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## Media in modernity: a nice derangement of institutions

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# **MEDIA IN MODERNITY: A NICE DERANGEMENT OF INSTITUTIONS**

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## ***Abstract***

This article reviews the contribution of media institutions to modernity and its wider institutional arrangements. It will consider how this relationship has normally been conceived, even mythified, and then, in its second half, review how the institutions that we now call ‘media’ are, potentially, disrupting, even deranging, modernity’s arrangements in profound ways. The article will suggest that, under conditions of increased complexity and radically transformed market competition, the changing set of institutions we call ‘media’ demand a major reinterpretation of how modernity ‘works’ through institutional concentration. The first main section reviews in schematic terms the role which media institutions (the press, radio, television, film, but also infrastructural media such as the telegraph) played in the institutional development of modernity from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, *stabilising* the circulation of information and contributing to the freedom associated with modernity, but in the course of this installing a ‘myth of the mediated centre’. The second section will review how this traditional settlement between media and modernity is now being deranged. This goes beyond the globalization of modernity and the complexification of culture landscapes through media and time-space compression. It is a matter, more fundamentally, of a change in the conditions under which media institutions exist and are able to ‘centralize’ communications flows. Today, communications are becoming centralised *less* through the production and circulation of elaborate media contents at/from global/national centres throughout the social domain (funded through audience-based advertising or state subsidy) and *more* through the stimulation to/from everywhere of symbolic interactions within a global information space (the internet, and its related apparatus) funded by the collection and sale of data ‘exhaust’ generated by those interactions. The result, paradoxically, is likely to be an increasing destabilisation of many traditional institutions of modernity, and the normalisation of unfreedom through continuous surveillance, undermining the legitimacy of institutional arrangements on which modernity has conventionally relied.

## ***Keywords***

Media; modernity; myth; legitimation; the internet; datification; surveillance.

## ***Length***

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## **MEDIA IN MODERNITY: A NICE DERANGEMENT OF INSTITUTIONS**

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Media have played a fundamental role in the emergence of modernity's institutions and the forms of coordination on which they rely. The relationship between media (as ways of organising communications) and the possibility of society is so basic to modernity that it is often hard to see: its operations are almost entirely naturalised, and in a specific sense (to be explained later) mythified. But the key institutions of modernity (corporations and trade unions, communities and churches, civil society organisations and governments) may now be being disrupted, deranged even, by the new and distinct set of institutions that we still broadly call 'media', a possibility to which this article seeks to orient us. The article's main title recalls sociologist John Thompson's book *The Media and Modernity* (1995) which offered a definitive account of media's contribution to modernity on the threshold of the internet era. The article's subtitle recalls an article by philosopher Donald Davidson ('A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs') which offered a challenging reinterpretation of how language works through convention. My purpose here is to suggest that, under conditions of the intensified production and circulation of communication – as well as radically transformed market competition - the changing set of institutions *we call* 'media' demand a reinterpretation of how modernity itself 'works' through institutional concentration. In this way, I hope to contribute to this special issue's 'critical inventory of modernity'.

My argument involves an underlying move, which is to uncover the role that communications have *always* played in the emergence of the coordinated spaces of exchange and interaction intrinsic to modernity. Take markets for example: at all times and not just in the modern era, they have been spaces of communication, but national or regional market economies require a more highly organised flow and recording of communications (across space and time) than is enabled by the resources of the traditional market square. That dependence is partly direct (as in the operations of national stock markets) and partly indirect, because a market economy relies on a transportation system, and that transportation system, if it is not to quickly break down, relies in turn on faster and more coordinated flows of communication. Because however human beings are fundamentally animals who construct reality through communication, communication (as just 'what goes on between us') tends always to get *effaced* in our accounts of the solid, stable institutions associated with epochal shifts in human organisation. When doing institutional analysis, we are tempted to 'see through' face-to-face communication and focus on the 'harder' structures supposedly underlying it, forgetting precisely the fundamental role that communication plays in making those very structures possible. But recent changes in the organisation of communication invalidate any attempt to 'see through' communications' role in institutional formation, because they bring changes in the possibilities for organizing people and resources, which, in turn, have with fundamental consequences for future forms of modernity, for what we might call late 'late modernity'.

