Defending Whose Democracy?
Media Freedom and Media Power

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Rarely has the relationship between media and democracy been so centre-stage. Whether regarding regulatory reform brought about by phone hacking in the UK, concentration of media ownership in Italy, Hungary, Australia to mention but a few; or in relation to social media and the internet as a supposed means to increased access to information and citizen production and circulation of non-mainstream content leading to greater so called media freedom. The debate on whether or not and in what form the media are related to the nature and practice of democracy is raging; and rightly so.

Yet too often this debate, usually cast in populist terms, belies complexity. We are frequently told that one leads to the other. In one formulation, 'free' media are seen as a pre-requisite for democracy to flourish. Here we see an ill used interpretation of the concept of 'freedom of the press' used to defy explanation and justify most anything – who can be against freedom, particularly press freedom when the press have such a crucial relationship with a healthy democracy? Such a knee-jerk response is frequently no more than a cheap disguise for the promotion of free-market capitalism which is then seen as a direct path to enhanced democratisation on the gravy train of commercial media.

Alternatively, it is proposed that 'freedom', as a free floating concept more generally connected in this instance to democracy (or more accurately, usually Western forms of capitalist democracy) will inevitably lead to a free media. But once more, dig a little deeper and this free media is largely construed as a media free at the point of profit. Both approaches present varying degrees of media determinism that forge a type of logic that then lends support to arguments for the inherent liberating and democratising impact of new media forms, such as the internet, regardless of actual content or the broader context of which they a part. Media Freedom in other words finds itself morphed from a complex concept into a simplistic notion that has assumed a level of normativity and developed a common-sense relationship to liberal democracy. To have one *must* be to have the other thereby denying a more critical analytical interpretation of its contemporary neo-liberal translation.

What such approaches all too often fail to point out is that the relationship between media and democracy also depends on the *existing* state of the media and of the market and indeed on the state of *actually existing* democracy in each individual context – where context is likely to be state-led because of the prevailing dominance of state legislatures but not state-bound due to globalisation. Thus, this relationship also depends on political culture and media policy; the nature of the economy and the market; media and

communication technologies and formats as well as social and cultural issues such as literacy, poverty, religious differences and daily rituals (Curran, Fenton and Freedman 2012). This combination of factors all impinge, sometimes directly, on the relationship between media and democracy as each of these factors have an effect on media circulation and on media consumption and influence how and to what extent democracies can function effectively – yet are all too frequently side stepped leaving us analytically moribund and politically stagnant.

In these sets of complex relations, news media are given a particular relevance with regards to citizen participation in political life. News provides, or should provide, the vital resources for processes of information gathering, deliberation and analysis that enables democracy to function. In an ideal world, unfettered by commercial pressures of failed business models, new technology and plummeting sales and circulation figures, this would mean that news media would survey the socio-political environment, hold the Government and other officials to account, provide a platform for intelligible and illuminating debate, and encourage dialogue across a range of views. This is an ideal relationship, however, and it's hinged on a conception of independent journalism in the public interest linked to notions of knowledge, political participation and democratic renewal. But news media have been beset with many challenges over the last decade that have introduced considerable stress-lines to these ideals. A huge growth in the number of news outlets including the advent of and rapid increase in free papers, the emergence of 24 hour television news and the popularization of online and mobile platforms, has meant that more news must be produced and distributed at a faster rate than ever before. In a corporate news world it is now difficult to maintain profit margins and shareholder returns unless you employ fewer journalists (Fenton 2010). But fewer journalists with more space to fill means doing more work in less time often leading to a greater use of unattributed rewrites of press agency or public relations material and the cut and paste practice now known as churnalism (Davies 2008; Lee-Wright, Phillips and Witschge 2011).

