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Power, Media Culture and New Media

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Power, Media Culture and New Media

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us …"
(Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859: 1*)*

1. Introduction [1]

The label 'new media' is closely associated with The Information Society and with a particular vision of developments in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). For economists who follow developments in digital ICTs, these terms are aligned with a vision where innovative ideas and technologies are expected to 'fuel' economic growth. This is a vision that crystallized after World War II when scientists, engineers and mathematicians became interested in control systems that might realize hopes for the contribution of artificial intelligence and robotics to improvements in the lives of workers and in society as a whole (See Shannon and Weaver 1949; Wiener 1956; and Mansell 2009b).

Innovations in these technologies often provide technologists with new 'toys' and it frequently is suggested that if miniaturized and better versions of these technologies can be built, then they can be marketed to the benefit of users worldwide. The main goal of economists is to employ these technologies in ways that will contribute to productivity strategies that will stimulate economic growth. Digital information and new media content, produced at relatively low cost and circulated through global networks, are expected to provide the basis for this. This is the predominant expectation in our times. However, as I suggest in this paper, there is a need to give greater consideration to the tactics and strategies that might enable the new digital techniques of socio-cultural production to be used for the benefit of all, rather than for a minority who find themselves able to acquire the necessary capabilities for living in an intensely mediated world.

Policy makers try to maintain decent levels of employment and information workers seek to increase access to knowledge by crafting better new media tools. Many social scientists seek to understand how the changes in new media are transforming society, raising questions that go far beyond the preoccupations of economists. Is there, for example, evidence of a sustainable shift in power relations that might yield greater equality in society as a result of developments in ICTs and new media applications? Are we becoming cogs in the ICT system or empowered savants - the worst times, or are there signs of empowerment for the disadvantaged in society?

[1] A short version of this paper was presented as a keynote lecture at the German Communications Association Conference, University of Bremen, 30 April 2009.

In the early 1950s, Harold Innis warned against the 'ideology of information technology'. He did not think that economic, social, cultural and political outcomes associated with a dependence on electronic information would ever be associated with enhanced human well-being in any straightforward way. Research on new media from critical perspectives in the social sciences is often more concerned with power relationships and the unpredictable social outcomes associated with the situated nature of ICT-mediated human experience. This research yields a mixed picture of the transformative potential of new media technologies, suggesting that we are living in both the best and the worst of times. In this paper, I assess some of the claims and counterclaims about these developments, concluding with the question: what kind of society do we want?

2. Harbinger of the best of times

Daniel Bell (1973), one of the first scholars to refer to The Information Society, argued with considerable enthusiasm that technological innovation would proceed at a pace that would prize open existing power relations, creating the potential for new modes of rational action that might work to the benefit of all citizens, notwithstanding the pressures created by the workings of the capitalist system. In this sense, the post-War period was widely understood to be giving rise to the 'best of times'. As Bell put it, "technology is the instrumental mode of rational action… Technology has created a new definition of rationality, a new mode of thought …" (Bell 1979: 515). This new mode of thought placed hope in technologies of control, thereby releasing humans from the more mundane and repetitive aspects of capitalist reproduction. Human creativity might be released for a larger share of the workforce. Knowledge might be shared and distributed more easily because of the declining costs of its reproduction. Social welfare might be enhanced by the application of the new technologies in fields as disparate as agriculture and medicine. This was the promise of technological innovation.

As Paul David and Dominique Foray (2003: 20) put it succinctly, "knowledge has been at the heart of economic growth and the gradual rise in levels of social well-being since time immemorial. The ability to invent and innovate, that is to create new knowledge and new ideas that are then embodied in products, processes and organizations, has always served to fuel development". Economists operate with a somewhat mechanistic model of knowledge creation and circulation. Though some acknowledge that the linear model of the communication of information is overly simplistic, nevertheless, most of the economics profession regards ICTs as being implicated in the knowledge transfer process as a result of investment in more sophisticated software and hardware (Cowan et al. 2000). The challenge, therefore, is to understand increasingly complex systems of knowledge transfer so as to ensure that the maximum benefit is achieved in terms of economic welfare (Antonelli 1999).

