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The Power of New Media Networks

by

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Introduction ¹

In this chapter I reflect on some of the implications of the new media that are associated with substantial changes in the social, political and economic power relationships embedded in social networks. There are many claims about the multiple ways in which the intensification of such relationships can become empowering for citizens. References in the literature to empowerment generally imply that relationships facilitated by new media can equip citizens with the knowledge they need to make choices about how they want to live their lives, and more specifically, to participate more effectively in democratic processes.² It is often assumed that this holds even for the most culturally, politically or economically marginalised people. I argue here that policy makers, business leaders and citizens must become more aware of the many different ways that relationships mediated by the new media may be altered, not always for the better. When it is simply assumed that these technologies are always a ‘good’ thing, there is little that can be done to use new media in ways that may help to avert social exclusion when this is already a feature of people’s lives. One means of encouraging reflection on the full range of implications of new media is by focusing on citizen’s rights and entitlements in an intensely mediated world.

Despite the fact that for those who do have access to new media, these technologies are becoming relatively routine ‘everyday technologies’,³ the availability of email, video, instant messaging, blogs, wikis, personal websites, listservs, and social networking websites such as Facebook and MySpace, continues to give rise to debate about how their use by citizens is influencing on and offline practices. It is known, for example, that users of mobile phones, instant messaging, and social networking websites in the United States communicate primarily with small groups of well-known friends and family (Walther 1996, 2006). While empirically grounded research

¹ A shorter version of this chapter was presented 23 October 2001 as the First Dixons Public Lecture, ‘New Media and the Power of Networks’, London School of Economics and Political Science.

² The literature in question is often produced by organisations concerned with development, gender equity, education, etc. It is too voluminous to cite here.

³ Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006: 2) define new media as ‘information and communication technologies and their associated social contexts, ... as infrastructures with three components’ (artefacts, activities and practices, and social arrangements).

is providing some understanding of the dynamics of mediated relationship of this kind, we do not have sufficient insight to assume, as some observers do, that these relationships are necessarily empowering. This is especially so in places where little or no empirical research has been conducted. What we do know is that, as Silverstone argues, ‘..the world of globally mediated communication offers and to a degree defines the terms of our participation with the other’ (Silverstone 2007: 27). It therefore matters what is said and how what is said is interpreted and understood. This means that it also matters whether citizens are able to develop critical evaluative skills to assess how to value their communicative relationships and the information that they both produce and consume. The capabilities or critical evaluative skills in question are often labelled media literacies. Research has shown that the capabilities for making sense of various types of online spaces are unevenly spread across populations even in the wealthy countries (Berker et al. 2005).⁴ Information or media literacies are difficult to define, but generally are said to involve the following.

‘...at a minimum these skills include the abilities to access, navigate, critique and create the content and services available via information and communication technologies’ (Livingstone and Van Couvering 2008).

Participation in education, the workplace and society depends increasingly on these kinds of skills (Livingstone 2004; Livingstone et al. 2007). This means it is very important to give consideration to the implications of a growing dependency on new media in terms of citizen’s rights and entitlements.

It is also important to focus on both the potentially enabling power of new media which support social networks and on the circumstances in which a growing dependency on these networks may be disabling or disempowering. Such networks become the mediators of our responses to human and natural disasters wherever they occur (Chouliaraki 2006). It can be very difficult to make sense of this mediated environment, not only because of the quantity of network relationships, but also because of the absence of clarity as to the provenance of information. In this environment the empowering or disempowering character of new media is ambiguous at best.

⁴ And see for the UK, Ofcom (2006).

I indicated almost a decade ago in an assessment of the potential of new information and communication technologies (ICTs), that issues relating to capabilities would be very important even as efforts were being made to reduce disparities in access to them.

