The Humanities as Allies: Media Studies and the Web

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TITRE

Les humanités comme alliées: études sur les médias et le Web

TÍTULO

Las humanidades como aliados: los medios de comunicación y la web

PRELIMINARIES

Dickens opens his *A Tale of Two Cities* with '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…' Today we are perched on another precarious historical fence, weighing the pros and cons of late modernity: all the material wealth and well-being are juxtaposed with increasing deprivation and social crises; there is an unease as we sense that our compelling technological progress is indeed proving to be a Faustian bargain – not least as we look at the state of the environment. We are not convinced that 'progress' has made us 'happier'.

A central feature of late modernity is the media, especially in their newer digital forms. (In this text I use the term the Web out of convenience – if somewhat inaccurately – to refer to the technical infrastructure and software of integrated digital media, including social media). The Web is not only embedded as an inexorable manifestation of this age, it is also a force that contributes to driving it forward, particularly via the meta-processes of mediatisation. As I explain below, this term posits that the media interplay with all dimensions of the social and cultural world, reorganising how we live and experience our lives. I underscore that the dynamics of mediatisation – and more specifically their consequences – are ambivalent. The rise of the Web as mass phenomenon only two decades ago has dramatically altered our lives, providing us with tools that would been unimaginable not long ago. With all the advantages, however, it manifests dark sides as well, thereby raising serious questions.

Most research with the field of media and communication studies (or, media studies for short) is firmly anchored in the social sciences; there are some contributions from the hu-

manities, but they remain a minority. The ultimate intention of this text is to invite more engagement from the humanities regarding the Web. My premise is that we as social scientists, and the field as whole, would greatly benefit from such engagement, as intellectual stimulation for the field. So why cannot the social sciences handle these issues largely on their own? Well, they can and they have, but in my view there are areas of inquiry where humanities perspectives could see things through different lenses and genuinely enhance our understanding, by posing other sorts of questions – and perhaps pointing to different kinds of answers. Digital media are not only about how we do things, how we work, socialise, play, and get things done. With their ubiquity, they have also become central to our sense of who we are, and to how we experience and relate to the world – themes that the humanities could further probe in edifying ways, situating them in historical contexts, illuminating normative and aesthetic dimensions. Democracy, in turn, is not just about a formal system, its structures and dynamics. It is all about the people and their subjectivities, the values, and cultural patterns that sustain and permeate society.

In the presentation I begin with some brief reflections on why the humanities are important for media studies, while also acknowledging the difficult position in which the humanities find themselves. The question might be raised: why seek help from wounded allies? My view is that even if their institutional position is weak, their intellectual affordances can help us. Moreover, I argue that their plight has relevance for democracy itself. From there I turn to the field of media studies and the emerging paradigm of mediatisation, offering a short scene-setting for what follows. The next and central section looks at the Web, highlighting a number of key thematic areas that are persistently problematic. This is by no means an 'anti-Web tirade'; rather, my discussion is driven by a sense that with all the justifiable praise accorded to the Web, some important questions are left in the shadows. It is here where more engagement from the humanities could offer spotlights.

Why the humanities?

At heart, the notion of 'the humanities' encompasses both production within arts and culture – the generation of various kinds of 'works' – as well as the analysis of such production (e.g. literature *and* literary criticism). Our concern here resides largely with the analysis side of the humanities, although certain kinds of production, for example, philosophy, are also of considerable relevance. For those readers who have their anchoring within the humanities, the rubric of this section no doubt sounds redundant; for other readers, I wish to recapitulate a number of very traditional arguments. I do this with a starting point in a rather recent text by Holm, Scott and Jarrick (2014); their *Humanities World Report 2015* is both a survey of the views of leading humanistic scholars from around the world as well as an original contribution to the contemporary discussions about the state of the humanities.

Essential contributions

The authors contend that the humanities make a number of essential contributions to people and societies all around the world (there is no fashionable 'cultural relativism' in their argument: they assert the significance of the humanities for everyone). They assert first of all the most classic view, that the humanities have an *intrinsic* value, in that they support personal and spiritual development, not least by fostering aesthetic appreciation. This of course has been the basic position for at least two and a half millennia. Bringing up the perspective to the contemporary world, they make the unassailable case that the humanities contribute to other disciplines, feeding into other fields, ranging from the

social and natural sciences to medicine, computer science, and engineering/design. The contributions can vary enormously, from illuminating implicit value premises in social research to elucidating the aesthetic parameters of an architectural design.

