# Speakers for the Dead: digital memory and the construction of identity

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Orson Scott Card's 1986 novel, *Speaker for the Dead*, presents a society in which, alongside the clerics and customs of traditional religions, the dead may be mourned by summoning Speakers, who serve "as priests to people who acknowledged no god and yet believed in the value of the lives of human beings", acting at the request of the family or community of the departed "to discover the true causes and motives of the things that people did, and declare the truth of their lives after they were dead".[1] Speakers are not eulogists; they speak *for*, in place of, rather than *about* the dead; they take control of the private knowledge of the deceased and disseminate it on their behalf, healing relationships that had been damaged by secrecy, misunderstandings, or incorrect assumptions during the lives of the deceased.

In the wake of the killing of twelve people at the offices of the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*, thousands of individuals—many of whom had never before seen a copy of the paper—changed their Facebook statuses and profile pictures, or broadcast Twitter updates to proclaim "Je suis Charlie." A month previously, a similar outpouring of digital sentiment took place in response to a New York grand jury's decision not to indict white police officers who had been filmed choking a black man named Eric Garner to death: #icantbreathe. Approximately eighteen months later, the shooting of fifty people during Latinx Night at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, gave rise to #WeAreOrlando. In this paper, I wish to consider these mourning rituals not as an entirely new phenomenon, but as a continuation of a much longer historical trend in which, as I have argued at some length in previous publications, public memorialisation functions to construct and enforce a collective identity.[2] I do not intend to repeat that previous argument within this current paper; I am instead more interested in discussing the politics of the "us" which results from these commemorative rituals, making some suggestions about whether, and how, the problematic notion of collective identity is transforming in the digital age.

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[1] Orson Scott Card, *Speaker for the Dead* (Tor Books, 1986) p. 51.

[2] See especially Vincent, A., 'Forgetting Capsules: Public Monuments and Religious Ritual', in *Monument and Memory*, ed. Mattias Martinson. Berlin: LIT-Verlag; Vincent, A., *Making Memory: Jewish and Christian Explorations in Monument, Narrative and Liturgy*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Press.

Card's Speakers for the Dead offer a remedy for, and thereby assurance against, the terrifying void of death—not the void that each individual might encounter at the end of their own life, but the void of unfinished business, unresolved relationships, an inability to account or compensate for loss that confronts those who remain behind, fear of which has given rise to countless ghost stories and, I wish to suggest, also underlies appropriative mourning movements such as *je suis Charlie*, #ican'tbreathe, and #WeAreOrlando. Laying claim to the identity of the victim of a widely publicised tragedy offers an opportunity for symbolic role-playing, in which the individuals claiming the identity are able to mitigate against their terror of death by agitating for "justice" "on behalf of" the victim(s), thereby reassuring themselves that the tragedy is an anomaly in an otherwise securely ordered world, and that such anomalies can be, and have been, put to rights.

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At the risk of stating the obvious, it is worth noting at the outset that the internet is a large, and constantly growing, virtual space. It is not a monoculture. The major social networking sites—Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, Reddit—are each hosts to hundreds, if not thousands, of subnetworks, formed both from personal contacts between users ("friends" or "followers") and from more loosely organised shared interests (hashtags, [3] groups, and subforums). However, the largest two of these—Facebook and Twitter— incorporate both top-level and local "trends", which may serve to draw particularly popular items to the attention of users even when the social sharing mechanic around which each site is built has failed to do so. Thus, particularly popular trends are likely to register in the awareness of users even if they or their immediate contacts are not active participants in transmitting them. To the limited extent that it is possible to speak of "internet culture", it is these events which constitute it; it is these events which are the most useful examples on which to found a discussion of the potential of the internet as a political space.[4]

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[3] See "The Use of Twitter Hashtags in the Formation of Ad Hoc Publics", http://snurb.info/files/2011/The%20Use%20of%20Twitter%20Hashtags%20in%20the%20Formation%20of%20Ad%20Hoc%20Publics%20(final).pdf; see also http://creativitymachine.net/2011/06/08/a-very-short-history-of-social-media-taglines/

[4] These event-driven memes are distinct from the classic image memes which have mostly been the focus of meme studies. See, e.g., Jana Herwig, "The Archive as the Repertoire: Mediated and Embodied Practice on Imageboard 4chan.org" in Günther Friesinger, Johannes Grenzfurthner &

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When I am talking about politics or the political, I am doing so in the technical language that Hannah Arendt developed to describe one of three main spheres of human activity, alongside labour (sustaining the life-cycle through the cultivation of food and other biological necessities) and work (the production of material objects which themselves endure beyond the period of human activity required to bring them into being).

