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Review essay

Democracy in the age of negativity, abundance and hybridity

Dr Jonathan Sullivan.¹

Andrew Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

John Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Stuart N. Soroka, *Negativity in Democratic Politics: Causes and Consequences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Introduction

Twenty years ago, at the outset of the internet revolution, much academic literature on the state of media and politics in advanced western democracies was preoccupied with various forms of negativity. This was especially true of studies on the US, which frequently framed the state of media/politics in crisis terms, with central elements of the democratic process apparently on the brink of failure. Typical narratives described how the mass media had followed the dictates of commercialism in dumbing down their political coverage and fixating over strategy and human interest storylines. The media's obsession with the "horse race" features of political competition had become so entrenched that they were unable or unwilling to distinguish between routine governance and upcoming, often far off, elections.² Politicians were equally culpable; their campaigns having become excessively long and

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² Emmett H. Buell and Lee Sigelman, *Attack Politics: Negativity in Presidential Campaigns Since 1960* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

divisive, with candidates trying to out-spend each other in a race to sling the most mud.³ The underlying logics of media coverage and the imperative of political point-scoring under the tyranny of public opinion were such that politicians were said to be “permanently” in campaign mode. No wonder large numbers of citizens lost interest in politics and allowed themselves to become enmeshed in entertainment. Preparing to choose a representative was too troublesome—and large segments of the American electorate failed to turn out to vote.⁴ The disjuncture between democratic ideals and realities described by a generation of political scientists and communication scholars, had become, by the 1990s, a “disquieting gulf.”⁵ Since those dying days of the broadcast era, after the popularization of cable TV but before widespread access to the internet, the media ecologies in advanced democracies (and many non-democracies) have undergone revolutionary changes. Near universal mobile device ownership and access to the internet has had a radical effect on modes of political communication. But have these changes in the information and communications environment exacerbated or reduced the “disquieting gulf”?

Negativity

A cursory glance at contemporary academic work suggests that in the digital era media coverage of politics is superficial, obsessed with image, laissez-faire and worse with “the facts,” exaggerated, misleading, guilty of “churnalism” and pseudo-news that adds nothing of

³ Kathleen Jamieson, *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁴ Angus Campbell, Philip Converse, Warren Miller and Donald Stokes, *The American Voter*. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1960); Edward Carmines and James Stimson, *Issue Evolution* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989); Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter, *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1996); Ruy A. Teixeira, *The Disappearing American Voter* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2011).

⁵ Michael Franz, Paul Freedman, Ken Goldstein and Travis Ridout, *Campaign Advertising and American Democracy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), p. 12.

substance to the information environment.⁶ A glut of media content means that our daily lives are constantly disrupted by the flow of mediated events where “the adversarial and “gotcha” styles of commercial journalism” make the world seem more threatening and duplicitous than it really is, reducing public trust and darkening the public mood.⁷ Reflecting on contemporary media practices Keane describes how journalism “loves titillation, draws upon unattributed sources, fills news holes, spins sensations and concentrates too much on personalities.”⁸ Keane doesn’t, but many critiques of prevailing media conditions, in academic and popular narratives, invoke nostalgia for a more innocent time, usually the early era of mass broadcasting. They despair at trends in the news media that began in the 1970s and 80s when high demand for content from the new 24 hour news channels and the dominance of “strategic” and “conflict” frames post-Watergate drove media practices.⁹ Forgetting earlier iterations of media negativity and sensationalism (the terms muckraking and yellow journalism were invented to describe the New York publications of Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst at the turn of the 20th Century), structural accounts of the evolution of the media environment in the US typically run as follows.¹⁰ Technological advances lowered production costs as levels of disposable income increased, leading to the near universal affordability of TV sets by the late 1960s. Increasing demand led to an exponential increase in cable/satellite penetration and concomitant expansion of commercial channels. Fragmentation of the national TV market exposed broadcasters to intense market competition, with literally hundreds of channels, including nascent 24 hour news channels, competing for ratings and advertising revenue. As a result of these commercial pressures, TV moved away

⁶ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Random House, 2012); Nick Davies, *Flat Earth News: An Award-winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media* (London: Random House, 2011).

⁷ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 41.

⁸ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 103.

⁹ Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

¹⁰ Doris Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2000); Denis McQuail, *Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1992).

from issue-oriented “hard news” and analysis in favour of “infotainment” and “soft news” formats with greater mass appeal. By compelling broadcasters to present trivialized, personalized and de-contextualized coverage marked by the dominance of action over process and visualization over abstraction, Curran writes that the market undermined intelligent and rational debate.¹¹ Similarly, Patterson argued that market competition created a situation where “the chief goal of the media is not to foster a free marketplace of ideas, but to attract and hold a large audience for advertisers.”¹² Rather than constituting a civic forum encouraging pluralistic debate, public learning and participation in politics (as many have suggested it should),¹³ scholars found the opposite. By the early 1990s Patterson was already arguing that the progressively blurred distinction between news and entertainment had significantly diminished citizens’ ability to distinguish “reality” from “performance.”¹⁴ By the end of the decade Gunther and Mugham concluded that the news media’s emphasis on the “horserace” (who’s ahead? who’s behind?) forced voters to “make choices on the basis of criteria that are unrelated to the real business of government.”¹⁵

Alongside this structural account, a corollary cultural explanation for media evolution focused on the repercussions of the Vietnam War and protests and fallout from the Watergate scandal. These events marked the apotheosis of the media as “watchdog” and precipitated a fundamental form of “adversarial journalism” and “anti-politics” orientation of the press.¹⁶ Post-Watergate news coverage is noted for the increasing dominance of conflictual and strategic frames in which politics in general, not just electoral politics, is interpreted as a

¹¹ James Curran, “Mediations of Democracy,” in *Mass Media and Society*, ed. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (London: Hodder & Arnold, 2005), 122-152, p. 129.