Further, Holm, Scott and Jarrick (2014) posit that the traditional benefits of the humanities now have an extra relevance in the context of heterogeneous societies: they have 'broad social value' in their striving to create tolerance and understanding between citizens, facilitating social cohesion. The pertinence of this needs hardly be defended in the context of our multifarious, multicultural societies, where living together with difference is proving to be an ever-greater challenge. As an extension of this reasoning, they also underscore the importance of the humanities to enable citizens to understand, preserve, and not least – where necessary – to challenge national heritage and culture. This is to learn from the past about one's collective identities – to appreciate, appropriate, but also to confront and reject elements that have shaped a shared sense of community. The relevance of this horizon is brought home not least as some right-wing political leaders in Europe today are striving to have the histories of their countries rewritten, to promote a politically expedient narrative that edits out uncomfortable historical realities from collective memory. In short, democratic life benefits from input from the humanities.

The report also sees the humanities as serving to aid decision-making on ethical issues, which are becoming all the more complex as social policies must take into account more intricate social contexts, and as technological developments demand more attentiveness to ethical dimensions and risk aspects, from genetic manipulation to nuclear power.

In case there was any lingering suspicion, the *Humanities World Report 2015* makes it abundantly clear that the humanities should absolutely *not* be seen as some static body of truth or wisdom, even if they include some indispensable legacies. The humanities at heart foster critical thinking. This is their essence; it epitomised by – but not limited to – the Socratic tradition. Rather, they manifest an on-going critical dialogue and interrogation of circumstances, achievements, and dilemmas of the human world, while they aim to understand, interpret, inspire, and challenge.

CRITICAL THINKING IN A WORLD OF HAZARDOUS TRANSITIONS

The critical tradition of the humanities became incorporated in the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment reaffirmed the basic view of the traditional humanities that questioning is essential for the growth of knowledge. Thus the idea of 'critical' has become an attribute associated with arts, science, and pursuit of knowledge. Moreover, the notion of 'critique' emerged as a more specific stance (I expand on these themes in Dahlgren 2013). Walter Benjamin suggests that critique involves brushing against the grain of established understandings. For Hegel, critique veered towards reflections on power relations, and challenges to domination – an intellectual thread that Marx most famously picked up and pursued. No less famous is Kant's notion of critique, in the sense of reflections on the conditions of our knowing: what are the contingencies that shape how we know the world and ourselves (in his *Critique of Pure Reason*)? Enlightenment for Kant becomes precisely the way out of our self-imposed ignorance.

Thus, this 'brushing against the grain', probing power relations, and reflecting on the factors that shape and inevitably delimit our knowledge are essential toolkits for navigating the modern world, which often feels – and is – overwhelming. The future is not what it used to be, so to speak. Just looking at some of the major hazardous global transitions that we facing makes this apparent: climate and pollution trauma, economic-financial

breakdowns, political crises, culture and religious collisions, failed states, and wars fill the news daily. This is generating not just uncertainty, but also fear, which is being politically exploited on many fronts. Spheres of human life previously separated by geography, class, normative horizons, domains of power, or expertise, are becoming ever-more juxtaposed, intermingled, hybridised. Confusion is considerable. Yet, this 'liquid' character of late modernity (Bauman 2007), where values and ethics appear further dislodged from traditional perceived certainties, also offers us new opportunities to think afresh, to break new ground. We need philosophers, historians, text analysts: it is in the interplay with other fields that the humanities can make an extra contribution that other disciplines are less equipped to do. By questioning and offering critiques, they can enhance the growth of knowledge in their own fields as well as those with whom they enter into critical dialogue.

This stance of critique is important. However, it is not always clear to what extent it is operative. In regard, for example, to the new emerging hybrid filed of digital humanities (DH) Holm, Scott and Jarrick (2014) on the one hand laud the engagement and crossover between the humanities and computer science that DH represents. The benefits of DH are obvious: the analytic work of some humanities research can be made easier; with all the vast cataloguing of materials that are going on, and it facilitates access in ways previously not possible. On the other hand, authors find that despite all the helpful applications, DH does not seem to be critically dialoguing with computer science; it is not generating much in the way of new research questions. They opine that DH must demonstrate its *intellectual* power and potential and promote new ways of thinking; it must generate critique.

The humanities under duress

It is clear that all is not well with the humanities, unfortunately: their marginalisation in higher education and in the allocation of research funding has been going on for many decades. I am in a sense appealing to assistance from potential allies who are wounded. In fact, one could argue that the 'humanities' have been in decline ever since the term became widespread in the academic world, which was after World War II. Prior to that, the usual rubric was 'Liberal Arts', 'Arts and Sciences', or 'Arts, Letters and Sciences' (Perloff, 2001). Some observers would go back even centuries earlier, others would place the start of the crisis in the 1960s. In any case, in the post-war era, the general societal drift that lauds 'utility', efficiency, and market logic has eroded the vitality of the humanities. Their perceived significance among those outside these fields, especially among academic decision-makers and politicians, has been in steady decline (see Pedro 2015 for a witty rendering of the debates).