If you combine the faster and shallower corporate journalism of the digital age with the need to pull in readers for commercial rather than journalistic reasons it is not difficult to see how the traditional values of professional journalism are quickly cast aside in order to indulge in sensationalism and deal in gratuitous spectacles and dubious emotionalism. Set this alongside the fact that in many places, such as the UK, there are an ever-smaller number of global media institutions dominating the media landscape; then, the simple notion that more media means better democracy starts to look rather tenuous (Media Reform Coalition 2011).

The larger and more concentrated media empires become, the more concerned politicians are to maintain good relations with owners and senior executives and editors (Davis 2002). Political Parties, the police and other institutions are reluctant to investigate wrong-doing in the news media, hinder the expansion of large media conglomerates or introduce new regulation of news organizations and journalistic practice. Such patterns and relations have resulted in certain public policy areas being avoided for fear of either hostile reporting or media owner conflict. And, for the same reasons, politicians are more likely to discuss populist policies. As such, a media system that may have many platforms and points of distribution but is dominated by a few, powerful voices and a news media increasingly run to secure financial reward or political influence is unlikely to foster greater participation in political culture.

Theories of democratic political participation have long since recognized the roles the media play in activating political citizenship and participation. Media coverage plays a significant role in creating awareness and engagement. News matters at a fundamental level to society. But a simple abundance of news, one that just assumes that the more news we have the more democratic our societies are, speaks to a naïve pluralism that has been shown to be blatantly false. More news does not necessarily help democracy, even if consumption is high, if the nature of news content serves the interests of the news industry over and above the public's information needs. In such cases contemporary coverage can actually lead to a mood of anti-politics, thwart political participation in the public sphere and diminish democracy (Coleman 2012).

Partly because the relationship between democracy and media is so complex and contingent it is also never fixed and constantly open to contestation – although the terms and extent of that contestation may be constrained under particular circumstances. The media, as democracies, are not homogenous, static entities. Both are ever changing, both contain power and shape the space where power is competed for, albeit in different ways. As a consequence, both also contain difference and division as well as being subject to social forces and indeed social movements that may challenge established and vested interests (Freedman and Fenton 2013). When this happens and it most often happens at the point of crisis – whether due to the failings of democratic systems or the dismal behaviour of some parts of the media – it is then that the opportunity arises to rethink the relationship between media and democracy. We are at this point now in the UK and it is a battle that is being hard fought but one that is severely unbalanced in relation to media power. The tabloid press in particular, have thrown their might, money and megaphone behind a campaign designed to claim freedom as their right to publish whatever they like in the pursuit of profit; a response that equates markets to freedom and increased regulation to creeping authoritarianism.[1] The discursive binary of freedom or authoritarianism is of course, a fake dichotomy that quickly falls apart once the notion of power is injected into the debate. Most people may be able to speak in this public sphere but we can not all speak at the same volume or be heard in the same way. So-called freedom is never unfettered or unstructured. It is always worth asking who or what in this unregulated nirvana has power? Certainly not your average person in the street or even your average journalist, but rather those corporate entities that ever more dominate the media landscape. Once power is taken into consideration then a critique of freedom takes on a rather different mantle from the crude assumption that we all begin from a level playing field and everyone approaches access to freedom from the same vantage point. These issues are exemplified in the recent hacking scandal in the UK.

The Case of the UK: Marketisation and Deregulation of the Press

In the summer of 2012 the *News Of the World*, owned by Rupert Murdoch, stood accused of illegal, unethical behaviour through the systematic phone hacking of politicians, members of the royal family, celebrities and murder victims and their families. Murdoch subsequently closed down the *News of the World* and several ex-editors and journalists found themselves under criminal investigation. The Prime Minister, David Cameron, publicly embarrassed by his employment of Andy Coulson (a former Editor of *News of the World*: 2003-2007), as his Director of Communications, who was arrested by the

Metropolitan Police Service in July 2011 for allegations of corruption and phone hacking, then called for an inquiry chaired by Lord Justice Leveson to investigate the issue.