In the past three decades, the digitization of most communicational content, the construction of an encompassing global space of communicative exchange called 'the internet'; and the embedding in daily life of the resulting possibilities for everyday action have, together, begun to transform social relations and so the very nature of modern institutions. While a first wave of social theory (Anthony Giddens, Arjun Appadurai) drew key insights from an earlier stage

in the globalization of media, those insights predated the establishment of high-speed, high-bandwidth, many-directional digital communications as a *banal fact* in the everyday lives of billions. This recent intensification of communications ('recent' in the sense of 'in the last two decades') has come at a price: the embedding of most actions in a new 'communication system' (Mansell 2012) across which the generation of economic value becomes fundamentally reliant on the gathering, processing, evaluating and selling *of data*: that is, the data constituted by those acts of communication themselves. The result is an emerging regime of total surveillance developed primarily for corporate benefit, but also available for use by political power, as revealed in Edward Snowden's revelations about the NSA and GCHQ. Markets and states, indeed all social forms from institution building to informal interaction, are becoming increasingly dependent on a communicative *infrastructure* whose operations are incompatible with the value of freedom that once seemed fundamental to the project of modernity.

This is the 'nice derangement of institutions' which the article will try to unpack. Its argument is anticipated in fable-form by San Francisco author Dave Eggers' novel *The Circle*. That novel parodies new 'media' institutions' ambitions for control, and their corrosive implications for any possible ethical life. This article offers a sociological unpacking of how we could have reached the dystopian threshold that Eggers depicts.

### ***The emergence of media institutions in modernity***

The role of the printing press in the Reformation in Europe in challenging traditional forms of religious authority is well known; so too is the role of books and pamphlets in the emergence of profound challenge to the autocratic states of the UK, France and elsewhere, and in the longer-term building of modern civil society (Wuthnow 1989). Newspapers, although their origin derived from the need for the circulation of market information (Rantanen 2009), became over time essential fora for the deliberations of emerging social and national imagined communities (Anderson 1990), and emerging forms of democratic deliberation (Tocqueville 1961). Mass newspapers were one key element in the emergence of the more intensely connected national publics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Tarde 1969). The history of mass printed media within modernity is well known and frequently celebrated.<sup>1</sup>

Less often celebrated is a broader infrastructure of distributing written matter in all directions which was essential to market and state: the modern postal service. As a general system for distributing content *from anywhere to anywhere*, the postal service was useful to the emergence of modern markets (both their networks of producers and their interconnected mass of consumers). Indeed as soon as we focus on many-to-many communications, other forms of movement - equally important in modernity's history - come into view, such as mass transportation, yet this is not always considered as part of the same transformation. We must choose a wider-angled lens.

This involves considering the relations of media and modernity *not* from the perspective of specific media innovations (tracing out from there their ever-expanding effects over time and space), but instead from the perspective of modernity at the broadest institutional level, that is, the development of the modern state, the modern economy (on national and increasingly transnational scales) and, through both, the emergence of an inter-national or 'world system' (Wallenstein 2011). Within this broader perspective, there are of course important things to say about the role of media innovations, for example the role of the *telegraph* in the

emergence of modern diplomacy and warfare (Mattelart 1994). Even more important, however, is to shift our starting-point from an exclusive focus on single technological innovations to what we might call 'structural' innovation, that is, innovations in the way that communications technologies and practices of many sorts get embedded into, and eventually integrated within, wider patterns of *organizing everything*. Here the emergence of large-scale markets and organizations that market to them ('corporations') is crucial, and relatively neglected in communications research. As Craig Calhoun noted in an important essay:

State power could grow because the new forms of organization and the improved transportation and communications infrastructure (based partly on new technologies but, at first, more on heavy investments in the extension of old methods) enabled the spread of increasingly effective administration throughout the various territories of a country . . . But [recognising this, NC] is not sufficient. A full account needs to recognize . . . that the growth of the state, like the capitalist economy, developed infrastructures that could be used by ordinary people to develop *connections with each other* (Calhoun 1992: 214, added emphasis).

The gradual development of those connections, not just among 'ordinary people', but in their interactions with corporations, was to instal a 'tertiary' (that is, institutionally mediated) level to social relations over and above the two basic levels of primary and secondary relations that Charles Cooley (1962) had theorised at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (whole-person relations versus relations mediated by roles) The fullest account of *how* this occurred is provided by James Beniger's brilliant book *The Control Revolution* (1987).