The evidence and/or arguments are familiar: humanities are not of much utility, they have modest relevance in today's world, they have limited commercial appeal, and they mostly do not easily lend themselves to quantification. Research is underfunded, teaching is understaffed, and the salary gap between scholars in the humanities and in other fields has widened. We witness massive declines in university enrolments for humanities studies, with currently about only eight percent of undergraduates in the US having a major in them, which is a 50 percent reduction since 1966. Obviously such a complex development cannot be reduced to one single factor, but many critical observers see an integrated logic. This has to do with the corporatisation of higher education, a vector of the more overarching neoliberal paradigm of societal development that has been hegemonic in the West since the early 1980s. Jay (2014) makes the case that the corporatisation of higher education involves a profound transformation towards vocational training. Higher edu-

cation becomes geared for credentialising, whereby the value of courses and credits are judged in terms of their practical vocational utility. In this setting, it is understandable that the humanities are hit the hardest, especially when the overall trends in knowledge where computational, technological, and mechanical skills are replacing broad-based education that emphasises history, philosophy, and aesthetics.

We should note, however, that these neoliberal logics are not in any way restricted to universities; they imbue our entire society. Thus, for those with humanistic and artistic life interests, the situation is economically dreadful; they must either have external income or a 'day job' to pay the bills. Their position and relevance in society is increasingly peripheral.

More broadly, authors such as Sandel (2012), Nussbaum (2010), and Brown (2015) demonstrate in various ways how trust, solidarity, and other virtues are bulldozed over by economistic rationality, which seeps into and put price tags on just about all areas of human life. Moreover, neoliberalism has become not just a policy horizon but also a cultural motif, shaping social relationships and visions of the good society (see, for example, Couldry, 2010; Young, 2007). Even democracy itself becomes corroded, as normative frameworks that concern justice are subverted, derailing the foundations for democratic political discussion: issues that are normative and political in character become rendered in terms that are economic, technical or administrative in character, undermining the meaningfulness of participation. This carries with it feelings of disempowerment and ultimately either disengagement or populist 'enragement'.

Thus, I would argue, the importance of the humanities lies also in their service to democracy; they are an essential resource, a compass to help us in piloting the treacherous waters of explicit and implicit un- and antidemocratic values, and provide visions of the good society. And with the voices of the traditional humanities less and less heard, much is being lost – perhaps irretrievably. I turn now to a short discussion of the field of media and communication studies, to illustrate more concretely why our field needs more input from the humanities, and why this has bearing on the life of democracy.

MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES – AND MEDIATISATION

Porous – and expanding – boundaries

Media studies was established around the world over the course of a number of decades – 1960s-1990s – as proponents of the new field marched out of various 'mother disciples' such as sociology and political science to launch new university departments and research journals. The humanities were in a limited way among some of the 'mother disciplines', notably literature and rhetoric, and to a lesser degree visual aesthetics. Film as an academic discipline is a special case in that while it focuses on 'a medium', it has long maintained its institutional independence from media studies (this distinction seems to be eroding somewhat now with the increasing convergence of media technologies). History has generated a small but robust domain of 'media history' within the field, as is the case with philosophy. I should also mention that the adjacent field of cultural studies – which is at least as eclectic and porous as media studies – has had a strong humanities profile, especially after it became established in the US (arriving from the UK in the late 1970s-early 1980s). There are some small areas of juxtaposition and overlap between the two fields, and certainly the humanities are well represented in these domains. In sum, though, we can say that while the humanities have always having some sort of presence in the field of media studies, its role is a rather minor one.

This can be illustrated by looking at the three largest professional associations in the field: The International Communication Association (ICA); The International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA). The ICA and the IAMCR are organised around more or less permanent theme divisions plus various temporary groups; at present these units together total 31 in both associations. ECREA has 2 sections. In these associations, the humanities are represented by two or three units, with titles like Communication History and Philosophy; Theory and Critique; Communication History; and Ethics of Society/Communication. Obviously work with a humanities profile can appear in some other units of these three associations, (e.g. Popular Communication; Visual Communication; Religion, Communication and Culture; and Television Art). Still, the overwhelming character of media research remains social scientific in its orientation.

This tendency is reinforced by the trends in assessment criteria and the templates for journal publishing, where quantitative methods, terse prose, and models of research with origins in the natural sciences have increasingly become the norm in the last decade or so. Generally, it is somewhat easier for researchers in the science sciences to adapt to these publishing templates than for those in the humanities, where longer, descriptive and analytical prose, often in an essayistic style, is more common.