Hackgate, as it became known, reveals the mechanisms of a system based on the corruption of power. It is not a distortion of a functional system, it is part and parcel of a system that is fully integrated into neo-liberalism. Phone hacking did not happen just because those who did it knew they could get away with it and editors thought on balance it was a business risk worth taking (in other words, that any subsequent payouts to victims would be easily offset against increases in sales). Indeed, many editors denied that they had any knowledge of illegal practice occurring. The problem is much broader and deeper than any slippage in ethical practice would seem to suggest and rests not with the individual journalists but with the system of news production they were part of. The reasons phone hacking took place are complex and involve the increasing entanglement of political and media elites as news coverage has taken on an ever more important role in policy making and elections (Davis 2002); the failure of the Press Complaints Commission (the newspaper industry watchdog) to uphold ethical standards and enable adequate self-regulation of journalists (CCMR 2011; Couldry, Phillips and Freedman 2010); alongside the broken business model of newspapers with plummeting circulation and readership figures and the migration of classified advertising to online sites such as Craigslist in the US and Gumtree and eBay in the UK (Fenton 2010; Levy and Nielsen 2010). But one thing is clear – the illegal practice of phone hacking did not have the primary motive of the press as fourth estate holding truth to power. Rather, in a thoroughly marketised and deregulated newspaper industry the mission was to gain competitive advantage and increase newspaper sales.

The practice of phone hacking has been widely condemned. However, a common response from the news industry itself has been to direct responsibility for phone hacking towards the law and inadequate policing, claiming that it was not the concern of the media industry but rather a result of failures in criminal investigations and prosecutions. The solution must lie therefore with the police and the enactment of the law and not through further regulation of the profession or industry which should remain 'free' to do effectively, as it pleases. 'Freedom' in this sense becomes a narrative device to sidestep the deeper, systemic problems of the newspaper industry of which these ethical misdemeanours are but one symptom. Freedom of the press stands in for *all* activities of the press regardless of whether they have democratic intent or not.

As soon as the value of news to society is invoked, the contribution of news to the public sphere and consequently its relationship to a healthy democracy follows suit. In this manner, the relationship between journalism and democracy is understood as causal. Once we accept this inevitable sequential relationship it is easy to slip into commonsense assumptions: the more news we have the more democratic our societies are; the less news we have the less democratic we are. Abundance comes to stand in for pluralism and for freedom in the same breath. Of course, democracy is far more than the quantity of news and many so-called developed democracies have a plethora of news media but a public sphere that is severely impoverished (Aalberg, Aelst and Curran 2010). But this kind of short-cut libertarian defence that in fact aligns freedom with established and vested power interests' ability to do whatever they like within the law means that any form of regulation that may encourage news organizations to behave in particular ways, is assumed to be detrimental to democracy and involvement of the state in any

form whatsoever in relation to the press becomes nothing more than state censorship.[2]

Such arguments, that we see echoed in the proposition that the internet because of its potential for information pluralism, must, by its very nature, deliver more democracy, reveal a particular ideological premise. This was made explicit in the comments by David Price QC, an expert on the law of defamation and privacy:

> There is something Orwellian about describing this as the 'Media Freedom and Regulatory Standards Bill', as if they compliment each other, when they are direct opposites….It makes the mistake of assuming more regulation will help us get to the truth more easily. We get to the truth by having ideas tested in the marketplace, not by further regulation or by the great and good deciding what is true or ethical. (David Price QC quoted in *The Times*, 7.1.13)[3]

So, the marketplace, dominated by publishers who promote a very particular definition of public problems will deliver this thing called a free press that will enable a healthier democracy. Price goes on to say that he is also concerned by the reference to the regulator needing to ensure the dignity of the individual:

> We have a proud tradition of ridicule and satire that has protected against abuse of power. A free press will inevitably be undignified but it is far safer than a sanitised one […..] The point remains […] that a free press and freedom of expression are indivisible rights that belong to all or none at all. Defending that principle does not mean endorsing everything or anything that the press does. But it does mean accepting the freedom of others to publish what you don't want to read, whether your personal tastes deem it 'ethical' or not. Freedom is always a messy business. Nobody has to pass a test set by Lord Justice Leveson or Hacked Off to qualify for the right to free speech. (Ibid)

It is true that if we look to both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights they do proclaim a universal right to *freedom of expression*. The latter is more detailed and it is helpful to look more closely at it. In Article 10.i It states that

> Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. This article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises. (ECHR 1950:11)

However, article 10.ii – far less often read or cited – qualifies Article 10.i by stating that:

> The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.(ECHR 1950:11)

As Baroness Onora O'Neil (2012) argues, the much quoted Article 10 when seen in its entirety, does *not* assume that freedom of expression is an unconditional right, or that it may not be restricted or subject to regulations. The Declaration proclaims a *qualified* right to freedom of expression, but leaves it to legislatures and to courts to determine which qualifications and restrictions are and are not needed and acceptable at a given time and place. Baroness O'Neill goes on to argue that an individuals' right to freedom of expression cannot be transferred directly to the speech of powerful organizations stating that, "it is simply a mistake to see the speech of the powerful as self expression" (O'Neill 2012: 9).

This mythology of naïve pluralism assumes that journalists already operate with full independence and in the interests of democracy; that news organisations have democratic intent at their core. But much (although by no means all) tabloid journalism runs counter to the public interest and has little democratic intent. As Trevor Kavannagh, Associate Editor of the *Sun* noted in his own evidence to Leveson:

> …news is as saleable a commodity as any other. Newspapers are commercial, competitive businesses, not a public service. (6 October 2011): http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/oct/06/trevor-kavanagh-leveson-inquiry-speech.

News in these formulations is primarily for profit – this is a marketplace that operates on market principles. But of course, news is no ordinary commodity – it offers the possibility of directing the public conversation and hence is of relevance to politicians keen to convince voters of the benefits of their particular policy formulations. This puts news proprietors in a particular position of power. The owner of the *London Evening Standard* and the *Independent*, Russian billionaire Evgeny Lebedev tweeted after his appearance at Leveson: "Forgot to tell #Leveson that it's unreasonable to expect individuals to spend £millions on newspapers and not have access to politicians".

In the UK it would seem, there is a relationship of sorts between news and democracy but a largely dysfunctional one whose breaking points pivot on issues relating to the commercialism and marketisation of news as well as concentration of ownership and deregulation. The notion that somehow truth will emerge victorious in this so-called marketplace of ideas is clearly misconstrued and we would do well to remember that just as journalism can be democratising, so it can also be de-democratising (Fenton 2012).

Hackgate reveals the mechanisms of a system based on the corruption of power and one that displays many of the hallmarks of neo-liberal practice. Rupert Murdoch and the news culture he helped to promote was part of this process in the UK that began with the defeat of the print unions at Wapping and continued with the lobby for extensive liberalisation of media ownership regulation to enable an unprecedented global media empire to emerge. And where did we end up? Hackgate enabled the naming and shaming of what many had believed to be the case for years: systematic invasions of privacy that wrecked lives on a daily basis (Cathcart 2012); lies and deceit of senior newspaper figures; the wily entanglement and extensive associations of media and political elites (Coleman 2012) (during the Leveson inquiry it was revealed that a member of the Cabinet had met executives from Rupert Murdoch's empire once every three days on average since the Coalition was formed);[4] and a highly politicised and corrupt police force (Rebekah Brookes, Chief Executive Officer of News International 2009-2011 and former Editor of *News of the World* and *The Sun*, admitted to paying police for information in

a House of Commons Select Committee in 2003 but denied it in 2011 (BBC News UK, 15 April 2011) and over a quarter of the police public affairs department were found to be previous employers of the News of the World (Warrell 2011)).This was certainly a media freedom of sorts but certainly not one that was defending democracy even in its most populist formulations.

