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## 5

# Network Society, Networked Politics?

'The new electronic infrastructure of the world turns the whole planet into a market place for ideas . . . We are thus witness to a true revolution; power really is moving to the people.'

Walter Wriston<sup>1</sup>

'The [internet] does not fit well with the way people get politically socialized . . . the internet is a form of syntopia – an extension of, but still heavily integrated with, other face-to-face and mediated channels and processes.'

James Katz and Ronald Rice<sup>2</sup>

'Democratization is a dynamic process that always remains incomplete and perpetually runs the risk of reversal – de-democratization.'

Charles Tilly<sup>3</sup>

Theories of societal functioning in the early to mid-twentieth century were based on certain assumptions which are now outdated, wherever we are: assumptions of a single social system, fully integrated social values, and social processes bounded by the borders of nation-states. Contemporary social theory challenges those assumptions.<sup>4</sup> Bruno Latour has questioned the very idea of 'the social' as an object of analysis, proposing 'a sociology of associations' or 'associology'.<sup>5</sup> I have shown, however, in the first four chapters that, starting from *minimal* assumptions about social order – indeed from the explicit starting point that there is pluralism of values, no explanatory 'centre' of society, and no coherent 'centre' to media processes – we can explain many of the *centripetal* pressures in contemporary media and social life. In that sense, aspects of earlier accounts of society can be

repaired, although from different premises and under starting conditions that are at least partly now transnational.

But what of the transformative potential that stems from the radically new features of digital media? What if digital media include within themselves the principles of a new social, a new politics? This has been the hope of many writers impressed by the socially distributed nature of 'Web 2.0'. Predictions of new forms of political and social connection, even radical politics, have accompanied previous waves of technological change: for the nineteenth-century European working class, for example, hopes were pinned on the political pamphlet.<sup>6</sup> In the past half century, accounts of the internet have been distorted by what Vincent Mosco sardonically calls the 'digital sublime'.<sup>7</sup> Yet, hype or no hype, we must acknowledge that the internet is potentially a major source of institutional innovation because digital communication practices, just like the newspaper two centuries ago, constitute resources with the force of institutions.<sup>8</sup> The events of the 2011 Arab Spring bring such debates into particular focus.

The possibility that digital media forms and infrastructures themselves constitute the means to build a different *type of* social organization – without the institutional centres taken for granted in the past 200 years – is politically inspiring. But let's remember at the outset two things. First, governments, media, corporations and even many elements in civil society have a vested interest in *avoiding* such fundamental reorganization (a power issue raised already in chapter 1); second, predictions of political and cultural change based on the features of media tend to rely on a rather thin account of social processes. This is not, *pace* Latour, because 'the social' does not exist but because an account of the 'textures' of digitally enabled social life,<sup>9</sup> and its resources of political engagement, remains to be developed. As we will see in the chapter's second half, there are many factors which suggest a less optimistic assessment of digital media's implications for democratic politics. Much depends on which part of the world, and which institutional matrix and cultural context, we are discussing. Understanding those factors will help us see why former Citicorp banker Walter Wriston's technoliberal claim (quoted above) – made *before* the invention of the World Wide Web – remains today as far from fulfilment as ever, and why the caution of the second and third quotes above is necessary.

While there are many competing theories (liberal, republican, deliberative or elitist) of how democracy *should* function, my argument here does not depend on taking a particular position on that issue. At most, I start out from the premise that democratization is good and that, for this purpose, as Sheldon Wolin puts it, 'democracy's

idea is based on a culture that encourages members to join in common endeavours . . . as the means of taking care of a specific and concrete part of the world and of its life forms.<sup>10</sup>

### The missing social

The internet, because of its basic networked features, has generated new possibilities for political association, mobilization and action. Sara Bentivegna sums up the democratic potentials of the internet as 'interactivity', 'co-presence', 'disintermediation', reduced costs, 'speed' and the lack of boundaries.<sup>11</sup> We can now meet and organize politically with people we don't know and can't see, doing so at great speed, across local, regional and even national boundaries. Some see this as the beginning of a new more conversational, less formal mode of politics;<sup>12</sup> others are more sceptical. On any view, there are new mechanisms of political socialization to investigate.

Three accounts of increasing complexity insist that media's role in society and political culture is changing fundamentally: Henry Jenkins's influential account of 'convergence culture', legal scholar Yochai Benkler's book, *The Wealth of Networks*, and Manuel Castells's recent book, *Communication Power*, which builds on his earlier three-volume work, *The Information Age*.<sup>13</sup>

Henry Jenkins starts out from (indeed, helps to clarify) the key reference point for today's media industries, that is, 'convergence': 'the flow of media across multiple platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.'<sup>14</sup> Jenkins is interested not in the basic change in media delivery systems but in changes in the 'associated protocols' of use.<sup>15</sup> Jenkins's account is usefully based in cultures of media use and what in chapter 2 we called 'media-related practice'. The interoperability of media interfaces – the now taken-for-granted ability, for example, to send a picture, video, weblink, song or text to anyone else – alters the *density* with which media content can circulate and so intensifies media's saturation of social interaction. New media-rich forms of social cooperation are easy in the digital media era and, as Jenkins shows well, media industries – ever more concerned to retain their audiences' loyalty and attention – are keen to stimulate that process: online audience engagement is not only easily trackable, it has become an indispensable industry resource. So a 'convergence culture' exists: certain highly engaged fans making meaning in close proximity to media industries' production and

marketing interfaces. Jenkins's book provides many vivid examples of such a culture: for example, online 'spoilers' of the plot of the reality game show *Survivor*.