Emerging as a synthesis from a number of mother disciplines, media studies remains today rather eclectic, with porous boundaries and an uncertain core. While some are troubled by this (the topic gives rise to occasional soul-searching in themed journal issues), others feel that this allows for a relatively pluralistic atmosphere with a healthy degree of tolerance (even if the occasional battle over theory and/or methods is still fought). The profiles of departments vary considerably around the globe, offering different specialisations. These tend to lean either towards the 'academic' or the 'practitioner' end of the spectrum; in the latter camp we find for instance media management, public relations/strategic communication, and media production. Journalism as an academic field has had a long history of its own, but is often organised within media and communication departments (or schools), in some cases with both an academic-research as well as a professional profile.

What is of particular relevance today is that the field of media studies no longer has a monopoly on its objects of research: scholars from across the range of social sciences have been increasingly engaging themselves in media research, especially since the advent of the Internet. Moreover, some fronts of the field are merging with computer science, telecommunication, informatics, and even AI – artificial intelligence. The very notion of what a 'medium' is – or what 'media' are – has been problematised by the technical developments. Some within the field may grumble about this growing expansion and the resultant 'external competition' – and want to guard their institutional interests. Yet intellectually we should laud this development, which adds more scholarly voices and perspectives – even if it risks rendering our distinct academic *raison d'être* slightly less secure.

Let us be clear about these developments: for all their significance and the intellectual excitement they generate, for all the interesting results they can deliver, they are for the most part not moving towards the humanities. Rather, within this sprawling field and its interfaces with other disciplines, the direction is all the more towards qualitative trends, where huge computational analyses of phenomena such as Twitter behaviour are highly unlikely to critically inquire about the deeper social realities behind the numerical findings. A number of scholars in the field do relate easily to the humanities via their use of qualitative ethnographic approaches and/or their use of textual methodologies such as semiotics, hermeneutics, and discourse analysis. Yet, there seems to be a generational factor here, with these 'softer' approaches in use among older scholars, while younger researchers are all the more likely to follow the quantitative trends.

Mediatisation: meta-processes of late modernity

There has been a compelling conceptual development in the field over the past decade, which has to do with the perceived scope of the research terrain and with situating the role of media today. Traditionally, in the era of mass communication, media research pivoted on the tri-part division of the institutions of the media, the form and content of their communication, and the consequences or significance of these representations for individuals, organisations, for culture and for society. Though there have been a variety of research paradigms over the years, it was generally taken that mediated communication is a largely one-way, distinct phenomenon emanating from specific organisational entities and impacting on various audiences and publics. However, a rupture began to emerge with the Internet: technically, there need not be a difference between 'sender' and receiver'; the 'users' could now be producers as well.

Many aspects of modern life are in some way *mediated*, in that they make use of media; this is not very controversial. But with the notion of *mediatisation*, which has been gaining ground in recent years, it is argued that the media's interplay with each sector is in some way altering it, and by extension transforming society at large. This is the 'grand' claim; some other versions are more modest. Some argue that mediatisation should be seen as a 'sensitising' concept – one that guides and stimulates, rather than makes definitive claims (Bruhn Jensen 2013). In any case, the revolution brought about by the Internet does lend credence to the claims of mediatisation – the Web today does just about touch all phases of personal, organisational, and institutional life.

Pulling together the above discussion, we see that Media and Communication Studies, a broad and eclectic field, does encompass some elements from the humanities, but it is largely a social scientific enterprise. Moreover, the research focus understandably follows the development of media technologies, the emphasis is increasingly on the analysis of large amounts of quantitative data, and the mode of research and its style of reporting are increasingly modelled on the natural sciences. The humanities are being left further behind. Finally, with the turn to mediatisation, the field is increasingly asserting the intersection of mediated communication with all other domains of society, evoking the need for a multidisciplinary approach to media-society analysis. The low profile of the humanities in this context is unfortunate: the need for their intellectual contribution becomes all the more apparent. This insufficiency becomes evident if we look at some of the central attributes of the online world, and the discursive frameworks in which they are embedded.

Dilemmas of life online

The social sciences tend to stay with questions that are of the more overtly empirical kind, for obvious reasons; larger issues are more difficult to operationalise for such research. Yet these are the questions many people are asking themselves about the Web. For example, even the idea of 'human' is evolving, as our bodies become more bio-technically integrated with digital media; where does this leave the classic notion of the subject? Part of the challenge lies in fact in identifying and formulating the important topics of our time in the face of late modern, Web-based mediatisation; a number of them are normative-ethical in nature, not merely empirical – and for these reasons I make this appeal for more assistance from the humanities. I realise of course that scholars have always found it difficult to get a firm grasp of their own historical era, especially when it is characterised by extremely rapid changes; historical hindsight is always easier. Yet we cannot merely postpone our efforts to understand and come to terms with the present to some vague point in the future; we need to tackle many issues now, albeit with an awareness that is

always imperfect. The following discussion, in part inspired by a number of stimulating contributions from the humanities, identifies and briefly addresses a range of dilemmas we face as we increasingly live our lives online, and as aspects of our offline lives become increasingly mediatised. Obviously it is impossible to be exhaustive here; what follows can only be suggestive.

