

[Nick Couldry](#)

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**RELEGITIMATION CRISIS: BEYOND THE DULL COMPULSION OF MEDIA-SATURATED LIFE**

**NICK COULDRY**

**[FINAL DRAFT ARTICLE FOR *DIVINATIO* JOURNAL]**

There is a long tradition of blaming media for the ills of society. It found expression in the reflections of the 1975 'Report on the Governability of Democracies' submitted to the Trilateral Commission. The resulting book contained the following quote from one of its authors, the French sociologist Michel Crozier: 'Television has . . . made it impossible to *maintain the cultural fragmentation and hierarchy* that was necessary to enforce traditional forms of control . . . the more this [media] sounding board emphasizes the emotional appeal of the actors' "life experience", especially as biased by the technique of the media, the less easy it is to force a real analysis of the complex game on which political leadership must act'.<sup>1</sup> The fear of the authors was not that mass media undermined democracy, but that it stimulated too much democracy, as another report author, Samuel Huntington, reflected: 'we have come to recognize that there are potentially desirable limits to economic growth. There are also potentially desirable limits to the indefinite extension of political democracy.'<sup>2</sup>

Echoes of Plato's banishment of poetry from the ideal state can be found here in these decades-old reflections, but the common principle is not the danger of 'beauty', but the role of certain media (in ancient Greece, poetry and drama; in the 1970s television) in allowing and encouraging *expression*. Another 1970s pessimist Daniel Bell argued that culture - defined as 'the arena of expressive symbolism' - generates contradictions within capitalism, contradictions between a 'culture of hedonism' and the actual organizational demands of the economy.<sup>3</sup> Bell's implied reference to popular culture and mass media as a site of individual and group expression was clear. Jürgen Habermas' account from the same period of a growing legitimation crisis in 'advanced capitalist societies' was far more subtle and indirect,

but it too argued that, while the threats to legitimation *internal* to the political system could probably be dealt with by the welfare state and political competition, the key threat to legitimation came from a 'motivation crisis' linked to the prolonging of adolescent anxiety into later life: once again, without being named as such, mass media's causal role as a site of pleasure, sexual freedom and group identity was clearly implied.<sup>4</sup>

The direction of Habermas' analysis was however directly opposed to that of the Trilateral Commission. Running through *Legitimation Crisis* is Habermas's debate with Niklas Luhmann, and Habermas's *rejection* of Luhmann's view (that was almost a double of Huntington's) that government based on growing *participation* is incompatible with solving the complex system-problems of government (understood as administration) in large societies.<sup>5</sup> For Habermas, by contrast, it was a fundamental error to *reduce* 'questions of validity' ('claim to truth and correctness') to 'questions of behaviour' or system functioning, because in that way the possibility of redeeming the legitimacy of a political system was lost for ever.<sup>6</sup> Habermas' debate with Luhmann is important for the argument I will make here, since Habermas defended the *possible* link between ethics and social or political organization. A similar insistence is focused in the writings of Daniel Dayan that generated this conference: a concern that we face a crisis generated by contemporary media's incompatibility with effective democracy. My argument, put briefly, is that we cannot grasp, or think beyond, what I call today's '*relegitimation crisis*' without *both* an ethics of media *and* a sociology that captures how mediatisation has transformed the everyday realities of all the organizational processes (economic, political, administrative) that in the 1970s seemed still autonomous from the media sector. (In today's crisis of democracy, incidentally, there is a remote double of Luhmann's old position: it is occupied by those who argue, like Mark Deuze, that 'media life' – the process of media-saturated identity generation across multiple platforms – is now a natural process that supplants any need for ethical or political distance.

<sup>7</sup>Paradoxically, this call to celebrate 'media life' as a second nature claims to be in tune with a 'new' democratic voice, even as it decouples itself from the only possible basis of democratic critique of existing institutions.