‘In some parts of the world ICTs are contributing to revolutionary changes in business and everyday life. Other parts of the world, however, have hardly been touched by these technologies. There is little question that their social and economic potential is enormous, but so too are the risks that those without the *capabilities* to design, produce and use the new products and service applications may be disadvantaged or excluded from participating actively in their local communities ...’ (emphasis added) (Mansell and Wehn 1998: 266).⁵

The potential for exclusion as a result of difficulties in acquiring certain capabilities, notwithstanding the spread of access to new media (including the evermore ubiquitous content available via mobile phones) is just as great almost a decade after this observation was made. More affordable access to new media has been achieved in some parts of the world, but the greater reach of global networks and new media applications has been accompanied by a situation in which ‘...they have provided few or no resources to understand and respond to ...difference, nor do they necessarily represent it adequately. And the consequences of that representation have tended to produce either worldly indifference or hostility, both strategies for denial’ (Silverstone 2007: 28). This suggests that the issue of media literacy and the acquisition of relevant capabilities must be taken very seriously if informed public discussion is to be encouraged. Is it possible to imagine how the contradictory power of new media can be employed in a manner that is enabling for most citizens – and therefore for society as a whole? It is feasible to do so but changes of this kind require a consideration of the wider framework of human rights, entitlements and the dynamics of social development (Mansell 2006).

The remainder of this chapter is structured around four questions. First, why should we be concerned about the new media and the power of the networks of relationships that they sustain? Second, is there a case for a change in new media policy to ensure

⁵ Revolutionary refers here to the potentially disruptive nature of the technology following Freeman (2007), not necessarily to the magnitude of change in society.

that citizens have the right to acquire certain kinds of capabilities? Third, why can we not leave it to teachers to address the ways in which these capabilities should be acquired? And, fourth, what grounds are there for optimism that the emphasis of policy will shift in the direction I advocate in this chapter?

New Media and the Power of Networks

Why should we be concerned about new media and the power of the networked relationships they facilitate? Silverstone (1999) suggests that we need to be concerned because of the way the media contribute to the exercise of power in late-modern society. The focus of most policy with respect to new media is on markets and regulation, on access to technology, and on the costs of reducing social exclusion. However, as indicated above, it is increasingly clear that people need to acquire certain new media literacies if they are to be able to make choices in an intensely mediated world. Such literacies go far beyond being able to read or understand the content of new media. If people are to have the freedom to achieve the livelihoods that they want, they must be able to acquire the necessary literacies. Without the ability to achieve these literacies, problems of alienation, poverty, or ignorance, and terrorism are likely to worsen and the empowering potential of new media will be substantially reduced.

For some, the new media are encountered in situations where they are able to acquire the capabilities to use the new applications in ways that strengthen their chances of making choices about how to live their lives. They do so, for example, by accessing or sharing information about treatments for illness, exploring websites that enable learning and skill development, or simply by searching for like-minded people with whom they can establish online relationships. For those who are unable to do so, however, it can be argued that their human rights are being infringed. There are grounds therefore for policy action to ensure that new media spaces are available to enable citizens to acquire the capabilities that will assist them in managing their lives.

The capabilities that are at stake here are not simply those necessary for acquiring skills to surf the Internet, or the ability to use the web, discussion lists, or email. Nor is this matter concerned solely with access to new electronic government or

commerce services. The capabilities that are at stake are those associated with the acquired cognitive abilities to discriminate between alternative choices. As Sen (1999) suggests, these capabilities are the foundation of freedoms that allow an individuals' needs to be met; needs such as remaining healthy and interacting with others in ways that are valued.

If new media electronic spaces can be developed in ways that will augment these kinds of capabilities, then arguably there is a public obligation to do so. Much has been written about the need to reduce or eliminate so-called 'digital divides', an issue that is too often characterised by the documentation of the uneven diffusion or affordability of telephones, computers, or Internet access (Norris 2001; Warschauer 2003). In this chapter I argue that a radical step is needed to ensure that the spread of new media does not simply exacerbate social and economic disparities. New media policy must be developed in such a way as to give a much higher priority to the creation of electronic spaces to facilitate the acquisition of capabilities in Sen's meaning of the term.