For Arendt, the main purpose of these spheres of activity—the purpose of life, if you will—is worldmaking: the world is not simply a space we inhabit, not the location of our being, but an idea which we are constantly struggling to bring into being. In my reading, Arendt does not impose a false separation between labour, work, and politics (which she also refers to as "action"); she is quite clear that each is at least partially dependent upon the others. But for her, political action is the most interesting, most difficult, and therefore the most important sphere of human world-making activity. Political action, unlike the other sorts of activity she discusses, is always contingent and uncertain. Unlike labour and work, which are each interactions with the material world, action functions entirely in the realm of ideas; the products of action have, in themselves, no concrete existence. So worldmaking involves a complex set of mitigations, in which labour and work look to the realm of action for the narrative structures which endow their activity with meaning, while action looks to labour and work for the material actualisation of its imaginative potential, a process which Arendt calls "reification".

The contingency of action, however, is not fully addressed by recourse to other spheres of activity; Arendt devotes considerable space to the dilemmas of irreversibility and unpredictability, which she argues are mitigated only by means of further action—the acts of forgiveness and promise-making, respectively:

Thomas Balhausen (eds.) *Mind and Matter: Comparative Approaches towards Complexity* (Transcript Verlag 2011) pp. 39-56; Carl Chen, "The Creation and Meaning of Internet Memes in 4chan: Popular Internet Culture in the Age of Online Digital Reproduction", *Habitus* III (2012) pp. 6-19; Limor Shifman, "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres", *Journal of Visual Culture* 13.3 (2014) pp. 340-358; Jakub Nowak, "Internet meme as meaningful discourse: Towards a theory of multiparticipant popular online content", *Central European Journal of Communication* 1 (2016) pp. 73-89.
For another discussion of the internet as political space, see John Postill, "Digital Politics and Political Engagement" in *Digital Anthropology*, ed. Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller (London: Berg, 2012) pp. 165-184.

> The unpredictability which the act of making promises at least partially dispels is of a twofold nature: it arises simultaneously out of the "darkness of the human heart", that is, the basic unreliability of men who never can guarantee today who they will be tomorrow, and out of the impossibility of foretelling the consequences of an act within a community of equals where everybody has the same capacity to act. [5]

It is worthwhile to note that at this point in Arendt's scheme, action's dilemmas do not arise from action itself, but from the presence of other people whose actions may impinge upon our own. We cannot predict the results of our own action because we never know what others might do—our worldmaking is thus always a negotiation with others.

In a shorter essay, "Introduction into Politics", written around the same time as *The Human Condition*, Arendt clarifies exactly what she means by "world", writing:

> ...wherever human beings come together—be it in private or socially, be it in public or politically—a space is generated that simultaneously gathers them into it and separates them from one another. Every such space has its own structure that changes over time and reveals itself in a private context as custom, in a social context as convention, and in a public context as laws, constitutions, statutes, and the like. Wherever people come together, the world thrusts itself between them, and it is in this in-between state that all human affairs are conducted.[6]

The world, then, is the space that humans have in common, and worldmaking is the task of tending to that commonality, creating structures—both physical and conceptual—which enable and enhance our existence as individuals living in relationships of mutual responsibility with and to other individuals.  There is an important distinction here between commonality and collectivity: the former enhances the capacity of the individual through a system of relationships of mutality with other individuals. The latter obscures the boundaries between individuals, and in so doing renders both relationship and mutuality impossible.

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The question about the extent to which internet culture influences culture offline is contentious, and unlikely to be settled any time soon. In many social networks, the option of anonymity is integral to the formation of community, by custom if not by deliberate design;

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[5] *HC* 244. Emphasis added.