What exactly is the *re*legitimation crisis I see today? First, let me emphasise, it is *not* the separate and deep legitimation crisis that today surrounds global financial markets and national political processes. A further irony, looking back at Habermas' 1970s book, is that the two factors he believed *secured* Western democratic systems from an internal legitimation crisis – the welfare state and effective competition between political parties – are both now under threat in neoliberal democracies where no effective challenge exists to relentless marketization, including of the welfare state. But today's immediate crisis of working democracy – the conflict in many countries between the representation of political will in democratic process and a very different popular will emerging on the streets – that crisis, while played out in media, derives the specific breakdown of financial markets from 2007 onwards and so cuts across the longer-term difficulties in the relations of media to democracy that concern me here.

That (re)legitimation crisis will continue even after (as we hope) today's deep financial and governance problems are resolved. When I write of 'crisis', I mean this less to signal an irretrievable breakdown of society and politics, and more to signal a decision-point (the origin of the term 'crisis' in the Greek 'krisis', whose root is 'krinein', to decide or discern), a moment when choices need to be made as to the direction in which social and political organization are going. It is a crisis derived from the long-term consequences of the *mediatization* - or, more specifically, the increasing and irrevocable saturation by media - of every domain of daily life: both government process and individual self-organizing, both corporate time and family time. One of the best investigations of this crisis is Bruce Bimber's book *Information and American Democracy* which shows how the digitalization of

information, and the information abundance it generates, change the operating conditions of institutional power. Digitalization of information not only increases hugely the information resources available to institutional elites; it also transforms the *archival* access to past information and media for all sorts of actors, and facilitates horizontal *communication outside elites*. While this has benefits for institutional organization, a cost is to make institutions more vulnerable to the dissemination of information by non-elites, especially via media. As a result all institutional authority becomes vulnerable to leaks, sabotage and increased informational traffic: new information flows make institutions more porous, their authority more unstable.<sup>8</sup>

Other perspectives on the relegitimation crisis come from research on mediatization's implications for policy generation and political contestation. Thomas Meyer in his account of 'media democracy' argues that when media visibility becomes the basic condition of all political action, what counts as a political *problem* (that which requires a policy adjustment) becomes defined in large part by whatever is likely to play well as a 'policy adjustment' in media. Pierre Rosanvallon by contrast rejects the idea that we suffer a deficit of democratic participation, but insists the real question is what *type* of democratic participation is stimulated by a world of continual political spectacle and scandal: it is a form of 'counter-democracy' with ever more ways for citizens to express their *dissatisfaction* with government and power, but as yet few ways of expressing a positive political will, or building positive programmes for change.<sup>9</sup> (Rosanvallon wrote without reference to twitter and the rise of political blogs, but they only reinforce his argument.)

These writers are not concerned with the specific interests of media institutions, but as Graeme Turner has recently pointed out, media add a further paradox to the mix. If entertainment has become the domain paradigm of global media, as media markets expand across the world, then forms of social representation that fit entertainment templates become increasingly normal and such formats of social knowledge (such as reality TV formats in

neoliberal democracies are an important example) carry an ideological weight, even if they lack ideological intent. This process is amplified by the huge spread of media culture, through social media embedded in the very rhythms of everyday life.<sup>10</sup>

What I loosely call a relegitimation crisis – for the sake of a convenient title – is not (as in the 1970s) a matter of media culture obstructing the still separate and protected domains of government and corporate management, but instead the penetration by media (media pressures, timescales, incentives, forms) into more and more sectors of *both* government and everyday life. It is a crisis both of system (that is, organizations and institutions) *and* of lifeworld (that is, 'us'). A sign of this double crisis, or decision-point, are the emerging calls for ethical reflection by once fervent advocates of the digital: for example, Jaron Lanier in his book *You Are Not a Gadget* and Sherry Turkle in her book *Alone Together*, both published this year. Turkle asks directly the Socratic question: 'is [technology] offering us the lives we want to lead?'<sup>11</sup>