Alongside this strong focus on technological innovation, there has been discussion about the disruptive characteristics that accompany the wide-scale deployment of the new digital technologies (Freeman and Soete 1997, Freeman and Louçã 2001, Perez 1983). These disruptions are attributed to the revolutionary implications of these General Purpose Technologies (Bresnahan and Trajtenberg 1995). The functioning of markets is

expected to be disrupted as a result of 'standards wars', that is, competition by firms to achieve market dominance using technology designs and applications that may or may not be backward compatible with earlier generations of technology (Hawkins et al. 1995). Markets also may be disrupted by the positive or negative effects of network externalities, resulting in scale effects following initial investments in applications that run over global networks (Melody 2007). The economic implications of information goods when they are produced and circulated in a network environment are also disruptive because of the peculiar characteristics of information as compared to tangible goods. Information is intangible, non-rivalrous and non-excludable. As a result it is difficult to analyze market dynamics where information plays a significant role (Mansell and Steinmueller 2000, Stigler 1961). For many analysts, these disruptions create new opportunities for economic growth and development.

Other researchers focus on the disruptive social effects that seem to be associated with increasing dependence on digital networks and their applications. These effects are often associated with 'the good times'. For example, there is a widespread and contagious belief in the market value of information content (not always grounded on empirical evidence as for example with respect to assertions that the long tail effect creates new opportunities for the production and sale of all forms of content (Anderson 2006)). There are also many assertions about the positive benefits of ICT applications for both consumers and citizens, in the case of the latter, with respect to new opportunities for participation in policy decisions that affect citizens' everyday lives (Coleman 2005).

Many of the normative claims about the changes associated with the spread of network-based ICT applications suggest that in the world as it was (before the widescale spread of the Internet and its disruptive characteristics), incumbent firms and established political groups held authority in markets and in society, more generally. Some intermediary groups were represented of course, but those with the slightest influence were the civil society-based cooperating communities, the majority of whose activities are organised on a not-for-profit basis. With the spread of the Internet, the balance of power among these groups is said to have been changing (Benkler 2006). Although they still have a significance presence, the large, monopolising companies, e.g. Microsoft or Google, and the main components of the state apparatus are said to be diminishing in authority. The influence of cooperating communities is said to be ascendant (Mossberger et al. 2008). Intermediaries continue to play a role in lubricating markets and in mediating between civil society and state institutions, e.g. knowledge brokers, civil society organisations, think tanks, lobbyists and other pressure groups. And the insurgent cooperating communities are said to adhere broadly to values of sharing and reciprocity. While these values are sometimes mixed with market values, this is regarded by many as being consistent with greater equity and justice as compared to the values of market-oriented or state authorities (Chadwick 2006).

As these shifts in the positioning of groups within society adhering to different values are occurring, there is discussion of the implications for conventional ideas about the organisation of society and the relative power relations within it. A new narrative about power relations appears to be emerging, connected both to the spread of new media and

the Internet and to expectations with respect to a 'new politics' (Bennett 2003). For example, a new distribution of political and economic power is said to imply the demise of institutional hierarchies (e.g. flatter organisational forms associated with open network arrangements) and a much more fluid and loose set of network relations locally, regionally and globally. Following in the wake of the GPL (GNU General Public License) and the take-up of open source software (see Berdou 2009 forthcoming), there are increasing pressures to roll back many features of proprietary intellectual property protection as a stimulus to creativity in general and to scientific endeavour in particular (Bergquist and Ljungberg 2001; David 2004). It is argued that the growth in the activities of cooperating online communities suggests that, even in the marketplace, cooperation is ascendant over competition. Some prefer to think in terms of hybrid models such as those suggested by 'coopetition' (Brandenburger and Nalebuff 1996). Nevertheless, the relative shifts in power in the social order are widely considered to mean that entrepreneurial intermediaries and cooperating communities are better positioned to exercise power within the economy and society. The notion that 'everyone becomes a content producer' in the world of Web 2.0 is consistent with this thinking (O'Reilly 2005).