Political economy, technical architecture, and automation

As a way of grounding – in a social science manner – an understanding on the ubiquitous and seemingly infinite Web, and particularly social media, a few words about its political economy and technical architecture may be useful. Political economy addresses questions of ownership, control, and the relations of power that derive from these factors. These are the first important things to know about the Web: it is not a neutral communicative space, but is thoroughly structured by power relations. In the online digital world, a few large corporate actors such as Google, Microsoft, Facebook and YouTube dominate the Web environment; all are commercial enterprises (only the very small wiki sector has any significant non-commercial actors). This of course raises many issues, not least normative-democratic ones, but for our purposes here, suffice to say that the massive imbalance in power between users and these corporate entities, and the thoroughly commercial logic of the Web, are decisive in shaping the character of the Web and our experience of it. While we as users can make creative use of the Web, we have little power over its how it is run (see van Dijck 2013).

This becomes apparent if we look at the technical architecture. The technical architecture of the web and social media is, of course, immensely complex; my key point here, however, is quite basic: whatever aspect of the technical architecture that we look at, we find points of control – points where various actors/stakeholders are in a position to filter, edit, block or exclude what should be the democratic flow of communication for both individuals and social networks. Among the main levels of the technical architecture, each of which can be used as a locus of control, we have: the overall technical network, the specific device being used, their concrete applications, the actual content being transferred or blocked, and social data (which include users' location, histories of their web usage, applications use, contact histories and so forth). Thus for example, with the commercial logic comes a constant accumulation of private data that we provide the Web giants – in the case of Facebook, with our formal consent, in the case of Google, Amazon, *etc.*, by default. This data is packaged, analysed, and sold to many other Web actors. We use the Web, but the Web also uses us; we should not forget where the definitive power lies. And beyond the commercial logic of the technical architecture we have state surveillance, as was made globally public by the Snowden affair a couple of years ago. We are always potentially being watched; any lingering sense of privacy is mostly illusionary.

Of course this admittedly unpleasant baseline should not deter us from using the Web; rather it should just serve to remind us of its basic contingencies, and serve as a guide for our usage.

A very different set of issues emerge from the ever-impressive technical affordances of the Web. It echoes an old issue in compelling new ways, yet is rarely discussed today: automation. The theme of automation arose with the Industrial Revolution; the new machines resulted in enormous leaps forward in terms of efficiency and enhanced productivity. And yet, as we know, there was a backlash: Neo-Luddism in the UK during the early years of the nineteenth century was the most famous manifestation of this revolt against new technologies. While something was gained by these new technologies, it quickly became apparent that something was also lost: the 'deskilling' of crafts people became a major problem.

The adage of 'use it or lose it' applies perfectly here: without continually practising – and passing on to younger generations – their skills, the skills atrophied and disappeared. Moreover, there were other consequences: the machines tended to separate people from actual work, replacing it with stultifying routines. Automation refashions both the work process and the worker; it transforms the character of the whole task, the organisation, the roles, attitudes and skills of the people who participate in it. We become in a sense separated from ourselves.

In one of the few texts to apply this logic to digital media, Carr (2014) offers an array of examples of how new technologies erode not only skills but also imagination, fostering standardised thinking, professional complacency, and a decline in attention when so much of what should be built on creativity becomes predictable. He depicts what happens to doctors, architects, airline pilots, and even modern Eskimos – who become so dependent on GPS in their snowmobiles that when the technology fails they become literally lost. Debates on this theme appeared several decades ago when pocket calculators entered the pockets of many school children – 'How will they do math without these gadgets?' Since then, however, there has been much celebration over the often-amazing capacities we have gained, but little discussion about the skills we may be losing. I am certainly not making a neo-Neo-Luddite argument here – smashing laptops is not on the agenda – but rather asserting that we would benefit from a more sustained analysis of concrete digital practices. It may be possible to achieve less loss in the face of all the gain, or perhaps reframe our understanding of what is indeed 'gained'.

Abundance, speed, and pathways to knowledge

Above I mentioned how the basic technical architecture of the web becomes entwined with the power relations that shape it. There are other technical attributes of the Web that can impact on its use and the subjectivity of its users, even if they do not directly define power relations. Two such attributes are largely taken for granted by now and not discussed much anymore – they have merely become features that define the Web's character: the abundance of information it makes available and the speed at which information is accessible – and at which it is replaced by new information. These by now mundane facts have nonetheless much bearing on our subjectivity as users and on the culture of our times more generally.

