Are new media democratic?

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ABSTRACT

This paper – which was presented as a lecture to students at City University in 2010 – aims to give an overview and critique of the claims being made for new media in relation to their democratic properties and potentials. It (perhaps crudely) presents two distinct narratives, both of which are 'true' according to current debates, statistics and developments, asking readers to question their own use and understanding of digital media in terms of democracy, and to think again about the language that may have been naturalised around their use.

> *'No questions are more difficult than those of democracy'*
> (Williams 1976)

INTRODUCTION

> E-democracy aims for broader and more active citizen participation
> by the Internet, mobile communications, and other technologies in
> today's representative democracy, as well as through more participatory
> or direct forms of citizen involvement in addressing public challenges.
> (Wikipedia 2010)

This paper gives an overview and critique of some of the rhetoric
surrounding digital media at this time. Specifically, I wish to question
some of the claims being made about the democratic properties
inherent to such media, and that are being naturalised in discussions
about their use.

Notwithstanding difficulties in defining 'new' media (and
questioning the wider rhetoric of 'new'ness which can be unhelpful),
the central goal of this paper is to present two narratives of digital
media, and to prompt the reader to think about – even position – their
own understandings and uses of the media within (or outside of) those
narratives. More will be said about the technical qualities of new media,
and their implications, as we proceed.[1]

When we talk about democracy, (itself of course a contested term,
as Raymond Williams reminds us above), we are mindful of a number
of themes, structures and processes, not least popular power, electoral
systems and mandates, open argument, equality, and representation.
Even though these things are rarely in stasis – they are fluid, sometimes
oppositional to one another, manipulated and contested – they remain a
useful start point in this discussion.

The big claim being made for the digital media with regards
to democracy is that they 'amplify the political voice of ordinary

citizens' in a multitude of ways (Hindman 2008: 6). For example, in increasing access to information, inspiring participation, foregrounding transparency in political and other processes, rendering censorship useless, and galvanising support around the issues of the day. The advent of the new media have been seen as a way of widening the discourse about what is possible and even what is desirable within our cultures and communities.

One of the key facets and facilitators of democracy is of course free and open discussion between citizens, something championed in ideas of the public sphere,[2] yet which has remained allusive over time; no doubt due in part to a monopoly of elites who have prioritised and legitimised certain debates over others, and sought to manage the flow of information. This is nowhere more apparent than in the continuing concentration of ownership of the means of production of our news media (not only in the UK).[3]

What follows is an articulation and exploration of digital democracy presented as two narratives. One argues *for* the new media as a tool for democracy, the other argues *against* such media as a radical or useful way of understanding and enacting democracy in practice. These narratives may seem poles apart, but are both 'true' to the information and evidence about the new media that we have at the current time. They are purposefully provocative in voice with neither comprehensively representing the views of the author.

The narratives explore a number of themes: How (indeed whether) the technology underpinning the media opens them up in terms of access to the media and participation through the media. Do they represent an opening up of decision making processes? Or even a platform for increased activism?

In summary, each narrative will expose the persistent rhetoric and language which are used subtly (or otherwise) to configure and articulate the very use of the media. It is then for the reader to decide how, if and where they position their own use and experience of the

media within those narratives, and to anticipate – indeed enact – a future for this debate.

NEW MEDIA ARE DEMOCRATIC…
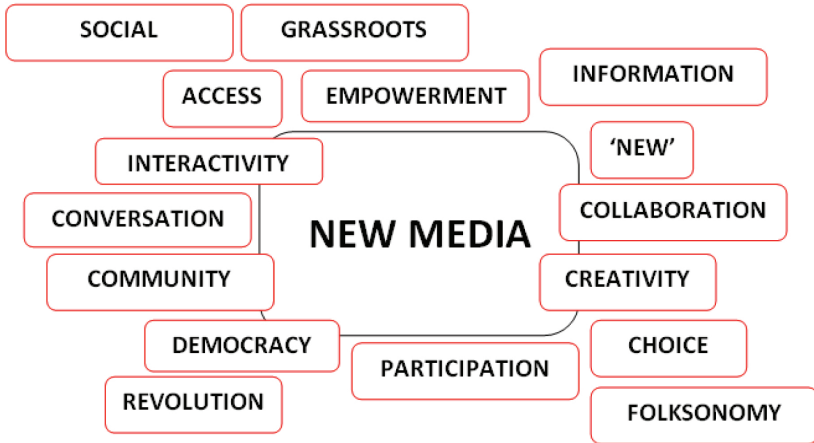
In this narrative, democracy emerges as encoded into the very mechanisms of digital media; in both their conception, and their manifestation as infrastructure.