In terms of democratic practice, the ethos of the 'new politics' springs from the idea that everyone (or nearly everyone) now has the possibility of interacting online. Citizens are able to participate in decentralised public debates as new media producers, whether as bloggers, producers of short message texts, or email messages. The citizen is understood in this context to be empowered. In this idealistic model, direct democracy or improved forms of representative democracy are expected to prevail based on e-democracy and e-government services. These expectations are commonly associated with the emergence of new voices and social movements, visible in sporadic and ongoing protests around the world.

The new media and new forms of political empowerment are associated with digital communicative practices and with aspirations for distributed forms of organisation as a result of time and space compression and the invocation of enhanced equality between the hubs and spokes of networks, foreshadowing cooperative and collective modes of information production and circulation. The new politics is said to involve flat distributed networks of citizens. Lance Bennett (2003) suggests that these are loosely structured, ideologically thin and identity or issue-based to a greater extent than in the past. Many of these networks encourage intensive personal engagement through the use of personalised media and they operate within multiple public spheres. In brief, the new media are said to support organisational and political transformation through new forms of network activism (Della Porta and Tarrow 2004). These developments give rise to the expectations of a sustained shift in political and economic power, consistent with the 'best of times'.

3. Dialectic relation with the worst of times

Notwithstanding evidence of these developments, it is important to consider the new forms of online activity in relation to their offline consequences for economic, political

and social action. What do they tell us about empowerment and its consequences in the offline world? Is it likely that the empowering potential of new media exists in a dialectic relation with new forms of disempowerment? For example, take the experience of protest movements organized around the environmental protection of forests. Although both older and newer media networks may be used to heighten awareness of a threat by the forestry industry to trees in places as geographically distant as Canada and India (Jain 1984; Reed 2000). Events have been organized to protect forests by 'tree-huggers', but often the logging still takes place and permits are awarded by governments to do so. The concerned social movements may use new media to voice their opposition very effectively, but the consequences are often no less environmentally damaging than they were in the era before the advent of the Internet and other new media.

Similarly, the lived experience of the introduction of new media technologies such as the much heralded mobile phone in some developing country contexts can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering for the users. When a gendered account, for example, is offered of the experience of mobile phones in Zambia, then the evidence suggests that women may be disempowered at the same time that they may experience empowerment through their ability to contact health services and communicate more effectively with those in their community. In Zambia, one study found that women report problems of mistrust and jealousy and, in some cases, physical and verbal abuse as their husbands find out how they are using their phones (Wakunuma 2007).

There is evidence suggesting that there may be a generational shift in the empowerment of loosely structured social groups. For example, young people's patterns of use of new media appear to differ from those of older generations (Livingstone 2009; Livingstone and Haddon 2009). But this evidence is ambiguous insofar as we do not have long term cohort studies to detect whether these intensive patterns of usage remain constant as young people mature and take on adult responsibilities in the home and in the workplace. There are also new risks for children as a result of their encounters with strangers in the online world. In addition, there is some evidence that some Internet users become disaffected (Wyatt et al. 2003), no longer seeking to participate online.

In our interpretations of the empirical evidence of changing modalities of communication in support of sociality and the economy that are associated with the increasing take-up of new media – at least in wealthier societies, it is important to consider the observations of those who have closely studied the history of mediated communication and culture. Scholars such as John Thompson, for example, emphasise the contradictions that are frequently associated with mediated communication. He emphasises that we should be cautious in drawing simple relationships between the advent of a new generation of technology and its social consequences and acknowledge that mediation results in indeterminate consequences (Thompson 1995). Similarly, Roger Silverstone emphasizes that where technology mediates human relationships there is likely to be a distortion of the benefits for those who are not at the centre of economic and political power (Silverstone 2007). As we consider the relationships between power, the new media and mediated culture, we should be careful to consider the ways in which the potential benefits may become distorted. The notion that empowerment for citizens is the 'natural'

outcome of the networked relationships that permeate society does not take account of the indeterminate consequences for power relations in society.