Castells (2001: 158) suggests that 'rather than strengthening democracy by fostering the knowledge and participation of citizens, use of the Internet tends to deepen the crisis of political legitimacy by providing a broader launching platform for the politics of scandal'. New media are becoming 'the new, and most effective, frontier for the exercise of power on the world stage' (Castells 2001: 161). In this context, media literacies are essential if people are to achieve what they value through their capacity for critical evaluation. In the context of older media, similar issues have been raised. Williams (1974) linked the structure and content of older media to questions about equity and the organisation of society. However, Thompson's (1995) analysis of the social organisation of the media suggests that there has been a profound neglect of how specific forms of media – including the new media spaces – influence the way people choose to live their lives. Much discussion about new media is not about how or even whether they might augment people's abilities to change their lives. There is a growing body of research on strategic uses of new media by activists and civil society groups (Rogers 2004; Axford and Huggins 2001; and Chadwick 2006), but it offers little insight into the cognitive capabilities for critical evaluation that are the concern of this chapter (see, for example, Latham and Sassen 2005; McCaughey and Ayers

2003; Olesen 2005 and Van de Donk et al. 2004). Instead, much of this work is completely divorced from a consideration of the conditions of citizens' everyday lives or of their freedom (knowledge and other resources) to create positive changes in their lives (Golding and Murdock 2001).

Thompson (1995) writes about the 'double bind of mediated dependency'. By this he seems to mean that just when the process of identity formation is being potentially enriched by new media's symbolic content and by the multiple identities people are able to adopt, citizens are becoming more dependent on new media networks that seem to be largely beyond their control. The majority of citizens have no control over what new media systems are developed, how they are structured, or whether they are consistent with enabling people to acquire capabilities for living their lives more effectively. He suggests, for example, as do Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992), that the kinds of mediated experiences associated with new media tend to disempower local forms of political organisation, rendering traditional fora for democratic dialogue very difficult to sustain. Thompson (1995: 10) concludes that a new form of 'publicness' is needed. He does not indicate, however, just where the responsibility for achieving this might lie.

Like Habermas's (1989) advocacy of the need to create arenas for public discourse and Thompson's (1995: 255) appeal to strengthen 'deliberative democracy' (see also Held 1987), most theoretical treatments of this issue say little about what might be done. There are, of course, debates about the need for regulation to achieve a reduction in the concentration of the media industries and many discussions about new media regulation or self-regulation as practiced by organisations such as the Internet Watch Foundation in the United Kingdom or the Free Press in the United States.⁶ However, discussions within the context of regulation often appear to have little bearing on questions of democracy and whether or not new media can contribute to the empowerment of citizens.

It is necessary to consider questions about new media policy and democracy alongside problems created by inequitable development. Melody (2007) argues that hardware,

software, and human capital are becoming the replacements for capital and raw materials as well as traditionally skilled workers (see also Romer 1995). Economic growth depends increasingly on being able to reap the benefits of organising one's life within densely interconnected networks (Mansell et al. 2007). However, the main focus of discussions about emerging knowledge societies is usually on issues of economic growth and the diffusion of technology (Quah 2001). Rarely is attention given to matters of equity, human rights or social development. Where issues concerning capabilities are addressed, the focus is often mainly on technological capabilities for designing networks and services or on institutional capabilities for making policy, regulating and governing in areas such as intellectual property protection, electronic commerce or broadcasting (Mansell 2002). A consideration of the capabilities that may be understood as citizens' entitlements in the new media context calls for a different starting point.

Acquiring New Media Capabilities

What is the case for changing new media policy to encourage new media capabilities? Sen (1999: 75) offers a helpful way of thinking about issues of rights and entitlements that can be applied with very practical results in the new media field. He calls for an examination of certain capabilities as a basic human right. In building his idea of capabilities, he is concerned about 'functionings' understood as what 'a person may value doing or being'. Functionings may be very basic like being free from hunger or illness. They can also be complex such as 'being able to take part in the life of the community and having self-respect' (Sen 1999: 75). Capabilities are therefore the combinations of functionings that citizens are able to achieve for themselves.