Jenkins's story matters a lot to the media industries; it also fits well with more emotive, more personally targeted rationales of marketing<sup>16</sup> and has become almost a new orthodoxy, at least within media and cultural studies. But what does it add to our wider understanding of society and politics? Jenkins offers a metaphor as to how we should understand convergence culture: 'right now our best window into convergence culture comes from looking at the experience of the early settlers and first inhabitants.'<sup>17</sup> Certainly, early adopters provide a window for the types of practices Jenkins wants to foreground, but why assume that this is also the best window on wider convergence culture; or that there is such a thing as a general convergence culture? The reason cannot be because these 'early adopters' are demographically typical: as Jenkins acknowledges, they are 'disproportionately white, male, middle-class and college-educated'.<sup>18</sup> Nor can it be because, as fans, they are typical of wider engagement with media. Fan studies have shown that, for any media object, there is a spectrum of engagement and emotional investment, with each of us differently placed along that spectrum, depending on which object we take.<sup>19</sup> Yet Jenkins insists that the fan behaviours he describes are typical of something: of the 'new knowledge culture', increasingly important as other social ties break down; a new 'more democratic mode' of knowledge production that contributes to a more 'participatory form of power'; a new mode of 'creative intelligence'.<sup>20</sup>

What is the evidence for these claims? Perhaps Jenkins's boldest argument for why these slices of 'convergence culture' might matter is that they showcase the convergent skills we are now learning as audience members (voting, circulating, commenting, lobbying and so on), skills that we will, Jenkins claims, be deploying 'for more "serious" purposes, chang[ing] the ways religion, education, law, politics, advertising and even the military operate'.<sup>21</sup> But this is either a truism – all new possibilities of online social collaboration are *available* for adoption in relation to entertainment, political organizing and anywhere else – or it is a very large claim about the political field: what evidence is there to back up that large claim? Most of what Jenkins analyses as convergence culture could be described as consumer politics. Unquestionably, consumer politics has been an important form of political action both today and throughout modern history,<sup>22</sup> but this says nothing about consumer politics' relevance to other forms of politics, for example, contests over labour rights, political representation or the distribution of social and economic resources. The

relevance of fan protests to *those* sorts of politics must be justified separately, and Jenkins's example of culture-jamming style activism around the short-lived Howard Dean campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination in 2004 is insubstantial. In addition, Jenkins's notion of 'convergence culture' is modelled exclusively on US practice, and a very particular slice of US life at that. Is there a convergence culture, Aniko Imre asks, in countries such as Eastern Europe where practices of fandom are largely imported and where American cultural forms are generally treated with suspicion?<sup>23</sup> The metaphor of a single 'convergence culture' to define the digital age needs at least to be treated with caution.

Yochai Benkler's important intervention in internet regulation and policy is based on an argument of more general power: that in the digital age the economics of cultural production have everywhere been fundamentally altered. In *The Wealth of Networks*, Benkler writes that:

the high capital costs that were a prerequisite to gathering, working, and communicating information, knowledge, and culture have now been widely distributed in the society. The entry barrier they posed no longer offers a condensation point for the large organizations that once dominated the information environment. Instead, emerging models of information and cultural production, radically decentralized and based on emergent patterns of cooperation and sharing, but also of simple coordinate existence, are beginning to take on an ever-larger role in how we produce meaning.<sup>24</sup>

As Benkler makes clear, the reversal of the economic concentrations of industrial media production is only partial; forms of non-market 'sharing' and the alternative information infrastructure they enable will, at best, exist *alongside* market-based media structures. But that does not dim Benkler's vision of a completely new model of social storytelling; indeed he argues that 'we have an opportunity to change the way we create and exchange information, knowledge and culture.'<sup>25</sup> Is this, Andrew Chadwick argues, the start of a change in people's opportunities to contribute to larger political processes?<sup>26</sup> Potentially, but we need also to acknowledge some limits to Benkler's analysis.

First, in challenging the conventional economics of information production, Benkler makes key assumptions of his own. An explicit assumption is that '[the cost of] the mechanical means of sensing our environment, processing it, and communicating new information goods . . . has drastically declined in computer networks.' This is not the end of the story for Benkler since another key form of capital,

'human communicative capacity', remains scarce if we look only at particular sites, although the internet's distributive capacity overcomes this scarcity where production and distribution tasks can be broken down into modules through what Benkler calls the 'granularity' of cultural action.<sup>27</sup> On a different scale, however, drastic recent changes in news production represent the withdrawal of capital from television newsrooms and press news desks.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the relevance of Benkler's economic analysis depends on which 'mechanical means of sensing the environment' we are talking about. Benkler's reference to 'computer networks' suggests he mainly has in mind the economic savings in the infrastructure of the information environment, and his detailed examples bear this out.<sup>29</sup> But have the 'sensing' costs of the substantive information packages that people want and need – for example, foreign news or economic news – fallen in the same way? Not obviously. So the relevance of Benkler's account depends on an implicit assumption about shifting *demand* away from the types of supply typical in the last half century towards other types of supply and the assumed positive consequences of this. This is unproven. Think of political news: the demand side of new media's relationship to political information is just as important as the supply side, and much less researched.<sup>30</sup> We don't know yet if demand is reorienting itself to new media sources enabled by the changes in supply. Clay Shirky notes that political or social change requires much more than technological opportunity: there must be the motive for new types of media production and a relevant culture of need. Otherwise, the habits of data-sharing now evolving online will not generate real 'public and civic value'.<sup>31</sup>

Second, Benkler's account does not analyse in any detail people's usage of the new media landscape. An example is his discussion of internet architecture: this draws exclusively on the literature on links between websites<sup>32</sup> and says nothing about how such links might relate (or not) to users following those links. Benkler offers, as a spur to legal and policy reform, a vision of how things *might be*, not an account of how they are likely to be. Yet understanding the terrain of actual habitual use is crucial to analysing how technological change affects everyday culture and politics. A third problem flows from the second. Since Benkler offers no account of actual media use, he must fail also to address the wider constellations of practice and social organization built from, and around, media use. Benkler plausibly argues that the thin everyday context of individual internet use does not matter so much as we might first think. He offers two interesting cases of the 'networked public sphere'.<sup>33</sup> First, he describes an online campaign whereby people angry at Sinclair Broadcasting's blatantly

political decision to air an anti-John Kerry documentary, *Stolen Honor*, just a month before the US 2004 presidential election were mobilized to contact local advertisers for Sinclair's local TV stations and persuade them to withdraw their ads, leading to immediate loss of revenue, a hit to Sinclair's share price and, eventually, to Sinclair pulling the programme. Second, he cites a campaign in 2002–3 (in the wake of the intensely controversial presidential election of 2000) against Diebold Electronic Systems, a manufacturer of electronic voting machines used in US elections, a campaign which involved networks of campaigners, often students, successfully protecting leaked or discovered files of incriminating data against Diebold legal threats and leading to Diebold machines being withdrawn in California. Benkler uses these cases to argue that 'the topology of the network allowed rapid emergence of a position, its filtering and synthesis, and its rise to salience. Network topology helped facilitate all these components of the public sphere, rather than undermined them.'<sup>34</sup>