¹² Patterson, *Out of Order*, p. 253.

¹³ For instance, Pippa Norris, *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Post-industrial Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 24

¹⁴ Patterson, *Out of Order*.

¹⁵ Richard Gunther and Anthony Mugham, eds., *Democracy and the Media: A Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 7.

¹⁶ Norris, *A Virtuous Circle*.

game in which politicians vie for power. In this strategic schema,¹⁷ winning and losing is the central concern, depicted with the language of war, metaphors from sports and preoccupation with opinion polls. Politics becomes a story with its own performers, critics and an audience who will decide on the respective merits of the candidates' narratives with their votes. The image, style and perception of the candidate often render their stand or record on "the issues" irrelevant.

Social scientists, and indeed journalists, have long warned about developments in the media and the negative effects they may have at the mass level.¹⁸ Concerns have been particularly resonant when it comes to potential exposure effects on voters. In one early study, Lang and Lang found that watching TV news led to voter cynicism as a result of over-emphasis on political conflict.¹⁹ Robinson, who coined the term "video malaise", found similar feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration among voters exposed to TV coverage of politics.²⁰ More recently, scholars found that "media attention to scandal leads to public belief that politicians are corrupt."²¹ Many researchers in the 1990s appeared to share the worry that "the conflict-driven sound-bite oriented discourse of politicians and conflict-saturated strategy-oriented structure of media coverage" combined to create a "mutually reinforcing spiral of cynicism."²²

Among other things, the changing nature of media coverage created the impression, that election campaigns (and by extension, all politics) had become progressively negative. In

¹⁷ See for instance, Jamieson, *Dirty Politics*.

¹⁸ Robert M. Entman, *Democracy Without Citizens* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); James M. Fallows, *Breaking the News: How the Media Undermine American Democracy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996); Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 2006); Larry Sabato, *Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism has Transformed American Politics* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Kurt Lang and Gladys Lang, "The Mass Media and Voting," in Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz, eds. *Reader in Public Opinion and Communication*. (New York: Free Press, 1966), 455-472.

²⁰ Michael Robinson, "Public Affairs Television and the Growth of Political Malaise: The Case of "The Selling of the Pentagon,"" *American Political Science Review* 70, no. 2 (1976): 409-32.

²¹ Joseph Nye, Philip Zelikow and David King, eds., *Why People Don't Trust Government* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p.16.

²² Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Spiral of Cynicism: The Press and the Public Good* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 9.

fact what happened, starting with the 1988 presidential campaign between George Bush Sr. and Michael Dukakis, was a significant increase in media attention to the negative aspects of political competition. In other words, negativity itself became news.²³ The supposed degeneration of standards after 1988 was therefore an illusion, albeit a powerful and entrenched one that to a certain extent became the conventional wisdom. Here, as elsewhere, the media's power in "culling and crafting countless bits of information into the limited number of messages that reach people every day" distorted reality.²⁴ Another prevalent example of this is how TV news' "problem frame" highlighting distress and suffering leads to erroneous impressions among viewers about real-world levels of danger and violence.²⁵ Soroka's analysis of crime news coverage compared to actual crime rates in the US shows this negativity bias at work—crime stories are more frequently reported than the crime rate would suggest, with a tendency to exaggerate the frequency of violent crime, and to give more space in accordance with the degree of violence.²⁶ Soroka found a similar dynamic in coverage of the economy in US, UK and Canadian newspapers: Overall, one mildly negative piece of economic news resulted in an average of two news stories based on it. By contrast, an average of two pieces of positive information would have to emerge to produce one story.²⁷ To probe the ingrained idea that "bad news sells", Soroka then coded the front covers of Maclean's, Canada's leading news weekly, and compared them to sales data controlling for the focus of the story and a number of other variables. Issues with negative front covers sold more copies by a very substantial margin.

²³ John G. Geer, *In Defense of Negativity: Attack Ads in Presidential Campaigns* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 118-23.

²⁴ Pamela J. Shoemaker and Timothy Vos, *Gatekeeping Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 1.

²⁵ David L. Altheide, "The news media, the problem frame, and the production of fear," *The Sociological Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (1997): 647-668; Stephen J. Farnsworth and S. Robert Lichter, *The Nightly News Nightmare: Television's Coverage of US Presidential Elections, 1988-2004* (Lexington, KY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

²⁶ Soroka, *Negativity in Democratic Politics*.

²⁷ Soroka, *Negativity in Democratic Politics*, p. 91.