Beniger's book set out to track 'a complex of rapid changes in the technological *and* economic arrangements by which information is collected, stored, processed and communicated, and through which formal or programmed decisions might effect societal control' (1987: vi). That broad focus on both 'information processing' and 'communication' (1987: 8) enabled Beniger to grasp a fundamental higher-order dynamic of 19<sup>th</sup> century modernity which he called 'a crisis of control'. To explain: because the Industrial Revolution speeded up 'society's entire material processing system', it precipitated 'a crisis of control' in which information processing and communications practices lagged behind processes of energy production, manufacturing and transportation (1987: vii). The crisis required integrative solutions across many diverse domains, for example, transportation *and* media, product standardization *and* advertising, in order to enhance the overall predictability of society, both market and state. Beniger's most vivid example is a US rail crash in 1841 in which 2 Western US railroad trains crashed head on, simply because (unknown to each other) they were travelling down the same track at the same time in the opposite direction (Beniger 1987: 221-226). The result was a sudden realization in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century that accelerated transportation *required* faster and more coordinated communication, if disasters were to be avoided. The risk profile of everyday interaction in any one locality had been changed profoundly by the banal possibility of transporting distant goods and people *into* that locality within a matter of hours, requiring the development of a *communications* ecology that linked localities everywhere in certain ways. Meanwhile, the solutions to such problems generated improved networks of transportation, which also served to accelerate the delivery of centralised symbolic content (newspapers). Such transformations of communications processes integrated with wider organizational change had impacts far beyond general risk management: they affected the quality and speed of economic production (its better coordination across growing economic networks), consumption (based on the more secure

flow of information about potential purchases to consumers), and distribution (to ensure that the desired goods actually reached consumers).

Such an account takes us some way from centralizing narratives concerning media's role in the nation's imagined community (Anderson 1990); by bringing out the key role of coordinated communication in the development of market *and* state *and* state/market relations, Beniger's analysis reveals the role of 'media' (in a broad sense) in the achievement of higher-order solutions to complex problems of interdependency (Elias 1994). That broad framing of media's relations to the development of modernity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century will be essential when we turn later to the potential derangement of modern institutions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Comparable processes of interlocking market and state development through communications occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of what Raymond Williams (1990) called 'mobile privatization': radio and television for the instant communication of symbolic content to populations of hundreds of millions; the telephone as a means for instant one-to-one communication across local, national, and international networks; and, in the background, radical changes in transportation - the car for individuals over shorter distance, the plane for fast long-distance travel - that in turn made further demands on the communications infrastructure under conditions of peace and conflict.

The increasing presence of daily and, by the second half of the 20th century, hourly media flows in everyday life helped transform wider norms of sociability, mutual recognition and engagement with the state-focussed political system (Scannell and Cardiff 1991; Starr 2004). While the balance-sheet is distinctly mixed when one turns away from relatively stable countries such as the UK and the USA to countries with states of sharply varying strength (Germany: Kershaw 1987), or weak states in postcolonial contexts (Nigeria: see Larkin 2008), or states in the process of disintegration (former Yugoslavia: Smith 1995), there is some plausibility to the general claim that the continuous daily operations of media institutions ('the media') somehow contributed to the stabilization of the broader institutions and institutional frameworks of modernity. Certainly 'the media' are institutions without which our inherited forms of society and politics are barely imaginable in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The great historian Eric Hobsbawm notes this, for the case of politics, while striking an appropriately ambivalent note about the implications: 'as the [twentieth] century ended, it became evidence that the media were a more important component of the political process than parties and electoral systems and likely to remain so . . . however . . . they were in no sense a means of democratic government' (Hobsbawm 1995: 581-582). Certainly, there is a danger, in such an argument, of conflating what political scientist David Lockwood half a century ago classically distinguished, namely, system (practical) integration and social (value-based) integration (Lockwood 1964, discussed Couldry 2000: 10-12). That is a distinction to which I will return.

Notwithstanding the apparent fit between media institutions and modernity's broader features, in the 1970s and 1980s a sense developed that the increasing quantity and intensity of media messages were generating a qualitative phase-shift: a turn to the *post*-modern. There were many strands to 1980s debates about postmodernity – including broader forms of de-differentiation derived from expanded global cultural flows and the increasing salience of 'culture' in economic production for ever larger and more differentiated markets (Lash 1990; Lash and Urry 1994), but the most clearly delineated aspect of the postmodern emerged in

relation to media specifically. This took the form of Jean Baudrillard's well-known claim that, through television, modernity had become an age of 'simulation' in which the epistemological reference-points for modernity's legitimating discourses (freedom, societal and economic progress, democracy) were now buried under a welter of media messages. Media power itself, on this view, became hard to grasp since we could no longer stand outside it: 'it is impossible to locate an instance of the model, of the power, of the gaze, of the medium itself, since *you* are always already on the other side' (Baudrillard 1983: 51, original emphasis). A more subtle version of this argument was Joshua Meyrowitz's (1985) account of electronic media's effects on the reorganization of key settings of everyday social interaction, for example the family (continuously *invaded* by authoritative images of other ways of behaving through media), or the working lives of politicians (continuously *exposed* to their electorates through media). For other writers, media saturation had the effect of dissolving space (McLuhan and Fiore 1967: 63), place (Auge 1995), and time (Nora 1989).