The World Wide Web was originally conceived in 1989 by Tim Berners-Lee (the inventor of the Web and not the internet – this distinction becomes important later in this paper) and then given, *not sold*, to the world in the 1990s. This was a technology that could have made Berners-Lee billions, but instead, was built on a philosophy of open information exchange; a hippy ideal and aesthetic. This philosophy continues to underpin the World Wide Web Consortium's work on Web standards and accessibility, as can be seen in the consortium's ongoing concerns:

1. Web for All – promoting the importance of internationalisation, device independence and Web accessibility

2. Web on Everything – accessing the Web as easily as possible through a variety of media

(adapted from W3C 2009)

The inherent qualities of the digital media (with their origins in code) actually favour access, malleability, reproducibility and sharing. As all data are converted into numeric forms which can be read and conveniently stored on computers, they become more transportable, connectable and less geographically and materially centred with an authentic 'original'. As information is de-materialised, it can be compressed in smaller spaces, accessed at high speed and in non-linear ways, and, can be manipulated. Encryption and database management mean information storing, access and sharing are possible.

Consequently in the infrastructure of the Web, it is as if 'information wants to be free'.[4] It is incredibly hard to block websites (although of course it has been tried in a number of countries in recent years), as able hackers quickly find ways around the encryption and into hidden information. People tend to work around censorship blockages, if of course they have the know-how, which makes controlling what people see (and say) hugely problematic in the online environment. This is only possible because no one person or state 'owns' the internet and can decide what it will be 'for'. No-one has the power to turn the internet on and off.

The movement of information in cyberspace is then, very different to that favoured and enabled in and through other media. Think of the qualities inherent to broadcast or print media for example. If I 'own' such media, I can choose its emphasis, frequency, tone, voice and politics. But I must have a radio frequency, a television channel, a newspaper, and this means significant financial investment.

There is a hierarchical value chain in operation. New media are an entirely different proposition of course, one where that value chain is dramatically altered or, as Sven Birkerts has written, 'bent into a pretzel' (Birkerts 1994: 5).

On the Web especially, everyone has a potential voice, a platform, and access to the means of production , especially with the advent of 'Web 2.0'. The Web has developed into a many-to-many conversation rather than a top-down, 'broadcast' model. That means that if we have an issue that we want to gather people around (say climate change), we can find and reach those people with an ease and speed that we never could before. Perhaps even move them to direct action. It is a low cost, high reach model.

Increasingly then, the possibility of 'reach' is demonstrable. The statistics for internet access, readily available online, are (at last) starting to look impressive:

- The number of world internet users has doubled between 2005 and 2010.

- In 2010, the number of internet users will surpass the two billion mark, of which 1.2 billion will be in developing countries.

- A number of countries, including Estonia, Finland and Spain have declared access to the internet as a legal right for citizens.

- With more than 420 million internet users, China is the largest internet market in the world.

(ITU World Telecommunications/ICT indicators Database 2010)

The claim is that increasingly we are becoming a part of a 'global village (first anticipated by Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s) where distance shrinks; we begin to recognise ourselves according to our

commonalities rather than differences; and we can take part in global conversations about issues of importance. Simultaneously, patterns of production and consumption become blurred.

