Muckraking becomes rife. There are moments when it even feels as if the whole world is run by rogues.

Muckraking has definite political effects on the standard institutions of representative democracy. It arguably deepens the already wide divisions that have opened up between parties, parliaments, politicians and the available means of communication. In recent decades, an accumulation of survey evidence suggests that citizens in many established democracies, although they strongly identify with democratic ideals,

---

[55] Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (New York, 2005).

Figure 1.5 Nellie Bly, pseudonym of Elizabeth Cochrane Seaman, *c.* 1890, by H. J. Myers.

have grown more distrustful of politicians, doubtful about governing institutions and disillusioned with leaders in the public sector.[56] The patterns of public disaffection with official 'politics' have much to do with the practice of muckraking under conditions of communicative abundance. Politicians are sitting ducks. The limited media presence and media vulnerability of parliaments is striking. Despite efforts at

[56] Pippa Norris, *Democratic Deficit: Critical Citizens Revisited* (New York, 2011).

harnessing new digital media, parties have often been left flat-footed; they neither own nor control their media outlets and they have lost much of the astonishing energy displayed at the end of the nineteenth century by political parties, such as Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD), which at the time was the greatest political party machine on the face of the Earth, in no small measure because it was a powerful champion of literacy and a leading publisher of books, pamphlets and newspapers in its own right.

The overall consequence is that under conditions of communicative abundance the core institutions of representative democracy become easy targets of rough-riding. Think for a moment about any current public controversy that attracts widespread attention: the news and commentaries it generates typically begin *outside* the formal machinery of representative democracy. The messages become memes quickly relayed by many power-scrutinising organisations, large, medium and small. In the world of communicative abundance, that kind of latticed or networked pattern of circulating controversial messages is typical, not exceptional. It produces constant feedback effects: unpredictably non-linear links between inputs and outputs. The trend renders obsolete once influential propositions in the field of political communications, especially the claim that democracies are principally defined by 'band-wagon effects', 'running with the pack' and 'spirals of silence' fuelled by fears of isolation among citizens.[57] The viral effects of public scrutiny have profound implications as well for the state-framed institutions of the old representative democracy, which find themselves outflanked by webs of mediated criticisms that often hit their target, sometimes from long distances, often by means of boomerang effects.

Consider a few samples of muckraking from a twelve-month media cycle (2008/9) within the world's democracies: a male legislator in the Florida state assembly is spotted watching online porn while fellow legislators are debating the subject of abortion. During a fiercely fought presidential election campaign in the United States one of the candidates (Barack Obama) switches to damage control mode after calling a female journalist 'sweetie'; he leaves her a voicemail apology: 'I am duly chastened'. In Japan, a seasoned Japanese politician (Masatoshi

---

[57] The influential thesis that public opinion is loneliness turned inside out was developed at length in the classic work by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence. Public Opinion: Our Social Skin* (Chicago and London, 1984).

Wakabayashi) is forced to resign from the Diet after being caught on camera during a budget debate pressing the voting button of a parliamentary colleague who had earlier left the chamber; the disgraced legislator, who had evidently supposed that he was sitting in the blind spot of cameras, later confessed to breaking the parliamentary rules: 'I wasn't thinking straight. It was an unforgivable act, and I'd like to apologise.'[58] While on a state visit to Chile, the President of the Czech Republic was caught on camera at a signing ceremony pocketing a golden ballpoint pen. In Finland, a senior politician was brought down with the help of a mobile telephone. His private text messages rebounded publicly, to reveal his duplicity and force the resignation of a government minister, as happened in April 2008, after *Hymy* magazine revealed that the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ilkka Kanerva had sent several hundred text messages, some of them raunchy, to an erotic dancer, who first sold the messages to the magazine, then failed to win a court injunction to stop their publication. He tried unsuccessfully to defend himself by saying: 'I would not present them in Sunday school, but they are not totally out of line either.' In the age of communicative abundance, Sony hand-held cameras are meanwhile used by off-air reporters and amateur users to file ongoing videos and blogs featuring politicians live, unplugged and unscripted. This is exactly that happened in recent years in France; according to video footage quickly uploaded onto LeMonde.fr, the Interior Minister (Brice Hortefeux) agreed to be photographed with a young Arab supporter and responded to an onlooker's joke about 'our little Arab' as a symbol of integration with heartfelt words: 'There always has to be one. When there's one, it's ok. It's when there are a lot of them that there are problems.'

It is not only elected politicians and formal political institutions that come in for stick. Oiled by communicative abundance, it seems as if no organisation or leader within the fields of government, business or social life is immune from political trouble. Our great grandparents would find the whole process astonishing in its democratic intensity. It certainly spells trouble for 'bad news' accounts of contemporary media, those that are convinced that democracy is going to the dogs because 'the media' is 'dumbing down' or 'entertaining to death' its citizens, for instance, by churning out materials of a poisonously low quality. Such

---

[58] Alex Martin, 'Wakabayashi exits Diet due to Illicit Votes', *Japan Times*, 3 April 2010.

pessimism contains a fundamental flaw: it misses the brawling, rowdy, rough-and-tumble qualities of communicative abundance, its propensity to stir up public troubles by exposing hidden discriminations and injustices.

But who or what drives all this muckraking? Certainly, they are not the effect of the medium alone, as believers in the magical powers of technology suppose. Individuals, groups, networks and whole organisations make muckraking happen. Yet buried within the infrastructures of communicative abundance are technical features that enable muckrakers to do their work of publicly scrutinising power. From the end of the 1960s, as we have seen, product and process innovations have happened in virtually every field of an increasingly commercialised media, thanks to technical factors, such as electronic memory, tighter channel spacing, new frequency allocation, direct satellite broadcasting, digital tuning and advanced compression techniques.[59] These technical factors have made a huge difference, but within the infrastructure of communicative abundance there is something special about its distributed networks. In contrast, say, to the centralised state-run broadcasting systems of the past, the spider's web linkages among many different nodes within a distributed network make them intrinsically more resistant to centralised control (Figure 1.6). The network functions according to the logic of packet switching: flows of information pass through many latticed points en route to their destination. Initially broken down into bytes of information that are then re-assembled at the point of delivery, these flows readily find their way through censorship barriers. If messages are blocked at any point within the latticed system, then the information is diverted automatically, re-routed in the direction of their intended destination.

This packet-switched and networked character of media-saturated societies ensures that messages go viral, even when they come up against organised resistance. Media-saturated societies are thus prone to contestability and dissonance. Some observers claim that a new understanding of power as a 'mutually shared weakness' is required in order to make sense of the impact of networks on the distribution of

---

[59] For treatments of the background, see Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford and Malden, MA, 1998), especially ch. 5; Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* (Oxford and New York, 2003); Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (Cambridge, 2012).
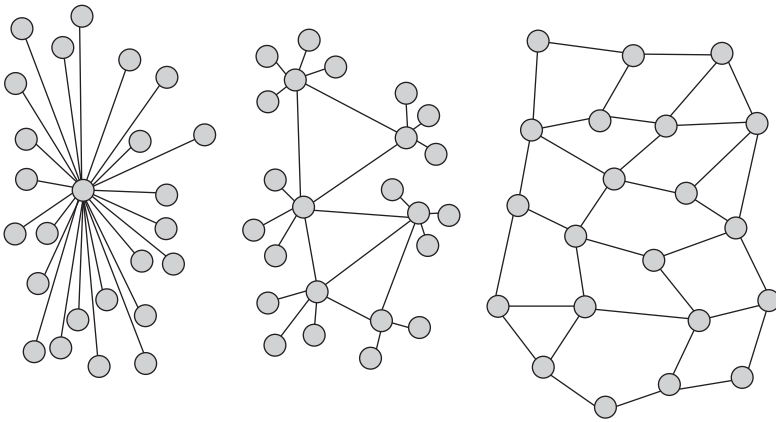
Figure 1.6 Centralised, decentralised and distributed networks, by Giovanni Navarria.

power within any given social order. The claim is that those who are in positions of power over others are subject constantly to unforeseen setbacks, reversals and revolts. Manipulation and bossing and bullying of the powerless become difficult; the powerless readily find the networked communicative means through which to take their revenge on the powerful. Unchecked power becomes harder to win, much easier to lose. Exemplified by online political initiatives such as the South Korean citizens' journalism site OhmyNews, UK Uncut, the Indian online tool I Paid A Bribe, the American campaigning network MoveOn.org Political Action, and SMS activism of the kind that contributed to the fall of Philippines President Joseph Estrada, the trend is summarised by the American scholar and activist Clay Shirky: when compared with the eras dominated by newspapers, the telegraph, radio and television, the age of communicative abundance, he says, is an era when 'group action just got easier'. Thanks to networked communications and easy-to-use tools, the 'expressive capability' of citizens is raised to unprecedented levels. 'As the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory', he writes, 'the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action.' Others speak of the rising predilection for 'self-organizing' and 'connective action' spurred on by the belief that 'life can be more

participatory, more decentralized, less dependent on the traditional models of organization, either in the state or the big company'.[60] Still others experiment with the principle in the field of party politics, for instance, by trying to outflank mainstream political parties using the techniques of 'liquid democracy'. Beppe Grillo's 5 Star Movement in Italy and the Pirate Party in Germany are examples. So is Iceland's Best Party, which, in 2012, won enough votes to co-run Reykjavik City Council, partly on the promise that it would not honour any of its promises, that since all other political parties are secretly corrupt it would be openly corrupt.