By 'network topology', Benkler means the widespread distribution of computing skills, the quick emergence and coordination online of 'small groups that share common concerns', and mobilization of support from that base. Benkler builds a powerful case that the infrastructure of political protest has changed: the new infrastructural support for 'social production practices' creates *enough* of a context for short-term, interruptive political action, especially at election times when the legitimacy of the whole democratic process is at stake.<sup>35</sup> There is no doubt, as Pierre Rosanvallon argued, that in recent decades the repertoire of 'counter-democracy' has increased, that is, the politics of opposition and rejection: arguably networked publics, working as what William Dutton calls a 'fifth estate', are creating pressure towards new types of political accountability.<sup>36</sup> But what of the social contexts within which new projects of *positive* political action (policy promotion, advocacy, implementation) can emerge and be sustained? We need to know much more about the social and political forms that make such positive political actions possible and meaningful.

This takes us to Manuel Castells's work in communication and social theory. Castells's argument in *Communication Power* is, put simply, that in recent decades the organization of society and politics has changed radically, and from two directions: first, the emergence of *networks* which determine the distribution of resources and provide the fabric that connects people across old nation-state boundaries; second, the construction of *meaning* within those networks because power always needs to be legitimated and culturally translated. The

first factor is no doubt important, but what is its relationship to the second? Castells's book rightly avoids a simple optimism or a simple pessimism. The power of networks weakens states, gives vast influence to those who control leading network nodes, and especially those who have power over the switching of context and resources from one node to another, such as Rupert Murdoch; *but* where political resistance itself forms large networks, they can mobilize quickly, interrupt everyday politics and even bring down governments. In the cultural domain, because culture is always open to multiple interpretation and reinterpretation, power is never absolute, *but* power over networks can hugely influence the messages circulated to the general population and how issues are framed, leading to bizarre misperceptions, such as the widespread US belief in the early 2000s that Saddam Hussein had a role in the 9/11 attacks. Castells's network society narrative provides a very useful account of how *spatial* flow (of meanings in media networks and resources in financial and other networks) disrupts national politics in a 'systemic dissociation between communication power and representative power';<sup>37</sup> his analysis of how media and finance networks converge on a global scale is particularly illuminating.

Castells does not claim to offer a comprehensive theory of power, focusing explicitly on political power<sup>38</sup> and spending little time on standard distinctions between types of power. Instead, he offers something more radical: a second-order theory of the forces which sustain societies *as spaces of power* within a wider global order. Building on Beck's deconstruction of national societies as power containers, Castells seeks to 'identify the sociospatial networks of power (local, national, global) that ... configure societies' from the outside. Castells draws on his well-known concept of the 'network society' – 'a social structure constructed around (but not determined by) digital networks of communication' across national borders – to claim that 'global networks' 'structure all societies'.<sup>39</sup> Castells rightly dismisses the notion that societies are 'based on shared values' rather than 'relational power', seeing 'relational power' as based in both 'coercive capacity and communicative resources', thereby introducing a *cultural* element to social structure: this analysis is fully compatible with the argument of chapters 3 and 4,<sup>40</sup> and none of what follows should be read as a rejection of the concept of networks as such.<sup>41</sup>

In spite of this admirable balance, Castells's account generates major uncertainties. First, how exactly does power *over* and *within* networks translate into other forms of power beyond the flow of networks, and vice versa? Castells insists that 'whoever holds power decides what is valuable' and value is generated in networks, while

also insisting on individuals' ability to interpret, use and 'reprogramme' the meanings that circulate in networks. While his account of how news influences people notes the role of everyday context, showing that people only pay attention 'to news about . . . topics that clearly relate to their lives and experiences', it leaves unresolved the relative causal weight of context versus networks in explaining social and political process: clearly, the context of everyday action is not reducible to the operations of networks or people's positioning within networks.<sup>42</sup> Second, while global communications networks disseminate values that cannot be delivered within national political processes (consider Iran's failed revolution in 2009), what contexts and resources are needed to sustain political agency *in time*?<sup>43</sup> Why were the short-term 'communities of practice' mobilized by the Obama presidential campaign of 2008 not sustained into the battles of the Obama presidency's first two years?<sup>44</sup>

Third, and more fundamentally, how exactly are societies 'configured' by communication networks? Economic power, military power, legal authority cannot *simply* be reduced to network operations, even if they require networks as their means: if, for example, the state's monopoly of violence remains, as Castells notes, 'decisive', the state must be more than 'the default network for the proper functioning of all other [non-communication] power networks'. And then there are crucial issues of balance: how do we weight the growth of 'mass self-communication' (online social networks, blogs and the like) against the constraints (of time and other resources, sheer habit) that may block many from being permanently active online or orient them overwhelmingly towards non-political contexts?<sup>45</sup> Jodi Dean argues such communication is in everyday life coopted into corporate frames, but even if we find that too pessimistic a generalization, the deeper hierarchies (including class and gender) that shape political agency must be considered.<sup>46</sup> What grounds *are* there for believing such hierarchies are no longer shaping people's judgements about whether their actions matter? Castells's examples of networked politics (the 2008 Obama presidential campaign, the decades-long growth of global environmental politics) steer clear of everyday power struggles in the economy (rights in and to work, challenges to corporate authority). This neglect of labour activism within debates about the new networked politics matters when labour activism plays such a vital role in extending democracy in countries such as China, and when in the USA the supposed carriers of new political culture (young people) are the least likely to be members of labour or political groups.<sup>47</sup> We need more insight into how non-political forms of

power (economic, legal, social) shape individuals' *own* framings of their opportunities for political action.