In applying his argument in the context of new media, it is essential to ask what an individual's 'realised functionings' might be or, in other words, 'what can a person do'? It is necessary to consider what capability set is available to each individual. There also must be some means to evaluate and decide upon the capability set that a person is entitled to. As Sen (1999: 78-79) puts it, this evaluation process is 'a "social

⁶ See <http://www.iwf.org.uk/> and <http://www.freepress.net> accessed 30 March 2008.

choice” exercise, and it requires public discussion and a democratic understanding and acceptance’.

The social choice is not only concerned with capabilities for encouraging social or human capital development for effective participation in the economy. As Sen points out, these capabilities tend to emphasise the agency of human beings in augmenting the production of goods and services and they are mainly concerned with the economic problem of growth in the economy, that is, with productivity or efficiency. While this dimension is important, Sen’s (1999: 293) approach emphasises ‘the substantive freedom – of people to lead the lives they have reason to value and to enhance the real choices they have’; in other words, the freedom to critically assess the information available to them in both their offline and online everyday lives.

His argument begins with a concern for human well-being and from a view that choice and the freedom to act are essential. Sen explicitly rejects the neo-classical proposition that human welfare can best be served by market exchange or that such exchange produces a measure of well-being.⁷ This framework offers the foundation for a needs-based approach to the evaluation of appropriate new media entitlements. Garnham (1999) applied this approach to issues of telecommunication access, emphasising that entitlements are unrelated to merit or absolute wealth. The metric for deciding who is entitled to what is not money or pleasure (utility), but, instead, a judgement about whether citizens should be entitled to develop a capability set that will enable them to achieve what they value.

For example, following Sen, those who lack food, safety, love or esteem are likely to need food more than other things, but when their physiological needs are relatively satisfied, another set of needs, for instance, for stability, security, protection, freedom from fear, anxiety or chaos, may be highly valued. The emphasis on the individual’s capacity for well-being downplays considerations about the self in relation to others, but this framework is useful in drawing attention to a capability set that involves cognitive capacities and learning. As we move towards a more intensely mediated

⁷ It is acknowledged that there may be concerns about the standpoint from which well-being is assessed, see White and Pettit (2006).

society, arguably it is the cognitive capacity for critical evaluation of encounters within new media spaces that becomes increasingly essential for well-being.

Predictions that the new media will offer new capacities for improving social connectivity which, in turn, will lead to profound social changes are probably correct, notwithstanding the fact that they suffer from hyperbole. However, such predictions often overlook the fact that the offline world of things and relationships still matters (Orgad 2007). Nevertheless, in the light of the global reach of new media networks, the potential is there for providing open spaces for learning in ways that could enable critical reflection on a host of pressing issues that affect citizens everywhere.

In the absence of capabilities for critical reflection it is likely to be difficult, if not impossible, for the majority of people to take advantage of the potential offered by new media in terms of augmenting their freedoms in Sen's terms. Silverstone argues that there is a need for all contributors to these spaces to be accountable. This means that contributors to new media spaces must have the right to acquire the capabilities that will enable them to be accountable both to themselves and others.

‘Accountability must be systemic, and as such dependent on the work of audiences and media users as participants, who are media literate enough to make their own judgements on what is being presented to them or in what they are participating. Our trust therefore must be conditional, critical. Our participation must be knowing participation: proper distance must be informed by proper scepticism. Trust can neither be blind nor passive. The media are both institutions and discourses. Both need to be trustworthy’ (Silverstone 2007: 127).

The availability of software and hardware-based technical tools (such as Privacy Enhancing Technologies and encryption) intended to support trusted mediated relationships has given rise to the hope that citizens' privacy can be protected and that they will be able to regard their mediated environments as being trustworthy (Borking and Raab 2001; Collins and Mansell 2005). As new media applications have become more pervasive, there are similar aspirations for the tools for managing and organising information and online modes of communication. The personalisation of digital services using 'intelligent' search engines that learn individual preferences and content rating systems, is the most obvious example. However, none of these

technical solutions detracts from the need for citizens to acquire capabilities for making judgements about whom and what to trust or to value. Therefore, it does seem appropriate that the policy agenda for new media should focus on the right of citizens to acquire capabilities to enhance their ‘functioning’ with respect to their participation in society.

