

**This Time it is Different: Social Media, Networked Activism and the Long Cycle of Dissent**

**Daniel Drache Drache@yorku.ca**

**November 30**

# **This Time it is Different: Social Media, Networked Activism and the Long Cycle of Dissent**

Daniel Drache

## **Abstract:**

Rallies against sexual harassment in Tahir Square, the visceral expression of public anger against the Delhi bus rape, and the surprise support in Israel's 2013 election for Yair Lapid's Social Justice Party, "There's a Future," winning second place in the Knesset on a platform of injustice and inequality, are but a few recent examples of a cycle of dissent spreading its wings. The push back from the under-thirty risk-takers, who see no future in a status quo world, is at the core of this turbulence. Many are university graduates, they are tech savvy but jobless. The immediate danger for the movement and for researchers is that the effects of social media are being oversold by its champions, while paradoxically, its transformative capacity and full potential remains underutilized and misunderstood. It is something of a cliché to point out the obvious that 'the revolution cannot be tweeted' and that people are at the epicentre of all this change, not new information technology. But, the global use of social media technology makes possible mass messaging and mass mobilization on an unparalleled scale, and this definitely is a transformative change that is innovative, irreversible and far-reaching. Web 2.0 is a high-powered system of mass messaging that has transformed millions into active producers of information and ideas. Code 2.0 is the hardwired infrastructure, which runs the World Wide Web and creates the unique communications environment that puts the user in the driver's seat with a virtual megaphone (Lessig, 1999). What is more, they have devised new ways to occupy public space and construct common goals. The enigma addressed in this chapter is what sustains these broad social movements in the post 9/11 world both theoretically and practically? Has globalization entered into a long cycle of dissent?

## **The Paradox of the Internet**

The French edition of *Defiant Publics: The Unprecedented Reach of the Global Citizen* has lost none of its relevance as it offers a glimpse into the possibility of a much more radical and activist-centered future. From Cairo to Quebec, from Barcelona to New York and in many other countries, activists' use of social media has transformed the global landscape politically and socially.

Rallies against sexual harassment in Tahir Square, the visceral expression of public anger against the Delhi bus rape, and the surprise support in Israel's 2013 election for Yair Lapid's Social Justice Party, "There's a Future," winning second place in the Knesset on a platform of injustice and inequality, are but a few recent examples of a cycle of dissent spreading its wings. The push back from the under-thirty risk-takers, who see no future in a status quo world, is at the core of this turbulence. Many are university graduates, they are tech savvy but jobless. They represent a worldwide youth-demographic revolution confronting vulture capitalism, power hungry elites, and mainstream media discourse. Public anger has grown over the revelations of massive bankers' bonuses and excessive corporate payouts to bankers who accepted bailouts from taxpayer money. It is no accident that the message from Occupy Wall Streeter is finally getting through. In 2012, the EU introduced tough legislation to cap bankers' pay and bonus packages, which was approved by compliant corporate boards.

The immediate danger for the movement and for researchers is that the effects of social media are being oversold by its champions, while paradoxically, its transformative capacity and full potential remains underutilized and misunderstood. It is something of a cliché to point out the obvious that 'the revolution cannot be tweeted' and that people are at the epicentre of all this change, not new information technology. But, the global use of social media technology makes possible mass messaging and mass mobilization on an unparalleled scale, and this definitely is a transformative change that is innovative, irreversible and far-reaching. Web 2.0 is a high-powered system of mass messaging that has transformed millions into active producers of information and ideas. Code 2.0 is the hardwired infrastructure, which runs the World Wide Web and creates the unique communications environment that puts the user in the driver's seat with a virtual megaphone (Lessig, 1999).

We have seen earlier cycles of dissent come and go. Most recently in 1968, the Vietnam anti-war protests and demonstrations and the public defiance of political authority drove LBJ from seeking a second presidential term. Much earlier, in 1848, a wave of revolutions led by students, artisans, workers and a radicalized middle class swept across Europe. Riots and demonstrations forced besieged monarchs to bow to political demands for democratic change (Masson, 2012). This time the on-the-ground movements for social change want to believe that with their innovative tactics they are organized very differently. What is more, they have devised new ways to occupy public space and construct common goals. The enigma is what sustains these broad social movements in the post 9/11 world both theoretically and practically?