Caution is required at this point because, to repeat, the changes catalysed by networked innovations are not the product of technical design and networked communicative abundance alone. It should go without saying, but it is often forgotten, that the changes that are going on have been driven by a variety of technical causes *and* human causers, including radical alterations to the ecology of public affairs reporting and commentary. As the revolution in favour of communicative abundance has taken root, the whole media infrastructure through which news of worldly events is produced and publicly circulated has become ever more complicated and cluttered. It is much more rough and tumble, to the point where professional news journalism is now just one of many different types of power-scrutinising institution. Within all democracies, many hundreds and thousands of monitory institutions now skilfully trade in the business of stirring up questions of power, often with political effect. Human rights reports, blogs, courts, networks of professional organisations and civic initiatives are just a few examples of the watchdog, guide-dog and barking-dog mechanisms that are fundamentally altering the spirit and dynamics of democracy.

These public monitors thrive within the new galaxy of communicative abundance. They do not simply give voice to the voiceless; they produce

---

[60] Giovanni Navarria, 'Citizens Go Online: Probing the Political Potential of the Internet Galaxy', PhD dissertation, University of Westminster, 2010; Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* (London, 2008); Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (London, 2010); Clay Shirky, 'The Political Power of Social Media', *Foreign Affairs* (January/February 2011); Yochai Benkler, as quoted in Nicholas Kulish, 'As Scorn for Vote Grows, Protests Surge Around Globe', *New York Times*, 27 September 2011; W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, 'The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics', *Information, Communication & Society* (2012): 1–30.

echo effects. An important case in point is the Spanish *Los Indignados* (15-M) movement, which used a wide range of new media tools to monitor and resist police brutality, welfare budget cuts, house evictions, corruption within the credit and banking system, unfair electoral laws, antiquated parliamentary procedures and the suppression of 'inconvenient' news by mainstream media.[61] The political work of such movements is strengthened by the growth of aggressive new forms of professional and citizens' journalism. The days of journalism proud of its commitment to the principles that 'comment is free, but facts are sacred' (that was the phrase coined in 1921 by the *Manchester Guardian*'s long-time editor C. P. Scott) and fact-based 'objectivity', ideals that were born of the age of representative democracy, ideals that were always the exception in practice, are fading. In place of the 'rituals of objectivity'[62] we see the rise of adversarial and 'gotcha' styles of commercial journalism, forms of writing that are driven by ratings, political affiliation, sales and hits. There is biting political satire, of the deadly kind popularised in India by STAR's weekly show *Poll Khol* using a comedian anchorman, an animated monkey, news clips and Bollywood soundtracks (the programme title is translated as 'open election', but is actually drawn from a popular Hindi metaphor which means 'revealing the hidden story'). All these criteria sit poorly with talk of 'fairness' (a criterion of good journalism famously championed by Hubert Beuve-Méry, the founder and first editor of *Le Monde*). We witness as well open challenges to professional 'embedded' journalism bound up with the spread of so-called citizen journalism and enclaves of self-redaction.[63] The forces of professional and citizen journalism often intersect, and when that happens (as at *The Guardian*) they are understandably proud of their contribution to the muckraking trend. They like to emphasise that they refuse to take no for an answer, that their job is to uncover things that were previously hidden, to report things as they are, to slam

---

[61] The best account is Ramón Andrés Feenstra, *Democracia monitorizada en la era de la nueva galaxia mediática. La propuesta de John Keane* (Barcelona, 2012).

[62] C. P. Scott, 'A Hundred Years', [1921], reprinted in *The Guardian*, 29 November 2002; Gaye Tuchman, 'Objectivity as Strategic Ritual: An Examination of Newsman's Notions of Objectivity', *American Journal of Sociology* 77(4) (January 1972): 660–79.

[63] John Hartley, 'Communicative Democracy in a Redactional Society: The Future of Journalism Studies', *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 1(1) (2000): 39–47.

the foolish, to give liars and thieves a hard time. They are sure that the function of journalism is to produce neither pleasure nor harm nor 'objectivity' nor 'balance'. Its purpose, rather, is to point cameras at wounds, to find words to confront injustice, to let victims of power speak in their own voices. Sometimes they say journalism should be guided by killer instincts – even if that means that there must be victims. Such talk is sometimes simple self-justification and (as we shall soon see) we need to be more sceptical of the way many professional and citizen journalists like to see themselves as the midwives of 'truth'. But given this gutsy style of independent journalism there is little wonder that public objection to corruption and wrongdoing nowadays has become commonplace.

We shall soon see that the new age of communicative abundance is blighted by trends that contradict the basic democratic principle that all citizens are equally entitled to communicate their opinions, and periodically to give representatives a rough ride. Yet rough-riding happens – on a scale and with an intensity never before witnessed. Speaking figuratively, one could say that communicative abundance cuts like a knife into the power relations of government, business and the rest of civil society. In the era of media saturation there seems to be no end of scandals; and there are even times when so-called '-gate' scandals, like earthquakes, rumble beneath the feet of whole governments. The frequency and intensity of media-shaped '-gate' scandals are greatly feared by power wielders; and although scandals can have damaging effects on the spirit and institutions of democracy, they provide a sober reminder of a perennial problem facing any political system: that there are never shortages of organised efforts by the powerful to manipulate people beneath and around them.

That is why the political dirty business of dragging power from behind curtains of secrecy remains fundamentally important. Nobody should be seduced into thinking that media-saturated societies, with their latticed networks, multiple channels, tough-minded journalism and power-scrutinising institutions, are level playing fields in the democratic sense. Yet even though societies shaped by communicative abundance are not paradises of open communication, historical comparisons show just how distinctive is their permanent flux, their unending restlessness driven by complex media combinations of different interacting players and institutions, permanently heaving and straining, sometimes working together, at other times in contrarian ways. The

powerful routinely strive to define and to determine who gets what, when and how; but the less powerful, taking advantage of communicative abundance, keep tabs on the powerful – sometimes with great drama and surprising success.

The consequence is that media-saturated societies are richly conflicted, political orders in which, contrary to some pessimists and purists, politics does not wither away. Nothing is ever settled, or straightforward. In striking contrast to galaxies of communication that were structured by the printing press, the telegraph, radio and television, media-saturated societies enable actors to cut through habit and prejudice and hierarchies of power much more easily. They stir up the sense that people can shape and re-shape their lives as equals; not surprisingly, they often bring commotion into the world. Media-saturated societies have a definite 'viral' quality about them. Power disputes are often bolts out of the blue; they follow unexpected pathways and reach surprising destinations that have unexpected outcomes.