In short, power is potentially shared across society in ways that have not previously been possible:

> When people can express themselves, they will. When they can do so with powerful yet inexpensive tools, they take to the new-media realm quickly. When they can reach a potentially global audience, they literally can change the world. (Gillmor 2006: xv)

New technologies thus empower their users, and the opportunity to 'do' or 'act' can be taken if one has the means and the motivation, as Clay Shirky has said:

> In the 20th Century if you had something to say in public you couldn't. Period. If you were a civilian, a citizen, but not a media professional you could not broadcast a message. No matter how hard you tried. People who went out of their way to spread messages through amateur channels were widely regarded as being off their rockers. That change is enormous. Anyone who wants to participate at least has the means to participate. (Shirky on BBC 2010)

Participation then becomes all the easier – and can take many forms, not least:

- Writing a blog. Blogs are now very much mainstream: On 23rd November 2010 the number of blogs being tracked by BlogPulse was 151 million, there had been 42,738 new blogs registered in the last 24 hours

- Commenting on a news item or political announcement or taking part in a consultation

- Starting or joining a campaign with like-minded individuals (such as at www.38degrees.org.uk)

- Crowdsourcing or crowdfunding a project/event/campaign. Perhaps the most obvious crowdsourcing example is www.wikipedia.org. Examples of crowdfunding projects are numerous, but include www. wedidthis.org.uk, www.kickstarter.com and www.sponsume.com

- Making and distributing creative content with a message (such as anti-ads, culture hacking or jamming)

People are more able to express their politics directly, and can choose to by-pass traditional electoral politics completely if they wish (and we have seen in recent months how disillusioned many people feel with party politics in the UK).

Increasingly also, the tools of social media have become a part of the conversation about democracy (even presented as a 'solution'). What happens when the conversation is happening un-moderated and un-mediated in spaces completely outside the reach of the 'big media'? In such spaces, the 'promise' of the Web as a space for collaboration, sharing, openness and conversation is perhaps being most interestingly realised.

But it's not just about the flow of information. With the advent of tools such as PayPal, increasingly we are even seeing a global currency, the free movement of small or large amounts of money around the world that gives people sovereignty over their money in ways that they have never had before. This means that people can more easily play a part in funding culture and politics. In the first Quarter of 2007 Obama raised $5.77million worth of contributions under $200 from sites such as Justgiving.com (Wikipedia 2010b).

New media have also encouraged transparency in political processes (think for example of the expenses scandal in the UK and the amount of information that was – and continues to be – published about our MPs online as a result) and, where transparency has not been forthcoming, have given people the space and the impetus to put sensitive information into the public realm (think for example of the Wikileaks project).

One example of how these issues of politics and participation have recently played out is in the example of the use of Twitter in Iran.In June 2009, in the aftermath of the Iranian election, there was huge opposition to an election many people believed to be a fiction. There were riot police in the streets and a ban of any media reporting in the country ensued. On an unprecedented scale, over the next 18 days, the protestors turned to Twitter. There were no less than two million tweets from Iran by 500,000 people. At the height of activity there were 200,000 tweets an hour (BBC 2010).

In the UK, individuals were distributing the tweets, consolidating and linking protestors with the outside world, and passing information back to them; 'I've just got news that they are arresting people on such and such a road, tell people to go the other way' (Oxford Girl, speaking on BBC 2010). Then videos started appearing on YouTube.

The Iranian Government tried to block Twitter and YouTube with filters ('Access Denied') but many worked around that blockage in ways that were secure and encrypted; with no chance of being found out. Information continued to change hands unchecked through the new media:

> When people in their moment of need wanted to do something co-ordinated they could suddenly lay their hands on these tools in a way they hadn't been able to before. (Shirky on BBC 2010)

Summary

The Web maintains illusion, remains allusive, resists one rule of 'order', works outside of the jurisdiction of any one country and beyond state control. It is resilient. It is unmediated, interactive, global, uncontainable, mobile, and operates in real time (as in Iran). It prompts real and instant reaction.

In this narrative, action is facilitated from the bottom up not top down, empowerment is real, direct democracy is renewed. Digital media's style of operation is the antithesis of what we have grown

accustomed to. Governments don't set the agenda, we do. New media are nothing less than a revolution.