[6] Arendt, "Introduction *into* Politics", *The Promise of Politics* (Schocken Books, 2005) p. 106.

attempts by networks such as Google Plus and Facebook to force users to identify by their legal name have proven both contentious and ineffective.[7] Anonymity does not obscure only detailed demographic data; the potential for a single individual to create multiple identities on any given network can make even very basic usage statistics difficult to ascertain. The most concerted attempts to study social network demographics have been undertaken by marketing firms, and largely limited in geographic scope, generating little useful data for researchers interested in potential cultural transference across national and linguistic boundaries.[8] 77% of all Twitter accounts are registered outside of the United States.[9] In a raw numerical analysis of accounts active every month, the US is dominant (followed by the UK, Canada, Australia, Brazil, Germany, Netherlands, France, India, and South Africa), but measuring per capita use—the number of Twitter users in a country relative to national population, which can be taken as a very rough measurement of Twitter's potential for social influence—tells a rather different story, with the top nations being Kuwait, Netherlands, Brunei, UK, USA, Chile, Ireland, Canada, Sweden, and Puerto Rico.[10]

Even this loose data sketch is already suggestive of a potential disparity between the producers and consumers of internet culture; the digital 'we' is influenced by American and British culture to a greater extent than it is likely to influence them. There are a few other characteristics of the "us" of digital culture that can be derived

[7] See, e.g., Rebecca MacKinnon and Hae-in Lim, "Google Plus Finally Gives Up on Its Ineffective, Dangerous Real-Name Policy" *Slate* 17 July 2014 http://www.slate.com/blogs/future_tense/2014/07/17/google_plus_finally_ditches_its_ineffective_dangerous_real_name_policy.html Accessed 14 August 2016.
[8] e.g., the Pew Research Centre's Social Media Update http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/09/social-media-update-2014/ which uses data obtained from telephone interviews conducted within the US only. See also "Understanding the Demographics of Twitter Users" http://dougleschan.com/the-recruitment-guru/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Understanding-the-Demographics-of-Twitter-Users-Jukka-Pekka-....pdf which begins with a much larger dataset based on self-reported user data, but restricts its more finely tuned analysis to only US-based accounts. For some notion of the scope of data excluded from these studies, compare http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/ (all accessed 10 September 2015). See also Alexia Maddox, *Research Methods and Global Online Communities: A Case Study* (Routledge, 2015).
[9] https://about.twitter.com/company. Accessed 18 April 2016.
[10] www.forbes.com/sites/victorlipman/2014/05/24/top-twitter-trends-what-countries-are-most-active-whos-most-popular/ ; http://sysomos.com/sites/default/files/Inside-Twitter-BySysomos.pdf Accessed 18 April 2016. Due to the tendency of memes to spread from one social network to another (see Linda K. Börzsei, "Makes a Meme Instead: A Concise History of Internet Memes", *New Media Studies Magazine* 7 (2013)), understanding the demographics of any single social network will still not offer a complete understanding of cultural influence.

either directly from network usage data or else by inductive reasoning from this data:

- We have the ability to read English (although advances in machine translation are quickly changing this).
- We have sufficient access and leisure time to be reasonably invested in digital culture. While technological advances are continually lowering the threshold for entry, digital culture is still largely a domain of relative economic privilege.
- We quite literally do not see race—unless content producers are making a deliberate effort to show us race. The invisibility of physical markers in digital space contributes to a flattening of perception; it is easy to assume that the person on the other end of an online interaction is, in essence, another "us", unless and until they demonstrate otherwise.[11]

This last point is where I want to focus for the remainder of this paper: the assumption of homogeneity and the penalties attached to dissent.