The phone-hacking scandal that hit News Corporation in mid-2011 is a striking case in point: it began with investigative reporting by *The Guardian* newspaper, which revealed that the company's publication *News of the World* had hacked into the voicemail messages of a 13-year-old murder victim, Milly Dowler. Public indignation suddenly flared. The global company suffered reputational damage. In quick succession there followed several arrests of News Corporation executives; the closure of the *News of the World*, which had been in business for 168 years; parliamentary hearings; and a public apology by Rupert Murdoch, the company's chairman and chief executive. He was forced to watch the public embarrassment of his political friends and to witness the collapse of his plans to buy control of a multi-billion pound major satellite television provider, British Sky Broadcasting. Soon afterwards came recommendations to shake up the management of the firm by a major investor advisory organisation that criticised News Corporation's senior executives for their 'striking lack of stewardship and failure of independence' by a board unable to set a strong tone at the top about unethical business practices; and the public inquiry led by Lord Justice Leveson into the culture, practices and ethics of British media.[64]

[64] The materials gathered by the Leveson Inquiry are available at: www.levesoninquiry.org.uk; see also Michael J. de la Merced, 'Advisory Firm Urges Ouster of Murdoch and his Sons', *International Herald Tribune*, 12 October

Other examples of unexpected power disputes spring readily to mind. Groups using mobile phones, bulletin boards, news groups, wikis and blogs sometimes manage, against considerable odds, to heap embarrassing publicity on their opponents. Corporations are given stick (by well-organised, media-savvy groups such as Adbusters) about their services and products, their investment plans, how they treat their employees and the size of their impact upon the biosphere. Power-monitoring bodies such as Human Rights Watch, Avaaz.org, Global Witness and Amnesty International regularly do the same, usually with help from networks of supporters spread around the globe. There are initiatives such as the World Wide Web Consortium (known as W3C) that promote universal open access to digital networks. There are even bodies (such as the Democratic Audit network, the Global Accountability Project and Transparency International) that specialise in providing public assessments of the quality of existing power-scrutinising mechanisms and the degree to which they fairly represent citizens' interests. Politicians, parties and parliaments get much stick from dot.org muckrakers like California Watch and Mediapart (a Paris-based watchdog staffed by a number of veteran French newspaper and news agency journalists). And, at all levels, governments are grilled on a wide range of matters, from their human rights records, their energy production plans to the quality of the drinking water of their cities. Even their arms procurement policies – notoriously shrouded in secrecy – run into trouble, thanks to media-savvy citizens' initiatives guided by the spirit, and sometimes the letter, of the principle that in 'the absence of governmental checks and balances … the only effective restraint upon executive policy and power in the area of national defense and international affairs may lie in … an informed and critical public opinion which alone can … protect the values of democratic government'.[65]

WikiLeaks

These are times in which terrifying state violence directed at citizens is witnessed and, against tremendous odds, publicly confronted by

2011, p. 21; Tom Watson and Martin Hickman, *Dial M for Murdoch: News Corporation and the Corruption of Britain* (London, 2012).
[65] These are the words used by Justice Potter Stewart in the United States Supreme Court's famous opinion in *New York Times Co.* v. *United States* (1971), the so-called *Pentagon Papers* case.

Figure 1.7 Demonstration by the Space Hijackers against an arms fair in east London (September 2007).

citizen-uploaded videos, digital sit-ins, online 'hacktivist' collectives and media-savvy monitory organisations, such as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Anonymous and Burma Watch International. There are small citizen groups, such as the Space Hijackers, which manage to win big publicity by acts of daring, for instance, driving a second-hand UN tank to Europe's largest arms fair in London's Docklands, ostensibly to test its 'roadworthiness', then to auction it to the highest market bidder, in the process offering prosthetic limbs for sale to arms dealers (Figure 1.7).

Then there are global headline-making initiatives that lunge non-violently at the heart of highly secretive, sovereign power. WikiLeaks is so far the most talked-about experiment in the arts of publicly probing secretive military power. Pundits at first described it as the novel defining story of our times, but the point is that its spirit and methods belong firmly and squarely to the age of communicative abundance. Engaged in a radical form of muckraking motivated by conscience and supported by a shadowy band of technically sophisticated activists led by a charismatic public figure, Julian Assange (Figure 1.8), WikiLeaks took full advantage of the defining qualities of communicative abundance: the

Figure 1.8 WikiLeaks founder and publisher, Julian Assange, London (February 2013).

easy-access multimedia integration and low-cost copying of information that is then whizzed around the world through digital networks. Posing as a *lumpen* outsider in the world of information, aiming to become a watchdog with a global brief, WikiLeaks sprang to fame by releasing video footage of an American helicopter gunship crew cursing and firing on unarmed civilians and journalists. It then sent shock waves throughout the civil societies and governments of many countries by releasing sprawls, hundreds of thousands of top-secret documents appertaining to the diplomatic and military strategies of the United States and its allies and enemies.

With the help of mainstream media, WikiLeaks produced pungent effects, in no small measure because of its mastery of the clever arts of 'cryptographic anonymity', military-grade encryption designed to protect both its sources and itself as a global publisher. For the first time on a global scale, WikiLeaks created a viable custom-made mailbox that enabled disgruntled muckrakers within any organisation to release classified data on a confidential basis, initially for storage in a camouflaged cloud of servers. WikiLeaks then pushed that bullet-proofed information into public circulation, as an act of radical transparency and 'truth'.

WikiLeaks was guided by a theory of hypocrisy and democracy. Its attempt to construct an 'intelligence agency of the people' supposed that individual employees within any organisation are motivated to act as whistleblowers not just because their identities are protected by encryption, but especially because their organisation suffers intolerable gaps between its publicly professed aims and its private *modus operandi*. Hypocrisy is the night soil of muckrakers, whose rakes in the Augean stables of government and business have a double effect: they multiply the amount of muck circulated under the noses of interested or astonished publics, whose own sense of living in muck is consequently sharpened. Muckraking in the style of the WikiLeaks platform has yet another source, which helps to explain why its attempted criminalisation and forcible closure is already spawning many similar offspring, such as BalkanLeaks, a Bulgarian-based initiative to publicise organised crime and political corruption in the region; and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, a global network campaigning to end the secrecy that protects capital assets held in offshore havens. Put simply, WikiLeaks feeds upon a contradiction deeply structured within the digital information systems of all large-scale complex organisations. States and business corporations and other organisations take advantage of the communications revolution of our time by going digital and staying digital. They do so to enhance their internal efficiency and external effectiveness, to improve their capacity for handling complex, difficult or unexpected situations, swiftly and flexibly. Contrary to Max Weber, the databanks and data-processing systems of these organisations are antithetical to red tape, stringent security rules and compartmentalised data sets, all of which have the effect of making these organisations slow and clumsy. So they opt for dynamic and time-sensitive data sharing across the boundaries of departments and whole organisations. Vast streams of classified material flow freely – which serves to boost the chances that leaks into the courts of public opinion will happen. If organisations then respond by tightening internal controls on their own information flows, a move that Julian Assange has described as the imposition of a 'secrecy tax', the chances are that these same organisations will both trigger their own 'cognitive decline', their reduced capacity to handle complex situations swiftly and effectively, as well as increase the likelihood of resistance to the secrecy tax by motivated employees who are convinced of the

hypocrisy and injustice of the organisations which are unrepresentative of their views.[66]

Unelected representatives

The subject of representation brings us to a fourth trend that has significant implications for democracy in representative form: in the age of communicative abundance, unelected representatives multiply, sometimes to the point where their level of public support casts shadows over the legitimacy and viability of elected representation (politicians and parliaments) as the central organising principle of democracy. The phrase 'unelected representatives' refers to champions of public causes and values, public figures whose authority and power base are located outside the boundaries of electoral politics. It is, of course, an unfamiliar phrase. Taking us back in time (it seems) to the age of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and to contentions about the importance of great men and heroes,[67] it grates on democratic ears. Hence, it is important to understand carefully its meaning, and the ill-understood trend it describes.

Our ignorance of the past inevitably breeds misunderstandings of our present, so let us go back to the age when the grafting of the principle and practice of representation onto democracy irreversibly changed the original meaning of both.[68] Representation, once conceived by Hobbes and other political thinkers as simply equivalent to the actual or virtual authorisation of government, had to make room for equality, accountability and free elections. For its part, at least in theory, democracy had to find space for the process of delegation of decisions to others and, hence, open itself up to matters of public responsiveness and the public

---

[66] Julian Assange, 'The Non-linear Effects of Leaks on Unjust Systems of Governance', 31 December 2006, available at: http://web.archive.org/web/20071020051936/http://iq.org/#Thenonlineareffectsofleaksonunjustsystemsofgovernance; cf. 'State and Terrorist Conspiracies', 10 November 2006, available at: http://cryptome.org/0002/ja-conspiracies.pdf, both accessed 18 January 2011.

[67] Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and The Heroic in History* (London, [1840] 1870); Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men: Seven Lectures* (Boston, MA, 1850).