Sen (1999) observes that modern communication networks require basic education and training although he does not outline specifically what this should entail. Social justice arguably requires that, if they choose to do so, citizens can take part in decisions that affect their lives. Sen argues that the capabilities of reading and writing are important, as are being well informed and able to participate freely in society. Arguably these become more complicated in new media spaces as demonstrated by those who, for example, have researched the use of language in computer-mediated discourse (Herring 2004). Increasing reliance on new media spaces means that – as Silverstone (2007: 147) puts it, ‘... access to, and participation in, a global system of mediated communication is a substantive good and a precondition for full membership of society, and ... the distribution of such a right must be fair and just’.⁸ The difficulty is that we do not have a sufficiently detailed consideration of what measures would encourage the broadest development of capabilities for informed choice making. Without detailed consideration of this, it is difficult to imagine what policy action would be feasible or, indeed, realistic.

Acquiring a New Capability Set

Why can we not leave it to teachers to address the ways in which these capabilities should be acquired? Moving beyond exhortations that more new media spaces should be established to encourage the capabilities for critical reasoning strongly suggests the need to strengthen the capabilities of all citizens to participate in mediated environments in ways that they choose (Couldry 2007). This means that there is a need to re-imagine the roles that new media can play in society and the associated cognitive capabilities that are needed. This is not an issue that can be left to solely to those concerned with pedagogical development for ICT skills in educational settings.

Formal education is very rarely organised to encourage a diverse dialogue about entitlements and social or political purposes. A focus on human rights and entitlements in the new media age raises the question of whether the new media spaces that are available are sufficiently oriented towards this kind of learning.

The problem is not simply one of access and affordability. At present, new media spaces arguably are overwhelmingly oriented away from fulfilling their potential in this way. An Internet search quickly yields large numbers of information intermediaries on the World Wide Web. Industry sectors from publishing to automobiles, and from insurance to banking are populated by dozens of web sites, many claiming to offer support for commercial transactions. However, the majority of these sites are walled or closed sites for members only. Even when they are open, they are not always what they seem. Claims are made about offering business support services like logistics or about providing help for producers to meet industry standards for quality or environmental protection and to verify the identities of firms, but few sites that make such claims deliver on them without requesting registration and sometimes payment. The notion of the trusted intermediary in the commercial world of new media is valid in practice only for a minority of employees of firms who are members of relatively closed clubs (Humphrey et al. 2004).

The commercialisation of new media spaces is creating pressures to close up the public online spaces so that they are more trustworthy for commercial purposes and to mitigate security threats (Lessig 1999; Mansell and Collins 2005). As this pressure increases it is likely that the open spaces for learning the capabilities that will facilitate critical reflection will recede or become closed to some segments of the potential population (as a result of security measures). Hence, if new media literacies or capabilities are to be fostered there needs to be a consideration, not only of the architectures and platforms (the artefacts), but also of the activities, practices and social arrangements that are encouraged by new media intermediaries. For instance, there is a need for empirical analysis of whether new media developments are encouraging open spaces that support citizens in acquiring the capability set involved in discriminating between alternative choices with respect to information and with

⁸ This issue should not be confused with questions concerning codes of practice to foster civility in the

respect to mediated communicative relationships. From the health sector to the education sector, and on issues of environmental protection or globalisation and, indeed, anti-globalisation, there are huge numbers of web sites. Those sites that are embedded in established institutions – governments, education establishments, or development organisations - provide people with highly structured, authoritative information, at least in terms of the institutional creators' view. Some support interactivity, but few allow citizens to contribute their own information, or indeed, to acquire the capability of deciding how that information should be valued or acted upon.