### **Questioning Authority, Challenging Power**

Is it the unique qualities of the participatory communication platform of the web 2.0 information technology that is behind this global pushback from below? Should we be looking at the weakening of authority and hierarchy, and the decline of deference to explain the paradigm shift

in the rise of networked individualism? Is it that new information technology has a bias for pluralism, diversity and practical democracy? Are these emergent, bottom up political spaces the consequence of the dramatic decline of the left/right binary, the once indelible marker of political change?

There is no single explanation to account for the profound global shift in mentality, defying authority and learning by doing. It appears that practice has overtaken theory in the production of new ideas about society and markets. This is not accidental. Hundreds of million users have access to the fastest, most interactive, most accessible, and in Castell's words, "self-expanding means of communications in history" (Castells 2012). For Zizek, these counter-movements have acquired hard-earned gravitas. They have become a 'hegemonic' social force playing a key emblematic and structural role in many countries (Zizek, 2012). His original idea is that the digital age has spawned a new species of social movements organized for 'on the ground,' bottom-up push back. The latest wave of global protest has turned its hope and rage against the domestic agents responsible for the long, harsh years of neoliberal policies at the domestic level.

In Gerbaudo's words, "these physical acts of assembly combined with the virtual sphere of discursive autonomous communities are responsible for creating an unlikely variety of emotional space for all kinds of collective action" (Gerbaudo, 2012). The rich diversity of these locally anchored movements and the much-in-evidence pluralism, in which no one ideology or approach has the necessary instruments to prevail against all others, speaks to the core quality of the new information age. What has become apparent is that the autonomy of the social actor and the technological platform of 'mass self-communication' have given citizens influence both in their neighbourhoods and around the world. The public used to be stereotyped as a 'phantom,' à la Lippman's classical formulation, but the process of socialized communication and the production of meaning made possible by the information economy takes us well beyond the realm of interpersonal communication (Drache, 2008).

The rapid diffusion of new information technology correlates very closely with Castell's original insight that capitalism is under fire from transnational networks, coalitions and advocacy campaigners with their own iconic heroes and ideas (Castells 2012). A culture of networked individualism along with rights-based models of citizenship has empowered groups to organize and mobilize across state boundaries in unprecedented ways.

### **"The Inclusive Middle" and "The Big Bang of Social Movements"**

Social scientists have largely neglected the role of emotion in social movement studies; gradually however, the psychology of collective action is better understood as a fundamental component of these newly minted, user-driven digital networks. Two arresting ideas stand out. First, 'the inclusive middle,' to employ Bobbio's words, with its competing intersubjectivities, requires total strangers to network and connect discursively with other citizens through the process of

communication and ultimately collective action (Bobbio, 1996). Our modern idea of being in public requires the act of strangers coming together for a common purpose to achieve a set of shared ends. These assemblages of unscripted actors, in Gerbaudo's imaginary are testing the purpose and rationale behind governments' austerity measures and cutbacks. The fallout from the fraying of the historic left/right binary has had an emancipatory effect in the information age. What we can now comprehend is that the once discredited middle, the dead zone of contemporary electoral politics, has been transformed into a vital space for social actors and broad-based networks. New media activists are no longer prepared to play ball with their elected governments. Of course social movements are not political parties but become surrogates for political actors out of touch with under thirty voters. These on-the-ground networkers and on-line communities are the eyes and ears of dissenting publics. They have taken to the streets in Holland, Greece, Spain, Portugal and, most importantly, Italy, the fourth largest EU economy. This grey area of the 'inclusive middle' is fast becoming the centre of gravity where change begins when unscripted actors contest power and challenge authority.

Secondly, Twitter, Facebook and text messaging activists are turning their ire against the political parties and politicians who have underestimated the depth of public anger over financial scandals where cossetted bankers pay themselves bonuses after being rescued by tax-payers' dollars. Castells identifies this central dynamic when he writes that the "big bang of the social movement starts with the transformation of emotion into action" (Castells, 13, 2012). Or again: "If many individuals feel humiliated, exploited, ignored or misrepresented, they are ready to transform their anger into action, as soon as they overcome their fear" (Castells. 15,2012).

Is this not what happened in 2012 among Canada's aboriginal community? The community self-organized from the ground up against the indifferent Harper government. Few thought that such a grass roots movement was even possible. The one-hundred thousand plus 'Idle No More' movement of socially networked First Nations organized a month-long protest and blockaded highways and rail lines against the Canadian government's initial refusal to meet with the grand Chiefs. What they demanded was a new relationship with Ottawa and the signing of peace treaties. The 'Idle No More' protestors were energized by the month's long hunger strike of Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence and were encouraged in their demands by the global support they received.