The output on the Web is, from the practical horizons of any user, seemingly inexhaustible. Of course each of us has his/her own areas of interest, networks and sites that we follow, and thereby wall off most of what is 'out there' as not relevant to our purposes. We all develop personal strategies for navigating the daily tsunami of information, the 'infoglut' as Andrejevic (2013) calls it. Yet, as he argues, even as we zero in on just those topics that interest us, we are often still confronted by a vast output, and moreover, in the realms of society, culture, and politics, we are faced by many different perspectives, premises, and conclusions. And even while we tend to adhere to the groupings whose worldviews we share, doubt can set in. And the consequences of doubt operate on the individual, group, and societal levels. Cognitive certainty is dislodged by informational abundance; moreover, as people become all the more media aware and understand the constructed character of mediated representation, suspicion of sources grows. So, to avoid such dissonance, we emotionally wall off those whom we mistrust the most, yet we can still become anxious about what we might be missing. Climates of popular debunking emerge, coloured by cynicism.

Fernández-Armesto (2010) suggests that historically there are four basic methods that we use in determining what is true: what we feel, what we are told, what we figure out, and

what we observe. All four co-exist in various relationships at any point in history. Today, in the viral world of Web information, the first option – that which we feel – is clearly on the rise. With just a little exaggeration, we can say that truth becomes an inner subjective reality, an affective leap, as in the notion of 'truthiness' (a term popularised by the U.S. comedian Stephen Colbert). The affectively attractive becomes the foundation for validity claims about reality, prompting outraged commentary about a 'post-factual' mentality in politics.

On social media getting confirmation from others is of high importance, for instance, via Twitter 'storms' and Facebook groups. We gather and quantify our 'likes' to enhance our public image – a pattern that further reinforces the reliance on feeling and ultimately does damage to the critical role of public spheres. Coupled with weak sense of efficacy, it is easy for citizens' assumptions to be psychologically stronger than their critical reasoning, which can open the door to problematic and even dangerous post-rational trajectories. Affect can lead people to find short cuts to deal with the massive amounts of information and their at times overall ambivalence. This becomes debilitating for the individual, it fosters the cognitive closure of groups, and erodes the character of public discussion. It also ferments populism, which can further undercut the dynamics of democracy.

The dangers of the Web's speed are related. Finding and extracting relevant information that one can trust can be difficult in a fast-moving informational environment, but still more challenging is developing 'knowledge', in the sense of resources for civic cultures. Knowledge emerges through the critical integration of new information with existing frames of reference, and may involve the modification of these frames. This takes time and effort, both of which become easily marginalised in the digital milieu of the 'the ever new': the present becomes devalued as attention turns to whatever will come next. Decision-making requires reflection, which in turn also demands time. The overall 'speed up' of (late) modern culture is a theme found in a number of writers, including and Harvey (1991) and Virilio (2002), and digital technologies are central here.

Manovich (2013) describes the computer as a 'metamedium', characterised by 'permanent extendibility'. It is capable of translating just about everything into data, and via the use of algorithmic analysis it alters what it means to 'know' something, engendering what he calls software *epistemology*:

Digital code, data visualization, GIS, information retrieval, machine learning techniques, constantly increasing speed of processors and decreasing costs of storage, big data analytics technologies, social media, and other parts of the modern techno-social universe introduce new ways of acquiring knowledge, and in the process redefine what knowledge is (Manovich 2013:338).

With new algorithmic methods, one can now even generate new information and knowledge from existing analogue sources from the past, such as photos and models. This is called *data fusion*, and it is clear that it demands some serious rethinking of our traditional epistemologies.

Moreover, in the popular consciousness, not least among policy makers, there has emerged a hegemonic discourse that Mozorov (2013) sees as Internet-centric, a techno-utopian mind-set that assumes that a quick fix is available for social and political problems. Such 'solutionist' thinking results in programmes that throw laptops at underprivileged young people in urban slums in hopes of enhancing their life changes, or installing online chat forums for so that citizens and can communicate with their municipal governments to enhance democracy. And the obvious failures of such strategies do not seem to evoke much critical reflection.

Algorithms, subjectivity, attention,

In a related intervention, Berardi (2015) contends that while we believe that digital media are empowering us, they are in fact undermining 'the world' that we as a human community know. He sees the fundamental transition from an alphabetical foundation of knowledge to a digital one as constituting a major historic transition in human civilisation. This shift involves on the one hand, an erosion of memory, empathy, sensibility (that is, a fundamental transformation of our subjectivity), and on the other hand, a decreasing capacity to effectively impact on this new world:

A world is a projection of meaningful patterns on the surrounding space of lived existence. It is the sharing of a common code whose key lies in the form of life of the community itself….When the signs proceeding from the environment are no longer consistent and understandable within the frame of the shared code, when signs that convey effectiveness and potency escape the shared cultural code, a civilization ceases to be vital. (p. 331).