Some researchers (Flew 2008, Jenkins 2005, 2006, and Tapscott and Williams 2008) persist in announcing that the new forms of mediation are giving rise to collective intelligence or to mass collaboration on a global scale. There is research on interactivity in online games and digital platforms, where user interactions (through their avatars) affect the results of other users and where, as in the case of Second Life, there are tools for exchanging virtual assets such as currency. Some of those working in these areas are champions of claims about a 'participatory turn' which is said to be associated with the interactivity of Web 2.0 applications. Various scholars refer to convergence culture (Jenkins 2006), participatory culture (Jenkins 1992), democratizing innovation (von Hippel 2005), produsage (Bruns 2008), and wikinomics (Tapscott and Williams 2006), as evidence of the way new media enabled interactivity is facilitating opportunities for the empowerment of those who participate.

However, at the same time that digital technologies are supporting networks for the potentially empowered social movements and new modes of cultural production, the state apparatus is becoming more intent on using these technologies to augment the surveillance of citizens in their public and (increasingly) in their private lives (Ball and Wood 2006, Lyon 2003b). In many countries the deployment of surveillance cameras to monitor behaviour is rising, microchip technologies are being used to monitor movements of people, and conventional conceptions of privacy are being challenged both legally and practically by the introduction of applications such as Google's Street View camera. Efforts to limit access to personal information held by the state and the private sector on individuals are increasingly challenged both by individuals' reluctance or inability to follow safeguard procedures and by the willingness of the courts to permit intrusions in the name of public safety and protection (Braman 2006, Whitley et al. 2008). In addition, electronic trading networks are operating outside the control or monitoring of governance authorities as witnessed by the harsh realities of the economic recession, now being felt on a global basis in the first decade of the 21st century.

These developments stem in part from the social practices of those who establish the ways in which new media are being used. At a technical level there are also many developments that run counter to the heightened expectations for the empowerment of the disadvantaged. There are those who suggest that the increasing intensity of networking is consistent with collective confusion, chaos and social disorder (Feenberg 1992, 2008). This possibility has several origins. Despite progress in developing tools for managing vast repositories of data, today's metadata and meta-information practices are used by a minority. The research in the computing sciences that is applied to this issue has yet to scale up to handle the majority of real world, everyday situations in which there is a need to process (and make sense of) increasingly vast repositories of information. The design characteristics of the tools, algorithms and programmes, including search engines, which allow us to find information are still in their infancy (Himma 2007). The information infrastructures that underpin much of society's functioning today are less than robust according to many software engineers (Mansell and Collins 2005). Their capacity to

withstand attacks of various kinds from pranksters and from those who wish to cause economic or social damage to others is also fragile (Jordan and Taylor 2004, Matusitz 2008).

4. Claims and Counterclaims

In the light of this account of both the empowering and disempowering developments around new media, how are we to make sense of them in terms of the way they inflect social and economic power? If we adopt a sceptical position with respect to the claims and counterclaims we may find ourselves in agreement that, as in *The Tale of Two Cities*, today's information society developments are implicated in both the best and the worst of times. While the new media underpin the potential for the creation of diverse media content and many new ways of contributing symbolic value, it is unclear how the benefits are being distributed. In the context of the traditional media, recourse to stored information in the form of graphics by the press means there is greater risk of the misleading portrayal of events. Editors no longer monitor the provenance of such information in the way that gatekeepers were able to do this in the past (Beckett and Mansell 2008). The use of mash-ups and the increasing diversity of outlets for media content means that the traditional rules that governed the mixing of advertising, editorial comment, and entertainment can no longer be easily monitored or regulated by any authoritative institutions – certainly not on a global basis.