**Game Changers Learning by Doing or Practice Before Theory:  
A Period of Intense Cumulative Change Since the 1999 Battle for Seattle**

1999-2007 Anti-globalizers organize dozens of mass demonstrations against World Bank and IMF meetings, WTO Ministerials and G20 Summits in Geneva, Washington, Genoa, Cancun and Quebec

2008 Obama elected as the first Facebook President relying on social media to turn out the vote

2010 Arab Spring topples authoritarian regimes

2010 WTO Doha Round Implodes- Mark 1 for anti-globalizers We are 99%

2011 Occupy Wall Street 800 Occupations in the name of the 99%

2012 200,000 Quebec students strike against higher tuition fees and actually win- Jean Charest loses his seat- Couldn't be Done

2011 Ana Hazare rallies hundreds of thousands across India in support of his hunger strike demanding anti-corruption legislation

2012 US presidential slug fest- Mobilizing the base using big data to target the 'voter like consumer'- two million volunteers/800 paid organizers

2012 100,000 strong 'Idle No More' movement of Indigenous Canadians demands a new relationship with Ottawa and their own leaders inspired by the hunger strike of Attawapiskat Chief Theresa Spence

2012 Israel's We Have a Future movement wins 24% of the vote campaigning on social justice

2013 Brazil's spontaneous BBQ protests rallying thousands to have civic authorities enact local reforms

2013 In India, mass protest rallies demanding tough reforms to protect women from rape and domestic violence in their country

2013 Beppe Grillo's Five Star party wins 25 % of the Italian vote and holds balance of power in minority government. Social media and mass messaging turned out supporters in record numbers.

Still there is much we do not understand about how this big idea of contesting power and challenging authority has sunk its roots into such diverse environments – from the Wall Street Occupiers to the mobilized, alert and angry Arab street. Nor do we know a lot about social media and how it connects people and how under some conditions people take the huge step from engagement on-line to action off-line. Nor why others choose to remain disengaged as citizens? Finally, why does e-activism with such a fluid organization and few leaders in the conventional sense of the term become the primary institution for mass mobilization in modern society?

**Diversity, Inclusion and Networked Pluralism**

How and why people decide to build community, change the public conversation, mobilize, and take their discursive issues offline remains a conundrum. We can also see that evidence-based arguments on the internet are sharply contested, and the public conversation often appears confused and contradictory. The ‘refeudalization of the public sphere,’ to employ Habermas’ language, has grown rapidly with the intrusive reach of the security state in the last decade. Still state security forces do not easily control social networked activism. New information technologies put authoritarian regimes like those of China, Egypt and others under pressure in a way no one imagined. Constant blogging and alternative information sites cannot be permanently blocked and shut down as the Chinese authorities know from first-hand experience. There exists an uneasy balancing act between the panoptical state and the openness of the internet and citizen acts. In China, with all its repressive powers, the Communist party has been unable to control the internet and the networked social movements of the internet age. With the fastest, most accessible, self-expanding and interactive means of communication in history, authoritarian regimes do not have a viable strategy to contain these ‘soft power’ movements. Social activism has demonstrated the veracity of the old adage that history turns on a dime. Things change instantly and for no apparent single reason. In an information age, bottom up interaction and bootstrap collaboration faces constant tests of its tactics from skeptics and supporters alike.

The upshot is that we do not have adequate theories to explain long-term structural change not the impact on users themselves and the mediated public. For instance, many scholars are particularly interested in the way the new mass media demands nano-second immediacy when, as a result, the user/spectator’s critical perspective is lost. Being overwhelmed by information is the very opposite of being informed.

Other experts hold to the idea that identity politics, premised on the competing and converging intersubjectivities of individual experience, explain the fluid connections between different power networks. The built-in, natural attraction and curiosity for alternative interests and values challenges the dominant ways politics and political parties organize themselves. Traditional binary left-right ideological thinking has been sidelined by the under-thirty activist’s culture of ‘yes we can’ and a new citizenship empowerment. For many, elections have lost their function as a means of choosing between competing ideologies. In many democracies, elections result in split decisions with no clear winners on voting day. In Greece, the United Kingdom, Israel and Italy, new populist movements are game changers, and often election spoilers. Using blogs, twitter and hyperactive campaigning, they shake-up a political order that is out of touch with the electorate. It should not be forgotten that Obama secured two stunning presidential victories against the tide defeating McCain’s war patriotism, the Teabagger’s neoliberal tax-cutting promises, a billion dollars’ worth of Republican attack ads paid for by big moneyed interests, and Romney’s defense of the privileged one percent.