When one looks more closely, however, such arguments derived their force from their *distance* from everyday experience. The period of the apparently 'post-modern' was characterized by the growth of many new forms of travel through which space and place seemed to matter more, not less. A parallel argument could be made for media's role in stimulating an expanding interest in popular history (Samuel 1994). None of the arguments from the *intensification* of media flows in the age of television showed ultimately any fundamental challenges to modernity.

To make better sense of media's role in modernity, one needs to allow for media's transformations of *all* sides of social conflicts and interactions, and be suspicious of claims that media has disrupted modernity's formations in a linear way.<sup>2</sup> Required instead is a flexible account of the role that media has played in the development of modernity, sketched in the next section.

### ***The Myth of the Mediated Centre***

How could media have acquired such importance in modernity? It is worth reviewing this, before we move to the next stage of the history. 'Media' are, first of all, technological means for producing, circulating and receiving *communications*. We would have no media unless human life were constituted, in a crucial respect, by communications: by the exchanges of *signs* that enable acts of communications to *make* sense, to accumulate over time *as* meaning, *as* knowledge. As Paul Ricoeur put it, 'substituting signs for things . . . [is] more than a mere effect in social life. It is its very foundation' (1980: 219). It became essential however at a certain point in history to mark off the work of 'media' infrastructures from the general flow of communications. This occurred when technological forms of communications emerged that could consistently and reliably transmit certain bundles of meaning across large territories. Many would associate this with the start of large-scale printing in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe. The notion of '*the* media' emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (at least in English, according to the Oxford English Dictionary) with the interconnected growth of the modern state, modern economy and modern media institutions: stable infrastructures and networks for the production and circulation of communication packages to a state's whole population.

Media are institutions with particular power over the means for *representing* shared reality, reality that, over time and through that power, becomes recognised as 'ours': media

institutions, within modernity, came to acquire what Pierre Bourdieu, in relation to earlier religious institutions, called ‘the power of constructing reality’ (Bourdieu 1991: 166). To grasp how this power works, we need to follow the larger stories about ‘society’ and the ‘social world’ that get told through and about our everyday uses of media. The language of anthropology (for example, ‘myth’) is helpful here to capture how the relations between media and social knowledge have been framed and disguised. By ‘myth’ I mean not a credo or organised set of explicit beliefs, but rather an underlying pattern in how, as societies, we make sense of *organizing things as if* that certain types of information, expertise and knowledge are more valuable than others, and offer us a privileged view on the reality of social life. Myths are not merely an elite production: we are all, potentially, involved in producing these myths through our everyday actions (making ‘myth’ a more useful term, incidentally, than ‘ideology’).

As we look back, we can see what I call *the myth of the mediated centre* as crucial to the organization of modernity. This myth has as its domain the organization of everyday life and resources around the productions of large media institutions. This myth has various beneficiaries: proximately, media institutions themselves; ultimately government (which needs large media to provide the means for assuming that it can still talk to its population) and advertisers, or least those advertisers still interested in buying access to whole populations or segments of them. To grasp the social importance of this myth means going beyond the analysis of particular media contents and production processes, and considering media institutions’ role in the stories we tell about ourselves, as members of a social domain. Raymond Williams captured this in his 1974 inaugural Lecture at Cambridge when he wrote of the role of TV drama in providing ‘images, representations, of what living is now like’ (1975: 9) in societies that were becoming increasingly ‘opaque’.

I use the term the ‘myth of the mediated centre’ (Couldry 2003; 2012) to point to the long history whereby media institutions became increasingly implicated in the languages, practices and organizational logics of whole societies. This myth is what we might call a ‘reserve rationalization’ that makes sense for us of organizing our lives around the content flows of media organizations; it tells us that society *has* a ‘centre’ of value, knowledge and meaning, and that particular institutions, those we call ‘media’, *have* a privileged role in giving us access to that supposed ‘centre’. Media institutions work hard to sustain that myth, telling us we are all watching, that this programme or event shows ‘what’s going on’ for us as a society. So too do other institutions, such as governments and political parties, which depend on something like a mediated centre to underwrite their ‘space of appearances’ (in Hannah Arendt’s term: Arendt 1960). This is how media institutions’ symbolic power gets reproduced.

Through the workings of the myth of the mediated centre, modernity’s pressures towards centralization and decentralization achieved a set of stable institutional forms (with accompanying patterns for focussing the infinite flux of daily life), that installed certain media institutions which, in turn, could name in their language elements of local social life *as* all part of the “reality” of the nation. This fundamental role of media within modernity can be underlined by drawing on the recent sociology of critique developed by Luc Boltanski. For Boltanski ‘reality tends to coincide with what appears to hang together . . . [that is] with order’ (2009: 93), and certain institutions have a deep role, at the level of everyday language, in constructing reality and making possible a particular reality’s appearance of hanging

together against a background of much greater flux. It is to those institutions that is 'delegated the task of stating the whatness of what is' (Boltanski 2011: 75 = 2009: 117).