Apart from institutional sites, there are growing numbers of individual home pages, blogs, and text and video spaces such as MySpace. Many of the thousands of English language blogs on political issues contain citizens' views, albeit in a highly unstructured format. Organisations representing various segments of civil society have set up blogs such as MySociety.org and, at the time of writing, the United Kingdom government was assessing how to take advantage of 'the phenomenon of internet advice sharing sites' so as to '.. empower people with information that could help improve their lives'.⁹ The status of these sites as trusted intermediaries is established by these organisations. Although 'sharing' is assumed, most sites mainly offer information *to* citizens, only rarely providing the means for acquiring the capabilities to critically assess information that is provided.

What new media intermediaries generally do is to keep track of information the online visitor has viewed or they may enhance information with annotations and personalisation features. Putting an intermediary between the originator of the information and the online visitor can make Internet surfing more efficient. However, these developments do not address the issue of capabilities in Sen's meaning of the term. Nor do they suggest the extent to which progress is being made on the wider issue of human rights and entitlements to acquire these capabilities.

One means of beginning to address this issue may be the development and free availability of toolkits for producing and sharing information in open new media

new media blogging environment, see Freedland (2007).

spaces. There are examples of this type of website. For instance, the Internet Scout project supported by the National Science Foundation and the Mellon Foundation in the United States, has developed a toolkit that simplifies the technical hurdles involved in creating and sharing web based information and discussions. The availability of blogging software has opened up new opportunities, but there is little evidence about which voices are represented or about which views are being taken into account by those in the position to do so.¹⁰

In addition, even when citizens are given the tools to make contributions to public discussion or to share information, many of these sites are inadequately funded (Latham and Sassen 2005). The contributors struggle to maintain their work and to manage their new media spaces. Most publicly sponsored sites and most sites of civil society organisations are designed mainly to be authoritative information providers in a familiar ‘broadcast’ or ‘advertising’ mode. Even when account is taken of the unstructured blogs, it is not clear that they are encouraging the majority of citizens to acquire new media literacies (Cammaerts and Carpentier 2006; Hemer and Tufte 2005).

Any assessment of the capabilities for critical assessment of new media environments also needs to take into account the unequal power and contested relationships in the offline world. These relationships constrain what views can be published in the online world. This is so notwithstanding the potential for anonymity and claims about the empowering and libertarian features of new media. If, for example, the constraints confronting reporters in countries where governments do not encourage press freedom are considered, it is clear that even where improved access to new media is possible and media producers have the necessary capabilities for critical reflection, the offline world constraints can be substantial.

Regardless of their capacities for critical reflection, what journalists choose to report can be constrained in many different ways. For example, Philip Ocheing, a reporter for *The Nation* in Kenya, comments in an interview with a researcher that, ‘we still have a lot of problems with NGOs working in the media sector. I don’t agree with

⁹ See Cabinet Office (2007).

their vision of the world, especially with that of a free flow of information.... Free flows of ideas are only moving in one direction, all the ideas are coming from the West. The West is not paying attention to ours. If I have any idea about democracy, it won't reach you in London'.¹¹ The availability of new media and the appropriate skills for critical assessment can do little in themselves to counter this perception.

The realities of political contexts and power relations informing what can be voiced are visible again in a comment by Jusef Gabobe, Editor of the *Somaliland Times* and *Hatuuf*, to the effect that 'we are hostages of peace'. Jailed and subsequently released, his comment was offered in the light of the fact that he and others had fought for peace. To maintain it, he argued that sometimes journalists would have to censor themselves so as not inflame potential tensions. This would apply to online new media spaces as well as to the hardcopy of the newspaper, highlighting again that critical reflection, whether on or offline, needs to be politically contextualised. The voice of Lucy Orieng, Managing Editor of *The Nation* in Kenya, points to politics and power relations more directly. 'There is nothing more political than women rights. Talking about women rights in Kenya is talking about power. But when you raise issues like that, people try to silence you' – this is likely to be so regardless of where such issues are raised.