Social media helps voters, particularly first-time voters and marginalized groups realize how profoundly the consequences of globalization pervade their daily lives and the complex ways a

multitude of threads binds them irreversibly to places near and far. Beyond this, however, the student strike in Quebec, Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring all suggest the plurality of models of the network society. The decentered, open and participatory broadcast model of these new information technologies stands in sharp contrast to the passive and fixed role the public played in the age of television and radio. Most critically, networked pluralism gives us a way to explore the role of governance, politics, culture and fate in the globalization narrative.

From this perspective, the real antagonism in the present era is between the politics of neoliberal austerity and the newfound power of immaterial labour in the production of alternative ideas, texts and programs by virtual and real counterpublics of every description (Zizek 2012). The collateral damage from successive financial crises in Asia 1997, Russia 1998, Brazil 1999, Argentina 2001, the dot.com bubble 2001 and the 2008 global financial meltdown has triggered a movement to de-globalize and revalorize the local at the expense of the global. These structural collapses and the recurring instances of systemic breakdown need to be evaluated and studied. It is a mistake to consider globalization as a static concept premised on the ideal of ‘frictionless capitalism’ (Reinhardt and Rogoff, 2010). For a system spinning out of control there is little doubt about the preferences of the majority of the population. In Habermas’ apt words, the taxpayer must bear the ‘liability for system failure’ (Habermas, 125: 2012). For the first time in the history of the global, market-driven system, there is awareness that the only way to rescue the economic system is a new, yet to be realized political consensus that is premised on a very different set of principles.

### **The Remarkable Open-Ended Globalization Narrative: Always A New Chapter in the Making**

Three decades ago, globalization was principally an economic concept, and the driving idea was the deregulation of financial markets, increased capital mobility, massive capital flows, unparalleled acquisitions and foreign direct investment flows. The next wave of globalization established trade blocs, which gave foreign business new rights to be treated no differently than domestic firms and, where trade law allowed, gave corporations the right to sue governments thus limiting government ability to implement regulations, particularly in the areas of environment and health. The EU, NAFTA and other blocs were designed to broaden and deepen market access largely to facilitate the growth of multinational global strategies. The acceleration of global integration that irreversibly binds people together by fate, choice and a shared common destiny has been facilitated by the rise of new information technologies that radically reduced transportation and communication costs. With a dramatic fall in telephone rates, long distance telephone calling has become affordable any day and any time. The ubiquitous cell phone and global news networks have created a vast information grid. Skype lets millions call for free to keep in touch with friends and family and provides business with an essential tool for reducing costs. These dramatic life-style changes have provided the world’s telecommunications companies and computer giants with gilded economic opportunities to globalize and establish

powerful monopolies over the sale of information and services domestically.

Globalization had the largest and most visible impact on consumption patterns and culture in the global north first and then in the global south. 'Global brandism,' with the worldwide sale of every kind of consumer product, changed local consumer preferences for clothing, fast food and entertainment in the developing market economies. McDonald's golden arches became the icon of the age where global status goods and products replaced local consumer choices.

By 2000, the globalization narrative changed direction again acquiring a powerful political dimension along with regulatory practices. As governments accepted zero inflation targets, belt-tightening cuts and deepening market access, the Washington consensus set the standard for global governance practices. National governments accepted double accountability; first to their own electorates, but equally important, a second to the transnational rules and practices of global governance through the WTO and other global governance institutions. This opened the areas of health and the environment, highly sensitive policy spaces that had not been part of previous global trade agreements to global governance rules. The governance by hard and soft law legal cultures reached behind borders and redefined the boundary between the domestic and global governance institutions challenging the Westphalian expansive notion of sovereignty with the state as the epicentre. The 'end of history' thesis framed the neoconservative Reagan revolution in constitutional and individual rights terms. It predicted that in a post-socialist world there was no need for an emancipatory democratic project; history had ruled against it. At the political level, the globalization agenda marginalized the citizen sowing the seeds of dissent and citizen pushback. The social economy was pushed deep on the back burner while the market-driven agenda left hundreds of millions behind (Chanda, 2007).