The notion of 'society' implicit in the hybrid concept of 'network society' remains metaphorical. Castells tries to invoke a new 'social': 'could it be that the technological and organizational transformation of the network society provides the material and cultural basis for the anarchist utopia of networked self-management *to become a social practice*?'<sup>48</sup>

But the implication is unclear: is the horizontal network equivalent to the social? If so, what exactly qualifies it as a *social practice*? How does it relate to other types of thick social context that we still encounter? Castells also argues that 'how people *think* about the institutions under which they live . . . *define*[s] whose power can be exercised and how.'<sup>49</sup> But when Castells gives a detailed example of how we have come to reinterpret power (the growth of politics based on global warming), his gloss is curious: 'We had to reprogram the networks of our minds by reprogramming the networks of our communication environment.'<sup>50</sup> Here, the social (including the social contexts in which media contents are interpreted and put to use) is bypassed altogether, with both social networks and the processes of individual cognition collapsed into a single term: 'programming'. Castells is hardly unaware of this strange evaporation of the social; indeed, he insists in his earlier work that 'people, locales and activities lose their structural meaning' in a network society.<sup>51</sup> In some respects, Castells's reduction of political explanation to a confrontation between 'net' and 'self' has justification in an age of intensely individualized struggles for meaning, where political information is also individually targeted in an age of fragmenting audience and online consumer tracking.<sup>52</sup> Yet he leaves under-theorized the long-term contexts that *sustain* individual action: the individual cannot simply put these together him- or herself. Indeed, as Andrew Barry notes, the network metaphor 'may give little sense of . . . the fissures, fractures and gaps that [the network] contains and forms'.<sup>53</sup> A whole set of sociological concepts (agency, social context, class, identity, value) seems to have gone missing, distilled into bland cybernetic metaphor.<sup>54</sup>

This foreshortening of the social is common to all three writers just discussed, and other writers too.<sup>55</sup> It may not be surprising to find Christakis and Fowler (medical academics who are also popular writers on connectivity) operating with a thin account of social life that draws more on biology than sociology, but it is striking when much-fêted critics of capitalism such as Hardt and Negri, while

plausibly rejecting the idea of any 'unified social body', go on to invoke a new social whose features remain entirely undefined: 'What we experience [in our postmodern society] is a kind of social flesh, a flesh that is not a body, a flesh that is common, living substance . . . The flesh of the multitude is pure potential, an unformed life force, and *in this sense* an element of social being, aimed constantly at the fullness of life.'<sup>56</sup> What is missing here, more drastically than in Castells, is a sense of the specific resources, contexts of action and historical opportunity structures required for sustained political mobilization: in short, 'social institutions'.<sup>57</sup> It is those same social institutions which, against all the transformative hopes surrounding past communication technologies, have ensured that their eventual outcome is to reinforce *existing* networks: the early evidence on the mobile phone and online networks is already headed in the same direction.<sup>58</sup> Reflecting on this, Keith Hampton and his colleagues speculate that the result of today's intensified networks may be information flows that 'again resemble the repressive, inward-looking structure of traditional village life'.<sup>59</sup>

The combination of internet hype and a thin account of social process generates what Evgeny Morozov calls 'the net delusion'.<sup>60</sup> This blocks our understanding of how the internet might contribute to the institutional structures needed for democratization. Without more sociological underpinning, the term 'network' risks becoming empty.<sup>61</sup> At this point, it is useful to draw on a different theorist, the late Charles Tilly, who defined democracy as 'the extent to which the state behaves in conformity to the expressed demands of its citizens' and identified three macro-conditions for the emergence of democratization in practice:

- 1 the integration of trust networks into public politics;
- 2 the insulation of public politics from categorical inequality; and
- 3 the reduction of major non-state power centres' autonomy from public politics.<sup>62</sup>

Focusing on (1) for now (I come back to (2) and (3) later), Tilly's point is not that we need more trust but, more subtly, that trust *networks* need to be integrated into wider social organization and specifically into the bargaining processes of public politics. Such integration does not require people to trust rulers more (often the opposite!) but rather to commit their 'valued enterprises' to the risks inherent in the democratic political process: they need to trust *process* more, accepting processes of 'mutually binding consultation' and the structures of judgement on which they are based.<sup>63</sup> That, in turn,

requires a 'legible, visible totality', as Pierre Rosanvallon puts it, in which political action is assumed to take place, and a public where joint issues can be imagined and discussed.<sup>64</sup> This is a key link back to questions of symbolic practice and the ways in which the polity is represented.

### Digital media, politics and social transformation

Recall David Easton's classic definition of politics as 'the authoritative allocation of goods, services and values'.<sup>65</sup> The definition is, by itself, too narrow since it does not take into account the possibility of ongoing contests over what counts as authority or the goods required to be allocated. Such contests are not abstract 'metapolitics', but the very stuff of politics. That qualification aside, Easton's definition is a good starting point for considering the conditions of politics in a digital age. Why? Because it identifies one clear dimension that we must always keep in mind: *authority*, from which follows the issue of political legitimacy.

Authority is linked to *evaluation*. If we take as our starting point French sociologists Boltanski and Thévenot's insistence that society is no longer unified by the common values that political sociology once assumed as its reference point,<sup>66</sup> then any transformative politics depends on actually *changing* some or all of the regimes of evaluation dominant in the organization of everyday life. A third key dimension that shapes the preconditions of politics is *framing*: the construction of the 'world' that is addressed and potentially transformed in politics.<sup>67</sup> Media are crucial contributors to all these contextual dimensions of politics. A strength of Castells's account is that it acknowledged these dimensions, but a problem is that network society theory says so little about the routine social domains where authority, evaluation and framing are rooted.<sup>68</sup> How would our account of politics and society in a digital age look if we took more seriously the role of media at this basic social level?

In one short chapter, I cannot offer a complete answer to such questions but, by reviewing the wider literature on digital media and politics, we can identify some key social factors to be incorporated into a fuller account of how digital media are changing politics. My argument will build on chapter 2's account of the complexity of media-related practice and on chapters 3 and 4's account of media's role in representing the social world. I will start by looking at the *who* of politics (what kinds of people or thing now count as political agents?); from there I move to the *what* of politics (what kinds of



thing can be political in various modes: deliberation, action, decision?) and the *why* of politics (what larger contexts, or frames, make certain kinds of political agent/action possible or impossible?). We need also to look out for certain systemic side effects of the changing 'who, what and why' of politics, side effects which may shape the paths of political transformation in an age when, as Bruce Bimber notes, democracy itself 'is growing increasingly information-rich and communication-intensive'.<sup>69</sup>

#### *The who and what of politics*

The set of political actors has always been much larger than the official list of mainstream political institutions and their representatives. Violence or non-violent physical resistance has been one way of acting politically for those not granted the authority to speak. Such violence – by contrast with the legitimate violence of the state (Max Weber) – lies at the edges of legitimate politics: it is often not given the name of politics and called 'terrorism'. Arguments about the new digital politics are not primarily concerned with politics by violence. They concentrate instead on the claim that the digital age enables new types of legitimate political action, that is, new voices recognized as agents of political discourse.