Boltanski does not discuss media institutions at all (his emphasis is on legal institutions), but the relevance of his argument to understanding media's role in the social world is clear. Media's emergence as institutions for 'stating the whatness of what is' has been a historical achievement over two centuries.<sup>3</sup> Such a reading of media's role explains media institutions' association with 'tradition', but does not itself depend on any assumption of the dominance of tradition, and so is open to the emergence of radical dislocations. And, in the last two decades, forces within the expanded media industries themselves have emerged which are potentially disrupting the arrangement of modern institutions. These are discussed in the second half of the article.

### *Late 'late modern' media institutions*

The account of modernity offered so far – and specifically the account of media's role in the stabilization of modernity – is under challenge. It is not that 'media' have disappeared (that is, most traditional media, although hardcopy newspapers are under pressure in most countries), or that media's claims to be central have diminished – arguably those claims have become *more* insistent. It is rather that the *whole terrain* of media (and media institutions) has been reshaped by the 'triple revolution' (Rainie and Wellman 2012: ix) of the internet, continuous access to communication (whether interpersonal and mass, and often online) while on the move, and the rise of online social networking via platforms, such as Facebook. Social media are important to the myth of the mediated centre, because they offer a new *form* of centrality, a new *social* 'liveness', mediated apparently *by us* rather than by content-producing media institutions. The implications for media as social institutions are profound. When we think about media today, we cannot sharply separate, as we once did, 'media' infrastructure (for the centralized distribution of institutional content) from 'communications' infrastructure (for distributed, interpersonal forms of communication). Both now flow into and over each other and across the same platforms.

From the point of view of modernity, the changes under way recently go beyond the thoroughgoing globalization of modernity, and the global complexification of cultural and media 'scapes' (Appadurai 1996), that are consequent upon media's role in time-space compression (Giddens 1990). They also go beyond any rejection, following Latour (1993), of a certain modernity's imaginary separation of nature (science, technology) from culture (society). Of course, in the wake of modern media, culture (and society) cannot coherently be separated from technology, or from the technologically adjusted version of nature that we inhabit. Under way now, more fundamentally, is a change in the conditions under which communications flows can be centralized, with profound implications for the institutional basis of modernity, that is, any possible future modernity (or late 'late modernity'). To grasp this, let us return to (and update) our institutional history of the media and social interface.

### *The Emergence of the Internet: Behind the scenes*

At the turn of the century, when internet services were in the early years of diffusion, their significance was framed primarily in terms of whether 'the internet' would replace television as the reference medium of contemporary life. This was the wrong question. Television viewing has not disappeared, but *increased* in many countries, as internet use has established

itself (Miller 2010); television remains a dominant form of news and entertainment, even if the physical device for watching television may, for many, have changed from a non-networked analogue television set to a digital television, laptop or tablet that can interface with a range of internet-based content streams. The better question concerns the role that the *connective infrastructure* of ‘the internet’ is playing in the institutional transformations of late ‘late modernity’. And here there is a dramatic new picture, whose outline is only gradually becoming clear.

The history of ‘the Internet’ has been told many times. Everyone knows that it emerged from the research arm of the USA’s military establishment, through its connections with university research labs; as such it exemplifies how developments for which ‘the market’ claims credit usually derive from underlying subsidies by the state and other public institutions (Mazzucatto 2013). But that is only the beginning of the story. Particularly important is the combination of steps (some state-led in the US and Switzerland, some driven by markets) as a result of which in 2015 a small number of corporations loosely called ‘media’ – Google, Facebook, Apple, perhaps also Twitter and Instagram and in China Alibaba– can, through their ‘platforms’, act *directly* on the world of consumption and the world of everyday social interaction.

The stages involved in that development are worth setting out more fully:<sup>4</sup>

1. the building of ‘distributed’ networks of communications between (initially very few) computers through the innovative process of ‘packet switching’, as a means, initially, to ensure more secure forms of communication under military attack (the formation of ARPANET in October 1969, NSFNET in 1985).
2. the development (anticipated by Vannevar Bush in 1945) of a protocol for connecting up groups of already linked computers into a wider network, first implemented in the early 1980s, and leading by 1989 to an ‘internet’ of around 160000 computers in the public sector.
3. The emergence of the world-wide web from the idea that texts could be linked together if associated with ordered sets of ‘metadata’ called ‘hypertext’, and Tim Berners-Lee’s formalization of the means to ensure the reliable transmission of hypertext. From this followed the proposal in 1990 for a ‘web’ of files on networked computers and the first system for ‘browsing’ the domain of those texts (‘the World Wide Web’), and the first ‘web’ site in November 1991 (info.cern.ch).