### **2008 Financial Panic and Meltdown**

With the implosion of global financial markets in 2008, capital no longer leads the charge for the recovery. With the exception of China and India, the world economy has stalled. The EU countries grew a paltry one percent in the last five years according to a recent quantitative 2013 study published by researchers in London (Giles, 2013). Certainly, in an analytical sense neoliberalism as an economic framework adopted by governments worldwide and the unleashing of markets by very different means across the globe are impossible to disentangle. However, the supreme irony is that in the debates about cultural globalization, social networking has also flourished at the micro-level under neoliberalism. Global cultural flows drive the inter-country movement of people, ideas and information across the globe and offer the possibility to think differently about the interlocking globe (Rodrick, 2010). In the orthodox view, the market is seen as a space of rational self-interest, the defense of property rights, individual freedom and choice. As a social institution for the exchange of non-material ideas, information and signs, the market is interactive, interpersonal, relational and subject to regulation and diverse values. As we have already seen, the production of meaning stimulates new debates about the practical and

theoretical implications of the new order. The most important debate is the emergence of a counter-hegemonic discourse with its twin beliefs of social justice and inclusivity (Boutang, 2011).

So the question is will the aspirations for freedom and equality ultimately force a change in the system? Are we entering a period of de-globalization in which domestic policy space is growing more robust while the globalization imperative, though tarnished and on the defensive, is regrouping to make fresh demands on citizens and governments to support unsparing austerity measures that cut services, wages and jobs? Global neoliberalism is looking for a comeback but the fundamentals have altered.

### **Questions and Doubts About Social Media**

New strategies to occupy physical space in large urban settings, the complementarity between the street and the tweet, and finally, the configuring of people and social groups in new and innovative ways in cyberspace and on the streets, capture the core dynamics of an intergenerational value shift that is largely the result of soft power and access to new social media. This is why *Time* magazine named the Protester as the banner story of 2011. These latest developments take social media far beyond the internet of a decade ago, which was seen as an autonomous space separate from the rest of society.

At a deeper level, Braudel gave us a way to grasp the complex dynamics of sweeping structural change. His insight was that when rigidity and tradition prevent institutions from adapting and changing, new practices and values are both needed and possible (Braudel, 1987). We can see why the text and conversation are the building blocks of a new, process-driven discourse of politics. One can drop in and join up any time; the barriers to entry are few. When you decide that you have had enough, you can exit easily. The possibility to share information autonomously and continuously and to connect non-scripted actors has pushed the cycle of dissent in new and more compelling directions extending its reach beyond the densely populated cosmopolitan settings where publics have easy access to the internet.

### **Deconstructing the Lifecycle of Dissent: Trigger to Trough**

A chronology of online/offline activism reveals that a long decade of citizen activism has created a Niagara of interactive energy and information flows in which the new information technologies and political messaging feed off each other. The effect is, so far, incremental, cumulative and in the moment. Each outburst of online activism begins from an ad hoc event which no expert could have predicted. The 'feeling-the-stones' as you walk practices and creative strategies are diverse across the globe.

Compare the Occupy Wall Street movement with the Quebec Student Movement and the Arab Spring. There are many models of oppositional change -- anti-capitalist in the case of Occupy

Wall Street, anti-authoritarian in Egypt and elsewhere, and anti-austerity for the Quebec Student Movement.<sup>1</sup> So even though the citizen has a fragmented identity and citizen rights are in free fall from neoliberal cutbacks, as Richard Falk has argued in his sobering work on the rout of the global citizen, he/she also has leverage in the public sphere largely because of the way social media content is distributed (Falk 2000). Social media gives the activist a virtual megaphone to get the message out loudly and far through user-generated mega hubs like Wikipedia, multimedia sites like YouTube and with meta-blogging on Facebook and Twitter. Add to this mix, global broadcasters like Al Jazeera, BBC World, France2 -- all of these different hubs and spokes of new information technologies coalesce to form something quite special. The global circuitry has evolved into a new kind of communications platform with a Facebook newsroom for the networked individual qua activist, a Tweet café for the discursive community and a Google library of information for any curious person (Hodson 2013).

Vernon's 1966 idea of the product life cycle puts into perspective the growth, diffusion, maturity and decline of these transformative technologies. An initial massive uptake enables rapidly changing kinds of web 2.0 technologies to gain 'mature product' status selling in the hundreds of millions. The critical idea is that within a remarkable decade a non-stop outpouring of transformative social media was created: suddenly there was global news broadcasting, the World Wide Web, Facebook, Skype, Twitter, YouTube, the Ipod, Iphone, Ipad, and e-readers plus a million blogs and limitless sites for information digging. All of this information gadgetry