Offline power relations have an economic dimension as well that can limit which voices will be heard regardless of whether older or newer media are used. Drake Ssekeba, an experienced Ugandan journalist, observes that 'we journalists come to serve people. We don't serve ourselves. When politicians come to government, they're actually pretending that they are serving you but actually they are serving their own interests. When I come to write a story, I don't expect a reward from the public. I just expect my employer to give me a salary at the end of the month or week'. Without a means of obtaining an income, critical evaluation of what should be reported in the online world is no less difficult than it is in the case of the older media.

¹⁰ See <http://scout.cs.wisc.edu/> accessed 30 March 2008.

¹¹ Journalists in this section were interviewed in 2006 with by Iginio Gagliardone, then employed by UNESCO, and currently a doctoral student in the Media and Communications Department, London School of Economics. The author of this paper is grateful for permission to use these quotations.

Notwithstanding these reflections by several media practitioners, the under-resourcing of efforts to develop the capabilities for critical evaluation still needs to be addressed. Finding better ways to encourage such developments through sustainable funding mechanisms is one way of enabling improved conditions for learning and for more people to participate in choices about their lives. Policy measures encouraging sensitivity to offline power relations and to the need to learn the skills of critical reflection could be facilitated by a needs-based approach to new media policy; a policy that takes citizens' entitlements and human rights into account.

Potential for Radical Change

Are there any grounds for optimism about a radical change in new media policy? The relationship between technical change and social development is a key theme in social science inquiry historically. In the 1930s Lewis Mumford (1934: 6) wrote, for instance, that 'technics and civilisation as a whole are the result of human choices and aptitudes and strivings, deliberate as well as unconscious'. A needs-based approach was called for but little progress was made. Arguably, it will be more difficult to achieve now that the scale of the challenge is global and it is complicated by a world fragmented by multiple networks.

Nevertheless, since the new media have profound implications for society, the implications of the 'new' media for the distribution of knowledge and for democracy need to be considered (Innis 1951). While today's new media offer spaces for new kinds of mediated dialogues, it is becoming clear that the mediation of the conflicts and tensions experienced by others is not experienced in the same ways as in the past and can lead to misperceptions of many different kinds (Chouliarki 2006; Cohen 2001; Silverstone 2007). It is also clear that online spaces will not foster dialogue aimed at building trust and understanding if citizens have limited capabilities for contributing, for discerning the provenance of information, or for deciding how to value the new media's content or those they meet online.

As indicated above, there are economic incentives as well as growing concerns about human and information security that are favouring closed new media spaces, 'broadcast' modes of communication are still common, and advertising is becoming

interwoven with non-commercial information provision. All these developments work against the potential for learning and the acquisition of the capability set discussed in this chapter. Nevertheless, the networked world is malleable and greater effort could be given to developing policies that will encourage the acquisition of these new media capabilities. If this should happen, there is a chance that as, Lévy (1997: xxi) observes, the new media could play an important role in enabling citizens to acquire the essential capabilities to which they are arguably entitled. The new media might then become instrumental in reshaping ‘the structure of the social bond in the direction of a greater sense of community and help us resolve the problems currently facing humanity’. To achieve this there will be a need to divert existing public support for new media developments into establishing open new media forums for debate and for learning. These issues are being addressed to some extent by those who are critical of media and communication researchers’ efforts to tackle these issues. McChesney (2007) argues for example, for greater attention to media criticism by scholars. My argument is intended to go beyond the realm of scholarship to consider how more concrete efforts might be made to enhance capabilities for critical reflection by all those who encounter our mediated environment.

It might be argued that policy intervention of this kind is inconsistent with a libertarian stance towards new media developments. Castells (2001: 183) argues that ‘there is an unsettling combination in the Internet world: a pervasive libertarian ideology with an increasingly controlling practice’. Any policy intervention is often interpreted as being contrary to the libertarian ethos and as a controlling effort to shape nascent markets. However, diverting a proportion of the spending that is allocated to promoting access to the new technologies, to underwriting the costs of regulating the media conglomerates, and to developing means of digital rights management, towards support for new media spaces that foster capabilities consistent with citizens’ entitlements is not likely to jeopardise spending in other areas to support innovation. Instead, it may well stimulate a growing interest in new media dialogues that are valued by broader segments of the global population, at least by those for whom access is affordable.