This publicly subsidised development had produced by the early 1990s the skeleton of a connective infrastructure but this was not yet linked to everyday commercial activity, or even non-specialist everyday use.

A rather different and accelerated sequence generated the deeply commercialized internet and worldwideweb that we know in 2015:

4. In 1991, NSFNET was closed and the internet’s operations handed over by the US government to commercial providers. The first commercial web browsers (MOAIC and Netscape) quickly followed. Meanwhile there was the diffusion of small desktop computers and then laptops as means for accessing the internet easily.

5. A shift in the late 1990s in the means to access the exponentially growing domain of internet-linked files from managed directories (Yahoo) to Google's *algorithmically*-based model of indexing pages based on a hierarchy ordered through counting the number of *links in* to each internet page. Google's model was distinctive because, rather than searching within a bounded and finite directory, its operations were recursive, each new link increasing the data over which its calculations ranged, and so increasing the mechanism's power, without limit.
6. Building on the huge success of its Google search engine, Google bolted on to it a much more robust commercial infrastructure for the internet: a new model for advertising tied to terms searched through Google ('Google Adwords') and a system of live-auction advertising ('AdSense'), which together opened up a new basis for the *marketization* of online 'space'.
7. The independent development of 'smart' mobile phones that could access not just phone functions (talking, listening, the sending and receiving of SMS), but also the domain of the worldwideweb. Around 'smart' phones there developed quickly 'apps', installable on each phone, to provide simplified access to particular domains of web data.
8. A final but crucial step involved the emergence (tentatively in 2002 and on a larger scale from 2006) of a new type of website architecture (or 'platform') that enabled hundreds of millions of users to network with each other, but within the parameters designed by that platform's owners: so-called 'social media networks'.

The result of these interlocking steps has been a strikingly complete transformation of 'the internet' from a closed, publicly funded and publicly oriented network for specialist communication into a deeply commercialized, linked space for the conduct of many aspects of social life. The question then is how we make sense of this transformation's consequences for modernity and its institutions.

### *Consequences?*

Understanding the consequences of the internet's emergence as a *connective* infrastructure for modernity and its institutions involves itself a number of steps.

First, we must notice the profound shift in the spatial organization of modernity's communications that flows not from the internet in itself, but from the *normalization* of access to the internet on a continuous basis for social actors, wherever and whenever they are. The idea of a many-to-many communications space was already inherent in the small networks which began to be set up between computers in the 1960s, but so far it benefited only elite communicators, and the state or military institutions in which they were embedded. *Diffusing* the possibility of networked transmission and networked reception across large percentages of the population changed the *basic resources* of everyday social action. 'Mass self-communication' (Castells 2009) from the mid 2000s in many countries, unimaginable even a decade before, had become by the end of the 2000s banal. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century replaying the role of lateral communications which Calhoun (1992: 214) noticed for the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but this time harnessed to a global space of communications. As a result, the *space* of social action has been transformed from a space in which possibilities for action-at-a-distance had to be 'loaded' through the specific, and serial, use of particular technologies (the

phone, the radio, even email) into a space that is at all times ‘sprung’ with the potential for acting, and being acted upon, at/from multiple distances and directions, and in multiple modalities (phone call, email, twitter, instagram, etc). Habit has evolved quickly to reduce the effective range of choice from moment to moment, but the ‘sprung’ potential of social space cannot, any more, be denied or removed.

Second, this new potential of social action - always at least two-way (the capacity to send an SMS while on the move, saying one is late *and* the capacity to receive an SMS, indicating that there is no point going on, because a meeting is cancelled) - necessarily now involves not just actions between individuals, but actions *by corporations* on individuals. Corporations have capacities to act more continuously in time and with fuller coverage of space than individuals, and in this way to act effectively on ‘the social’ (the effectively infinite domain of points where interaction can be started with one or more social actors). Social space-time accordingly, through the enhanced possibilities of connection accumulated over the past 15 years, became open to saturation by corporate action, that is, action directed always at instrumental ends: the making of profit, but (for governments) also the regulation of action. As Joseph Turow writes, ‘the centrality of corporate power is a direct reality at the very heart of the digital age’ (Turow 2011: 17).