Freedom of the press has always been associated with the ability of news journalists to do their job free from interference from government (Muhlmann 2010). Clearly this is crucial for independent news production and a healthy public sphere. Self-regulation has become the sacred mantra associated with the freedom of the press – the only means to ensure governments can't interfere in, dictate the terms and thwart the practice of journalism. But this denies the influence and power of a corporate culture that wreaks its own havoc and sets its own agenda often far more blatantly than any democratic government would ever dare. If you are relatively powerless (say a journalist in relation to an editor) then self-regulation can be meaningless, particularly when the person in power does not share your views. Most recently, with the threat of compulsory redundancies at the Independent newspaper, Michelle Stanistreet, General Secretary of the National Union of Journalists has commented that a workforce that is paid "bargain basement salaries […] is fearful and compliant" (Press Gazette, 2 August 2013).

But it is not only journalists whose freedom is circumscribed by corporate compliance. Our ability to exercise our own democratic freedom as ordinary members of the public is premised on the basic fact that governments are not distorted by private interest of multi-media conglomerates. When governments as well as journalists are beholden to corporate power then freedom is hard to come by for all but the most powerful.

Understanding the role of the news as an industry and news organizations as corporate entities in these relations is crucial to our understanding of how 'freedom' can be more easily claimed by some to the detriment of others. 'Freedom of the press' as an ethical practice does not somehow magically transcend the market it is part of. Far from it, rather, it has become embroiled in a particular political-economic system. This is a system that tells us that productivity is increased and innovation unleashed if the state stays out of the picture and lets businesses get on with it. Productivity in the market and hence news as a commodity takes precedence over the social and political concerns of news as a mechanism of democratic process. In other words, the less 'interference' in the form of regulation, the more liberalised the market, the better the outcome (Jessop 2002). In neo-liberal democracies the power of the market is just as significant as the power of government. In the UK, there is certainly no rush to regulate for a healthy relationship between news media and democracy, yet there is plenty of urgency about the need to deregulate media for the benefit of the market.

The industry response to the hacking scandal in the UK largely conformed to this neo-liberal premise. Freedom of the press expressed purely as the need to get the state to butt out and give commercial practice free reign is about nothing more than enabling market dominance to take priority over all other concerns. Freedom of the press expressed in this way is not a precondition or even a consequence of democracy so much as a substitute for it. Freedom requires accountability otherwise those with the most power will be free to do as they please while the powerless are ignored or worse. The journalistic ethics on offer in this rhetoric is not the coming together of journalists for the general promotion of journalism in the public good and for the public interest – as

one may find in such organisations as Reporters Without Borders[5]. Rather, it is a post-state capitalist logic (Boltanski 2011) that has become normative.

In the context of the hacking debate the phrase 'freedom of the press', has become a term that has been emptied of its real meaning by becoming one of what Hardt and Negri (2009, p.120) call "false universals that characterise dominant modern rationality". But the process of assigning meaning can never be total and will always reveal contradictions. As such, the relationship between capitalism and democracy (or capitalism and political freedom) should not be taken for granted. One of the areas of media that has been invested with the power to expose these contradictions is the internet – and it is to these debates that we now turn.

Free at Last: Deliverance via the Internet?

Just as individuals cannot claim the right to freedom of expression in the same manner as media conglomerates, neither can the so-called freedom of individuals online fulfill the emancipatory claims made of them. Most recently the notion of media freedom has been applied to information pluralism on the internet and claimed as a democratic gain. In this debate access to the internet (both as a producer and a user) is fore-grounded as the means to communicative and democratic freedom. The Internet, we are told, not only delivers communicative abundance but also brings power to the individual enabling them in Castells' terms to engage in self mass-communication. This liberation of the self comes via a form of creative autonomy (Castells 2009: 136) unleashed online. Castells argues that a new form of communication has emerged "where self-generated messages created by individuals can reach global audiences" (pp. 58-71) giving rise to unprecedented levels of autonomy imbued with emancipatory possibilities.