[68] An extended account of the complex historical origins of representative democracy is found in John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London and New York, 2009), Pt 2.

accountability of leaders. From roughly the last quarter of the eighteenth century, democratic representation came to mean a process of re-presenting the interests and views of electors who are absent from the chambers and forums where decisions are made. Representatives decide things on behalf of, and in the physical absence of, those who are affected.

But that was only one side of the complex, dynamic equation. For under conditions of democracy, or so many observers pointed out, those who are rendered absent from the making of decisions must periodically step forward and make their presence felt by raising their hands in public, or (in our times) by touching a screen or placing a cross on a ballot paper in private. Under democratic conditions, representation is a process of periodically rendering or making present what is absent; it is not simply (as Burke supposed) an act of delegation of judgements to the few trustees who make decisions on behalf of those whom they represent. Representation is, ideally, the avoidance of *misrepresentation*. By that is meant that representation is accountability, an ongoing tussle between representatives who make political judgements and the represented, the citizens who also make political judgements.

The upshot of this dialectic was that representative democracy became a distinctive form of government that simultaneously distinguished and linked together the source of political power – the people or *dēmos* – and the use made of political power by representatives who are periodically chastened by the people whose interests they are supposed to serve. The downside was that the election of representatives became a dynamic process subject to what can be called the disappointment principle.[69] Today, elections are still seen as a method of apportioning blame for poor political performance: a way of ensuring the rotation of leadership, guided by merit and humility, in the presence of electors equipped with the power to trip leaders up and throw them out of office if and when they fail, as often they do. Every election is as much a beginning as it is an ending. The whole point of elections is that they are a means of disciplining representatives who have disappointed their electors, who are then entitled to throw harsh words, and paper or electronic rocks, at them. If representatives were always virtuous,

---

[69] John Keane, 'A Productive Challenge: Unelected Representatives can Enrich Democracy', *WZB-Mitteilungen* 31 (March 2011): 14–16.

impartial, competent and responsive then elections would lose their purpose.

The disappointment principle coded into the principles and practice of representative democracy not only helps to explain why elected political representatives periodically come in for tough public criticism, or become scapegoats or targets of satire and sarcasm. The factor of disappointment helps to explain why, under conditions of communicative abundance, alternative forms of representation become attractive; and why unelected representatives attract great media attention and public support. Thomas Carlyle spotted that the fame of 'heroes' such as Shakespeare, Luther, Goethe and Napoleon was made possible by the modern printing press; he would be dumbfounded by the amplifying effects of communicative abundance. Media-saturated societies multiply the variety, scope and sophistication of publicity outlets hungry for 'stars'. An unsurprising consequence is the rapid growth and diffusion, well beyond the reaches of elected government, of famous individuals, groups and organisations who stand up for causes and carve out public constituencies that are often at odds with the words and deeds of established political parties, elected officials, parliaments and whole governments. Whatever may be thought of their particular brand of politics, or the merits of the particular issues for which they stand, unelected representatives alter the political geography and political dynamics of democracies. These respected public personalities with a difference add to the commotion of democratic politics – while often causing established representative mechanisms serious political headaches.

But who exactly are unelected representatives? What does the unfamiliar phrase mean? In the most elementary sense, unelected representatives are authoritative public figures who win public attention and respect through various forms of media coverage. Documentaries are made about their lives; interviews with them go viral; they have websites and they blog and tweet. Often extroverted characters, they sometimes seem to be everywhere, even though they usually have a strong sense of contract with the citizens who admire them, who see in themselves what they would like to become. These representatives have to be media savvy. They enjoy notoriety and they are good at its arts. They are famous, but they are not simply 'celebrities', a term which is too wide, too loose and too normatively burdened to capture their core quality of being unelected representatives of others' views. Unelected

representatives are not mindless fame seekers who have climbed the ladders of renown. They are not 'million-horsepowered entities' (McLuhan), individuals well known for their 'well-knownness'.[70] And they are not in it for the money. They are not exaltations of superficiality; they do not thrive on smutty probes into their private lives; and they do not pander to celebrity bloggers, gossip columnists and tabloid *paparazzi*. The figure of the unelected representative is not what Germans call a *Hochstapler* (a 'high piler'), an impostor who brags and boasts a lot. Unelected representatives instead bear the marks of humility. Their feet are on the ground. They stand for something outside and beyond their particular niche. More exactly: as public representatives they simultaneously 'mirror' the tastes and views of their public admirers as well as fire their imaginations and sympathies by displaying leadership in matters of the wider public good, seen from their and others' point of view.

Unelected representatives have the effect of widening the horizons of the political, even though they are not chosen in the same way as parliamentary representatives, who are subject to formal periodic elections. It is true that there are times and places where unelected representatives decide (for a time) to reinvest their fame, to make a lateral move into formal parliamentary politics and a ministerial position. An example is Wangari Maathai (1940–2011), the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize and the founder of the pan-African grassroots Green Belt Movement.

Other figures do exactly the reverse, by pursuing public leadership roles after elected office.[71] Many examples spring to mind. Among them are the efforts of former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who

---

[70] Marshall McLuhan, in *Explorations 3*, republished in *Marshall McLuhan Unbound 1* (Toronto, 2005); Daniel Boorstin, *The Image, Or, What Happened to the American Dream* (New York, 1962), p. 57. Treatments of the phenomenon of the celebrity include, Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York, 1961; 1971); Joshua Gamson, *Claims To Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley, 1994); Nick Couldry, *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age* (London, 2000); Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London, 2001); G. Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London, 2004); Chris Hedge, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of the Spectacle* (New York, 2009).

[71] John Keane, 'Life after Political Death: The Fate of Leaders after Leaving High Office', in John Kane, Haig Patapan and Paul 't Hart (eds), *Dispersed Leadership in Democracy: Foundations, Opportunities, Realities* (Oxford, 2009).

helped to found (in 1983) the InterAction Council, a group of over thirty former high office holders; Mikhail Gorbachev's and Nelson Mandela's running commentaries on world affairs; Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* campaign; the Africa Progress Panel and peace negotiation efforts of former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, for instance, during the violently disputed elections of 2007/8 in Kenya; and the multiple public activities of Jimmy Carter, whose self-reinvention as an advocate of human rights makes him the first ex-president of the United States to insist that the world is so shrinking that it needs new ways of doing politics in more negotiated and principled ways, nurtured by bodies like The Elders, which he helped to found in 2007.

It is hard to interpret the long-term viability and significance of these unelected representatives who once occupied high office (let alone what to say about those figures, like ex-president George W. Bush, whose first priority after leaving the executive was self-rehabilitation, using Facebook[72]). These public figures arguably demonstrate positively that the age is over when former elected leaders lapsed into mediocrity, or spent their time 'taking pills and dedicating libraries' (as Herbert Hoover put it), sometimes bathed in self-pity ('after the White House what is there to do but drink?', Franklin Pierce reportedly quipped). What is clear is that elections or governmental politics are not the normal destiny or career path of unelected representatives. Fascinating is the way they most often shun political parties, parliaments and government. They do not like to be seen as politicians. Paradoxically, that does not make them any less 'chosen' or legitimate in the eyes, hearts and minds of their followers. It often has the opposite effect.

Untainted by office, unelected representatives walk in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi: beyond the confines of government, they carve out constituencies and win over supporters who, as a consequence, are inspired to act differently, to strive to be better than they currently

---

[72] See at: www.facebook.com/georgewbush#!/georgewbush, accessed 7 June 2010. His page lists his location as 'Dallas, TX', his birthday as 'July 6, 1946' and he has 73,289 friends (more than the uncharitable might have imagined). A first status update read: 'Since leaving office, President Bush has remained active. He has visited 20 states and 8 countries; given over 65 speeches; launched the George W. Bush Presidential Center; participated in 4 policy conferences through The Bush Institute; finished the first draft of his memoir, "Decision Points"; and partnered with President Clinton to establish the Clinton Bush Haiti Fund. More on his activities in future posts.'

are. The upshot is that in their role as public representatives they often cross swords with elected authorities. They put the represented on trial as well: they challenge them to hold fast to their convictions and/or urge them to take a stand on an issue. And despite the fact that they are not mandated by periodic votes, unelected representatives most definitely have a strong sense of being on trial, above all by acknowledging their 'contractual' dependence upon those whom they represent. Their supporters and admirers are in effect their creators. That is why they have to handle their self-importance carefully: their fame requires them to be both different from their admirers and yet similar enough so that they are not aloof or threatening. Unelected representatives are in this sense not to be confused with 'oligarchs' or 'demagogues' or scheming demiurges such as Vladislav Surkov, the style architect of 'sovereign democracy' in contemporary Russia.[73] The grip of unelected representatives on popular opinion is much more tentative. Their fame can be thought of as the democratic descendant of aristocratic honour. It does not come cheaply. It has its price: since their reputation for integrity depends upon a strong media profile, unelected representatives can find, sometimes with surprising speed, that their private lives and public reputation are quickly ruined by the active withdrawal of the support of the represented. The old maxim, a favourite of Harry Truman when he was out of office, that money, craving for power and sex are three things that can ruin political leaders, applies with real force to unelected leaders. Unlike celebrities, who can thrive on bad press, they find scandals fatal, ruinous of their whole public identity. They know the meaning of the old maxim: reputations are hard won and easily lost.