NEW MEDIA ARE NOT DEMOCRATIC…
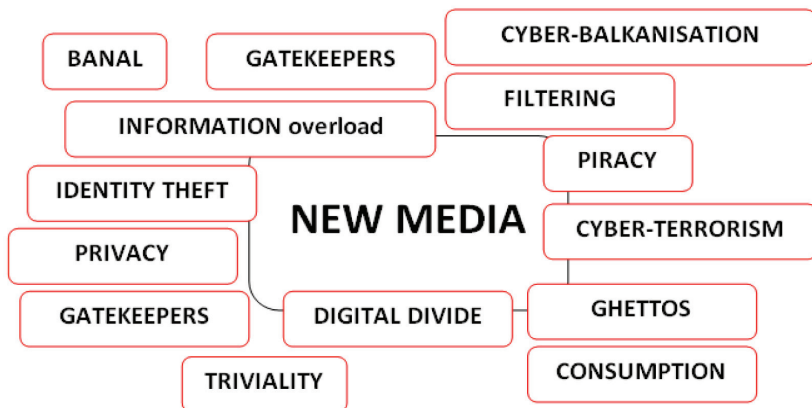
In this narrative, the Web emerges as a dangerous, limiting and reductive space, or, at best, a banal incoherent rabble. It shows the claims of the previous narrative to be vastly inflated and misleading:

> All this boosterism and herd-like affirmation is bizarre because the internet is a new mode of convenience, nothing more, nothing less. It has not made society more egalitarian, it has not made modern democratic politics more 'transparent', it has not made us happier. Rather, it has made our appetites more impatient to be satisfied, devised new, speedier ways of satisfying them, and created more sophisticated methods of monitoring and controlling our private lives. (Siegel 2009)

In this history, the eventual use of the technology itself is shaped by the nature of people. In the final analysis, our desires, greed, weaknesses and fears will come to provide a more honest account of the development of new media than any inherent technological qualities.

The internet (to note: not the Web) was conceived in the 1960s as a response to the launch of Sputnik. It constituted a global network of linked computers designed to keep information safe in the event of an attack. It was categorically not about open, democratic, sharing of information across the globe. It was the politics of fear that gave the internet shape in its formative years.

Years later, the Web (Tim Berners-Lee's creation), although founded on openness and information, was swiftly colonised by businesses seeking to make money resulting in the dot.com boom of the 1990s. It was then the interests of Capitalism that gave the Web shape in its formative years.

As much as we might imagine that the infrastructure of the internet and architecture of the Web has allowed for the free flow of information and access to all, there remain some significant structural issues that quietly order our experiences of the Web along rather traditional lines. Gatekeepers emerge as hugely important on the Web, a means of filtering the masses of information that we are presented with, and making sense of it. In terms of everyday activity on the Web, there is only one web browser (Internet Explorer), one search engine (Google), one social network (Facebook), and one shop (Amazon) that matter (BBC 2010). There is a new 'big media' to worry about online.

Online audiences are often no more decentralised than audiences for traditional media (that is, they go to a same type and number of sources over and again), meaning that there is no more chance of being heard in cyberspace than in the 'offline' world, and that those who do get heard are far from an accurate representation of the public (Hindman 2008: 8). This makes extremely problematic those claims about participation that we encountered previously.

> If we consider the architecture of the Internet more broadly, we find that users' interactions with the Web are far more circumscribed than

> many realize, and the circle of sites they find and visit is much smaller than is often assumed. All of this changes our conclusions about how much room there is online for citizens' voices.' (Hindman 2008: 15)

Matthew Hindman's research into the democratic potential of online communications resulted in some stark findings; that political traffic is a tiny portion of Web usage, that the link structure of the Web limits the content that citizens see, that much search engine use is shallow, that some content is expensive to produce, even in the digital world and that, very quickly, social hierarchies have emerged online. Consequently, 'It may be easy to speak in cyberspace, but it remains difficult to be heard' (*ibid.*: 142).

