Democracy in the Age of Google, Facebook and WikiLeaks*

John Keane

* Public lecture delivered in the Council Of Europe Democracy Debate Series, Strasbourg, Tuesday July 5th, 2011.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In the beginning there was a worldwide satellite television broadcast, live, featuring Maria Callas, Pablo Picasso and the Beatles. Then came fax machines, photocopiers, video recorders and personal computers. Now there is cloud computing, electronic books, scanners, interactive video technology, tweets and smart phones converted into satellite navigators and musical instruments. It is unclear even to the innovators what comes next but these and other media inventions, commercially available only during recent decades, have persuaded more than a few people that we are living in a revolutionary age of communicative abundance.

In the spirit of the revolution, as in every previous revolution in the prevailing mode of communication, fascination mixed with excitement is fuelling bold talk of the transcendence of television, the disappearance of printed newspapers, the decline of the book, even the end of literacy as we have known it. There is widespread recognition that time is up for spectrum scarcity, mass broadcasting and predictable prime-time national audiences. Symbolised by the Internet, the age of communicative abundance is a new world system of overlapping and interlinked media devices that for the first time in human history, thanks to built-in cheap microprocessors, integrate texts, sounds and images in compact and reproducible form, so enabling communication to take place through multiple user points, in chosen time, either real or delayed, within modularised and ultimately global networks that are affordable and accessible to more than a billion people scattered across the globe. In consequence, in countries such as India, the USA, South Korea and the Council of Europe member states, many people routinely sense sideways motion and forward movement in the way they communicate, even in the little things of life.

Gone are the days when children played with makeshift telephones made from jam tins connected by string, now on display in the Museum für Kommunikation Berlin; or (I recall) the evenings when they were compulsorily flung into the bath and scrubbed behind the ears, sat down in their dressing gowns and told to listen in silence to the radio. In the heartlands of the revolution, people no longer own telephone directories, or memorise telephone numbers by heart. Most people have had no direct experience of the nervous excitement triggered by making a pre-booked long-distance
call. Everybody chuckles when mention is made of the wireless. Typewriters belong in curiosity shops. Pagers have almost been forgotten. Even the couch potato seems to be a figure from the distant past. Few people think twice about the transformation of words such as text, skype and google into a verb. Writing and receiving hand-written letters and postcards have become a rare, nostalgic pleasure. Meanwhile, in contexts as different as Seoul, London and Mumbai, many office workers prefer to spend their lunch hours snaffling a snack while checking their e-mail or browsing the Web rather than taking a physical break from their desk; family members say that watching television in the company of others, except for sport and live reality shows, is now no match for the Internet’s magnetic pull; and the younger generation, determined to prove the point with an iPod plugged into one ear, spends many hours each day and night online, often connecting through mobile applications with others, elsewhere in the virtual world.

Think of what is happening to news: savvy young people in countries such as South Korea and Japan are no longer wedded to traditional news outlets; they do not listen to radio bulletins, or watch current affairs or news on television. Digital natives, as they are sometimes known, are doing things differently; refusing the old habit of mining the morning newspaper for their up-to-date information, as four out of every five American citizens once did (in the early 1960s), Internet portals have become their favoured destination for news. It is not that they are uninterested in news; it is rather that they want lots of it, news on demand, in instant form and delivered in new ways, not merely in the mornings but throughout the day, and night. Not surprisingly, plenty of observers, even from within the newspaper industry itself, have warned of the coming disappearance of newspapers. The claims are sometimes deliberately outlandish, designed to shock, for instance through predictions that on current trends newspapers in countries such as the United States will no longer be printed after 2040.

As in every previous communication revolution - think of the upheavals triggered by the introduction of the printing press, telegraph, radio and television - the age of communicative abundance is an age of uncertainty; it breeds exaggerations, false hopes, illusions. But there can be no doubt, when judged in terms of speed and scope, ease of reproduction and complexity, the new galaxy of communicative abundance has no historical precedent. Time-space compression has become a reality. Cheap and
reliable cross-border communication is the norm for growing numbers of people and organisations. The tyranny of distance and slow-time connections is abolished. In the most media-saturated societies, people usually take instant communications for granted; their habits of heart are exposed by the curse uttered when they lose or misplace their mobile phones, or when their Internet connections are down. They feel lost.

The novelty of all of this should be striking. When four decades ago Diane Keaton told her workaholic husband in Woody Allen’s *Play it Again, Sam* (1973) that he should give his office the number of the pay phone they were passing in case they needed him, it was a big joke. But farce four decades ago soon became reality. Growing numbers of people are now familiar with real-time communication; their waking lives resemble non-stop acts of mediated quick-time communication with others.