In the online context, what is often now called 'algorithmic culture' (Striphas 2015) signifies the manner in which commercial computational processes (e.g. Google search results) classify and rank people, locations, objects, ideas, and aesthetic works. This has an enormous bearing on how 'culture' today is experienced and practised. Not least these developments increasingly put culture in the hands of giant corporations, who commodify it and erode its public character – which takes us back to the political economy of the Web mentioned above.

While our attention is a commercial concern for corporate Web actors, for us it has to do with central dimensions of our existence. From the horizons of common sense, people have for some years increasingly begun to wonder about the amount of time we devote to screens. Just one little detail among many: according to a recent Neilsen survey in the US the average teenager exchanges about 4000 text messages a month (quoted in Harris, 2014). Whatever the accuracy of this statistic, it evokes scenes familiar to us all: a group lunch where conversation is constantly interrupted by mobile phones, or school yards at recess time where more children are communicating with screens than with each other. Perhaps we are indeed getting better at 'multitasking', but what of the quality of human interaction when attention becomes diffuse and sporadic? Pettman (2016) argues that not only do social media undercut attention by encouraging distraction, they also fragment us as a society by shuttling us into ever-smaller micro-zones of engagement.

We are more or less always available for our media devices, we are seldom more than a few clicks away from the Web. Indeed, a good deal of our social lives is now experienced or facilitated via the Web, and in the neoliberal era of capitalism, this means that 'the world' is active almost 24/7, which even encroaches on sleep (see Crary 2013). Harris (2014) laments this 'end of absence', and the 'loss of lack' that follows from it – that is, that we are rarely left to our own devices to think, meditate, and reflect, without the assistance of the Web in some way. Harris is not a professional humanist, he is a journalist, but he clearly articulates the concern that many have about 'using vs. losing' some of our most fundamental human capacities.

Access to information has never been greater in human history, but at the same time screen devices alter our relationship with text. The screen 'bias' is towards more visual representation, and, importantly, towards shorter texts. There are undeniable gains here in terms of the speed of information. But the attention required for encountering and processing longer texts seems on the wane among younger generations in many parts of the world, and school results point to a decline in reading skills, prominently among boys. Social scientific data has been presented, discussed, and debated as to the extent

and depth of these changes, but the larger questions of the fragmentation of attention and transformation of our relationship with the printed word need broader, historically oriented analyses.

THE MEDIATISATION OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

There is a very large literature dealing with the Web as an institution of the public sphere (see Dahlgren 2013 for an overview), and of course the Web has been an immense asset for democratic participation. However, the initial celebratory atmosphere has subsided, and scholars point to difficulties more and more often. For example, against the ideals of reasoned Habermasian deliberation in the public sphere, many observers emphasise the barriers to communicative rationality online. Aside from anti-democratic baleful threats and harassment, hate speech, propaganda, and plain uncivil behaviour, the general communicative environment of the Web is an impediment to such idealisations of democratic dialogue. As Lievrouw (2011) cogently describes the situation:

Media culture in the digital age has become more personal, skeptical, ironic, perishable, idiosyncratic, collaborative, and almost inconceivably diversified, even as established industries and institutions seek to maintain their grip on stable messages and audiences and to extend their business models online (p. 214).

What she captures here in fact are some of the definitive textures of the late modern situation, with their cross-currents of power relations and their particular sensibilities and affect. This massive outpouring of user-generated content robustly engenders horizontal communication among citizens, maintaining networks and situating people in various ways towards society and public culture, yet there are also issues. For example, in regard to journalism, there are all manner of 'amateur-', as well as 'para-' or 'quasi-journalism' juxtaposing and blending with each other: facts and viewpoints, debates, gossip, nonsense, misinformation, the insightful, the deceptive, the playful, the poetic, are mixed together, scrambling the traditional boundaries between journalism and non-journalism. Where public spheres end and entertainment and consumption take over is not always obvious.

On social media we see a great deal of 'post-Habermasian', multi-modal expression, where affect and aesthetic dimensions prevail. Emotional aspects such as a passion for justice and visions of the good society are always essential if people are to become politically involved, but the balance with rationality remains ever precarious. When fear, anger, denial, hate, revenge and other sentiments that lurk in the unconscious are in the political driver's seat – and they are even among political leaders (see Žižek, 2011) – they can readily be combined with dangerous tendencies towards repression, xenophobia, racism, fascism, *etc.* Moreover, as abundance and speed on the Web increases the competition for attention, and as the media environment becomes denser, the odds of getting and holding attention to any message generally decreases. If we frame this feature in terms of civic engagement, this suggests that people are less likely to engage for longer periods with any given political issue, let alone long range policy horizons; political attention becomes more event-oriented, as Couldry (2014) proposes.