The new means of the production and reproduction of meaning through mainstream media and distributed networks (including mobile technologies, digital TV) together with new platforms for alternative or citizen's media – representing a wide spectrum of political opinion, mean that there are opportunities for many more viewpoints to be expressed and witnessed by distant others (Chouliaraki 2006). Arguably, this does not mean that there is greater acceptance of, or respect for, those who differ from ourselves. In addition, the new electronic networks spanning the globe offer much greater opportunities for the monitoring of speech and actions through surveillance and new methods of 'social sorting' (Lyon 2003a). As these developments occur those who seek to control social activity are finding new means of re-labelling those who are playful and seek no harm to others – the hacktivists – as cyber-terrorists of one kind of another. By promoting the language of the war on terror and other similar rhetoric, citizens' capacities for critical reflection are suppressed not only for their own protection, but also as a result of the propagation of viral messages whose provenance is unavailable to the receiver.

The urgent research questions in the face of a cacophony of claims and counterclaims about the empowing characteristics of the new media include: 1) What are the pressures towards the commodification of meaning through the efforts of those who seek to profit from our relations within new media spaces? 2) What are the main contradictions in the symbolic and material production of the new mediated environments? These are similar to questions that have been investigated historically by political economists of media and communication (Mosco 1996). They are no less important today. The challenge is to discern what inequalities are being reproduced by whom and with what consequences. It is easy to be captivated by signs of the potential for empowerment, but we must not loose

sight of the fact that the underpinnings of society remain unequal. The question is which institutions are mandated to take action to alleviate the contradictions of capitalism as they re-emerge in societies mediated by ICTs.

We should not loose sight of the overall trajectory of changes in power relations, not only as implicated by the new media, but within society as a whole. In a fundamental way, it is important to consider mediated culture in terms of the potential for empowerment and for increasing passivity on the part of citizens. In the media sphere, passivity is often discussed in terms of the disaffection of increasing numbers of citizens from the formal procedures of politics, for example, studies of voting (Couldry et al. 2007). When there is a decline in voter turnout, there are discussions of the role of political marketing and relationship management often using new media as in the case, for example, of the Obama campaign in the United States (Dupuis and Boeckelman 2007, Gummesson 2002, Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy 2007). However, this is not necessarily a panacea that will lead to greater social equity or to citizen empowerment in the offline world.

Crucially, some observers have been concerned since the discussions about online interactivity began to take off in the research community in the 1970s, that many of these developments augment our ability to 'self-service' ourselves (Gershuny and Miles 1983). The new media are said to offer new, or alternative, logics of production and consumption that favour empowerment through their reconfiguration of older production-consumption paradigms. The frequently unchallenged assumption is that user participation through interactivity is based on creative and collaborative practices that are open, transparent and empowering for the consumer or citizen. But how extensive are the new opportunities for users to appropriate firm-provided resources and put them to work in support of their own needs? There are many contexts of new media use that are inconsistent with these scenarios. Another reading of these developments is that they are examples of the expansion of 'self servicing' activities that are closely aligned with practices that erode the individual's autonomy and cajole citizens into following a road to disempowerment.

Researchers have pointed to a shift towards 'self-serving' within the household and the ways in which this trend might spread into retail and government service sectors. Individuals increasingly are expected to take responsibility for the self-provision of services but their ability to control and exercise power over their environment does not seem to increase in consequence. As we are able to interact online, we become individually more responsible for our ability to make our lives productive and meaningful. Historical research shows that ICT use is always influenced and shaped by the context of its use (Marvin 1988). There are many ways in which essentially the same digital technology can be appropriated by those whose values and aspirations differ substantially from each other (Mansell and Silverstone 1996, Miles and Thomas 1995, Silverstone and Hirsch 1992). More recently, Richard Sennett's examination of labour force changes and practices has led him to observe that, "people can actively enter into their own passivity" through their disengagement with the political and their participation in self-servicing activities (Sennett 2006: 161). This is consistent with theoretical discussions such as those by Beck (1992) on individualisation and Bauman (2006) on

liquid modernity. If the result of these changes in tandem with the spread of new media is tending in this direction, then ideas and practices associated with collective responsibility with respect to individuals, the social order and the physical world around us, would seem increasingly difficult to sustain.