Similarly, in Benkler's (2006) analysis, the Internet has the potential to change the practice of democracy radically because of its participatory and interactive attributes. He argues that it allows all citizens to alter their relationship to the public sphere, become creators and primary subjects engaged in social production. In this sense the Internet is ascribed the powers of democratisation. This may be the result of the networked individual (in other words the individuals expanded relations to others), but it is primarily the liberation of the individual over that of the group that is emphasized.

So, in these formulations, autonomy and freedom unsurprisingly sit side by side and they also sit at the heart of the networked politics of new social movements. It is in these networked forms of radical politics that genuine emancipation and true political freedom is said to reside. It is worthwhile therefore, pausing to consider how freedom and autonomy are often construed in the most recent of new social movements such as Occupy. The conceptualization and enactment of autonomy in the networked sociality of contemporary radical politics has been forged through a connection to anarchism and autonomous Marxism. These approaches imagine the network as an ever-open space of politics. From this perspective, the network is not simply the expression of networked-individuals, but the manifestation of self-constituted, un-hierarchical, and affinity based relationships. Much post-marxist theorizing has claimed that this heralds the emergence of a new (networked) subject of history that is non-hierarchical, with open communication and self-generating information and identities that function via networks of activism and activists. Such networks are often staunchly anti-bureaucratic and anti-centralist,

suspicious of large organized, formal and institutional politics. This is a form of politics that cannot be identified by a party name or definitive ideology and is often liable to rapid change in form, approach and mission. It is a politics that makes a virtue out of a solidarity built on the value of difference that goes beyond a simple respect for otherness and involves an inclusive politics of voice. Marchart (2007) has called this a type of 'post-foundational politics', while others have claimed that the space of new media enables a broader range of voices and types of material to be communicated to a wider audience without the constraints of needing to comply with or follow a particular political creed or direction other than the expression of an affinity with a particular cause

The rejection of meta-narratives of political ideas in favour of autonomous political subjects and values is seen as being directly conducive to the pluralism of online mediated spaces. The principle that no-one speaks for the collective, that each takes control of their own political activism as being allied to every individual's ability to produce online. Thus, the Internet and the newly creative and autonomous political subjects it inspires is taken as evidence that radical politics can arise horizontally and take the form of networks, rather than hierarchical hegemonies as in a traditional politics of the Left.

There are of course, different ways of conceiving of autonomy. The type of autonomy expressed by post-Marxist discourse theorists that operates within a hegemonic frame (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) needs to be clearly distinguished from the post-hegemony autonomist theorists (Day 2005; Holloway 2002). The former stresses articulation and contingency and recognises that, although the singularity of multiple voices in pluralism must be recognised and respected, ultimately it is neither feasible nor necessarily desirable that each of these singularities occupies a permanently unified space, politics or language. In other words, while the singular authenticity of plural voices is constitutive of the whole and must be recognised as such, it is necessary, to transcend the particularity of the singular to form a collective identity and ultimately, a counter hegemony.

Post-hegemony autonomist approaches, on the other hand, all too frequently overlook the critical contextual factors of state boundaries, prevalent political infrastructures and ever dominant economic constraints that raise critical questions regarding the political efficacy of new social movements and many contemporary forms of radical politics. Frequently, such approaches either disregard the impact of the politics of new social movements on a state polity or base the success of such movements on their ability to function external to a state polity and, as a consequence, they are not well placed to assess the nature and consequence of the political act in a broader context of political structures, leaving wide open the critical question: how open to contest and revision is politics today?