Seeking an explanation for media negativity, Soroka goes beyond structural and cultural accounts. He argues that the media, as an institution designed by humans for human consumption, reflect an innate, evolutionary human tendency toward negativity. Negativity is a hardwired part of the human experience and the media's predilection for negativity reflects the inherent bias of journalists, editors and audiences. People have evolved to focus on negative information (danger signs, for instance) because it increases their chances of survival. Much of the first part of *Negativity in Democratic Politics* marshals findings across many diverse disciplines to show how central, and "normal", negativity is to the human experience. The consensus in the vast psychology literature on the topic is that negative information, events and assessments have more substantial effects on peoples' behaviour than positive information. Human judgments privilege negative inputs, while work on information processing shows that greater cognitive energy is expended on negative experiences, which we're also more likely to remember (to the extent that fearful events triggering danger signs can leave indelible memories). Research on neurological processes shows that negative stimuli generate greater responses, which are mirrored in physiological reactions such as "fight or flight" reactions to negative events. In sum, "the inside of the body is basically a source of evaluative negative input."²⁸

Research in the social sciences shows some of the practical consequences for human behaviour. In microeconomics, prospect theory provides a convincing explanation for the many empirical manifestations of loss aversion, the phenomenon where people care more about a loss in utility than they care about an equal gain in utility.²⁹ In political science the vast literature on negative campaigning has shown that people are more likely to remember

²⁸ Paul Rozin and Edward B. Royzman, "Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance, and Contagion," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 5, no. 4 (2001): 296-320, p. 301.

²⁹ Famously reported in Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (London: Macmillan, 2011).

negative advertisements.³⁰ Whether or not negative ads “work” in the way that their sponsors intend is hard to say, but there is convincing evidence that “negative campaign ads are more likely to stimulate and inform.”³¹ The attention-grabbing power of negative ads, to take one example, is a function of the relative scarcity of negative information. In our daily lives we are exposed to a lot of information, most of which does not concern politics and most of which is relatively positive. Thus when we encounter political or other news in all its negativity, it strikes us more forcefully. Again, Soroka finds an answer in our genes: “evolution favours animals that exhibit a combination of mildly optimistic and loss-averse behaviours. You have to be willing to try new food sources [but] if your friend gets eaten while you are there, you need to be the animal that never goes back.”³² As in frequency-weight theories and loss aversion in economics, expectations play a key role: We give greater weight to information that goes against our expectations. For instance, negative changes in the economy matter less when the economy is already performing badly. More formally, “the negativity bias is reduced when the information environment becomes predominantly negative [which] helps explain why we are not endlessly negative—at some point, when things are particularly bad, we start focusing on the positive.”³³ Negativity in American media/politics, as Riker’s account of the debate to ratify the American Constitution demonstrates, long precedes Watergate and Cable TV.³⁴ Soroka’s convincing alternative to structural and cultural explanations of negativity suggests that is exactly as it should be.

³⁰ John G. Geer and Richard Lau, “Filling in the Blanks: A New Approach for Studying Campaign Effects,” *British Journal of Political Science* 35, No. 1 (2006): 269-90; Robert Jackson and Jason Sides, “Revisiting the Influence of Campaign Tone on Turnout in Senate Elections,” *Political Analysis* 14, no. 2 (2006): 206-18.

³¹ Franz et al., *Campaign Advertising and American Democracy*, p. 19; Richard R. Lau, Lee Sigelman and Ivy Rovner, “The Effects of Negative Political Campaigns: A Meta-analytic Reassessment,” *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 4 (2007): 1176-1209.

³² Soroka, *Negativity in Democratic Politics*, p. 9.

³³ Soroka, *Negativity in Democratic Politics*, p. 51.

³⁴ William Riker, *The Strategy of Rhetoric* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

Hybridity

Digital communications have had a radical and disruptive effect on all aspects of media production and consumption, including of course political communications. In the space of a decade or so, terms like virtual reality, multimedia, saturation, digital natives, quick time, space shrinking, going viral etc. have become part of the lexicon as static, desk-based computing via a fixed internet connection has given way to mobile. Advanced economies, and some emerging economies like China that moved directly to mobile computing, have witnessed the extraordinarily rapid penetration and adoption of smart phones and Wi-Fi. The speed and scale with which people have accepted using their phones to consume and create all manner of digital communication and digital media are remarkable. With the popularization of Wi-Fi and handheld devices, “print”, “broadcast” and digital media are now available anywhere at any time. It has given rise to “a new world system of overlapping and interlinked media devices” that is characterized by “spectrum abundance, fragmented narrowcasting and less predictable “long tail” audiences.”³⁵ Ubiquitous connectivity has created the conditions for what Keane calls “communicative abundance”, which he defines as the high intensity use of multimedia in people’s daily lives enabling “messages to be sent and received through multiple user points, in chosen time, either real or delayed, within modularised and ultimately global networks.”³⁶ Accordingly, the “tyranny of distance and slow time is abolished [...replaced by...] non-stop acts of mediated quick time communication with others.”³⁷ Not only are people “awash in vast oceans of circulating information,”³⁸ as broadcasters become more adept at offering “customizable, personally tailored modes of consumption and interaction,”³⁹ they are awash in very discrete types of

³⁵ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 1; Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail: How Endless Choice is Creating Unlimited Demand* (London: Random House, 2007).

³⁶ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 2.

³⁷ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 10.

³⁸ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 32.