The internet's topology, as Benkler calls it, has made possible new kinds of legitimate political actor. First there are *network actors*: distributed agents of political coordination that link multiple persons, groups and positions across space, without the need for a physical headquarters or a bounded social membership. These became increasingly prominent in the 1990s with the rise of international online networks in the NGO sector and insurgent actors such as the Zapatistas. Since the mobilization against the World Trade Organization summit at Seattle in 1999, a whole new tradition of networked political organization has emerged.<sup>70</sup> The internet creates new possibilities for non-formal political actors to form and build communities of practice online, challenging the boundaries of national politics. Well-designed campaign websites, such as Tescopoly.org in the UK, can name a terrain of contest, provide networking resources for local campaigns and sustain a reference point for future mobilization and long-term action; in so doing, they extend the repertoire of political action and the scale on which political action is routinely possible and, in the process, the range of political actors. National political actors such as the UK mothers' lobby group Mumsnet quickly grew online from a small local group based on an immediate community of interest.<sup>71</sup>

Why is this? First, the possibility of anonymous action at a distance reduces some of the barriers to action such as fear of reprisal or embarrassment. More generally, the internet as a 'network of networks' enables networked actors to link easily with each other to form larger networks. The conviviality of the internet – the ease with which informal connections can be created without reference to differences that might, face to face, constitute boundaries – is also important.<sup>72</sup> Lauren Langman claims the internet requires us to rethink the nature of 'political mobilization' entirely; certainly, we can't know what shape a political agent must take any more: the networked possibilities are too diverse.<sup>73</sup> The most radical extrapolation is legal scholar Beth Noveck's proposal that networked groups should be legally and politically recognized by governments as responsible entities capable of contributing to political decision-making. The Icelandic government's 2011 online consultation about a new constitution is perhaps the first practical application of Noveck's proposals, albeit in a country of 320,000 people.<sup>74</sup>

Then there are new kinds of *individual political actor*: no longer just the charismatic party or strike leader, or the authorized commentator on mainstream politics (journalists), or the silent party member or demonstrator, but the individual – without any initial store of political authority – who can suddenly acquire status as a significant political actor by acting online.

Blogging is one prominent phenomenon that has extended the scope of political 'commentary' (our term from chapter 2) but its specific implications are uncertain. Are individual bloggers genuinely new voices in politics? Some no doubt are: for example the Chinese factory workers who used their blogs on Blogcn.com to promote a strike against their distant Japanese employers, or the citizens who uploaded pictures and text to their blogs to publicize a mass protest against a proposed chemical plant in Xiamen in 2007. It may also not be coincidence that one person killed by Egyptian police in the January/February 2011 uprising was a blogger, Khaled Said. But many other bloggers are members of old-style political elites whose voices are simply now archived in print rather than heard in political backrooms.<sup>75</sup>

International comparison greatly complicates the analysis. In South Korea, there were in 2005 already over 15 million blogs and the related but separate citizen journalism community *OhMyNews* appeared genuinely to represent the broader population, whose self-mobilization is credited with swinging a presidential election at the last minute. In China, the number of active blog users (updating within six months) was reported as 145 million at the end of 2009:



Yin Haiqing argues that a playful relationship to mainstream political ideology prevails in the Chinese blogosphere, but this playful humour and commentary is politically challenging to an authoritarian government. In Iran, explicit contention against mainstream politics is central to a very lively individual *and group* blogosphere of considerable political significance within an authoritarian regime. In the USA and UK, the situation is complex. The percentage of US 18- to 29-year-olds blogging had *fallen* by 2009 to 15 per cent while, in the fractured space of US politics, clusters of bloggers are able to stake out and then defend new bits of political territory online, often going far beyond what formal parties or organizations can say but dragging the political spectrum towards them, if picked up by mainstream media; under these conditions, professional politicians (Sarah Palin) can for a while renounce their official status and 'return' to being a mere individual via their blogs, Facebook pages and so on. In the UK's more centred and weakly contested politics, the leading political bloggers, such as Guido Fawkes and Ian Dale, are in one sense just digital revamps of the commentators who have always hovered on the margins of political influence, but, when their stories are picked up regularly by mainstream media and political actors, they acquire some authority (Guido Fawkes's revelations against UK foreign secretary William Hague in September 2010 being one example).<sup>76</sup> This looks more like a reinforcement of, rather than a counter-logic to, mainstream journalism.<sup>77</sup>

When we consider the wider internet, the pressures towards hierarchization among individual political actors are huge. Web visibility is no accident. It depends on being picked up by search engines (which prioritize on the basis of numbers of incoming links), on personal recommendations by Web users,<sup>78</sup> or (increasingly) being embedded in systemic recommendations such as phone apps. The first two at least are not so different from older ways of entrenching political power, especially when those recommending certain blogs are mainstream media actors.<sup>79</sup> The much hyped democratic potential of Twitter is also significantly concentrated: the Web Ecology Project found that 59% of tweeters around the failed Iranian revolution of 2009 just tweeted once and the top 10% of users generated 65% of tweets.<sup>80</sup>

We must, however, acknowledge the growth of *latent political actors*. In Britain, for example, there are people blogging or tweeting about aspects of institutional life, not yet acknowledged as contributing to political debate but able, given a suitable political context, to emerge from the shadows: blogging doctors, teachers, policemen/women, army officers, magistrates, employees of big pharmaceutical

companies, all forbidden from speaking in public about their conditions of work.<sup>81</sup> This domain of latent individual politics is new and only possible through the networked space of the Web. When coordinated across international borders (Wikileaks), such action may disrupt the old rule that information and trade flows tend to be closely tied together:<sup>82</sup> this has wider political consequences, and not necessarily good ones.<sup>83</sup> The result is a new *reserve* of political action.