Unelected representatives draw breath from communicative abundance, but by no means does this imply that they are 'second best' or 'inferior' or 'pseudo-representatives' when compared with their formally elected counterparts. Emerson noted how the printing press made it seem that some great men had been elected. 'As Sir Robert Peel and Mr. Webster vote, so Locke and Rousseau think for thousands', he wrote.[74] In the age of multimedia culture, unelected representatives similarly enjoy robust public reputations, and they exercise a form of 'soft' or 'persuasive' power over others, including their

---

[73] Peter Pomerantsev, 'Putin's Rasputin', *London Review of Books*, 20 October 2011.
[74] Emerson, *Representative Men*, in Porte (ed.), *Essays and Lectures*, p. 715.

opponents. They are listened to, admired, sometimes adored, often mimicked or followed; and to the extent that they are influential in these ways they may, and often do, present challenges to formally elected representatives, for instance, by confronting their claims or questioning their actions. So what is the basis of their unelected fame? How do they manage to produce political effects? To put things simply: what is the source of their popularity and how are they able to use it to stand apart from elected representatives, either to praise their work or to call their actions into question?

There are many different types of unelected representatives. Some draw their legitimacy from the fact that they are widely regarded as models of *public virtue*. Figures such as Martin Luther King Jr, Princess Diana and Aamir Khan (a Bollywood film star and television presenter known for spotlighting festering issues such as domestic violence and caste injustice) are seen to be 'good', or 'decent', or 'wise' or 'daring' people who bring honesty, fairness and other valuable things to the world. Their reputations are untarnished by allegations of corruption; although they are not presumed to be angels they are widely supposed to be living illustrations of alternative pathways, a challenge for people to aspire to greater moral heights, to inspire them to live differently. Other unelected representatives – Mother Teresa or Desmond Tutu – win legitimacy because of their *spiritual or religious commitments*. There are unelected representatives whose status is based instead on *merit*; they are former nobodies who become somebody because they are reckoned to have achieved great things. Amitabh Bhachan (India's screen star whose early reputation was built on playing the role of fighter against injustice), Colombian-born Shakira Mebarak and the Berliner Philharmoniker (the latter two are Goodwill Ambassadors of UNICEF) belong in this category of achievers. Still other figures are deemed to be representatives of *suffering, courage and survival* in this world (His Holiness the fourteenth Dalai Lama of Tibet is an example). There are other unelected representatives – in marked contrast to political party leaders and governments who 'fudge' issues – who draw their legitimacy from the fact that they have taken a principled stand on a particular issue, on which they campaign vigorously, in the process appealing for public support in the form of donations and subscriptions. Bodies like Amnesty International or initiatives such as the Live 8 benefit concerts are of this type: their legitimacy is mediated not by votes, but by means of *moral monetary contracts* that can be cancelled

at any time by admiring supporters and subscribers who are equipped with the power to draw the conclusion that these ad hoc representatives are no longer representative or worthy of their financial support.

Whatever is thought of their stardom, unelected representatives play a vital democratic role in the age of communicative abundance. They certainly refute the old presumption, championed by Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson, that unelected leaders serve to reinvent monarchical and aristocratic standards of proper behaviour and greatness, that, in effect, 'representative men' stand outside time and can be its master, re-binding the fractured polities of the modern world. This way of thinking about unelected leaders no longer makes sense; their dynamic effects are different. Unelected representatives can do good works for democracy, especially when politicians as representatives suffer a mounting credibility gap. They stretch the boundaries and meaning of political representation, especially by putting on-message parties, parliaments and government executives on their toes. Sometimes posthumously (Gandhi is a prime example), their figure draws public attention to the violation of public standards by governments, their policy failures, or their general lack of political imagination in handling so-called 'wicked' or 'devilish' problems that have no readily agreed upon definition, let alone straightforward solutions. Unelected representatives also force existing democracies to think twice, and more deeply, about what counts as good leadership. They serve as an important reminder that during the course of the past century the word leadership was excessively politicised, to the point where we have forgotten that the words *leader* and *leaderess*, from the time of their first usage in English, were routinely applied to those who coordinated such bodies as singing choirs, bands of dancers and musicians and religious congregations.

Unelected leaders can have profoundly transformative effects on the meaning of leadership itself. They serve not only as an important corrective to the undue dominance of state-centred definitions of leadership; and not only do they multiply and disperse different and conflicting criteria of representation that confront democracies with problems (such as whether unelected leaders can be held publicly accountable for their actions using means other than elections) that were unknown to the earliest champions and architects of representative democracy. Thanks to their efforts, leadership no longer means (as it meant ultimately in Max Weber's classic state-centred analysis) bossing and

strength backed ultimately by cunning and the fist and other means of state power, a *Realpolitik* understanding of leadership that slides towards political authoritarianism (and until today has given the words *Führer* and *Führerschaft* a bad name in countries such as Germany).[75] Leadership also no longer means manipulation through the bully pulpit (a peculiarly American term coined by Theodore Roosevelt to describe the use by leaders of a 'superb' or 'wonderful' platform to advocate causes and agendas). Leadership instead comes to be understood as the capacity to mobilise 'persuasive power' (as Archbishop Desmond Tutu likes to say). It is the ability to motivate citizens to do things for themselves.

Unelected leadership is certainly challenging. 'A determination to be courageous; an ability to anticipate situations; the inclination to drama-tise political effects, so as to warn citizens of actual or potential prob-lems; above all, the willingness to admit that mistakes have been made, to urge that they must be corrected, without ever being afraid of making

---

[75] Max Weber's famous account of the qualities of competent political leadership (*Führerschaft*) in parliamentary democracies is sketched in 'Politik als Beruf' (originally delivered as a speech at Munich University in the revolutionary winter of 1918/19), in *Gesammelte Politische Schriften* (Tübingen, 1958), pp. 493–548. During the speech, Weber said that democracies require leaders to display at least three decisive qualities. Genuine leadership, first of all, necessitates a passionate devotion to a cause, the will to make history, to set new values for others, nourished from feeling. Such passion must not succumb to what he called (Weber here drew upon Georg Simmel) 'sterile excitation'. Authentic leaders – this is the second imperative – must avoid 'self-intoxication' all the while cultivating a sense of personal responsibility for their achievements, and their failures. While (finally) this implies that leaders are not merely the mandated mouthpieces of their masters, the electors, leaders' actions must embody a 'cool sense of proportion': the ability to grant due weight to realities, to take them soberly and calmly into account. Passionate, responsible and experienced leaders, Weber urged, must be relentless in 'viewing the realities of life' and must have 'the ability to face such realities and … measure up to them inwardly'. Effective leadership is synonymous with neither demagoguery nor the worship of power for its own sake. Passionate and responsible leaders shun the blind pursuit of ultimate goals; such blindness, Weber noted sarcastically, 'does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord'. Mature leaders must be guided instead by the 'ethic of responsibility'. Recognising the average deficiencies of people, they must continually strive, using state power, to take account of the foreseeable effects of particular actions that aim to realise particular goals through the reliance upon particular means. Responsible leaders must therefore incorporate into their actions the prickly fact, in many contexts, that the attainment of good ends is dependent upon (and therefore jeopardised by) the use of ethically doubtful or (in the case of violence) even dangerous means.

yet more mistakes,' is how one unelected leader explains it.[76] Unelected leadership is many things. It involves flat rejection of the devils of blind ambition, what Carlyle called 'Lionism'. It is the learned capacity to communicate with publics about matters of public concern, to win public respect by cultivating 'narrative intelligence' that includes (when unelected representatives are at their best) a mix of formal qualities, such as level-headed focus, inner calm, courteousness, the refusal to be biddable, the ability to listen to others, poking fun at oneself and a certain radiance of style (one of the confidants of Nelson Mandela once explained to me his remarkable ability to create 'many Nelson Mandelas around him'; the same thing is still commonly said of Jawaharlal Nehru). The qualities of unelected leadership also include the power to use media to combine contradictory qualities (such as strength and vulnerability; singularity and typicality) simultaneously, and apparently without effort, as if leadership is the art of gestalt switching. Above all, unelected leadership demands awareness that true leaders are not the elect, that they are always deeply dependent upon the people known as the led – that true leaders lead because they manage to get people to look up to them, rather than hauling them by the nose.