³⁹ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, p. 42.

information that foster echo chambers and the balkanization of the internet. Prior suggests that abundance of choice may have another unintended negative effect on the electorate.⁴⁰ He argues that inadvertent exposure to television news during the broadcast era prior to the emergence of cable TV, when viewers could only watch what was broadcast on the terrestrial networks, had a powerful effect on turnout and political moderation. In the “low choice” environment, selection of preferred content was inefficient, exposing “switchers,” (i.e. viewers who favoured entertainment to news, but preferred any genre to turning the TV off) to political information. A lack of alternative options forced “switchers” to watch the evening news because there was literally nothing else on. Learning from this accidental exposure often made the difference between the less engaged going to the polls or not. The contemporary, ultra-high choice media environment allows everyone to efficiently access whatever they like without ever accidental exposure to political information.⁴¹ Prior’s convincing claim that inadvertent exposure to political information has receded in the high choice information age is outweighed by more widespread concerns about the effects of information overload. As Ansolabehere and Iyengar reported in the mid-1990s, information overload among less sophisticated citizens leads them to “tune politics out.”⁴² Hibbing and Theiss-Morse have similarly found that “the last thing people want is to be more involved in political decision making,”⁴³ which is particularly true of low sophisticates.⁴⁴ In need of a heuristic to help cut through the mass of information produced by communicative abundance,

⁴⁰ Markus Prior, *Post-broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁴¹ Preliminary research on Twitter suggests that Prior’s argument may not always hold. For instance, analysis of live tweeting around the BBC TV current affairs talk show Question Time identified “centripetal dynamics that pull disparate and often distanced individuals into a mainstream political event” (Nick Anstead and Ben O’Loughlin, “The emerging viewertariat and BBC question time: television debate and real-time commenting online,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 16, no. 4 (2011): 440–462, p. 457.)

⁴² Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative: How Political Advertisements Shrink & Polarize the Electorate* (London: Simon Schuster, 1995).

⁴³ John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans’ Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 1.

⁴⁴ Keena Lipsitz, Christine Trost, Matthew Grossman and John Sides, “What Voters Want From Political Campaign Communication,” *Political Communication* 22, no. 3 (2005): 337-54.

Soroka suggests that our natural negativity bias may actually be our most effective tool (2014: 121).⁴⁵

For media and political actors, the past decade has been a time of proliferating “disruptive” digital communications, “a chaotic transition period” in which “complex and multifaceted forces [are] reshaping the political communication environments of the western democracies.”⁴⁶ In the beginning, their responses were scrambling and ad hoc, presenting openings to non-traditional actors, like bloggers, for instance. But over time, older power dynamics have adapted and traditional power holders have re-grouped and reasserted themselves under the new conditions of “communicative abundance” and “media hybridity”. In its simplest guise, media hybridity refers to the way in which “the high density of daily communication is reinforced by the tendency of each formerly separate medium to merge with others, to become “hybrid” media.”⁴⁷ Chadwick goes much further, showing how the roles and effects of newer and older forms of media in politics (note the use of relative adjectives) have given way to entire media systems that, in the US and UK at least, are best characterized as hybrid.

Chadwick is an advocate of a broad definition of media to counteract the bifurcation of the field into scholars of “traditional media” (who tend to discount the digital) and scholars of “digital media” (who are internet centric and tied up in utopian/realist debates) in a world where the key to understanding the media-politics ecology is the interrelationship between older and newer media. Advocating a broad conceptualization of the media system, Chadwick argues that instead of a singular “media logic” we need to think in terms of hybrid media logics in the plural. The media logic concept was developed by Altheide and Snow,⁴⁸ as a way of identifying how “the assumptions, norms and visible artefacts of media, such as

⁴⁵ Soroka, *Negativity in Democratic Politics*, p. 121.

⁴⁶ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, pp. 3-4.

⁴⁷ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 14.

⁴⁸ David L. Altheide and Robert P. Snow, *Media Logic* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1979).

templates, formats, genres, narratives and tropes have come to penetrate other areas of social, economic, cultural and political life.”⁴⁹ Over time media logic shapes the practices of those in other (Bourdieuian) “fields”, and the borders between fields are broken down. For instance, media coverage of sports, terrorism and war has shaped how actors in these fields behave.⁵⁰ In politics, the merging of news and entertainment into the “infotainment” formats that dominate news programming internationally is one example.⁵¹ More fundamentally, “the discrete interactions between media elites, political elites and publics create shared understandings and expectations about what constitutes publically valued information and communication”, to the extent that actors who seek to influence public discourse “must adapt their communication strategies to fit the dominant formats required by the media.”⁵²

For Chadwick, the hybrid media system is constituted by complex and ever-evolving interactions among older and newer media logics (incorporating technologies, genres, norms, behaviours and organizational forms) characterised by adaptation, interdependence and simultaneous concentrations and diffusion of power. In practice, hybridity minimizes or disguises dichotomies between professional and amateur, traditional and digital media, and is characterised by complexity, interdependence, transition, heterogeneity, flux, liminality and the “blending, meshing, overlapping and coevolution of media and politics.”⁵³ It is symbolised by the culture of hacking and the mash-up. It is easy to see the fearful challenge that this presented to political actors. Soroka, for instance, notes how politicians’ “words are chopped up and reshuffled to produce a narrative determined not by the source but by the journalist.”⁵⁴ The trend that Hallin reported in the early 1990s—the declining average length of politician sound-bites on network news from 43 seconds in 1968 to 9 seconds in 1988—

⁴⁹ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, p. 19.

⁵⁰ See for instance, Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Loughlin, *War and Media* (London: Polity, 2010).