Two questions lie at the heart of this gradually emerging relegitimation crisis: first, are today's forms of organization (political, bureaucratic, social) compatible with the intense mutual glare of mediatization? Second, are our individual lives - with and through media - sustainable under the pressure of intensified mutual display that digital media practice brings? It is artificial, of course, to separate the organizational domain from the personal (clearly they interpenetrate each other). The overlap between the organizational and the personal has vividly emerged in the phone hacking crisis within News International Corporation and other parts of the UK press, where the conflict between the systemic demands of a hypercompetitive scandal-chasing media and even the most basic norms of human interaction and respect has become clear. Behind this scandal, however, lies an even more difficult question: whether we are yet *able to* clarify the ethical norms that should apply to the circulation of images between individuals in today's media-saturated world?

One response to such deep and interpenetrating crises is to say: practice will find the solution. Wittgenstein once remarked that 'the sickness of a time' is cured only 'by an alteration in mode of life'.<sup>12</sup> But if we followed Wittgenstein, we would give up writing, stop talking, and go home! My own view is it is the sheer difficulty and overlaid nature of today's democratic crises that requires us, as academics, to work to articulate the problems, to chart the obstacles to change, and to reimagine the horizons of possibility in society and politics, as in the conference that hosted these papers. In the second part of my talk, I want to outline the way forward that I envisage: this will combine a critical sociology of media with an ethics of media, and it will be that combination that is crucial.

### *A Way Forward*

The issues already raised are too many to be discussed in detail. So I want in the rest of my time to elaborate on two aspects: first, the underlying dynamics affecting how media institutions contribute, for good or ill, to the texture of contemporary public life; and second, the relationship between a *sociological* understanding of the conditions of contemporary media and society, and an ethical approach to media. Under the second heading, I will not say much about the specific principles of media ethics (about which I have written at length elsewhere), but will focus instead on explaining how a media ethics is both compatible with, and necessary for, a sociology of media. I know that for some sociologists it makes no sense to enter into the realm of normative critique, and I admit to finding myself uncomfortable when expounding even what I take to be potentially consensual principles of an ethics of media. But we have, I believe, no choice.

Today, the world of media institutions is subject to many interlocking uncertainties in the digital age (uncertainties of platform and bandwidth, economic model and audience) but let me concentrate on an uncertainty of key importance for political legitimation: the

changing status of media as social and political institutions. Media make representations: they re-present worlds (possible, imaginary, desirable, actual). Media make truth claims: the gaps and repetitions in media representations, if systematic enough, can distort people's sense of *what there is to see* in the social and political domains. Modernity's key processes of centralization (economic, social, political, cultural) themselves have always relied on media as infrastructures of communication, as James Beniger's great book *The Control Revolution* brought out for 19<sup>th</sup> century industrializing societies such as the USA and UK and as replayed today in very different circumstances India and China, Iran and Brazil.

It is the *apparently* necessary role of media in the social fabric that underlies what I have called elsewhere 'the myth of the mediated centre'.<sup>13</sup> I say 'apparently' because there are always historical alternatives (there is no teleology to history, *pace* Hegel). 'Centres', still less 'mediated centres', are not necessary features of social organization: rather, over time, things have been progressively organized so that, to borrow a phrase of Pierre Bourdieu, '*everything goes on as if*' they are necessary. Our very notion of '*the media*' is an example:<sup>14</sup> out of the disparate dynamics of multiple media industries, something has emerged as general and as mythical as '*the media*'. But what if the changing dynamics of media's production, consumption and economics are *undermining* this myth of the mediated centre? What if the very idea of '*the media*' is imploding, as the interfaces we call 'media' are transformed? The disruptive dynamics are *not* here technological per se: the internet's distinctive ability to link up previously separate contexts (think of YouTube) arguably makes it *easier*, not harder, to sustain 'the media' as a common reference-point.