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It is tempting to understand this assumption in unambiguously positive terms, as digital anonymity permitting individuals to meet and know each other as substantial persons freed from the burden of prejudice linked to accidental characteristics such as race, gender, or economic status, fulfilling the promise of Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you have all become one in Christ."[12] Viewed in this light, personally assuming the mantle of victimhood is not simply symbolic role-playing

[11] See Beth Kolko, "Erasing @race: Going White in the (Inter)Face" in Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura & Gilbert Rodman, eds., *Race in Cyberspace* (Routledge, 2000) pp. 213-232. However, note that the use of marked language is one way in which race is displayed in online communications; see, e.g., Alice Crawford, "The Myth of the Unmarked Net Speaker" in Greg Elmer, ed., *Critical Perspectives on the Internet* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) pp. 89-104; A. H. Jakubowicz, "Ethnic Diversity, 'Race', and the Cultural Political Economy of Cyberspace" in Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn, eds., *Democracy and New Media* (MIT Press, 2003) pp. 203-224; Anna Katrine Jørgensen, Dirk Hovy, and Anders Søgaard, "Challenges of studying and processing dialects in social media", *Proceedings of the Workshop in Noisy User-generated Text* 31 July 2015, Beijing, China; W. M. Campbell, E. Baseman, and K. Greenfield, "Content + Context = Classification: Examining the Roles of Social Interactions and Linguist Content in Twitter User Classification", *Proceedings of the Second Workshop on Natural Language Processing for Social Media in conjunction with COLING-2014*, 24 August 2014, Dublin, Ireland; Taylor Jones, "Toward a Description of African American Vernacular English Dialect Regions Using 'Black Twitter'", *American Speech* 90.4 (2015) pp. 403-440.

[12] I am taking some liberties with the translation, which more traditionally reads "you all *are* one in Christ", in order to emphasize the transformation from the *status quo* suggested in this verse.

intended to mitigate against the unreliability of the world made manifest in the events that prompt such expressions, but is a much deeper act of solidarity.

But what can solidarity possibly mean in this context? Clearly it is not affiliation based on shared characteristics, either the location based characteristics identified by Durkheim as mechanical solidarity, nor is it the labour-based interdependency he labelled "organic solidarity".[13] Nor is it the political solidarity that has become the common currency of race and gender justice movements, in which members of a minority group who have nothing in common save for their race, gender, religion, etc., nevertheless depend upon one another as members of a group constituted around a shared characteristic, to act, whenever and however possible, in one another's interests insofar as those interests are defined by the shared characteristic.[14] Here, however, no clear degree of interdependence exists; the vast majority of people using the hashtag do not appear to share any obvious characteristic connected to the individuals or events being commemorated. They are not African American, French secularists, publishers of satirical news magazines, Queer, or Latinx. What is being enacted is, then, either a simulacrum of solidarity or else a process by which the utterance itself brings solidarity into being, by creating or enhancing a previously non-existent or unacknowledged commonality with the actual victim. In this light, such expressions of solidarity are, instead, moments in which the potential redemption of the world is made manifest in the collective exercise of human agency.[15]

I am wary, however, of ascribing an excess of redemptive potential to technological innovation, just as I am wary of the theological narrative that underlies such a view. I am, in fact, unconvinced that the erasure of difference is a feature of a world that I would wish to live in, redeemed or otherwise, and I think that there is ample evidence to support the protest that the erasure of *difference* means, in practice, the erasure of *those who are different*. We can see this in the long history of religious conflict between Christians and

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[13] Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York Free Press, 1984).

[14] See, e.g., Angus Dawson and Marcel Verweij, "Solidarity: A Moral Concept in Need of Clarification", *Public Health Ethics* 5.1 (2012) pp. 1-5; Leslie Bender, "From Gender Difference to Feminist Solidarity: Using Carol Gilligan and an Ethic of Care in Law", *Vermont Law Review* 15.1 (1990); Cressida J. Heyes, "Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender" *Signs* 28.4 (2003) pp. 1093-1120; Jill Steans, "Negotiating the politics of difference in the project of feminist solidarity", *Review of International Studies* 33.04 (2007) pp. 729-743.

[15] There is something to be said here about the parallel to a liturgical community, which through shared practice holds a space for a vision of the world which is in practice always yet to come.