This problem is amplified when it comes to looking at the issue of access. The seemingly impressive figures that were outlined previously relating to internet use in fact represent a mere 25 per cent of the world population. In 2010, 75 per cent remain offline. In the UK 9.2 million adults have never accessed the internet (ONS 2010). What we begin to see from a close study of the statistics is that real world inequalities are being replicated in the online environment. The digital divide as it has been termed is a matter of geography, technological literacy, language, wealth, education, age, and, not least, politics – the democratic divide – those that can use the internet to participate in political activity and those that simply cannot. In actual fact, it is mobile phones that we should probably be talking about more in society if we are interested in digital democracy.

Because of the structure of the internet, not all choices are created equal. If we look at the 'science' of Google ranking systems, it becomes immediately apparent that not all voices are treated equally; how can they be? Google have come up with a system for rating pages based on 'relevance' and 'authority' (which is a necessary diminishment and open to manipulation): as van Alstyne and Brynjolffson have said, 'filters, even sophisticated electronic filters, must be selective in order to provide

value' (van Alstyne and Brynjolffson 2005: 852). Thus, certain contacts, ideas, or both, will be screened out. This is a natural way of making sense of the 'noisy communications' which take place online (*ibid.*).[5]

It is no surprise that the top Google results are overwhelmingly the only ones that matter – people cluster around surprisingly few sources of information in their day to day use of the Web, and tend to use simplistic and unsophisticated search mechanisms and criteria. It is then the same old voices that get heard online; the small group of white, highly-educated male professionals who are vastly over-represented in opinion making (Hindman 2008).

Many of us of course don't just use the Web for finding 'new' information, we use it also as a means of consolidating what we already know; confirming our world views, and seeking contact with people who think and feel like we do. This is no more true than when it comes to politics where people stay overwhelmingly 'on message', rarely looking at alternative points of view; especially, it turns out, if they are politically active (Hindman 2008). For those that are inactive, the problem is amplified; those who are disenfranchised and disengaged from political systems tend to remain so online.

So, the technology can only do so much. In actual fact ideology and inequality are so ingrained that the claim of 'democracy' and openness is necessarily a spurious one. Not least in terms of the extent to which participation is possible.

In the new media space, our participation is principally defined through our round the clock consumption; gambling, gaming, watching movies and 'interacting', whilst all the time we are shadowed and evaluated, our data 'gathered' (Chester 2008). In 2010, the money spent on Web Analytics – the science of our individual web use – is staggering. The reason: learning more about us so that advertising can be targeted more effectively. It can then be personalised and hit us at exactly the time we feel like spending. Social media spaces are increasingly being colonised by marketers and the 'cost' of 'free'

content (in information terms) is growing all of the time, that is, the information which we need to give about ourselves so that we can access free content and later be targeted for sales.

Advertisers are one of the key beneficiaries of the race to digital: leading to lack of privacy, saturation of brand messages, and technologies being developed to 'track, analyze and persuade' (Chester 2008). Marketers are connecting the information being collected about our movements online with information readily available for sale by data-mining warehouses. The kinds of information: about our families, our communities, our car purchases, house purchases, credit card bills, occupations, tastes, fetishes, habits. Much of this information we give unwittingly.

The marketers know what we click on and how we relate to it, how we arrived at it, where we go next, how likely are we to become 'buyers' of a product. Did we run our mouse over an ad? Did we interact with it? For how long? Do we watch videos? Do we pause or stop them? Do we tend to go for smaller or larger adverts. They know if there are times when we are more receptive to messages. And whether we are likely candidates for an upsell.

This is the kind of information people are interested in about me online; not what I might have to say in the content of my blog.

One place where the Web's commercial potential is being most enthusiastically explored is in China where more people are online than anywhere else (253 million) but where the Web is also seen as being a huge threat to the state. Censorship is very much alive on the Web in China where it is claimed 30,000 people are paid to secretly police the Web full time (BBC 2010). There is ongoing analysis of social media networks in order to police certain beliefs, and the Government employs a number of official bloggers to work across the internet in support of the official party line. There are as many as 300,000 '50 cent army' commentators in China today (BBC 2010). Thus, the battle for freedom of speech is not yet won on the Web.