So let's grant that the spectrum of political action has expanded in an age of 'information abundance', enabling what Bruce Bimber calls 'postbureaucratic forms of politics'. But it is not enough to identify new political actors: we also need to understand conditions whereby their actions are articulated into longer 'chains' and become recognized as part of the 'what' of politics. Mainstream political bloggers, just outside political parties, who become regular media sources, are articulated in this way, but most bloggers are not. For sure, new online networks have become visible in global politics, but with what sustained effect? Civic talk often occurs in detachment from the practice of power, while the sheer difficulty of converting an online presence into presence and legitimacy beyond a small circle makes Matthew Hindman's sobering assessment of blogs – 'the new *elite* media' – difficult to deny in countries that are working democracies. We should remember that a lot of small-scale democratic 'subactivism' lacks bridges whereby it can be linked to 'policymaking . . . in formal institutional spheres'.<sup>84</sup>

In principle, however, separate publics can be linked together easily online, generating 'a public of publics' around specific issues or a political crisis.<sup>85</sup> Let's consider some examples. Anti-globalization networks in Europe, North America and elsewhere have been a striking addition to the set of manifest, not just latent, political actors over the past decade. But how much have their actions influenced mainstream political agendas or the broader citizenry's understanding of politics? If we leave aside the work of network actors quite close to mainstream agendas (NGOs), western political agendas have, arguably, changed very little in the past two decades in spite of an undoubted extension in the range of political actors: indeed a neoliberal policy agenda has remained largely constant during that period.<sup>86</sup> The explanation may lie in the dimensions identified earlier: authority, evaluation, framing. Regardless of the expansion of political actors, political change requires changes in the distribution of political *authority*, which in turn must be grounded in transformations of dominant regimes of *evaluation*, which in turn depends on how the space where society's concerns and political needs get defined is itself *framed*.<sup>87</sup> This requires alliances across the divides of gender, age,

ethnicity and class. It also, as a recent study of Indonesian politics brings out, requires the sustaining of *physical* spaces where such political agency can be visible. The difficulty of such transformations reduces the chances of even the most resourceful new political actors to wield wider political influence. Jeffrey Juris's excellent study of the anti-globalization movement brings out the resulting frustrations for those new actors. New political actors *may* emerge online: think of the US Tea Party movement. But the Tea Party had only 67,000 members (in 2010) and two crucial advantages: its campaigning worked with, not against, the grain of dominant regimes of evaluation in US society (pro-market, anti-state, pro-local action), and it benefited from rich corporate supporters.<sup>88</sup>

The Tea Party case foregrounds an important issue: the same forces that have transformed the basic resources of political agency (and so extended the cast list of politics) benefit *all* political institutions, including established actors. The implications of information abundance for institutional political actors are certainly complex. As Andrew Chadwick notes, 'the internet . . . offers political elites many opportunities to intensify and diversify the ways in which they sustain themselves in positions of power.'<sup>89</sup> But institutions must also now assume that anyone who deals with them (whether employee, customer or contractor) can blog, that leaking is easy (just press the send button on an email) and that most people have a motive to blog or leak some of the time. As a result, institutions become *porous* in new ways, while media institutions are keen to dominate new sources of news and find new ways of diverting fickle audience attention.<sup>90</sup> At first glance, institutional porosity might seem good for democracy, exposing established institutional authority, increasing scope for contestatory politics all round. But remember that the very same porosity affects *political* institutions as well, including the state and its agencies: in Britain, leaks of Home Office errors (lost laptops brimming with confidential data); in the USA, the circulation of soldiers' photographs of the Abu Ghraib prison's torture practice. It may be in the interests of some institutions dependent on resources from the state (for example, the police) to have such information circulating in the public domain. This increased institutional porosity therefore *may* generate new forms of individual political agency, but again the consequences of such agency always require specific analysis that draw on other dynamics: in the Abu Ghraib case, as Bennett and colleagues point out, the US press, operating on a quasi-war footing, managed to neutralize the consequences by framing the images as 'abuse', not 'torture'.<sup>91</sup>

In any case, individual acts of disruption tell us little about democratization for the long term. What are the chances of creating new political *institutions* with sufficient authority to transform regimes of evaluation and challenge the framing of political space? I suggest they are small: if well-established political institutions' possibilities of 'sustained performance across events and issues' becomes more difficult,<sup>92</sup> how much more difficult is it to establish new political institutions with the authority required for sustained programmes of radical policy action? In an age of routinized political scandal, all political authority becomes more unstable and attempts to generate new forms of political authority doubly so.

To sum up, there are clear new opportunities for collaborative social and political production online;<sup>93</sup> indeed the boundaries and dynamics of the 'public sphere' in Jürgen Habermas's term have been transformed as the networking of the public sphere has shifted from a slow process of institutional referral to a rapid feedback loop between multiple nodes that sometimes can move with alarming speed or, as it is put in China, like 'fire' (*huo*).<sup>94</sup> Possibilities of transformative political action are silently weighted towards short-term disruptive interventions and away from long-term positive projects.

#### *The changing conditions of political engagement (the 'why' of politics)*

Too many accounts of politics concentrate on institutions and neglect the level of individuals, that is, the political orientation and skills of citizens. This level is crucial to understanding whether people have *reasons* to act politically. The increasing fragility of institutional political agency has implications for the engagement of citizens who are *not yet* political agents. As Lance Bennett notes, introducing a recent study of young people's 'civic life online', we need to acknowledge a broad range of 'pathways to political engagement'. But we must also note political engagement's deep basis in contexts of empowerment or disempowerment: 'most young people simply do not believe that following and learning about various issues will translate into the power to help decide them': in this context, it remains striking that less than 50 per cent of those aged under 50 in Britain regard themselves as certain to vote in the next general election, although that figure has recently risen for the overall UK population. Apparently 'interactive' sites contribute little, for example, to young people's sense of engagement if those same young people 'do not believe' that their contributions 'are being listened to'.<sup>95</sup> This gap between the

promise of political socialization and the reality of political (non)-participation matters. Digital media may not change this. Meanwhile traditional media remain much more important than often allowed: in the 2010 British general election, for example, television debates were universally acknowledged to be opinion-turning events, even if commentary on social networking sites amplified their effects, at least for younger and new voters.<sup>96</sup>

Take first the 'supply' side of political engagement. Let's put to one side any assumption that the interactivity of today's information interfaces is *itself* the same as engagement: it is not mere 'transactional' interactivity we are concerned with here but genuine possibilities of collaborative action.<sup>97</sup> Recall Pierre Rosanvallon's point that the implications of today's politics involve *more and more* incitements to participate in various forms of 'counter-politics' – 'the people as watchdogs, the people as veto-wielders, and the people as judges' – but *fewer and fewer* incitements to participate in forms of 'ordinary democracy', that is, sustained political action in favour of explicit political goals. It is not just that negative coalitions are easier to organize than positive coalitions.<sup>98</sup> Rosanvallon is concerned with a shift in the balance of incentives and disincentives that structure from below the landscape of political possibilities: although he doesn't emphasize this, *media* are crucial enablers and amplifiers of this shift. Media help negative action gather force, gain attention and generate extreme pressure on institutional actors. As regards positive political action, media destabilize the agents of constructive politics (whether established or new), framing challenges to the normal domain of 'the political' as dangerous or violent, and shortening the timescale in which new regimes of evaluation can publicly be built. The digital media landscape intensifies this asymmetry.