Cross-border publics

One other distinctive trend within contemporary democracy must be noted: communicative abundance makes possible the growth of large-scale publics whose footprints are potentially or actually global in scope, and whose membership cuts across and underneath the boundaries of territorial states, thus complicating the dynamics of opinion formation and representative democracy within those states.

   The trend should not be underestimated: the unfolding communications revolution of our time features the growth of networked globe-girdling media whose time–space conquering effects are of epochal

---

[76] From an interview with Emílio Rui Vilar, former senior minister of the first democratic governments after the defeat of the Salazar dictatorship, former Deputy Governor of the Bank of Portugal and Director-General of the Commission of the European Union, and director of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, a non-governmental foundation known for its active support for public accountability and pluralism in matters ranging from political power to aesthetic taste (Lisbon, 27 October 2006).

significance. The Canadian scholar Harold Innis famously noted the time- and distance-shrinking effects of the wheel, the printing press and other communications media, but genuinely global communication systems only began, during the nineteenth century, with inventions like overland and underwater telegraphy and the early development of international news agencies, such as Reuters.[77] In recent decades, the globalising process has been undergoing an evolutionary jump, thanks to the development of a combination of forces. Wide-footprint geostationary satellites (of the kind that broadcast the Beatles and Maria Callas to the world, in real time) have played an important role; equally important has been the growth of global journalism and the networked flows of international news, electronic data exchange and entertainment and education materials controlled by giant firms like TimeWarner, News International, the BBC, Al Jazeera, Disney, Bertelsmann, Microsoft, Sony and Google.

The rapid expansion of global media linkages has triggered talk of abolishing barriers to communication, which in some quarters functions as a misleading ideology of digital networks. Among the earliest and most influential example was John Perry Barlow's *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* (1996). It claimed that computer-linked networks were creating a 'global social space', a borderless 'global conversation of bits', a new world 'that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth'.[78] Such talk is complicated and contradicted by real-world trends, but it underscores correctly the way global communication networks have done what the world maps and globes of Gerardus Mercator (1512–1594) manifestly failed to do: these networks strengthen the intuition of millions of people (perhaps somewhere between 5 per cent and 25 per cent of the world's population) that our world is 'one world', and that this worldly interdependence beckons humans to share some responsibility for its fate. The trend is in a sense self-reinforcing; it has more than a passing resemblance, but on a vastly expanded scale, to the way newspapers, as Tocqueville put it, played the role of 'beacons' of common activity by dropping 'the same

---

[77] Harold Innis, The Bias of Communication (Toronto, 1951); Peter J. Hugill, Global Communications since 1844: Geopolitics and Technology (Baltimore and London, 1999).

[78] John Perry Barlow, *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* (8 February 1996), available at: http://www.eff.org.

thought into a thousand minds at the same moment'.[79] By imagining
that their work is targeted at potentially global audiences whom they
will otherwise never physically encounter, professional and citizen
journalists, book publishers, radio and television broadcasters, twee-
ters, emailers and bloggers till the ground in which actual publics of
listening, reading, watching, chatting citizens take root – on a global
scale, in opposition to time and space barriers that were once taken for
granted, considered 'natural' or technically unbridgeable.

The process is not straightforward, nor is it uncontested. Though
critics and commentators alike seem to agree that global media networks
foster a common sense of worldly interdependence, some sceptical
observers ask: exactly what kind of worldly interdependence are we
talking about? They note that today's global communications market is
disproportionately controlled by ten or so vertically integrated media
conglomerates, most of them based in the United States.[80] These media
conglomerates are no longer 'homespun' (to use Keynes' term for describ-
ing territorially bound, state-regulated markets). Bursting the bounds of
time and space, language and custom, media big business is better
described in terms of complex global commodity chains, or global
flows of information, staff, money, components and products. Not sur-
prisingly, so runs the argument, journalism associated with the global
media conglomerates gives priority to advertising-driven commercial
ventures: to saleable music, videos, sports, shopping, children's and
adults' filmed entertainment. In the field of news, for instance, special
emphasis is given to 'news-breaking' and 'block-busting' stories that
concentrate upon accidents, disasters, political crises and violence. The
material that is fed to editors by journalists who report from or around

---

[79] Alexis de Tocqueville, 'Of the Relation between Public Associations and the
Newspapers', in Phillips Bradley (ed.), *Democracy in America* (New York,
1945), vol. 2, bk 2, ch. 6: 'A newspaper is an adviser that does not require to be
sought, but that comes of its own accord and talks to you briefly every day of the
common weal, without distracting you from your private affairs . . . The effect of a
newspaper is not only to suggest the same purpose to a great number of persons,
but to furnish means for executing in common the designs which they may have
singly conceived.'

[80] The following points are taken up in more detail in my *Global Civil Society?*
(Cambridge and New York, 2003), especially pp. 65 ff. See also R. Burnett, *The
Global Jukebox* (London, 1996); Ali Mohammadi (ed.), *International
Communication and Globalization* (London, 1997); Edward S. Herman and
Robert W. McChesney, *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate
Capitalism* (London and Washington, DC, 1997).

trouble spots ('clusterfucks' they are called in the trade) is meanwhile shortened, simplified, repackaged and transmitted in commercial form. Staged sound bites and 'live' or 'catchy' material are editors' favourites; so, too, are flashy presentational technologies, including the use of logos, rapid visual cuts and 'stars' who are placed centre stage. The picture is then completed by news exchange arrangements, whereby subscribing news organisations exchange visual footage and other material, so ensuring a substantial deracination and homogenisation of news stories in many parts of the globe, circulated at the speed of light.

The trends dispirit some observers. Far from nurturing freedom of communication and democracy, they complain, global media companies produce bland commercial pulp for audiences who become politically comatose. 'McWorld' is the end result: informed citizenship is replaced by a universal tribe of consumers dancing to the music of logos, advertising slogans, sponsorship, brand names, trademarks and jingles.[81] Other critics slam 'global cultural homogenisation' in the form of 'transnational corporate cultural domination': a world in which 'private giant economic enterprises' pursue 'capitalist objectives of profit making and capital accumulation'.[82] Still others complain that the overall effect is a silent takeover by markets, a world 'where corporate interests reign, where corporations spew their jargon on to the airwaves and stifle nations with their imperial rule. Corporations have become behemoths, huge global giants that wield immense political power.'[83]

The criticisms are sobering; the complainants have a point. Corporate power is aggressively innovative, but it also poses threats to freedom of communication and democracy: media markets tend to restrict freedom and equality of communication by generating barriers to entry, monopoly restrictions upon choice, and by shifting the definition of communication with others as a publicly meaningful good to *commercial speech* and the consumption of commodities.[84] Yet this is not the

---

[81] Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World* (New York, 1995).

[82] Herbert Schiller, 'Not Yet the Post-Industrial Era', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 8 (1991): 20–1.

[83] Noreena Hertz, *The Silent Takeover: Global Capitalism and the Death of Democracy* (London, 2001), p. 8.

[84] See Owen Fiss, 'Why the State?' in Judith Lichtenberg (ed.), *Democracy and the Mass Media* (Cambridge and New York, 1990), pp. 136–54; John Keane, *The Media and Democracy* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA, 1991), esp. pp. 51–92.

whole story. Thanks to communicative abundance, there are signs that
the grip of commodity fetishism upon citizens is not absolute, and that
from roughly the time of the worldwide protest of young people against
the Vietnam War global media integration has had an unanticipated
political effect: by erecting a world stage, global media conglomerates,
helped along by the practice of global journalism, have slowly but surely
massaged into life cross-border media events and, with them, a plurality
of differently sized public spheres, some of them genuinely global, in
which many millions of people scattered across the Earth witness medi-
ated controversies about who gets what, when and how, on a world
scale, often in real time.