Another form of participation online is of course anti-democratic activity. Shock videos are released on the Web by the Taliban and Al Quaida every day. This kind of activity is (unlike our shopping habits) very difficult to track, predict or trace, in part because of the use of cybercafés. The Web lets people talk to like-minded people representing what has been called by Lina Khatib a 'Portable homeland' (Khatib 2003). The Web replaces geographical borders with more mobile and fluid ones. Meanwhile, the threat of a cyber-attack looms large (an example being the attack on Estonia in 2007).[6] All the more threatening because it is a more cost-effective way of waging war.

All of this smacks of a form of cyber-balkanisation – the selective use of the Web in order to re-inforce our pre-existing ideas:

> Advances in technology can make it easier for people to spend more time on special interests and to screen out unwanted contact. Geographic boundaries can thus be supplanted by boundaries on other dimensions. (van Alstyne and Brynjolffson 2005)

According to van Alstyne and Brynjolffson, an emerging global village is only one of a range of possible outcomes of new media. The Web can also create silos, or 'ghettos' where troubling kinds of conversations and activities flourish: think for example of adolescents who go online to discuss and compete in their eating disorders, to make suicide pacts, or those who exchange pornographic images of children. What counts as legitimate activity and what does not is of course not always clear.

But this rather relies on the Web as a hive of activity we might deem troubling. Perhaps a far greater hindrance to democratic action is the trivial nature of much online activity. The distraction of the mundane and banal is a much greater threat to democratic action, conversation and community than anything else. In this view, 27.3 million tweets per day is not a sign of a healthy democracy but an obsession with the trivial. The 350 million people on Facebook are unlikely to rally for a common cause any time in the near future. 4 billion photos on Flickr

represents participation of the lowest order. 1billion YouTube views per day says more about an unhealthy obsession with dancing cats and watching X-factor re-runs than changing patterns in the organisation of people.

Summary

The coming of new internet and multimedia technologies was heralded as the dawn of a more democratic media system where control was everywhere and the public would become 'empowered'. This is however, a grossly simplified scenario, and one that is not supported by research findings. To assert that a public is empowered is to assume not only that they have access to the means of making and distributing media, but that they are actively engaged in seeking that empowerment (not just using those avenues opened up to them). As Hamelink (1995: 12) asserts:

> Human rights imply both entitlements and responsibilities. This means that empowerment cannot be passively enjoyed, but has to be actively achieved and guarded.

There are also difficulties with the assumption that more voices being heard within the media would naturally lead to a more democratic system of representation. Structuring changes at the very core of ideology and society would be necessary in order to make such an assertion.

FINAL CONSIDERATION

And so, as we come to the end of our narratives, a number of questions remain. Which of these narratives of the new media is the most 'true'? Which rhetoric the most convincing? Can digital media be and allow for all of these things simultaneously? And, crucially, just how fragile is our relationship with the new media?:

Our creation of an electronic broadband media system will be viewed by future generations as one of our society's most significant accomplishments. Will it be seen as one of the highest achievements for a democracy, a place in cyberspace that helped enrich the lives of many and offered new opportunities for an outpouring of cultural and civic expression? Or will it be seen years hence as a new version of what the late scholar Neil Postman aptly described as a medium even more capable of "amusing ourselves to death"? We hold that decision in our hands. (Chester 2007: xxi)

NOTES

1. Particularly pertinent here will be discussion of the Web, but this is by no means seen as synonymous with 'new media'. For definitions, please see Manovich 2002; Creeber and Martin 2008; Lister *et al.* 2008.

2. In Habermas 1962, and more recently in Toulouse and Luke 1998; Crossley and Roberts 2004; Dahlgren 2009; Salter 2010.

3. Demonstrated in recent discussion about ownership of BSKYB in the UK.

4. A cry we have heard numerous times in recent months in relation to the continuing WikiLeaks revelations.

5. See Halligan and Shah 2009, for more on Google rankings.

6. A Distributed Denial of Service attack as recently used against companies who withdrew support for WikiLeaks. Such attacks involve taking control of computers to bombard a site with requests simultaneously so that it cannot function. The threat is that it is hard to know who or where the attacker is.

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