Turning to the 'demand' side of political engagement, what are the conditions under which today's infrastructural incitements to individual action can be converted into sustained political action? Mostly, it is large actors who dominate how the world's events are framed through their influences over the networks of media production and dissemination.<sup>99</sup> All the increased resources on which mass self-communication depends generate increased *promotional* resources also in the hands of corporations and other large actors,<sup>100</sup> affecting the landscape in which 'mere' individual political action is judged. The hugely increased incitements to discourse – by *anyone* – create a supersaturated environment of media *consumption* from which individuals are even less likely to select a particular theme for attention and engagement. As Danilo Zolo pointed out two decades ago, the premium on all forms of attention increases, which means that

the likelihood of specifically political attention is reduced: it follows that the likelihood of positive rather than negative attention to politics is even lower. Yes, if we all stopped watching TV, we would have more time to follow the welter of political communication available online, but will that 'cognitive surplus' be enough in an age when the flow of information and opinion is effectively infinite? In an era of post-bureaucratic politics, inherited loyalties and 'interest-based political affiliation' may count for less than short-term 'event-based' loyalties, with media institutions having a vested interest in pushing the latter. Meanwhile, older patterns of citizen duty are destabilized by institutional change, leading to a sharp divide between social and civic dimensions of everyday life, particularly for young people.<sup>101</sup>

It is particularly important to follow the evidence, not media hype, about how people are actually using digital media. In a rich study of Argentinian news production and audiences, Pablo Boczkowski shows that a vast majority of the new audience read no blogs or online commentary and barely do more than glance at the headlines on their homepage, leaving news links unclicked.<sup>102</sup> Meanwhile in Denmark, a country with very high internet penetration and political efficacy, only very small numbers participate in political debate online or use social networking sites to act politically.<sup>103</sup> Access to the internet in itself is not enough: as Matthew Prior notes from the USA, 'people who enjoy watching entertainment more than news *and* have access to cable TV and the internet are *less knowledgeable and less likely to vote* than any other group of people.'<sup>104</sup> This is, in part, because there is often in the USA no regular 'civic environment' that provides a meaningful context for constructive political action (the Tea Party's negative politics being a paradoxical counter-example); it is also because of the ease of clicking *past* political knowledge on the way to online entertainment.<sup>105</sup>

Any strategy of transformative politics – that is, any attempt to co-ordinate new forms of discourse and action that work to transform the structures of everyday life – must also challenge the media-enhanced orders that saturate *everyday* action. Think of the increase in workplace surveillance now taken down to the smallest category of action; the ability to link such surveillance can be linked to anticipatory narratives ('targets', 'missions', 'personal goals') that organize employees' working and wider lives. The imperatives of the surveillance-saturated work environment get translated into a social, leisure and consumption environment of *co-veillance*,<sup>106</sup> which reproduces the pressures to generate stories, 'leaks', revelations and scandals. Mutual monitoring has always been part of social life. However, digital media support forms of mutual monitoring that are fast, extensive and increasingly

continuous with institutional surveillance. Meanwhile, the intense mobility of a networked life, as Boltanski and Chiapello argue, reduces the *social* resources from which alternative values can be built and sustained collectively.<sup>107</sup> The constraint on transformative politics that Marx identified in 'the dull compulsion of economic life'<sup>108</sup> has now acquired a social and cultural dimension: what we might call *the dull compulsion of media-saturated life*.

So, on the one hand, the possibilities of *potential* political action are now greater and better resourced than in the pre-digital age. This change, because it does not depend on individual access to the new technologies, extends beyond rich countries. Websites, mobile phones, social networking sites and Twitter are now contributing to the texture of political action across the world: from the Philippines to Iran in the last decade, from Tunisia to UK Uncut this decade.<sup>109</sup> Yet, for reasons that are connected, *long-term* strategies of positive politics and new political institution-building are more constrained. A huge amount of 'noise' in today's augmented media environment fills in the gaps of the news cycle just as old style media did.<sup>110</sup> More subtly, the taking of mutual monitoring and social judgement that have always constrained people from the risks of positive politics (persuading others to change how they live) are reinforced. Networking more – and more effectively – does not stop the 'spiral of silence' against political non-conformism from turning.<sup>111</sup> It is this double movement – an inflation of 'counter-democracy' and reinforced constraints against 'ordinary democracy' – that is likely to shape political innovation for the foreseeable future.<sup>112</sup> What does it matter, against this backdrop, if mainstream *news* is being made more participatory?<sup>113</sup>

What are the implications of this analysis for democratization? Let's return to Tilly's three conditions of democratization. In the digital media age, Tilly's third condition (*the reduction of the autonomy of non-state power centres from public politics*) is partly enhanced. All institutions become more porous and open to media scrutiny and scandal, and so it becomes increasingly difficult for *any* institutional power centre to insulate itself from public politics: some networks (for example criminal networks) may do so, but only by not becoming public. The status of Tilly's second condition (*the openness of public politics to participants from any social category*) is unclear since it depends on the degree to which dominant regimes of evaluation already entrench categorical inequality. In some locations (where gender inequality drastically restricts entry into politics), media spectacle may provide openings for challenges to old regimes of evaluation.<sup>114</sup> Elsewhere, as we saw in chapter 4, the balance may be

in the opposite direction. Tilly's first condition (*the integration of trust networks into public politics*) is unlikely to be enhanced in the digital media age because the increasing information saturation of politics means that there are fewer reasons to trust the institutions which underpin processes of binding consultation, and growing reasons for people to withdraw their trust from such processes. Meanwhile, more and more levels of political decision-making are pulled beyond the spaces where, until now, some democratic process existed.<sup>115</sup>

The potential for new democratization is at best ambiguous and partial, whereas digital media's potential to contribute towards *de-democratization* (a weakening in existing democracies' institutional infrastructure) is multiple and continuous. Then consider the continuing pressures in mainstream media towards a narrowing of political positions that political economy has long noted.<sup>116</sup> We must beware of celebrating 'the technical fact of communication itself . . . as an inherent good',<sup>117</sup> without forgetting that communication forms by themselves will not be enough to build and sustain entirely new forms of public politics.