Jews, in which Jews have been subjected to forced conversion or extermination in order to further the project of Christian universalism. Similar attitudes and tactics have also been deployed against indigenous populations and people on the disability spectrum. [16] More recently, the perception of anonymity as the default in digital space has been posited as a contributing factor in some of the more widely publicised campaigns of online harassment against minorities, such as Gamergate, in which women who comment on the prevalence of violent misogyny portrayed within video games are subjected to sustained barrages of violent and misogynistic threats broadcast across social media.[17] One persistent theme in this harassment is the claim that victims, by calling attention to the ways in which they differ from the anonymous norm, by speaking *as women*, have not only passively invited but actively sought the negative attention to which they have been subjected.

In this light, what is being enacted in digital utterances such as "Je suis Charlie", #ican'tbreathe, or #WeAreOrlando is, however strong the intention towards solidarity which prompts them on an individual level, also a process in which distress at the unreliability of the world is mitigated precisely by causing actual victims, and therefore actual victimisation, to disappear from view. The logic at work here appears, at first, as a twin to the logic of Hannah Arendt's critique of innocent Germans describing themselves as morally guilty after the Holocaust.[18] Just as moral culpability is diluted to the point of meaninglessness when it is distributed from individuals who have committed particular acts and spread across an entire society, so too harm is diluted when it is distributed from individuals who have suffered particular wrongs. If #icant'breathe but I'm still standing here talking to you, then, hey, maybe breathing isn't actually such a big deal after all.

This is the point at which the logic of distribution breaks down and becomes not particularly logical at all: unlike responsibility, which is linked to a particular act only at the moment of that act and thereafter exists only as an intellectual construction, *harm* begins in a physical act and, as we have learned from Elaine Scarry, is thereafter physically inseparable from the person who is harmed. [19] Responsibility may be diluted, because responsibility has no physical existence (although *giving* it a physical existence has long been a

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[16] ADD EXAMPLES TRC findings on residential schools
[17] BIG LONG FOOTNOTE HERE.
[18] "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship"
[19] CITE ELAINE SCARRY *The Body in Pain*

favoured sport of novelists); the only equivalent operation that might be performed on harm is to lessen our awareness of its link to a particular physical person, and lessen thereby the moral claim that any particular individual may make in light of the harm they have suffered.

When distributed responsibility meets distributed victimisation, the predictable result is an uncomfortable stasis: we're all somewhat culpable, we're all somewhat injured, and so the best thing we can do for ourselves is to quietly get on with our lives. Again, there are some who would argue that such a stasis is, if not an absolute ideal, then certainly a pragmatically acceptable basis for a society to function. However, the stasis is easily disrupted, and individual claims to actual victimisation are particularly threatening, to the point that when such claims appear, they are often treated as attacks not only on social cohesion as a whole—the fictional, anonymous digital 'we'—but also on every other individual in the collective, as it threatens the assumptions necessary to their understanding of the world as a place of security. This is typified by the protest movement which began in response to the 2012 killing of 17-year old Trayvon Martin by self-appointed neighbourhood watch coordinator George Zimmerman, #BlackLivesMatter, [20] which immediately inspired a counter-protest movement, #AllLivesMatter, which claims that focussing on the particular tendency for black lives to be regarded as at best disposable, and at worst threatening to social cohesion through their very existence, oppresses white people—by making race an issue, #BlackLivesMatter has dissented from, and thereby undermined the assumption of homogeneity that governs online communities, *as well as* the American national myth of the melting-pot.

Of course, movements towards social equality being characterised by those who largely benefit from inequality as "making trouble" is nothing new; we do not need a nuanced understanding of digital culture to discuss this phenomenon. But we do need to understand the particular ways in which digital culture *amplifies* this argument. The language of the collective, "us" versus "them", has always been a tool which enables attitudes that would not be tolerated in a polite society if they were expressed on an individual level. Because online interaction is stripped of many of the identity signifiers that inform judgement offline, the language of the collective has acquired a much stronger claim to neutrality than it

[20] See Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement"
http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/

holds when a speaker's national, ethnic, gendered, religious and economic particularity is evident.

Not only is the claim to neutrality in digital collectives not truly neutral, it is also sharply limited in its scope. In spite of the viral spread of the photograph of Aylan Kurdi washed up on a beach in Turkey in the summer of 2015, in spite of the multiple calls to political and humanitarian action to address the refugee crisis, nobody has said "We are all Aylan." Nobody has said "We are all trapped together in small rafts on a rough sea." Nobody who is not a refugee has said "*Our* children are drowning." Even the expansive, unstable identity culture of the internet has its limits. The digital "we" is not universal; it cannot stretch to include Syrian refugees.