Inequalities of power found in regimes of (mis)representation are both replicated and found in different manifestations online to lay challenge to the apparent limitless plurality on offer via the Internet. Research on the digital divide notes that internet users are younger, more highly educated and richer than non-users, more likely to be men than women and more likely to live in cities (Norris 2001; Warschauer 2003; Shradie 2011). These concerns do not just refer to access to the Internet and the huge gaps prevalent between the global North and South; they also refer to online activity within developed nations and to traditional divides between the well educated middle class who dominate public discourse and those on the peripheries or excluded altogether (Hindman 2008). Plurality, or at least the ability to take advantage of plurality, it would seem, is reserved for the privileged.

Castells does contend that, with the expansion of the Web 2.0 project, the creative autonomy of subjects is constantly threatened by multimedia businesses, who seek to re-commodify autonomous communication. But nonetheless, he continues to maintain that "…the construction of communicative autonomy is directly related to the development of social and political autonomy, a key factor in fostering social change" (p. 414). One will lead to the other. Castells (2009:300) argues that social movements that engage in oppositional politics – "the process aiming at political change (institutional change) in discontinuity with the logic embedded in political institutions" – now have the chance to enter the public space from multiple sources and bring about change. In his argument the multiple prospects for intervention and manipulation coming from a myriad of social nodes combine to create a new symbolic counter-force that can shift dominant forms of representation. The counter political response swells to such a size online that it simply cannot be ignored offline and is in turn, taken up by the mass media. By using both horizontal communication networks and mainstream media to convey their images and messages, they increase their chances of enacting social and political change – "even if they start from a subordinate position in institutional power, financial resources, or symbolic legitimacy" (Castells 2009: 302).

Such accounts depend on an implicit assumption about the consequential relations between pluralism, networked communication and political demand. So the argument goes, technological ease of communication leads to abundance of information which is automatically a political gain. The Internet we are told, delivers beautiful and bountiful information and political pluralism bringing forth the means to communicative and ultimately democratic freedom.

But the sheer abundance of information available to us has also been argued to breed misinformation and lack of understanding (Patterson 2010) because the daily habits and rituals of news seeking have changed. People are no longer required to sit in front of the television for a set period of time each day or to read the newspaper over breakfast. Instead we do news snacking. But there are so many other more tempting treats on offer that 'healthy' news snacking is rapidly replaced by the more immediately gratifying tasty tit-bits of entertainment. Even more worryingly Patterson identifies a pattern whereby in a high choice media environment the less-well informed are more inclined to opt for entertainment while the better informed include the news junkies leading to increasing inequality of knowledge between the more informed and the less informed. Patterson (2010:20) also argues that speed "increases sensation but decreases learning" noting that about 60 per cent of those who regularly read a daily newspaper spend at least half an hour doing so compared to only 40 per cent of those who read an online daily newspaper.

The likes of Castells and Benkler's argument actually has little basis in an account of people's actual *usage* of the new media landscape. Understanding the daily habits and rituals associated with media use is crucial to analysing how the abstract possibilities of all technologies develop into everyday political culture. And if these accounts offer no analysis of actual media use, then they must also fail also to address the question of *context*. The experience of living in mediated worlds involves being part of the wider framings of social and political life, wider myths of social 'order' (Wrong 1994) specifically in relation to the particular types of framing of politics (and what lies beyond politics) at particular historical moments. Once this is taken into account we can begin to surmise how neoliberal discourse maybe a powerful and largely successful attempt

to reshape the framing of the political for a whole generation and remains powerfully in force in the individualistic values that saturate much life and action online. Bennett and Segerbergs (2013) work on social media and social movements is instructive here as it reveals how this heavily personalized means of communicating protest leads to connective rather than collective responses; a more individualized means of political agency.

Once we have taken account of the depth and breadth of contextual factors and situated them in a broader understanding of prevalent framings of meaning, then we must ask ourselves – has the networked communication of the internet integrated people better into public politics, made public politics administer against inequality and made centres of economic power politically accountable. I would argue, precisely the reverse in many countries with two or three decades of neoliberal politics and neoliberal culture which, arguably have eroded the integration of trust networks, increased inequality and increased the autonomy of corporations through deregulation and liberalization in a digital age where media usage is ever more surveilled, monitored and monetized.