Third, and connectedly, commercial corporations (in fact all who attempt to communicate beyond a small set of defined interlocutors) face a deep challenge which drives them, ever more, to *use* their new, hugely expanded potential for acting on ‘the social’. This challenge derives directly from the transformed nature of social space. Actors of all kinds now have hugely increased capacities to send messages in all directions, and they often exercise that capacity. As a result, the volume of messages in circulation has increased exponentially for a long period, creating two problems: the need to filter out most messages (regardless of their value) in order to focus on a more manageable subset of what is in circulation (addressed by apps or other means) and the need for tools to search for particular messages (addressed by search engines and, increasingly apps). Each person comes, increasingly, to engage with the world through an intense filtering, which, in turn, increases the difficulty of generalized communicators such as advertisers and governments. In response, advertisers, as Turow tracks (2011), have evolved their own cumulative set of solutions: now, in the USA and UK at least, they try to reach audiences not through such general means but through *continuous tracking*, wherever individuals are online and whatever they are doing.

Leaving aside the consequences of this third point for particular media institutions (such as the hard copy newspaper which, for two centuries, had relied on that content old cross-subsidy: Couldry and Turow 2014), a fourth and broader consequence is to fuel the rise of *generalised* communication interfaces (so-called ‘platforms’: Gillespie 2010) whose goal is to ensure that people spend as much time as possible *just there*, while performing as many actions as possible. Platforms are an institutionalised way of optimising the overlap between the domain of social interaction and the domain of profit. The simple name ‘platform’ belies the dramatic nature of the move under way from a world (until the mid 2000s) of largely *non-networked* social action concentrated nowhere in particular (that is, in localities and small networks that could never add up to a larger network) to a world (from the mid 2000s) of *pervasively networked* social action that passes through a small number of platforms under corporate, not public, ownership (Van Dijck 2013).

This has a fifth and broader consequence, that, as more and more of what we ordinarily do occurs (is encouraged to occur) on online ‘social media platforms’, via applications, or via other selective cuts through the infinite domain of commercially accessible online activity, so economic value increasingly depends not on the direct selling of goods or services (intensive commercial activity), but on the selling of *data about potential future actions* (protensive commercial activity). But the protensive bias of online commercial expansion has profound implications for the fundamental values of modernity, and particularly for freedom, through the new infrastructural conditions that, to enable and sustain this shift, we must accept. As legal theorist Julie Cohen explores, two forms of acceptance are crucial. There is acceptance of the norm of permanent surveillance (Cohen 2000): the business model of even the most ordinary start-up is likely to depend on collecting data about its users to cross-subsidise the service that it purports to offer, requiring from those users acceptance of something, permanent surveillance, that is normally regarded as conflicting with a basic principle of liberty of action (Skinner 2013). And, underlying this, there is acceptance of the broader operating conditions of the platform and system architectures on which one must rely to perform basic actions: a pragmatic acceptance of one’s vulnerability to that system’s refusal, whenever it thinks fit, *to accept* one’s acceptance, so excluding one from the system. This two-level acceptance installs, as Cohen argues (2012: 188-189), a system-based authoritarianism across huge swathes of everyday life.

Government meanwhile does not stand aside from these developments but itself looks to rely on the new accessibility of the social domain to permanent surveillance. The possibility of asymmetrical monitoring of the social is, of course, not in itself new, and was already theorized by Calhoun (1992: 219) as a ‘quaternary’ relationship to supplement the ‘tertiary’ level of communications with large-scale institutions that, throughout modernity, had increasingly been taken for granted in social interaction. But, while Calhoun already then noted the growth of data collection for commercial purposes, the possible extent, depth and connective power of such data collection could not have been anticipated in the early 1990s, since it depends precisely on the development of the internet as an open space for the social, without which recent data-mining industries could not have grown to their current scale (Amoore 2013; Turow 2011). In this way, the system integration of everyday life has developed massively, but without necessarily (or even possibly), a concomitant development of social, or value-based, integration.

It is surely naive to believe that such transformations will have no implications for the longer-term *legitimacy* of modern institutions of all sorts (from governments to corporations to civil society organizations) that flow from their stakeholders increasingly coming to understand that their institutional survival depends on the *continuation into the future* of such freedom-ignoring practices. Can the institutional arrangements of modernity – the transformed arrangements of late ‘late modernity’ – endure when their basic precondition is a regime of ‘total surveillance’ that is offered under the guise of freedom? It is clear that answers to such a huge question can at this stage be, at most, speculative, but in my conclusion I will attempt to sketch some beginnings of an answer.