Disruption instead derives from how technological possibilities are meshed with wider economic, social and political forces. Joseph Turow's analysis of the media industry's decreasing interest in the general audience identifies a deep economic dynamic of disruption. However, if basic consumer demand – for fashion, music, sport – is to be sustained at all, it



requires *common* reference-points towards which we turn to see what's going on, what's cool. Indeed media corporations are increasingly looking for the 'water-cooler moment' that will *drive* multiple individual users to follow content *across* platforms so that income can be generated along the way. As Graeme Turner argues, the (relative) decline of mass media is not the same as a decline of media's 'centrality'. In the multiple-outlet digital media era, 'centrality' becomes an even more important claim for media institutions to make, as they seek to justify their wider 'value'. The ability to speak for, and link audiences to, a 'mediated centre' becomes *all the more* important, even as its reference-points in social and political reality are unsettled.

Arguments for change in media's underlying *social* dynamics are equally ambiguous. For decades, the word 'liveness' has captured our sense that we must switch on centrally transmitted media to check 'what's going on'. Such social impulses do not suddenly disappear. But what if new forms of 'liveness' are now emerging that are primarily interpersonal? Is there emerging (on social networking sites, through everyday use of smartphones) a sense of *social* 'liveness', what Ken Hillis calls a 'distributed social centrality' – mediated, yes, but *not* by central media institutions?<sup>15</sup> What if social networking sites induce a shift in our sense of what 'news' is – a shift from following public politics to simply following social flow - a change as fundamental perhaps as the birth of 'news' itself in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries?

The directions of change are complex. The intensity of feedback loops on social networking sites makes them particularly well suited to create a 'buzz' around both niche and general products, feeding back into mainstream media. Far from focussing an *alternative* 'centre', the centring processes of SNS and mainstream media may well become increasingly intertwined like the strands of a *double helix*, in a world where marketing itself strives increasingly to be like more 'conversation'. There is little evidence so far that this double

helix works to amplify general *news* consumption. For sure, social media may take on a political role under conditions of conflict, as the Arab Spring and subsequent economic protests in Europe and North America have illustrated, but those circumstances may be precisely exceptional.

More broadly media's relations to 'the social' are intertwined with the fate of national politics, indeed *any* politics. It is a truism of political science that politics is fundamentally mediated. The pictures of politics that media circulate is not 'just another' narrative: it is the set of narratives that underwrites contemporary politics' *space of appearances*.<sup>16</sup> Nor have states disappeared; indeed their projects of social surveillance and border defence have grown more ambitious. Governments must engage intensely with 'the media's' fate, hence their pursuit of new political audiences via social networking sites, prominent first in President Obama's use of social networking sites in 2008. But here the underlying interests of large political, and large media, institutions - in sustaining their authority through the construction of a mediated centre - *converge*. The Guardian and BBC for example are happy to act as warehouses of protester videos (the Arab spring provided many examples, but an earlier example was their coverage of the 1 April 2009 G20 London summit, where fatal police attacks on a bystander were captured on mobile phone video). Media corporations' *uses* of so-called 'user-generated content' to bolster *their own* position as leading social storytellers repeat, under new conditions, a strategy Barbie Zelizer first noticed in television coverage of the assassination of John F Kennedy and its aftermath.<sup>17</sup>

If a mediated centre is sustained, it may be at the price of entertainment dislodging politics from its core. The dominance of entertainment (a less costly investment than investigative journalism) suits the bottom-line economics of weak media institutions, but is compatible with *many* political contexts and outcomes: whether in post-socialist competitive nationalism in former Yugoslavia, the socialist/market hybrid politics of China, or the fragile

democratic politics of post-dictatorship Philippines. And sometimes, as in today's Arab world or the USA of President George W. Bush, entertainment may be the *most* effective way for voices that challenge traditional and elite discourse to break through.