---

<sup>1</sup> Researchers have been fascinated by the fact that social activism has a proper life cycle from trigger point to plateau to trough where grass roots organizations enter into a long period of decline with loss of influence and media-attracting power. These bottom-up movements like Occupy Wall Street remain active at the margins but are unable to command attention from the mass media after being evicted from squares and parks across the US. Strikingly OWS did not have leaders or realizable goals; nevertheless, it had a global impact and captured the imagination of a new generation of activists worldwide. In contrast, the six-month student strike in Quebec had a different model and strategy. The Quebec strike was led by three student unions with articulate leaders, a grass roots direct democracy organization of decision-making and obtainable goals. Its story is well known. Though supported by 200,000 university and college students, it was attacked by the media and the Premier of Quebec who banned demonstrations. Despite this, the students emerged victorious, and the Premier was defeated in the 2012 election losing his seat and majority government. The anti-demonstration law that he passed to crush the strike was repealed, and the *causus bellus* of the strike, a thirty percent fee hike was cancelled by the new government, for the time being. Like Occupy Wall Street, the students were mobilized by texting, Facebook and Twitter as well as through university-based independent video networks.

is easy to use for the young and savvy, immensely profitable for the mega-firms that own it, and price competition makes it ever more affordable. Psychologically, this information rich universe satisfies the innate curiosity that we have for the world around us. It makes the individual feel special, feel that he or she is no longer a 'disconnected observer' of the system.

**The Great Information Transformation:  
A Massive Amount of Intense Innovation in a Very Short Amount of Time**

1990	Tim Berners-Lee It's Free Hypertext
1997	Page's and Brin's Google Search Engine Revolutionizes The Information Revolution
1992	20 million on internet
2012	1.8 billion web subscriber
1992	35 million cell phone users
2012	2.0 billion plus cell phone users
1998-	Steve Job's Apple Smart Technology Consumer Revolution More Than
2012	A Decade Long Revolution from the Ipod, Iphone, Ipad and Itunes Store
2004	Mark Zuckerberg et al create prototype Facebook- 4000 initial subscribers
2012	Facebook's 'Life without Curtains' exceeds 1 billion plus users
2003	Skype developed from Swedish and Danish software
2012	Skype-Microsoft daily 660 million users
2006	Jack Dorsey's Twitter launched 140-character tweet
2012	Over 500 million users handling over 1.8 billion tweets daily
2012	YouTube surpasses the 1 billion viewer threshold
2012	Amazon ebooks account for more than 50% of book sales

Source: Drache 2012

Countless numbers believe that they have rights and this devolution of power downwards to the user is unprecedented in the history of modern communications systems. However, this is not a statement of fact. The other reality is that the theory of the product cycle raises a red flag against an overly optimist of the future. There will be fewer product spikes in the long term, according to technology historians, and we are entering a long levelling off plateau where the emergence of transformative products like Facebook and Twitter will be less frequent. How long the digital revolution could be on this plateau is any one's guess.

**Web 2.0 Technology: A Unique Global Phenomenon That Carries a Dark Passenger**

We can see, in retrospect that the rapidity and intensity of the diffusion of Web 2.0 interactive, user-driven technologies worldwide is greater and more important than the astonishing growth of Facebook, the World Wide Web, Twitter and the cell phone revolution as separate entities. Combined they have obtained a critical mass with a long tail of lasting effects. The intensity and continuous innovation of new products is unprecedented. Since 1993, the World Wide Web of 20 million users has exploded to over 1.2 billion persons—in 2012 500,000 still join the internet ‘club’ each month. Cell phone ownership continues to grow at explosive rates particularly in Africa and South Asia. The world is linked, wired and connected to a degree no one could have predicted. Over four billion people on the planet are part of this information age as radio, television and satellite reach into every village in the four corners of the globe. Experts once predicted a runaway digital divide between the global south and the industrial first world. This turned out to be a misreading; diffusion is unequal and there are inevitable lags. Since an underwater cable has connected Nairobi with high-speed, copper optic cable, the internet revolution has exploded in Africa. Penetration rates are dramatically different in Asia where India is a laggard compared to China (Diebert et.al., 2010). However, in the next decade the digital divide between village and city looks likely shrink and diminish further.

Every transformative technological innovation of signal proportion is also an enabler of state regulatory and security surveillance powers. The automobile created for personal use and profit became an integral and essential part of modern warfare and revolutionized mass production organization and techniques. Birth control gave women reproductive control over their bodies, but it also presented the state with enormous regulatory power for family planning and abortion. The point is that it is naïve to believe that the World Wide Web, which was designed by Berners-Lee to be free, open to all and without copyright, would only result in a global information commons. State surveillance and corporate abuse of privacy concerns are also part of Lessig’s great web 2.0 code design.