### New routes to public politics

It very much depends, however, where you stand. The constraints on a 'new politics' must, at the very least, be understood alongside the hopes. Politics are nothing without hope. Philip Howard's bleak vision of a 'thin polity' whose 'immense total supply of information is only sparingly shared among citizens' is compelling for the USA (and the UK),<sup>118</sup> but not for the exceptional conditions of political mobilization in the contemporary Arab world (with its particular demographics, long history of neocolonialism and authoritarianism, and increasing poverty) or indeed for China where a large and generally young mass of 'netizens' are increasingly vocal and coordinated in using digital platforms to challenge and shame government.<sup>119</sup> Sustained political mobilization and transformation can only ever emerge through shared perceptions of intense need: perceived gaps between available and necessary resources that are intense enough that they require coordinated action. But, in times of growing global economic and social crisis when the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization warns of increasing food riots,<sup>120</sup> such needs may well be emerging. Local pressures towards politicization will often be played out live on a global media stage.

Digital media offer a new infrastructure for public media and public politics, what Jeremy Gilbert calls an 'alternative media

infrastructure':<sup>121</sup> what might a democratizing media 'infrastructure' look like? As we saw, Yochai Benkler identified the removal of key economic (and practical) obstacles to non-institutional cultural production but said too little about the dynamics of information demand. When political need exists (creating new demands for information, coordination, problem solving and mobilization), then out of media-related practice may emerge not just new sources of news and mobilization but *a new type of media user* who demands comment and information from a social pool extending far beyond institutions.<sup>122</sup> Such media users may become part of the media infrastructure not only through demands on other producers but through acts of 'search-enabling', 'showing', 'archiving' (see chapter 2): showing images of resistance or, as in Seoul's October 2011 mayoral elections, just voting; exchanging stories of injustice; collectively building toolkits for resistance and media archives for common use; or simply communicating across borders the experience of common struggle.<sup>123</sup> The revolutions (successful or halted) of the 2011 Arab Spring offer case studies of these possibilities and their limits. Social networking platforms enable, without doubt, a new *iconography* of popular politics and a new stage in the unfolding history of technology's implication in political form, extending Walter Benjamin's vision of political culture in modernity as based on reception 'in a state of distraction'.<sup>124</sup> Perhaps they even generated, on occasion, a *counter-myth* of the mediated centre, working against existing state/media relations. This is suggested by the idea of 'Facebook youth' that much popular and journalistic discourse saw as a key factor in the Arab Spring. An image on Twitter of a man holding a placard that reads in Arabic 'thank you Egypt's Facebook youth. Standing steadfast, we shall not leave' was perhaps a token of this possibility, but the actual role of social networking in the Arab insurrections has probably been exaggerated.<sup>125</sup>

Could these developments inspire political mobilization in multiple societies whose audiences all share the same basic tools for social networking? To some degree, such a transnational public sphere is already being enacted but in ways completely at odds with the capacities of existing political institutions to respond:<sup>126</sup> in the developing 2011 financial crisis, new social movements in Spain and Greece (*Indignados* in Spain, *Aganaktismenoi* in Greece) have emerged that echo the repertoires of the Arab Spring. But the crucial factor here is need, that is, the *demand* for politics that stems from despair. We wait to see if such pressures emerge in Britain: the riots of August 2011 may be an early warning sign. Need is the main driver of political engagement,<sup>127</sup> and media infrastructures, however dynamic,

cannot themselves create political need. A sociology of media and politics must recognize the multiple forces of *inertia* that ordinarily (outside special conditions of need) make change difficult. New 'communities of discourse' (in Robert Wuthnow's resonant phrase) can emerge and be sustained, and digital media will play a role in that process, but *only* through multiple intersecting pressures and opportunities. 'Network society' theory does not identify the thick contexts of social interaction that long-term communities of discourse require. It remains at this stage very difficult to predict the internet's impact on international politics over the long term.<sup>128</sup>

It is important therefore to keep distinct: first, the emergence of new forms of popular politics (as seen in the Arab world in early 2011); second, a long-term change in the conditions of elite politics (the strength and loyalty of the armed forces to each Arab regime remains a crucial variable); third, the emergence of an entirely new political process; and finally, a move towards a greater democratization. Optimistic early readings of the Arab Spring, for example, tended to blur the first and third, while ignoring the second and fourth.<sup>129</sup>

I asked at the start of chapter: what notion of the social is at stake in understanding digital media's consequences for new politics? Not one that is limited to the boundaries of the nation-state: many of the resources now needed for political change are information or social capital distributed across many countries. Not one that assumes the priority of the face-to-face encounter: impossible now, when so many of our face-to-face encounters are staged, relayed, reinterpreted or bypassed online and radical new social imaginaries have been inspired by online networks.<sup>130</sup> We need an understanding of the social that is 'thick' enough to register the pressure of people's daily battles over resources (basic material needs, but also battles over the organization of space, time and recognition).<sup>131</sup> Those battles can never be reduced to networked flows *between* places, because they only condense *as* needs, *as* inequalities, in local contexts of agency. In those local contexts, further inequalities are condensed: the 'local' may, following Latour, have folded into it many resources that work on multiple scales, but that does not cancel out important inequalities in the political resources available to particular groups of situated agents. It is only from challenges to these *layered* inequalities that real possibilities of political agency emerge. Scale still matters in politics: and media institutions, digital or otherwise, remain crucial in the production of scale and so key shapers still of the possibilities of political agency.

132 **Network Society, Networked Politics?**

In this chapter, we have refocused general questions about digital media platforms' consequences for politics in terms of digital media's likely consequences for situated political agency. In doing so, we have uncovered a mass of competing dynamics and a central contradiction: between increased stimuli to political contention and mistrust, and increased constraints on positive political construction. We will uncover other uncomfortable paradoxes in later chapters.