The Web has become central to democracy; if it does not function according to stipulated criteria of rationality, is all thereby lost? Apparently not, but how are we to understand the Web in relation to traditional requirements of communicative rationality? How are we to understand the mediatisation of democracy in late modernity? In the 1920s John Dewey wrote about the importance of education in shaping democratic citizens; Nussbaum (2010) continues in that that tradition. She underscores the importance of the

humanities and is adamant that ethics and compassion are central, as is the principle of treating other fellow citizens as people with equal rights. She stresses that the ability to see beyond one's own immediate interests, to be able to see what is good for the nation/the world as a whole and to be able to view the world from a variety of perspectives and test alternative sets of values are all immensely important.

If we go beyond the classroom, however, we still need viable civic cultures in the broader societal domain (see Dahlgren 2009). These provide taken-for-granted and accessible resources that can support democratic political agency. A central dimension of civic cultures is knowledge to orient oneself and one's actions in the world, and of course the Web looms massively here – with all the ambivalence I have suggested above. It can provide an endless flow of facts and information, but the challenge is in part to translate this into knowledge, to process information into cognitive frameworks. The other part of the challenge is to sift and filter through the cacophonic, 'post-rational' public sphere to find resources that will provide viable knowledge.

Civic cultures also comprise the democratic values and virtues that Nussbaum argues for. There have always been values prevalent that are not very compatible with democracy; the question is to what extent they actually threaten this form of government. Many observers are concerned about the commercial values that steer the entire Web. Commercialism is nothing new, obviously, but the worry is that in the context of the Web environment, democracy and civic horizons are being seriously marginalised by consumerist values. Indeed, even as people participate politically via social media or websites, they are embedded in a discursive environment, a habitus, that positions them as consumers. Online political participation can readily become a privatised activity. The often very loose or non-existent bonds with other active citizens often help generate a cosy personal comfort zone, a 'solo sphere' (Dahlgren 2013) characterised by 'slacktivism' and 'clicktivism', yielding situations where actors feel that engaging with the political remains a free-choice option among other leisure pursuits. Such engagement can be quite pleasurable – and does not require the sustained 'work' of serious political participation – yet erodes civic culture.

Civic cultures also predicated on trust: people must have enough faith even in strangers if they are to cooperate politically in an effective manner. On the Web, such trust is often found within the boundaries of personal networks, e.g. Facebook contacts. The down side here is that such groupings easily become 'echo chambers' where established views are reinforced, and, as some observers fear, even the ability to engage in reasoned argument with opposing views is dissipating. Beyond such networks, the Web can be an uncomfortable and even fearful space, where people are understandably very cautious about according trust, again impeding civic cultures. Yet even within the world of online 'friends' there are issues. Previously, friends were largely a personal, private matter. On social media, they become in a sense public, and serve as 'a public' for our manifestations of our identity. Thus, when people put on their Facebook page that they have been taking their kids to a lot of activities, when they post the greetings they sent to their mum on Mother's Day, something happens. On the one hand, that they do these private things is splendid. That they post such acts on Facebook turns them into public performances, a part of the digital presentation of self, an act that will hopefully elicit 'likes'. Where then does the meaning of these acts lie?

Bakardieva (2015) has traced the evolution of online sociality – which now culminates with the rise of socialbots, i.e. robotised functions that masquerade as 'friends' online. But even before this development, she sees a process of technical rationalisation of 'friendship' – sociality becomes an object of computation and takes on increasingly standardised and trivialised forms and gestures. Free-flowing sociality is essential for developing civic bonds;

even more fundamentally, friends are integral to our lives as human beings. How should we see such developments? What does 'friendship' mean?

Certainly more issues can be raised, but hopefully these will suffice to convey a sense of the kinds of issues that we need to creatively deal with in regard to the Web. A few marginalised voices (some are cited above) are addressing these topics, but in the contemporary situation, where techno-celebratory discourses prevail, these serious considerations remain few and are mostly left by the wayside. Today, people who were born after ca. 1985 have no direct experience of the pre-digital world. This referent has thus far been foundational in our attempts to understand the digital transformation of society. One can only – and with some trepidation – imagine the world when no living person has any memory of the time before digital media became pervasive. I wish to underscore again that to problematise these digital media is not to be 'against' them. It is not a question of choosing the corporeal reality over the digital one, but rather to critically inquire how we can live 'better' with both of them, with their interplay, and perhaps in the long run impacting on policies that shape them. In the short term, however, it is more a case of trying to probe how we can enhance our lives with them – and despite them. How to live well is a theme that has always been at the heart of the humanities.

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