The need to balance Habermas’ public sphere with Foucault’s notion of the dark side of surveillance is an essential feature of the new means of communication. The game changer in this new communication environment is public opinion. With independent messaging capacity and independent channels of information, the mainstream mass media no longer has the monopoly on information that was at one time unchallengeable. Public opinion can force the political class to think twice about signing a controversial, new, jumbo-sized WTO trade deal and has pushed legislators to cap bankers’ bonuses in the EU and Switzerland. Print media too faces competitive pressure from on-line independent websites and news blogs. The battle for independent public opinion is always unpredictable and increasingly volatile. It is no longer possible to keep the ‘inclusive middle’ public on a short leash. Social media has dramatically affected electoral outcomes in Italy, Portugal, Greece, the United States and Israel. The trend line is not accidental. New social movements are able to build mass followings without relying on the traditional media to get their message out. Bepe Grillo in Italy and Yair Lapid in Israel are cases

in point as each won significant victories against a hostile traditional media. They were ridiculed for their unorthodox campaigning and for the presence of thousands of volunteers, tweeting and messaging in the establishment media; but their methods proved to be on voting day when it mattered most (Alderman and Povoledo, 2013).

Cyberspace is a complex world peopled by individuals in their virtual bubbles who have the capacity and desire to build transnational networks around the globe. Information leaks and the ubiquitous presence of cellphone videos from anonymous citizens able to ‘document it’ have changed news reporting. Front-line, bootstrap, citizen journalists are able to send images from war torn zones or mass demonstrations to mainstream broadcast networks. As the margin and mainstream converge in news sharing, the mass media has to fight an uphill battle to retain its credibility as an independent news-gather (Gerbaudo, 2012).

### **The New Broadcast Model’s Defining Characteristics**

The new broadcast model is strikingly different from earlier radio and television models that made modern publics passive consumers of information. The old media worked with a limited selection of channels to choose from and connected people to information in specific places only. Initially, online content existed in a separate world from offline media and texts. Journalism was professionalized with credentialized guild news reporters. Amateurs from the listening public were largely unwelcome and unwanted. Most importantly, TV, radio and films were corporatized communications platforms owned by powerful and influential media and entertainment conglomerates. These have grown more influential with greater resources, and you still have to be rich to own mass media, produce the news, and be a national broadcaster.

By contrast, Web 2.0 is comprised of the following defining features: it is a vast global system based on point-to-point messaging, you click you talk; structurally, it is decentralized, there is no hub only hubbub; it is interactive by design, talk to anyone anywhere; it is open to all, no user authentication needed. Critically, its hierarchy is super flat, every user is a bootstrap broadcaster and it has two defining characteristics, it is dialogical and organizational. When talk and boots on the street are in-sync, social movements get a hard bounce to innovate and change the conversation in public. When there is no bounce, everyone just does their own thing in cyberspace. It is a planetary babble talk shop with a hundred million conversations waiting to be heard.

### **Is a Bigger Transformation on its Way? Who Controls the Great Code?**

So is a bigger Braudelian transformation on the way? The frank answer is that we are transitioning out of chapter one of a very large, contentious and evolving global narrative. Public reason is defined for many through their diverse experiences or subjectivities, the core idea of identity politics (Castells, 2012; Zizek 2012). The political language of social networking is surprisingly crosscutting, driven by the particular issue in play rather than permanent loyalty to a

political family. It is ad hoc, contingent, process-driven and hence the importance of dialogical community. The text and conversation are essential ingredients in a process-driven, new discourse of politics. You can drop in, join the conversation and later, just as easily, drop out when you have had enough. The barriers to exit are few. In theory, potentially everyone is a leader, but in reality, traditional political structures are in short supply. The lack of structure is as much a curse as a blessing.

Still organizations without steep organizational hierarchy and fixed command and control strategies of governance may well prove to be more resilient than critics acknowledge. In the next decade, Web 2.0 will unquestionably lose its newly minted innocence, and thus the need to ensure citizen participation is the highest priority. Global discursive communities are a hybrid of networked individualism, the public sphere and the mainstream media. The very idea of a 'discursive community' is a slippery term often invoked to capture the new class relations and marginality of the modern work world (Standing 2011). Without the powerfully constrictive left-right binary framing public discourse as it once did, social movements are a product of the global crisis and have learned to use the new information technology for a million different kinds of goals and projects in ways no theorist predicted.