It may also be argued that a policy enabling more citizens to acquire capabilities for discriminating between alternative information and communicative relationships

could have unintended consequences. It might, for instance, heighten the risk that new forums for deliberative debate, with potentially global participation, will become unstable, thereby weakening the capacities for governance on a global scale.

However, the risk associated with inaction is arguably greater. Deepening inequalities in new media literacies are likely to compound the complexities of governing and weaken capacities for addressing problems arising as a result of inequality in many other spheres of life. The potential of the new media to be used in ways that help to address social problems associated with marginalisation and poverty would then be substantially reduced.

Conclusion

This application of Sen's capability set approach to questions about appropriate policy interventions with respect to new media suggests that new media policy centred around legal issues and regulation on the supply side of the industry needs to be complemented by policies that address the capabilities or new media literacies that all citizens should be entitled to acquire. The key issue is the freedoms that people should have in the new media age. In the formal education arena, new media skill development tends to focus on information technology-related skills, and most training initiatives aim to enable people to be more productive in the workplace. Most initiatives do not entail a needs-based assessment with respect to the functionings of citizens in society more generally. In addition, they are often driven by what the technology has the potential to do, rather than by what citizens may need to do with it. Public investment in new media intermediaries charged with developing toolkits and resources for learning the skill of critical reflection would go some way towards enabling citizens to acquire capabilities to become informed participants in democratic debate, whether on or offline.

Most importantly, there is a need for an evaluation of the capability set that citizens should be entitled to acquire. This evaluation should not be limited to the main capabilities associated with human capital development for the workplace. The commercial sector is unlikely to have an incentive to encourage the development of the kinds of tools and new media spaces that are needed to foster well-being (unless revenues can be generated). It therefore must fall to the public sector and to civil society organisations to create and mobilise these kinds of spaces. There is a need for

debate about what capabilities specifically are required. All those involved in teaching and learning will be aware of how difficult it is to inculcate capacities for critical reflection in the offline spaces of learning as the 'student as consumer' culture becomes more entrenched; the challenge of doing so for citizens and new media spaces is arguably even greater. Evaluation is necessary, not with a view to reducing the conventional understanding of the 'digital divide' in terms of access and technical skills, but to provide the foundation for meeting the citizen's entitlement to become an informed participant in society.

As Silverstone (2007: 181) argues, 'media literacy is, or should be, a skill and capability of all those who participate in the mediapolis'.¹² He insists that '...media literacy is a matter for individual competence and that it will only be once it becomes so that it will emerge as a matter of societal capacity' (Silverstone 2007: 182). This applies as much to citizens who contribute to new media spaces as it does to those who consider themselves to be members of the journalism profession. With respect to the latter, '...media literacy at this level, that is among journalists and their editors, ... is a matter of informed and reflexive understanding of the nature of mediation as a practice and of the mediapolis as a social, cultural and political environment, in which their activities have significant moral consequences' (Silverstone 2007: 183). In this paper, I have suggested that citizen's must be entitled to the extent they chose to do so, to acquire capabilities for reflexive understanding too.

Following this line of argument, it is clear that claims about the potential of new media spaces to empower citizens need to be critically assessed in the light of whether measures are being taken to augment their capabilities for critical reflection. New media technologies are Janus-faced in the sense that they may be empowering but they may also be disempowering. The implications of new media depend partly on the capability set that citizens can acquire for participating in mediated societies and partly on the offline power relationships within which they are embedded. If media literacies are being encouraged that are consistent with capabilities for critical reflection then there is the potential for those who both produce and consume media

¹² Mediapolis is defined as 'the mediated public space where contemporary political life increasingly finds a place, both at national and global levels, and where the materiality of the world is constructed through (principally) electronically communicated public speech and action' (Silverstone 2007: 31).

to affect their circumstances through deliberation and action that may be empowering. If they are not able to do so, then the new media will be allied with the compounding of disparities in power relationships in social networks both off and online.

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