Following Castells, we might counter with the argument that although there is little clarity as to how the new media developments will influence the social order, the practices of mass self-communication offer the basis for hope that the incumbent authorities will wane in power in favour of those insurgents or civil society groups that are more concerned with equity in society. Castells is cautious, however, in noting that whether networked insurgent or cooperating communities can change 'hearts and minds' is tempered by the way dominant actors manage to create new electronic enclosures to contain these communities (Castells 2009).

5. Winter of Despair; Spring of Hope

The view that the developments around new media in the first decade of the 21st century are akin to a 'winter of despair' is supported by a number of observations including the fact that the norms and standards for new technologies remain largely competitive. It is not clear that all citizens will find it easy to access them or participate in these competitive markets. The media, regardless of the platform of distribution, continue to generate content that fosters distrust, violence, suffering and victimization through their representations of others. Despite the enthusiasm for open networks, content sharing, and cooperative models, there continue to be conflictual relations among different stakeholders. These do not seem to wane as communication through multiple networks intensifies (Mouffe 1999). There are relatively few signs that differences distinguishing social or economic groupings from each other are being acknowledged in constructive ways in new media environments. Instead, the representations of difference are often used used to stimulate fear and to brand new folk devils of our time (Cohen 2002).

Running counter to this, however, there are developments that may give rise to 'a spring of hope'. At all levels of society there is discussion of the intersections between the media (and new media) and human rights (Hamelink 2008). This discussion runs in parallel with discussions about the new media literacies and capabilities that are necessary to enable people to make sense of their mediated lives and to act according to their own choices in ways that might be considered empowering (Mansell 2009a). In the policy arena and in the scholarly literature there is some visibility of efforts to ensure the dignity of human beings through measures to enhance equality and through initiatives to codify information or communicative rights and entitlements in line with basic conventions on human rights (Dakroury 2009a, b). New media literacies are now rarely considered only in terms of sets of technical skills to access and use the new applications. They are discussed more generally in terms of a wide range of capabilities needed in education, for political participation, for entrepreneurship, and for managing partnerships in network relationships, both close and distant. It is more widely acknowledged than a decade ago that all forms of capacity-building and learning require new capacities for navigating and for meaning making in the new mediated world.

6. Conclusion

Wisdom is not obviously associated with scholarship in the tradition of the social sciences. However, in an age of contestation over values, we should ask whether an observer in the future would look at our times and conclude that this was an 'age of wisdom'. The empirical evidence that we have on the characteristics of the mediated environment of the early part of the 21st century suggests reasonably conclusively that, notwithstanding the new media's progression into the economy and society, power relations are always contested. We are not emerging into a social realm where unequal power relations disappear. There are some shifts in power such that those formerly in positions to control and exploit individuals in various segments of society are being curtailed. There are clearly acknowledged benefits for improved livelihoods in some cases. We should celebrate these local developments. But we must simultaneously acknowledge that these instances are neither the product of a technological determinism nor of a cultural or social determinism. They are the product of the situated intersection of the technical and the social – the replication of which cannot, and should not, be taken for granted.

We must also acknowledge that history suggests that control structures and practices that are discriminatory tend to re-emerge (Beniger 1986). They may not replicate the past, but they create new challenges for the social order. Despite the democratising potential of the new media technologies, the evidence suggests that these opportunities are not a panacea for pre-existing social ills any more than democracy is invariant in practice. If we are to be able to look back upon the present era with any hope of regarding it as an age of wisdom, these observations need to be considered, especially in the light of the indication that values become embedded in the technical systems of our time. These are contested and we need an ongoing debate about the morality of our mediated age – a debate that leads to action aimed at moulding an environment that is more equitable and enabling for more members of the world's population.

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We can start by considering the question: what kinds of mediated societies do we want? When this question is asked, we need to consider who is this 'we'? Who is deciding on whose behalf and how far do the outcomes of such decisions respect human dignity and well-being? Departures from a standard of respect need to be investigated and dealt with by complex sets of institutions and practices. The tactics and strategies that may enable us to appropriate the new media techniques of socio-cultural production in the interest of reducing inequalities in all spheres of life and in the interest of enhancing human wellbeing will emerge only as a result of efforts to tackle these difficult questions.

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