## ***Conclusion***

It might appear that, through the abstractness of my argument, I have engineered a paradox in media’s ongoing relation to modernity that is too violent to be plausible. Certainly, we should not underestimate the role of various factors in blunting for everyday life this paradox

between late 'late modernity's' infrastructural growth and its values. First, these violent contradictions are embedded within our daily relations with infrastructures that appear to enable us simply to achieve our goals of keeping in touch with friends and family, working effectively, buying the sorts of things we need and desire. The nature of infrastructure is that practical relations on which its functioning depends get 'sunk' phenomenologically, buried beneath the threshold of consciousness, far from political anger (Star and Ruhleder 1996), at least until the infrastructure breaks down. Second, we must not underestimate the capacity of institutional invention to find local solutions to the particular tensions to which these contradictions give rise (negotiating 'terms of service' to disguise better particular processes to which users have objected) or to frame acceptance within a wider narrative of threat (the current US and UK governments' narratives about the necessity of their vast surveillance programmes and the connivance of corporations on which they depend). Third, it never was true that modernity was *without* contradiction, and so there is nothing *automatically fatal* to the ongoing project of modernity from the fact that new contradictions have emerged, this time between the operating conditions of modernity's new communications' infrastructure and the demands made of its processes of political legitimation; it is not as if, after all, this emerging communications infrastructure yields no benefits for the political process, for example by redistributing the possibilities for visibility amongst general populations and political actors (Rosanvallon 2011).

We cannot assume that these contradictory factors are sufficient to 'mute' the tensions and contradictions that I have outlined, given especially that they are intrinsic to the business models that drive the internet's expansion and drive today's wider economy. Better, rather, to foreground, as a level of analysis, the *struggle to neutralize* these contradictions, which takes us back to the question of myth. In the article's first half, I argued that sustaining anything like the modern nation required the imagining of something like a 'mediated centre' and that this imagining stabilized over time in the arrangement of objects and agents, beliefs and discourses, that I call the 'myth of the mediated centre'. Today, perhaps, we are entering a new age of mythical inventiveness! On the one hand, the constant push to be present on social media platforms carries with it an incessant attempt to invoke a new horizon of social possibility focussed around those very platforms, an invocation which I have called the 'myth of us' (Couldry 2014a). On the other hand, the main route to *profit from* our presence on social platforms depends on the gathering and selling (whether to advertisers or other interested parties) of *data derived from* that presence and those platform activities. Data sometimes can be collected silently through cookies and other more elaborate devices, but its collection can certainly be enhanced by enlisting the social actor in specific actors of data release. A number of areas such as the health provision, drugs and health insurance sectors are increasingly focussed, particularly in the USA, around the expanding collection of data. What is at stake here depends on how much weight we give to hopes (for a more effective, because more data-intensive, sickness prevention regime) or to costs (the costs to freedom of the sort already noted by Julie Cohen for other much *less* intensively system-reliant forms of everyday practice than health). What is clear is that such major transformations of the institutional basis of health provision are unlikely to emerge without some further cultural supplement or myth. Jose Van Dijck identifies an 'ideology of dataism . . . a widespread belief in the objective quantification and potential tracking of all kinds of human behaviour and sociality through online media technologies' (Van Dijck 2014: 2); others (boyd and Crawford 2011; Couldry 2014b) have talked of the 'myth' or 'myths' of big data. The long-term significance and effectiveness of these myths in neutralizing the new communications-

based contradictions of modernity are unknown, but, given the effectiveness of the myth of the mediated centre for over a century, one would not bet against them succeeding!

Finally, it is worth situating this article's argument within the social theory context from which it began. I have argued that communications has generally been neglected as a key dimension of what is organised in modernity, but when we turn to late 'late modernity', the astounding speed of infrastructural change represented by the internet has generated new contradictions which threaten at least to challenge some ideas of modernity and possibly the very legitimacy of political and corporate institutions. Emerging might be a new crisis of control (Beniger 1987) focussed not around conflicts of risk management, but around the sustaining of *both* system *and* social legitimacy, when the 'ordinary' production of new economic value conflicts, because of deep system architecture, with the sustaining of social or institutional value.

Whether, over the long-run, the result of this major refiguring of modernity's infrastructure of communications will be to derange or resettle its wider institutions cannot yet be known. What is to be avoided however is the mythical belief that modernity's unfolding future is simply actualizing, in exciting new form, the consensual libertarian norms of the past: that at least is at odds with what we can already know and see.

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<sup>1</sup> For fuller histories, see Thompson (1995), Starr (2004), Mattelart (1994).

<sup>2</sup> Compare, for the state's recent transformations in an era of media saturation, Sassen (2006).

<sup>3</sup> For a rare discussion of the relevance of Boltanski's recent work to media, see Dahlgren (2013: 161-165).

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Keen's recent book (2015), though polemical, sets out these key stages with unusual sharpness.