What emerges from these reflections is that no institutional domain – no sector of society, whether government, corporations, religious bodies, the military or civil society – can *fail* to have an investment in what I call the myth of the mediated centre, and in sustaining that centre in some form, even if the contest very often is about *what* form this 'centre' takes. And although, within this multidimensional conflict over the direction and status of media institutions, there are *system* dynamics driven by something other than political or social intent (for example, media industries' need to sustain their audiences' attention as a precondition for selling it), that does *not* mean we can treat the outcomes of this struggle as a pure 'system output', and so beyond the reach of normative critique. On the contrary, what is at stake in this conflict are the regularities of how societies are represented to themselves, and indeed how something like 'societies' become accessible for public reflection and political challenge at all. And so a critical media sociology cannot be neutral on whether we have an ethical framework for thinking about media: it precisely *needs* such a framework in the background. Here Habermas' 1970s debate with Luhmann, discussed earlier, might be replayed in relation to Luhmann's own late reflections on media in his book *The Reality of Mass Media*,<sup>18</sup> which dismissed the idea that media are accessible to normative critique.

In my own work, I have explored the possibility of normative critique of media via neo-Aristotelian ethics, outlining three possible virtues of media-related practice for professionals and non-professionals alike: those virtues are accuracy, sincerity and care.<sup>19</sup> I don't want to repeat here my detailed arguments for the relevance of such virtues, not just because of lack of time, but also because a wider set of ethical problems concerning *all*

digital communications is now becoming visible that we are much less ready to chart.

Considering this will lead me into some closing reflections on the relationship between an ethics of media and a critical sociology of media. There must, after all, be more than an accidental connection.

There are multiple ways of living with media.<sup>20</sup> What values might enable us to start sorting out good from bad outcomes? One might be the concept of 'recognition' as developed by Axel Honneth. Individuals and groups need to be recognized as moral and social agents. This is linked to the fundamental value of 'voice' that I have described elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> In recognising someone as capable of contributing to the social process, we are recognising, for example, her capacity for deliberation about how life should be organised.<sup>22</sup> Media play an important role in providing such recognition and in sustaining spaces where such capacity can be actualized, as Eva Illouz's pioneering work has explored.<sup>23</sup> Recognition, in turn, requires us each to be allowed some freedom of action within which to fulfil the capabilities for which we are recognised: recognition without some practical degree of freedom is empty. Yet freedom is impossible except against the background of various degrees of practical and ontological *security* to which media and other institutions, in their stability, contribute.

Media institutions and outputs help sustain both the immediate and underlying conditions of mutual recognition. To sustain mutual recognition, media must be open to participation and challenge, worthy of trust as forms of truth-telling, and practised with care. Actual media institutions may well not meet these standards. There is little reason to believe that media institutions, *just* because they are free to compete in a market, are *ipso facto* likely to contribute to these broader goods. As the philosopher Bernard Williams argued, the market-system, while it may make outright tyranny difficult to sustain, 'does less well in sustaining the complex of attitudes and institutions that as a whole stand against tyranny'.<sup>24</sup> To value media freedom, then, does not mean regarding market freedoms as trumping all

other values for organizing media. Media, at bottom, are *social* institutions. The acute difficulties that market forces today pose for any ethical media practice of journalism – of which the recent phonehacking scandal in Britain is just an example – require normative principles framed beyond a narrow market-focussed notion of freedom.

We cannot clarify how – individually, collectively, institutionally – we can live well together with, and through, media unless we can agree on some extrinsic aims which our practices with media should satisfy. Indeed the intense implication of our lives in media, *from all directions*, creates what Paul Ricoeur calls a limit situation that requires us to build a new ethical perspective on media. Whatever the broader issues raised by our individual implication in digital communication every day (for example, via social media), we dare not neglect the distinctive ethical issues that continue to be raised by *media* institutions and *media* content (such as news), produced professionally for large-scale distribution. The practical projects of living well, and living well with media, are inseparably intertwined with the theoretical tasks of media ethics and media theory.