⁵¹ Daya Kishan Thussu, *News As Entertainment: The Rise of Global Infotainment* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008).

⁵² Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, p. 19.

⁵³ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, p. 4.

⁵⁴ Soroka, *Negativity in Democratic Politics*, p. 75.

has continued, so that the words of politicians no longer dominate news stories as they once did.⁵⁵

One arena where politicians have fought back against this loss of control is in their election campaigns. As Chadwick demonstrates through a careful and detailed analysis of Barack Obama's campaign for President of the US in 2008, successful campaigns now deliberately incorporate tools associated with both the older broadcast era and the current hybrid age.⁵⁶ It is worth citing at length Chadwick's summation of the landmark Obama campaign, which

“simultaneously constructed and ruthlessly exploited the hybrid media system for the purposes of campaign communication [...] the campaign clearly saw the internet as a tool for mobilization and the coordination of face to face activity such as canvassing and voter registration and mobilization. But the internet was not understood as a means of replacing TV and newspapers [...] and [...] the internet campaign would be tightly managed to ensure that it was fully integrated with the other divisions. Online interactivity, while encouraged, would, as much as possible, be on the campaign's own terms and harnessed in a way that fitted with this hybrid campaigning model. Obama's campaign was a calibrated and controlled response to long-term trends in the fragmentation of mediated politics. And yet 2008 also revealed the continuing importance of physical gatherings and big TV events. The theatrical, the grandiose, and the televisual endure in importance. Televised debates, ads, newspaper interviews, web videos and high profile TV appearances increasingly meshed together to create new campaign dynamics.”⁵⁷

The effects of the hybrid media system have been felt in many spheres not just election campaigns, and not just in the US. Consider, for instance, WikiLeaks, Edward Snowden, Occupy Wall Street activists and the democracy supporters in Egypt watching themselves on big screens hoping that the media coverage being beamed around the world would save them from the repercussions of their demonstrations. Consider how the “Occupy [Wall Street] activists hybridized real-space physical presence, with their own instantaneous social media resources and publishing channels—flows of information that they knew would be monitored

⁵⁵ Daniel C. Hallin, “Sound Bite News: Television Coverage of Elections, 1968–1988,” *Journal of Communication* 42, no. 2 (1992): 5-24.

⁵⁶ On Obama's “ground game” see Rasmus Kleis Nielsen, *Ground Wars: Personalized Communication in Political Campaigns* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁵⁷ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, p. 136.

and reassembled by professional journalists eager to create authentic representations of their protest camps.”⁵⁸ Activists have learned and adopted practices from broadcast media to exploit the porous boundaries in the hybrid media system, but the same kind of adaptation works the other way too. Consider FOX News host Glenn Beck’s rally in Washington DC to “restore honor”; later emulated by Daily Show host Jon Stewart and (at the time) The Colbert Report host Stephen Colbert’s “rally to restore sanity and/or fear”. Both events attracted tens of thousands of participants by issuing appeals on their TV shows and online. As Chadwick puts it, “the nature of mediated politics is evolving rapidly and is being pushed and pulled in multiple directions by multiple actors: Some of these forces are contradictory, some are integrative, all are generative of systemic hybridity.”⁵⁹

Communicative abundance and media hybridity have broken down the traditional barriers between the media and other spheres of life. As Keane puts it, “from the most intimate everyday mileaux through to large scale global organizations [all] operate within heavily mediated settings in which the meaning of messages is constantly changing and often at odds with the intentions of their creators.”⁶⁰ The same goes for the media, now that the horizontal interactions of social media means that “some big political news stories now break first online and are picked up by TV and print journalists who obsessively follow their email, Twitter, Facebook and blog feeds in the hunt for new leads.”⁶¹ And while the effects of cost-cutting measures prompted by the decimation of traditional media business models has undermined their authority, a new class of independent creators emerged—political commentators like the blogger Paul Staines (penname Guido Fawkes) who “regularly produce articles that are indistinguishable from those published in the op-ed sections of

⁵⁸ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, p. 55. Similar tactics were used by students in Taiwan’s Sunflower movement and Hong Kong’s Occupy Central.

⁵⁹ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, p. 59.

⁶⁰ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 23.

⁶¹ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, p. 44.

newspapers.”⁶² Again, boundaries are blurred and evolving, and after an uncomfortable period of adjustment older power dynamics have reasserted themselves. In the US, successful political bloggers have been hired by campaigns, interest groups, government agencies and traditional media. In short, “they have been appropriated by all elite sectors of public communication in the US, from politicians and agency officials to professional journalists to TV and radio presenters.”⁶³ In the UK too, bloggers like Staines have been incorporated into the “reserved domains of power” of the older news media, which “remain deeply embedded in the routines and insider networks of Westminster, Whitehall and the major metropolitan centres.”⁶⁴ Despite the supposed democratization of information, where everyone has the potential to create and disseminate content, it is “newspaper journalists working in well-equipped and well connected newsrooms [who] remain the content engines of talkback radio, TV news shows and blogs and tweets.”⁶⁵ Established media organizations have the experience, human and capital resources to out-perform newer media in terms of editorial authority, sophisticated delivery platforms and participatory web environments. It was “traditional” print media that broke the Snowden leak.⁶⁶ Julian Assange’s decision to bypass traditional media and dump WikiLeaks material en masse online meant that “the cables have never had the dedicated attention they deserve. They made a splash and then were left languishing.”⁶⁷

⁶² Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, p. 47.