Now, the obvious objection that someone is getting ready to raise is the two memes which arose in response to *je suis Charlie*: *je ne suis pas Charlie*, which was used to express discomfort precisely with the identity claim *je suis Charlie*, largely on the grounds of distaste for *Charlie Hebdo*'s style of satire,[21] or *je suis Ahmed*, which commemorated Ahmed Merabet, a Muslim police office who was killed by the gunmen as they entered the office of *Charlie Hebdo*, and which attempted to add nuance to the public discourse surrounding the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings which otherwise tended to present an undifferentiatedly Western, secular "us" whose value of free speech (with no regard given to effects of that speech upon its audience) must be defended against the racially and religiously particularised Muslim Other. And my response to that objection is that, in the first instance, what is being contested is not really the boundary of the collective, but its character: the utterance is "I am not Charlie", not "Charlie has nothing to do with me"; the assumption behind the utterance is that I am, in some tangible way, similar enough to Charlie that there is a need for the distinction to be pointed out—I am a participant in a "we" in which most others have declared themselves to be Charlie and I am dissenting from that particular declaration, in this particular instance, without thrusting either myself or Charlie outside of the "we". The second case, *je suis Ahmed*, may—possibly, within some particularly contrived argumentative limits—represent a genuine boundary negotiation, but it is still quite limited in scope: Ahmed Merabet, the son of Algerian immigrants, was born and raised in Paris, and died in the line of duty as an officer of the *police nationale*. He was a textbook 'good immigrant' (indeed, so good that he was not actually, properly speaking, an immigrant at

[21] See, e.g., http://www.theweek.co.uk/world-news/charlie-hebdo/62060/seven-reasons-why-people-are-saying-je-ne-suis-pas-charlie

all) which is to say that the traversal of the us-them boundary had already been accomplished, during his life, by his own efforts and those of his parents; the political function he filled in death was to demonstrate the permeability of that boundary to those who may have been otherwise prone to forget.

The conclusion we can draw from all of this is, I am afraid, rather disappointingly limited. The available evidence compels me to argue that the internet is, in Arendt's terminology, a tool, which aids in the accomplishment of its task without substantially altering the nature of the task itself—though the key word here is "substantially"; I am not saying that it changes nothing. [22] The internet has accelerated the rate at which action is reified and disseminated, but primarily among individuals who were already political actors. It has enabled the projection of action across a wider geographical range, and permitted negotiations between actors across traditional national and cultural boundaries, but the difference between the internet and previous communication technologies appears, in this respect, to be one of degree rather than kind. Anything the internet has done in this regard has also been done, albeit on a more limited scale, by some other medium—although we might fairly note that no previous medium has been quite so accessible in so many different ways all at once. We are, in short, making some adjustments to the scale of the world and the other actors with whom we negotiate our belonging within it, but this adjustment is mostly incremental. The major alteration that the internet brings to such negotiation is the anonymity of the medium (which is itself not really an innovation; the pamphleteers of previous centuries also had the option of anonymity). This alteration should be viewed with caution; it can actually stifle worldmaking potential, as it permits individuals to imagine themselves not as inhabiting a community of equals where everyone has the same capacity to act according to their diverse interests and desires, but as part of a collective, in which no negotiation is necessary or even possible, as the basic similarity among all actors means that the needs and desires of one are interchangeable with the needs and desires of all.

Arendt spent much of her own writing career concerned with "worldlessness", by which she meant the loss of a common space; a retreat from the negotiations required by public life, in favour of a primary existence within the familial or even individual sphere. The rise of neoliberal and radical libertarian politics in the decades since

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[22] Arendt draws a distinction between tools and machines in *HC* 146ff.

her death shows that this concern remains current. There is no technological redemption in the offing. The tools that we have at hand will only amplify, and perhaps accelerate, the process of world-making or world-disintegration for which we, ourselves, retain responsibility.