Things are, again, not straightforward or unproblematic, for it
remains true that even the most media-saturated societies, such as
the United States, are riddled with pockets of parochialism. Citizens
who read local 'content engine' newspapers like *The Desert Sun*
in Palm Springs, Cheyenne's *Wyoming Tribune-Eagle* or the
Gainesville Sun are fed a starvation diet of global stories, which
typically occupy no more than about 2 per cent of column space.[85]
Citizens' horizons are narrowed further by budget cuts for foreign
news desks, excessive dependence on English-language sources, and
recycled wire-service reporting and regional news exchanges that
feed tabloid newspapers. Not to be overlooked, is the way that
governments stick their noses into global information flows.
Protected by dissimulation experts, or what in Washington are called
'flack packs', governments cultivate links with trusted or 'embedded'
journalists, organise press briefings and advertising campaigns, so
framing global events, wilfully distorting and censoring them, to suit
their own interests.

It should be noted, by way of definition, that not all global media
events, such as sporting fixtures, blockbuster movies and international
media awards, nurture global publics, which is to say that audiences
are not the same as publics, and that public spheres are not simply
domains of entertainment or play. So what does it mean to speak of
global publics? Are they sober spaces of rational-critical deliberation
in search of truth and calm agreement, as the followers of Jürgen

[85] John Keane, 'Journalism and Democracy Across Borders', in Michael Schudson
(ed.), *Institutions of Democracy: The Press* (Oxford and New York, 2005).

Habermas suppose?[86] There are moments when rational communication in that sense sometimes happens, but, strictly speaking, global publics are scenes of the political, spaces within which millions of people, living at various points on the Earth, witness power conflicts and attempts to resolve them. Global publics become aware of characters, events, governing arrangements and NGOs. They observe them being publicly named, praised, challenged and condemned – courtesy of media networks and professional, and citizen and 'hybrid' journalists, whose combined effect, however temporary, is to attract the attention of millions of otherwise unconnected citizens, across borders, in defiance of the old tyrannies of time and space.

The conscious targeting and interpellation of global audiences by melding worldwide forms and themes with localised interests in real-time was pioneered by such English-language channels as CNN. Launched in 1980, it was the first American channel to provide all-news television coverage, and on a twenty-four-hour basis. Its international counterpart, CNN International, began as 5 hours a week of material submitted by 100 broadcast stations around the world, some professional and some amateur; ironically, the whole operation was backed by owner Ted Turner's now legendary prohibition of the word 'foreign' on air. Using alternative banners, such as 'Go Beyond Borders', CNN International is now available to audiences in several languages (Spanish, Turkish and English) within over 200 countries and territories. It played a vital role in covering the drama of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crisis where, for the first time, live feeds were watched globally by government diplomats and policymakers to decide what their next moves should be. CNN's coverage of the first Gulf War and other crises of the early 1990s, particularly the battle of Mogadishu, led many observers to speak of 'the CNN effect' to describe the perceived impact on decision-makers of real-time, twenty-four-hour news coverage on a global basis.

---

[86] Some limits of the rational communication model of the public sphere, originally outlined in the important work of Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied, 1962), are sketched in John Durham Peters, 'Distrust of Representation: Habermas on the Public Sphere', *Media, Culture and Society* 15 (1993): 541–71; John Keane, 'Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere', *Communication Review* 1(1) (1995): 1–22.

The global–local media dialectics typical of the age of communicative abundance are often much less spectacular, and with less immediate effect, helped along by bodies such as the Internet-based Earth Watch, the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), and public accountability initiatives such as Transparency International and Human Rights Watch. Then there are times when the same dialectics produce explosions. The dramatic media events that enveloped the overthrow of dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya in 2011 certainly ran in this direction, with radical democratic effects. The struggles for public space for a time proved infectious throughout the region. These were not straightforwardly 'Twitter' rebellions or 'Facebook revolutions'[87]; they were equally rebellions of the poor and powerless against the unjust recent deregulation of rapacious global markets. Yet these uprisings were marked by an unusual public awareness of the political importance of digitally networked media. Thanks to outlets such as al-Arabiya and Al Jazeera (it has 3,000 staff members and more than 50 million household viewers in the Arab world), never before had so many people instantly witnessed dramatic political events on a global scale. Citizens understood that news is by definition powerful information still unknown to others, which helps to explain the remarkable first-time experiments in the arts of gathering and circulating news. Huge crowds in Alexandria watched themselves live on satellite television, hoping the coverage would protect them from police or military annihilation. Helped by Web platforms operated by exiles, tweets and blogs and video footage uploaded on to the Internet powerfully described situations both terrible and hopeful. Everything, even the shooting of protesters and innocent bystanders at point-blank range, was recorded for posterity in real-time.

Global media events are becoming 'normal' in the age of communicative abundance; not surprisingly, so is the intrusion of global publics within the domestic settings of many democracies. What happens elsewhere, what the world's people think and how they react in the circumstances begins to matter to their citizens and representatives. Within the democratic world, but even more so within autocratic regimes, global

---

[87] Wael Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0. The Power of the People is Greater than the People: A Memoir* (New York, 2012).

publics are certainly vulnerable to state interference.[88] Through no fault of their own, these global publics are also highly vulnerable to implosion, above all because they enjoy neither strong institutional protection nor effective channels of representation and accountability, for instance, through the mechanisms of elected representative government. Global publics donate money, spread news, circulate information and stage events, many of them targeted at the doings of elected representatives, but they remain, for the time being, echoing voices without a coherent body politic to acknowledge and act on their concerns. The age when public spheres were typically contained within the territorial boundaries of democratic states is passing, yet the trouble for democratic politics is the homelessness of the new global publics. Think of the example of global opinion polls, efforts to sample and measure what the world's people in different countries think about, say, American presidential candidates or, say, whether Palestinians are entitled to their own territorial state. Such polls are more than make-believe or 'fictional' exercises. They are forms of interpellation that suppose what is not yet a reality. By calling upon the world's people to shrug off their insularity, by measuring their opinions and giving them a voice, they feed the growth of new cross-border publics. But their voice cries out for – it implies – the need for new institutions. Global publics invite the world to see that it resembles a chrysalis capable of hatching the butterfly of cross-border democracy – despite the fact that we currently have no good account of what 'regional', or 'global' or 'cross-border' democratic representation might mean in practice.[89]

---

[88] Monroe Price, *Media and Sovereignty: The Global Information Revolution and its Challenge to State Power* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2002); Nancy Morris and Silvio Waisbord (eds), *Media and Globalization: Why the State Matters* (Lanham, MD, 2002).

[89] The difficult task of drawing clearer pictures of the contours and dynamics of a more democratic global order is made all the more difficult by the fact that there are not only vast numbers of governmental and non-governmental organisations that know little or nothing of democratic procedures and manners. The world is structured as well by an agglomeration of governmental and legal structures – a cosmocracy comprising bodies such as the European Union, the United Nations, the World Bank – that defies the textbooks of traditional political science and political theory (see John Keane, *Global Civil Society?* (Cambridge and New York, 2003), pp. 175 ff). Many structures of the cosmocracy escape the constraining effects of electoral and parliamentary supervision, which is why the sceptics of extending democratic procedures and ways of life across territorial state borders raise strong objections. Consider the doubts of the doyen of

These are powerful constraints, yet, in spite of their daunting force, global publics still make their political mark, for instance, on the suit-and-tie worlds of diplomacy, global business and meetings of NGOs and inter-governmental officials. Every great global issue that has surfaced since 1945 – human rights, the dangers of nuclear war, discrimination against women and minorities, the greening of politics, the domination of politics by the very rich – first crystallised as 'hot topics' within and by means of these publics, which, in turn, have had the effect of heightening the sense of contingency of global power relations. Public spheres tend to denature the codes of power inscribed in cross-border settings. Helped along by tit-for-tat conflicts among various media (the ongoing spats between Al Jazeera and American television news media since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 is a case in point), these publics set or shape the agendas of various socioeconomic and political-legal institutions of our globally interdependent world. They put them on the spot, shake up their dogmas and sometimes inject them with legitimacy. They heighten the sense that they are transformable – that they are unfinished business.