⁶³ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, p. 54.

⁶⁴ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, p. 48.

⁶⁵ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 7.

⁶⁶ Andrew Chadwick and Simon Collister, “Boundary-Drawing Power and the Renewal of Professional News Organizations: The Case of The Guardian and the Edward Snowden NSA Leak,” *International Journal of Communication* 8 (2014): 22.

⁶⁷ Andrew O’Hagan, “Ghosting,” *London Review of Books* 36, no. 5 (2014a): 5-26.

Negativity, Abundance and Democracy

Information is a necessary commodity for representative democracy to function effectively.⁶⁸ If elections are conceived as the means by which the “will of the people” is expressed through the selection of candidates or parties that best represents the majority, or plurality, of voter’s interests,⁶⁹ then the role of voters is to choose the party or candidate that best represents their interests. For this to be possible, voters must have some awareness of their own preferences and sufficient relevant knowledge of the contending candidates.⁷⁰ If citizens in a democracy should be enabled and encouraged to communicate their preferences in favour of particular policies or to reward or sanction incumbents for their performance, it follows that sufficient relevant information should be made available to them. In short, “in an ideal representative democracy plentiful and reliable political information should be readily available to allow citizens to make informed political decisions.”⁷¹ The acknowledgement that “information matters” has prompted several political scientists to argue that even unseemly elements of current political competition, such as negative campaigning, may have a constructive role.⁷² Indeed Soroka suggests that “focusing on negative information may be a perfectly reasonable means for citizens to monitor their environment, and particularly their governments.”⁷³ Not only is negative information a useful heuristic for an increasingly crowded information environment, it is consistent with the human predilection for negativity and the way in which a wide range of cultural and social institutions have been designed to privilege negative information. Consider, for instance, the checks and balances built in to most democratic systems. As Soroka puts it “representative democracy has been to a large

⁶⁸ Keena Lipsitz, “Democratic Theory and Political Campaigns,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (2004): 163-89.

⁶⁹ Robert Dahl, *Democracy and its Critics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971).

⁷⁰ Richard R. Lau and David P. Redlawsk, *How Voters Decide: Information Processing in Election Campaigns* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁷¹ Gunther and Mugham, *Democracy and the Media*, p. 421.

⁷² For a review, see Franz et al., *Campaign Advertising and American Democracy*.

⁷³ Soroka, *Negativity in Democratic Politics*, p. 1.

extent about giving power to govern to one group and then surrounding that group with as many checks and balances as are necessary to minimize error.”⁷⁴ The consequence of this emblematically human institutional design is that political information is predominantly negative: only the government of the day actually produces positive information, while all other actors are obliged (and incentivised) to produce negative information. The end result of “the need for constant error monitoring [is] that everyday politics is rather negative.”⁷⁵ The media are negative because they were designed to fill this role: Negativity “reflects one of their principal institutional functions in a democracy: holding current governments accountable.”⁷⁶

For Keane, communicative abundance generated by the democratization of information, cheap methods of digital reproduction and the increase in number of people with the gadgets they need to access open information banks promised to have a fundamental effect on the extent to which citizens can monitor governments. Indeed in the early phase of the era of communicative abundance, “politicians [were] sitting ducks.”⁷⁷ But of course, companies and government have fought back, often in cahoots with older, established media. As Chadwick observes, “the practices of [older] media and political actors become so interpenetrated and the alliances between them so strong that the disruptions caused by the emergence of newer media affect the status and power of both media and political elites.”⁷⁸ Both have the incentive to adapt together to the new conditions, by slowly colonizing cyberspace and in continuing to manipulate and control public opinion through the media. Yet Keane argues that something much more fundamental is happening to our democracies, “an historic sea change, one that is taking us away from the assembly-based and representative models of democracy of past times towards a form of democracy with entirely

⁷⁴ Soroka, *Negativity in Democratic Politics*, pp. 30-31.

⁷⁵ Soroka, *Negativity in Democratic Politics*, p. 31.

⁷⁶ Soroka, *Negativity in Democratic Politics*, p. 21.

⁷⁷ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 43.

⁷⁸ Chadwick, *The Hybrid Media System*, p. 20.

different contours and dynamics.”⁷⁹ In previous work, he has conceptualized this new phenomenon as “monitory democracy.”⁸⁰

Key to the emergence of monitory democracy are several trends emanating from the architecture of communicative abundance: the democratization of information, the politicization of the private-public distinction, high intensity efforts by citizens and organizations to attack power holders with publicity and public exposure; the multiplication of unelected representatives etc. The upshot of these developments is that “within all democracies many hundreds and thousands of monitory institutions now skilfully trade in the business of stirring up questions of power, often with political effect.”⁸¹ By putting politicians, parties and governments “permanently on their toes, monitory institutions complicate their lives and question their power and authority, often forcing them to chop and change their agendas—sometimes by smothering them in political disgrace.”⁸² The routinization of “-gate” scandals, demonstrates that these “public monitors” work (to what extent we don’t really know), and also reminds us that “the political dirty business of dragging power from behind the curtains of secrecy remains fundamentally important.”⁸³ Revelations of malfeasance entrenches the idea in peoples’ minds that all institutions must be viewed suspiciously—a kind of cynicism that Keane argues is healthier than the conceit of the “informed citizen” who knows everything he needs to about politics—an anti-democratic idea from 19th Century used to promote a restricted educated franchise. Keane euphemistically conceives these cynics as “wise citizens” and imbues them with street smarts: “[they] know they have to think for themselves, keep an eye on power holders but also know that sometimes power monitoring doesn’t work or backfires [...and...] they know they

⁷⁹ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 79.