Conclusion: The Problem of Politics and the Importance of Power

To thoroughly interrogate the relationship of media to democracy requires a consideration of power – who has it and how is it used? To engage with a full consideration of power requires media scholars to embrace fully the social dimensions of mediated life and the political consequences of our actions and those of others. If we inject an analysis of power into the relationship between media and democracy then we are encouraged to take account of those who hold it and those who seek to claim it and then to critique how each is accountable to the other. The political cannot be understood outside of relations of power or without the social. It also requires us to avoid the assumptions and pitfalls of neo-liberal formulations of democratic life – discussed here in relation to particular interpretations of media freedom.

In seeking to understand media and democracy in the digital age, we must also be prepared to take stock of this thing called democracy. Democratisation, whichever way you choose to see it, requires the real and material participation of the oppressed and excluded, of the victims of the political system. Democracy conceived of as access to communication and information can only ever take us to first base. It may well offer possible changes in the dynamics of action. It may even enable an expansion of the realm of the contestable and in this sense extend the public sphere. But acknowledging this should not give way to a fetishization of notions of plurality, autonomy and communicative or media freedom. Political participation is not just about access or voice, although both are crucially important. Ultimately, participation is about limiting the control of a few privileged people or dominant corporations who rule. If participation is about sharing power, is it possible to share power at the level of the nation state, to reach a level of sovereignty by and for the people? In other words, we need to ask how do political systems work where representative democracy has gone askew? And then to question the role of the media therein and interrogate how the dynamics of political life and action are changing.

One simple yet terrifyingly complex goal would be to reconnect democracy with equality (social, economic, political, cultural and technological). This would serve the critical purpose of immediately flushing out differential power relations and enabling

a deeper understanding of what it means to give more control to more people. Reconnecting democracy with equality premises the discussion on the sort of conditions that might be needed for us to come together as collectives to shape common action and to live together better and that includes the conditions of mediated practice. To consider who amongst us can lay claim to being a political actor and why and in what circumstances would we want to? It is these sorts of questions that address the organization of life by capital, and seek to re-establish the value of publics such that we can re-imagine democracy and its relationship to the media in a more substantive and radically progressive way, that should be at the heart of our analyses as critical media scholars.

Notes

1. The dominant section of the Press Industry campaigning against independent self-regulation put forward by Lord Justice Leveson after a year long public inquiry, sponsored the establishment of the *Freedom of Speech Network* that unsurprisingly, subsequently received handsome coverage in the mainstream press despite very little coverage of the hacking scandal itself throughout the length of the Leveson proceedings (Bennett and Towned, 2012). The familiar retort of this press lobby is to compare those calling for improved self-regulation of the press overseen by a recognition body that will review the practices of press self regulation every 2-3 years in a manner recommended by Lord Justice Leveson to authoritarian states such as Zimbabwe.
2. Interestingly however, the UK newspaper industry has never once referred to the notable state subsidies to the press in the form of VAT exemption that total some £750m per year as state interference or censorship.
3. This Bill was proposed by Leveson as a means of offering statutory underpinning to a voluntary self-regulatory framework. Because of the concerns over Press Freedom the Bill was then replaced with a Royal Charter. Royal Charters are archaic instruments of the Privy Council overseen by the Queen and ironically are far less democratic in nature that any legislative mechanism allows for.
4. 20 Cabinet ministers met senior Murdoch executives 130 times in the first 14 months of office. See the full list on Number 10s website: http://www.number10.gov.uk/transparency/who-ministers-are-meeting/
5. Reporters Without Borders claims to be "the largest press freedom organization in the world, with over 120 correspondents across the globe." (http://en.rsf.org/rsf-usa-23-11-2009,35024.html). It works to expose limits on press freedom and support journalists who are being persecuted.

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