Global publics have other effects, sometimes 'subpolitical' effects, in the sense that they work in favour of *creating* citizens of a new global order, in effect telling people that unless they find some means of showing that the wider world is not theirs, they are witnesses and participants in this wider world.[90] The speech addressed to 'global

democratic thought in the United States, Robert A. Dahl, who considers as utterly unrealistic the vision of democracy beyond state borders (see Robert A. Dahl, 'The Past and Future of Democracy', revised manuscript version of a lecture at the symposium, Politics from the 20th to the 21st Century, University of Siena, 14–16 October 1999; and *On Democracy* (New Haven, CT and London, 1998), pp. 114–17). The growing complexity of decision-making, for instance, in the field of foreign affairs, renders impossible the 'public enlightenment' so necessary for democracy, he argues. Meanwhile, legal and illegal immigration, combined with a new politics of identity within and beyond territorial states, lead to growing 'cultural diversity and cleavages', which undermine 'civil discourse and compromise', Dahl says. Worldwide threats of terrorist attacks make it even less likely that civil and political liberties could flourish within 'international organizations'.

90 Martin Heidegger famously wrote: 'Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth' ('Building, Dwelling Thinking', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays* (New York, 1982), p. 146), but the implication in that passage that mortals are confined to local geographic places misses the new spatial polygamy that global publics make possible. Within global public spheres, people rooted in local physical settings travel to distant places, without ever

citizens' by Barack Obama at the Siegessaule in Berlin's Tiergarten, in July 2008, was a powerful case in point, a harbinger of a remarkable trend in which those who are caught up within global publics learn that the boundaries between home and abroad, native and foreigner, are blurred, negotiable and subject permanently to osmosis.[91] By witnessing far-away events, they learn that their commitments have become a touch more worldly. They become footloose. They live here and there; they learn to distance themselves from themselves; they discover that there are different temporal rhythms, other places, other problems, many different ways of living. They discover the 'foreigner' within themselves; they are invited to question their own dogmas, even to extend courtesy, politeness, respect and other ordinary standards of civility to others whom they will never meet.

Global publics centred on ground-breaking media events like Live Aid (in 1985 it attracted an estimated 1 billion viewers) can be spaces of fun, in which millions taste the joy of acting publicly with and against others for some defined common purpose. When they come in the form of, say, televised world news fixed on the suffering of distant strangers caused by man-made disasters and episodes of state violence, global publics also highlight injustice and cruelty. Media representation spreads awareness among millions of others' damned fates; global publics function as sites for handling unjust outcomes, bitter defeat and the tragedy of ruined lives. True, witnessing the pain and suffering of others can produce numbing effects, so that instead of active public engagement acts of witnessing by citizens turn out to be the prelude to

---

leaving home, to 'second homes' within which their senses are stretched. That they become a bit less parochial, a bit more cosmopolitan is no small achievement, especially considering that people do not 'naturally' feel a sense of responsibility for faraway events. Ethical responsibility often stretches no further than their noses. Yet when they are engaged by stories that originate elsewhere – when they are drawn into the dynamics of a global public sphere – their interest in the fate of others is not based simply on prurience, or idle curiosity or *Schadenfreude*. They rather align and assimilate these stories in terms of their own existential concerns, which are thereby altered. The world 'out there' becomes 'their' world.

91 Addressing a vast global audience and a local crowd gathered at the Victory Column at Tiergarten Park, Berlin (24 July 2008), Senator Barack Obama said: 'I come to Berlin as so many of my countrymen have come before, not as a candidate for president but as a citizen – a proud citizen of the United States and a fellow citizen of the world.'

turning their backs on those who suffer.[92] Yet the equation between suffering and witnessing has no automaticity. Media representations of terrible suffering do not necessarily produce ethically cleansed cynics, mindless lovers of entertainment slumped on sofas, enjoying every second of the blood and tears. There is plenty of evidence, to the contrary, that global publics that gather around the stages of cruelty and humiliation scrap the old rule that good and evil are typically local affairs. Global initiatives such as 'One Billion Rising', a cross-border protest (February 2013) against gender-based violence, prove that the old maxim that half the world never knows how the other half lives is rendered false. Publics come to feel that the suffering of others is contagious.

By circulating images, sounds and stories of physical and emotional suffering in symbolic form, global publics make possible what Hannah Arendt once called a 'politics of pity'.[93] Witnessing the suffering of others at a distance, millions can be shaken and disturbed, sometimes to the point where they are prepared to exercise their sense of long-distance responsibility by speaking to others, donating time or money, or adding their voice to the general principle that the right of humanitarian intervention, the obligation to assist someone in danger, can and should override the old crocodilian formula that might equals right. And especially during dramatic media events – like the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl; the Tiananmen massacre; the 1989 revolutions in central-eastern Europe; the overthrow and arrest of Slobodan Milošević; the terrorist attacks on New York, Pennsylvania and Washington; massive earthquakes in Chile and China; the overthrow of dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya – public spheres intensify audiences' shared sense of living their lives contingently, on a knife edge.

[92] See the important work of Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory Through the Camera's Eye* (Chicago and London, 1998); and her 'Journalism, Photography, and Trauma', in Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (eds), *Journalism after September 11* (London and New York, 2002), pp. 48–68.

[93] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth, 1990), pp. 59–114; and the development of Arendt's ideas on the subject by Luc Boltanski, *La Souffrance à distance: morale humanitaire, médias et politque* (Paris, 1993), translated as Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics* (London and New York, 1999); Clifford Christians and Kaarle Nordenstreng, 'Social Responsibility Worldwide', *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 19(1) (2004): 3–28; Toni Erskine, *Embedded Cosmopolitanism: Duties to Strangers and Enemies in a World of 'Dislocated Communities'* (Oxford, 2008).

The witnesses of such events (contrary to McLuhan and others) do not enter a 'global village' dressed in the skins of humankind and thinking in the terms of a primordial 'village or tribal outlook'.[94] When they share a public sphere, audiences do not experience uninterrupted togetherness. As witnesses of worldly events, they instead come to feel the pinch of the world's power relations; they sense that our 'small world' is an arena of struggle, the resultant of moves and counter-moves, controversy and consent, resistance and compromise, war and peace.

Global publics feed upon the exposure of malfeasance. They keep alive words like freedom and justice by publicising manipulation, skulduggery and brutality in other countries. Global publics, of the kind that in recent years have monitored the fates of Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi, Osama bin Laden or George W. Bush, muck with the messy business of exclusion, racketeering, ostentation, cruelty and war. They chart cases of intrigue, lying and double-crossing. They help audiences across borders to spot the various figures of top-down power on the world scene: slick and suave managers and professionals who are well practised at the art of deceiving others through images; fools who prey on their citizens' fears; quislings who willingly change sides under pressure; thugs who love violence; and vulgar rulers, with their taste for usurping crowns, assembling and flattering crowds, or beating, tear-gassing or shooting and bombing them into submission.

Exactly because of their propensity to monitor the exercise of power, global publics, when they do their job well, put matters like representation, accountability and legitimacy on the political agenda. They are, in effect, challenges to the thickets of powerful cross-border business, inter-governmental and judicial institutions that increasingly shape the destiny of our world. These publics pose important questions: who benefits and who loses from the contemporary global order? Who currently speaks for whom in its multiple and overlapping power structures? Whose voices are heard, or half-heard, and whose interests and concerns are ignominiously shoved aside? And these publics imply more

---

[94] See the introduction to Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan (eds), *Explorations in Communication* (Boston, MA, 1966), p. xi : 'Postliterate man's [sic] electronic media contract the world to a village or tribe where everything happens to everyone at the same time: everyone knows about, and therefore participates in, everything that is happening the minute it happens . . . This simultaneous sharing of experiences as in a village or tribe creates a village or tribal outlook, and puts a premium on togetherness.'

positive and far-reaching questions: in the push–pull of cross-border politics, can there be greater equality among the voices that emerge from the nooks and crannies of our global order? Through which institutional procedures could these voices be represented? Might it be possible to design alternatives that could inch our small blue and white planet towards greater openness and humility, potentially to the point where power, whenever and wherever it is exercised across borders, would come to feel more publicly accountable, more responsive to those whose lives it currently shapes and reshapes, secures or wrecks?