⁸⁰ John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009).

⁸¹ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 47.

⁸² Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 81.

⁸³ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 49.

should be sceptical and that in the age of paparazzi and Photoshop, the camera often lies.”⁸⁴ Keane sees the tools of communicative abundance (and media hybridity) as harnessing the “wisdom of crowds”, where “wisdom” resembles cynicism and street smarts, to continuously question and scrutinize power holders. Reversing Orwell’s dystopian vision to turn the panopticon against the state, Keane suggests “the constant public scrutiny of power by many differently sized monitory bodies with footprints large and small makes it the most energetic, most dynamic form of democracy ever,”⁸⁵ where “potentially all fields of social and political life come to be publically scrutinized [...] by a whole host of non-party, extra-parliamentary and often unelected bodies operating within, underneath and beyond the boundaries of territorial states.”⁸⁶ No wonder he writes that “politics in the age of monitory democracy has a definite “viral” quality about it.”⁸⁷

The potential Keane foresees in current developments are much more fundamental than the meanings normally attached to “going viral” (think BuzzFeed memes and YouTube videos), to the extent that the central tenet of representative democracy (one person, one vote, one representative) becomes one person, many interests, many voices, multiple votes, multiple representatives under the evolving system of monitory democracy. Keane writes that “in the era of monitory democracy it is as if the principles of representative democracy—public openness, citizens’ equality, selecting representatives—are superimposed on representative democracy itself.”⁸⁸ This is exhilarating stuff. But lest we get ahead of ourselves, he cautions that, like any other political system, monitory democracy is not inevitable. The potential for monitory democracy fostered by communicative abundance is already being undermined by the co-optation of the same technologies, via the manipulations

⁸⁴ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 107.

⁸⁵ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 105.

⁸⁶ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 86.

⁸⁷ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 107.

⁸⁸ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 86.

of information by commercial oligopolies' secret algorithms,⁸⁹ the normalization of surveillance and the dissolution of privacy,⁹⁰ hacking, disinformation, deception and dissimulation. Instead of promoting tolerance and diversity, the infrastructure and tools of communicative abundance "hands out mirrors to citizens, who use them to preen themselves in the looking glass of their blinkered choice."⁹¹ It leads to virtual mob rule, witch hunts, dogmatism, irresponsibility and "rabbit holes of special interests."⁹² It leads to disorientating "information cascades" that overwhelm people with rumours, trivia and spin,⁹³ where the "the cult of the amateur" triumphs⁹⁴ and anonymous online interactions take the form of "random shouting."⁹⁵ More worrying still, is another manifestation of media decadence; "the great public silences produced by large-scale adventures of power" the catastrophes caused by "long strings of wilfully blind miscalculations", that go by the name of Lehman, Deepwater Horizon, Fukushima etc. and have become commonplace.⁹⁶ Equally pernicious is the silence that surrounds the multiplying number of "slow motion catastrophes" like global poverty, the arms trade and environmental destruction that move too slowly, are too complicated or aren't deemed newsworthy enough. Catastrophes are symptomatic of the failure of democracy, warnings that "silent exercises of arbitrary power by manipulative human beings- the absence of monitory democracy- have harmful effects on citizens."⁹⁷ Freedom of communication, abundance and muckraking, i.e. the components of monitory democracy, are crucial bulwarks against these abuses of power. Keane thus exhorts ("wise") people to make a noise, to shatter

⁸⁹ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding From You* (London: Penguin UK, 2011).

⁹⁰ Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁹¹ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 122; Alice E. Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁹² Mat Honan, "Fear and Liking on Facebook," *Wired*, November 2014, p. 49.

⁹³ Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Cass R. Sunstein, *On Rumours: How Falsehoods Spread, Why We Believe Them, What Can Be Done* (London: Penguin UK, 2010).

⁹⁴ Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Blogs, Myspace, YouTube, and the Rest of Today's User-generated Media are Destroying Our Economy, Our Culture, and Our Values* (London: Random House LLC, 2007).

⁹⁵ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 126.

⁹⁶ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, pp. 228-36.

⁹⁷ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 239.

the silence that surrounds power holders and “to sound the alarm whenever they suspect that others are causing them harm.”⁹⁸

Anyone who has been online recently will bear witness to the cacophony therein, but noise alone will not guarantee that power holders toe the line or are held to account. Governments sometimes (how often, we can only guess) escape censure, either by avoiding detection or through collusion with the media. Collusion is an ugly word; perhaps we should say that there is frequent contact and cooperation between journalists and politicians who work closely and need each other. Politicians need the media because they can give positive or negative coverage, and have the power to selectively cover and frame things as they like. But politicians make the laws that govern media operations and can grant or deny access to journalists who need scoops and content. Communicative abundance has not changed the reality that “journalists and politicians drink and dine together ... bump into each other at gatherings, in shopping malls, airports and school grounds and at formal functions ... they frisk and frolic and keep in touch; sometimes they share beds ... their working habits coincide .. they think about similar things and talk to the same people often in tight circles of friends, sources, advisers, colleagues and former colleagues.”⁹⁹ But these unavoidably tight connections have long been cause for concern—the fear of mediocracy predates the current digital age.¹⁰⁰

Conclusion

Politicians, corporations and powerful actors in other sectors have long understood the importance of ‘controlling the message’, using the media to their benefit, or minimizing the damage of scandals and negative events. The technology may have changed, but the

⁹⁸ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 241.