The final piece of the puzzle is that the nation-state is the powerful site of Foucaultian discipline and as the dark side of the net grows exponentially, the new broadcast model faces an array of difficult challenges. For the US Congress the future of the internet is framed not by concerns about user access primarily but a variety of issues such as identity theft, cyberware, kiddie porn and spam viruses. National security, intellectual property rights and child pornography have become the third rail of US politics. The attacks of 9/11 were a pivotal event legitimating new state policies and practices to monitor, eavesdrop and track citizens' emails, phone calls and text messages. Post 9/11, there has been a massive uptake of this invasive technology by elite groups. Subsequently, we see growth in the new broadcast model as large companies try to combine offline marketing communication strategies with new online technologies particularly social media. Social media has changed marketing and corporate strategies giving global business a new profit frontier. The people who initiated the technology such as Mark Zuckerman with Facebook, Larry Page and Sergei Brin, founders of Google, Jim Balsillie, Blackberry's co-founder, Jeff Bezos CEO of Amazon and Richard Saul Wurman conceiver of TEDTalks along with hundreds of other entrepreneurs, scientists, programmers, venture capitalists and bankers have set themselves up at the core of the new elite because they control the code of the technology and provide leadership for the new Technocracy. So, in the future, will we be nothing more than toned-down, passive consumers when reading and autonomous messaging on the web as we are when reading a newspaper or watching TV? A dystopian would have us believe this is our current trajectory, but the new communication platform does more than enable people to talk and chatter with friends and family. It sustains nosey, in your face, autonomous-minded publics that demand to be heard.

## **Skeptics, Cynics and the Framing of Public Discourse: Lessons Learned**

Broader movements in society enable us to understand the dynamics of acquiring real political power and knowledge of the way society functions. However, broad political movements are not the whole process. It is important to recall the three drivers of diversity and inclusivity that have altered the relations between the citizens and the state. The first is the evolving globalization narrative that pushes people towards acquiring more political rights, the next is the intensity of social movements as a phenomenon of the information age, and lastly, the new web 2.0 broadcast model which devolves power to the user. Few took the staying power of the long cycle of dissent seriously, but it has put down local roots and grown into a worldwide phenomenon. Skeptics doubted its long-term effects as an autonomous space, but they have been proven wrong.

There remains a final point to make about the 2.0 World Wide Web code and the new means of communication. The participatory, decentralized architecture of the World Wide Web is paradoxically the best safeguard to protect the information commons as no one controls it and *no single actor has the necessary instruments to prevail against all others*. Will its decentralized character empowering the participatory activist public be enough to keep the information commons uncompromised? Finally, has the dissent cycle crested and plateaued? Is it still a transformative work in progress? What new informational changes are next for angry, restless non-conforming publics?

## **References**

- Alderman, Liz and Elisabetta Povoledo (2013). "Victorious spoiler faces test of tactics." *International Herald Tribune* March 2-3.
- Boutang, Yann Moulrier (2011). *Cognitive Capitalism*, translated by Ed Emery. London, Polity Press.
- Castells, Manuel (2012). *Networks of Outrage and Hope Social Movements in the Internet Age*. New York, Polity Press.
- Chanda, Nayan (2007). *Bound Together How Traders, Preachers, Adventurers Shaped Globalization*. New York, Penquin
- Diebert, Ronald Jonathan Zittrain et al (2010) *Access Controlled: The Shaping of Power, Rights and Rule in Cyberspace* (Cambridge: MIT Press).
- Drache, Daniel (2008). *Defiant Publics The Unprecedented Reach of the Global Citizen* London, Polity Press.

Gerbaudo, Paolo (2012). *Tweets and Streets Social Media and Contemporary Activism*. London, Pluto Press.

Giles, Chris (2013). "Advanced economies static, says new index." *Financial Times*, March 6.

Habermas, Jurgen (2012). *The Crisis of the European Union A Response*. London:Polity Press.

Hodson, Jaigris (2013). *Followers, Users and Friends: Technology, Participation and Organizational Stories on the Google, Facebook, and Twitter Blogs 2006-2011*. Doctor of Philosophy, York University, Toronto, April.

Lessig, Larry (1999). *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. New York, Basic Books.

Mason, Paul (2012). *Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere The New Global Revolutions*. London, Verso.

Rainie, Lee and Barry Wellman (2012). *Networked The New Social Operating System*. Cambridge Mass., MIT Press.

Standing, Guy (2011). *The Precariat The New Dangerous Class*. London Bloomsbury.

Zizek, Slavoj (2012). *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*. London, Verso Books.

## Acknowledgements