Media play a crucial role in representing the facts and norms that guide our action in the world, and, if they do so badly, they can injure the social fabric. A good life involves, among many other things, the existence of media that contribute to our ability to grasp accurately the conditions under which we, and others, live. In turn, an adequate debate about media ethics requires a clear understanding of what media do in the world, that is, a media sociology which analyses how media institutions shape the production and occlusion of knowledge, the formation of social power, and strategic claims to social 'reality'. The point, for me, of 'media studies' is to study how media contribute to conditions of knowledge and agency *in the world*, and so to our possibilities of living well together.

Today's relegitimation crisis requires a much more explicit debate than previously about the conditions under which 'the mediation of everything' (in Sonia Livingstone's

phrase) affects the stable working of democratic institutions. It also requires a much more open debate than has been seen since the early days of broadcasting about *who is empowered* to deliberate and how that contributes to whether the media we have are the media we need. It is vital that the process of media *regulation* is opened up once more to citizen participation (just as practised in the early days of French radio),<sup>25</sup> and also that working journalists and media professionals have *their* capacity for ethical reflection protected from the constraints which operate in most commercial media workplaces.

Such an expanded circle of debate about the means and ends of media, and their consequences for the social and political fabric, must confront openly some very difficult questions about the conditions under which an intensely mediated life – both public and private – becomes unliveable. Any answers to those questions will cut across market imperatives: so the debate that generates such answers must be as widely grounded in social and civic life as possible. In starting this long journey, we return to a problem that Alexis de Tocqueville put aside as too difficult when, in *Democracy in America*, he noted the inevitable tendency of media institutions to move from being mere conduits of information to being institutions with major social power of their own. In one passage he considered the possibility of some restraint being put on such media power, and certainly did not rule it out. To quote Tocqueville directly: 'if any one could point out an intermediate, and yet a tenable position, between the complete independence [of the press] and the entire subjection of the public expression of opinion, I should perhaps be inclined to adopt it; but the difficulty is to discover this position'.<sup>26</sup> Now perhaps is a good time to attempt once more to discover the position – the perspective from which open normative debate about media institutions becomes possible – that eluded de Tocqueville. I hope this special issue, and the conference from which it derived, will prove to be the start of that search.

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<sup>1</sup> Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki (1975: 34, 36, added emphasis).

<sup>2</sup> Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki (1975: 115).

<sup>3</sup> Bell 1976: quote from page 11

<sup>4</sup> Habermas (1988: 74ff) [1973].

<sup>5</sup> Habermas (1988: 130-143).

<sup>6</sup> Habermas (1988: 5-6).

<sup>7</sup> Deuze (2010).

<sup>8</sup> Bimber (2003).

<sup>9</sup> Meyer (2003), Rosanvallon (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Turner (2010: 25, 68).

<sup>11</sup> Turkle (2011: 17); Lanier (2011).

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<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, quoted Pitkin (1972: 340).

<sup>13</sup> For more detailed discussion, see Couldry (2003, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Bourdieu (1977).

<sup>15</sup> Hillis (2009: 58).

<sup>16</sup> On politics as a 'space of appearances', see Arendt (1960).

<sup>17</sup> Zelizer (1993).

<sup>18</sup> Luhmann 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Couldry (2006: chapter7), (2012: chapter 8).As noted in those longer discussions, this neo-Aristotelian approach does not depend on taking over Aristotle's limited and, in some respects, now even offensive, account of 'human nature'.

<sup>20</sup> The argument of this final section draws closely on the closing pages Couldry (2012, chapter 8).

<sup>21</sup> Honneth (2007), Couldry (2010).

<sup>22</sup> Recognition raises certain issues of justice regarding media that are difficult and I lack space to develop here: see Couldry (2012: chapter 8).

<sup>23</sup> Illouz 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Williams (2002: 213-219, quoting 217).

<sup>25</sup> Barbrook (1995).

<sup>26</sup> Tocqueville (1964: 204-205).