⁹⁹ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 182.

¹⁰⁰ Kevin P. Phillips, *Mediocracy: American Parties and Politics in the Communications Age* (New York: Doubleday, 1975).

underlying motivations of powerful interests are the same in the digital age as they have always been. As Keane puts it, “the techniques and tools of media-saturated societies are being used by powerful forces in ways that are having harmful effects on democracy.”¹⁰¹ This may sound dramatic until one considers the US under President Obama, the Nobel Peace Laureate who entered office so memorably as a beacon of hope (in large part by systematically and ruthlessly exploiting “democratizing” digital tools and media). For the first time in its history, the Committee to Protect Journalists felt compelled to issue a report on the US in 2013, heavily criticising President Obama’s “control freak administration”. Headed by a former editor of the Washington Post, the report stated that the “war on leaks and other efforts to control information are the most aggressive [...] since the Nixon administration”, while noting the sophisticated use of digital media to control the message.¹⁰² Obama’s attempts to control the agenda are symptomatic of the broader culture of spin that has given rise to a dissimulation industry. In a piece for the Financial Times entitled “the invasion of corporate news”, Edgecliffe-Johnson cites the US Bureau of Labor Statistics to the effect that “for every working journalist in America, there are now 4.6 PR (public relations) people.”¹⁰³ The incursion of PR into journalism is one thing, the broader culture of fear bred by the endless “War on Terror” is another. As Glenn Greenwald, the American journalist who helped bring Edward Snowden’s revelations about the NSA surveillance program to the world, puts it in his memoir: “a population, a country that venerates physical safety above all other values will ultimately give up its liberty and sanction any power seized by authority in exchange for the promise, no matter how illusory, of total security.”¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 241.

¹⁰² Leonard Downie Jr, “Leak investigations and surveillance in post-9/11 America” Committee to Protect Journalists. October 10 2013. Accessed online 23 Sept 2014 at <http://cpj.org/reports/2013/10/obama-and-the-press-us-leaks-surveillance-post-911.php>.

¹⁰³ Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson, “The invasion of corporate news,” *Financial Times Magazine*, September 19 2014. Accessed online 19 Sept 2014 at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/937b06c2-3ebd-11e4-ade4-00144feabdc0.html>

¹⁰⁴ Glenn Greenwald, *No Place to Hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA, and the U.S. Surveillance State* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014).

Pervasive suspicion and the compulsive need to “know everything” in order to prevent another terrorist attack led by turns to the systematic surveillance of millions of citizens and the astonishing scale of violations perpetrated by the NSA program. After blowing the whistle on the program, Edward Snowden, who it appears was driven by noble intentions, was forced into uncomfortable exile. Eerily echoing Keane, in an email he wrote to the filmmaker Laura Poitras, Snowden averred that “in the end we must enforce a principle whereby the only way the powerful may enjoy privacy is when it is the same kind shared by the ordinary.”¹⁰⁵ For Keane this is exactly what the promise of communicative abundance holds: “monitory democracy” carried out by savvy and cynical citizens in the all-seeing, always-on digital age. But as the Snowden affair demonstrated, there is considerable resistance from entrenched, powerful and threatened interests. For one thing, the potential for monitory democracy is being undermined by what Keane calls media decadence, the “troubling counter trends [that] encourage concentrations of cunning power without limit, so weakening the spirit and substance of public scrutiny and control of arbitrary power that is so vital for democracy.”¹⁰⁶ Here, another “disquieting gap” has opened up, between the ideals of monitory democracy and the reality in which media are implicated in promoting “intolerance of opinions, stifling the public scrutiny of power and fostering the blind acceptance of the way things are heading.”¹⁰⁷ As O’Hagan reminds us, “it was often journalists who opposed Snowden’s actions and hated what Greenwald was writing.”¹⁰⁸ On Meet the Press, host David Gregory asked Greenwald “to the extent that you have aided and abetted Snowden [...] why shouldn’t you Mr Greenwald be charged with a crime?”¹⁰⁹ Here was a journalist implying that a professional colleague should face prosecution for pursuing the truth at the discomfiture of the government. I began this essay by remarking on scholars’ pre-occupation

¹⁰⁵ Cited in Andrew O’Hagan, “Text-Inspectors,” *London Review of Books* 36, no. 18 (2014b): 11-12.

¹⁰⁶ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 112.

¹⁰⁷ Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence*, p. 119.

¹⁰⁸ O’Hagan, “Text-Inspectors,” p. 11.

¹⁰⁹ O’Hagan, “Text-Inspectors,” p. 11.

with negativity in the 1980s and 90s. Fears about negativity have receded, and indeed now appear rather quaint, but the intersection of politics and the media is still cause for concern. Since it involves powerful interests competing to maintain their power, it will always remain so. The emergence of communicative abundance and media hybridity has changed the nature of citizens' engagement with political communications, but not the underlying dynamics.