The grip of mediated communication is strongly evident in the United States, the most media-saturated of the old democracies. There it forms the second largest category of action after paid work; it is certainly the predominant household activity. Communication preferences are age- and gender- and income-dependent, and distributed quite unevenly, as suggested by figures (from January 2005 to September 2010) for SMS usage (women talk and text more than men do; and 13-17 year olds do so the most, etc.) Contrary to earlier predictions, the new digital media in that country show no signs of cannibalising old media, such as television and radio and books. The overall quantity of mediated communication grows, along with ever more complex and ‘hybrid’ patterns of usage. America’s love affair with televisions continues unabashed, but in altered, more multi-media form. The average number of televisions per US household is 2.5; nearly a third of households have 4 or more TVs. Each week, Americans watch roughly 35 hours of TV and 2 hours of time-shifted TV via DVR. But in the last quarter of 2009, simultaneous use of the Internet while watching TV reached 3 and a half hours a month, up 35% from the previous year; nearly 60% of Americans now use the Internet while watching TV. Internet video watching is rising fast; and so is the preference for watching videos on smart phones.
Such trends towards saturation multi-media usage, or communicative abundance as I am calling it, are by no means restricted to the United States. The Asia and Pacific region is arguably the laboratory of future patterns. Japan, whose citizens on average watch TV 4 hours a day, is the country with the most avid bloggers globally, posting more than one million blogs per month. Each of its well-entrenched social networking sites and game portals – Mixi, Gree and Mobage-town – has over 20 million registered users. Everywhere in the region, the take-up rate of new media is striking. Micro-blogging (Twitter use in India, for instance) and social networking is all the rage. Australians spend more time on social media sites (nearly 7 hours per month) than any other country in the world. Every month in South Korea, the leading social networking site, Naver, attracts 95% of Internet users. Then there are the rapidly thickening cross-border connections, displayed (December 2010) here for Facebook. Three-quarters of the world’s Internet population has now visited Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube or some other social network/blogging site; Internet users spend on average almost 6 hours per month on these sites in a variety of languages (Wikipedia has more than 5.3 million entries; less than a third [1.6 million] are in English); and two-thirds visit Facebook, the number one social networking destination.

Digital Democracy?

Pushed here and there by such trends, it is unsurprising that the developing culture of communicative abundance stokes political visions. The printing press spawned fantasies of ‘liberty of the press’; the telegraph created visions of a world without war. Communicative abundance fuels much excited talk of the ‘information age’; an example is the recent book by James Gleick, *The Information*, which claims that ‘information’ has become the vital principle, the blood and fuel, of our world. There is as well much talk of digital democracy, online publics, cybercitizens and wiki-government, even visions of a digital world where ‘citizens hold their own governments accountable’ and ‘all of humanity has equal access to knowledge and power’ (the words used by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during a January 2010 address at Washington’s Newseum). In the spirit of the revolution, some pundits go further; they conclude that there’s something like a ‘natural’ affinity between communicative abundance and democracy, understood (roughly) as a type of
government and a whole way of life in which power is subject to permanent public scrutiny, chastening and control by citizens and their representatives. Communicative abundance and liberal democracy are thought of as conjoined twins: the stunning process and product innovations in the communications infrastructure drive the process of dispersal and public accountability of power, or so it is supposed.

In this lecture, I want to drill down into these claims, to scrutinise their veracity, to probe more carefully the revolutionary things that are happening inside the swirling galaxy of communicative abundance. I cannot attempt a *Gesamtdarstellung*, a complete picture, and not only for reasons of time. The point is that there is too much reality for a *Gesamtdarstellung*. Its complexity is too complex, too elusive to be captured in smooth or slick formulae, in statistics, in hard-and-fast rules, in confident predictions. Communicative abundance is a harsh mistress. She keeps her secrets. We live in a strange new world of confusing unknowns, a thoroughly mediated universe cluttered with tools of communication whose political effects have the capacity to hypnotise and overwhelm us. Here, then, is my key conjecture: what are needed are bold new probes, fresh perspectives, ‘wild’ new concepts that enable different ways of seeing things, more discriminating methods of recognising the novelties of our times, the democratic opportunities they offer and the counter-trends that have the potential to snuff out democratic politics. Minimally, this means giving up all descriptions of communication media as the ‘fourth estate’, a misleading metaphor that originated with Edmund Burke and the French Revolution. Talk of ‘the media’ is also much too loose. Disciplinary divisions between political science and communications need to be bridged. Democracy and media must be analysed simultaneously. Just as in the 16th century, when the production of printed books and the efforts to read codex type required a fundamental shift of perspective, so today, in the emergent world of communicative abundance, a whole new mental effort is required to make sense of how democracies are being shaped and re-shaped by the new tools and rhetoric of communication - and why our very thinking about democracy must also change.

But how should we proceed? Which are the key trends that we need to note, to interpret, to internalise in our thinking about democracy in the age of Google, Facebook and WikiLeaks? In support of my key conjecture, I see five such trends that are pivotal:
Democratisation of Information

The most obvious effect of communicative abundance is the democratisation of information: thanks to cheap and easy methods of digital reproduction, we live in times of a sudden widening of access to published materials previously unavailable to publics, or formerly available only to restricted circles of users. Democratisation involves the dismantling of elite privileges. At the click of a mouse, often at zero cost, growing numbers of people gain access from a distance to materials once available only on a restricted geographical basis, or at a high cost. The NYT online, Harvard University’s vast collection of Ukrainian-language materials and Piratebay.org (a Swedish website that hosts torrent files) all stand as symbols of this meaning of democratisation. But there is another sense of the democratisation of information: the process of drawing together, often for the first time, new data sets that are made publicly available to users through entirely new pathways. Examples include Wikipedia, the controversial Google Book Search, the new Computer History Museum (located in Mountain View California) and TheEuropeanLibrary.org (a consortium of libraries of the nearly 50 member states in the Council of Europe has formed a single search engine in 35 languages) and the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library’s initiative ‘Capturing Women’s Voices’, a collection of postings by women from a wide range of blogs.

The contemporary democratisation of information has implications for the way we think about the present, the past and the future. Consider (to take a couple of examples) its contribution to the growth of a politics of remembering the past, evident in the important activities of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory in Spain, and the politics of inter-generational justice, evident for instance in the global climate change debate. Both examples illustrate the vital importance of the democratisation of information, a process which easily invites comparisons with the Reformation in Europe, which was triggered in part by the conviction that access to printed copies of the Bible could be widened, that there were no spiritual or earthly reasons why reading its pages should be restricted to a select few who were proficient in Latin. Such comparisons are probably overdrawn, but communicative abundance undoubtedly opens gates and tears down fences separating producers and users of
information, some of which is highly specialised, so that new and vitally important information banks become accessible to many more users, often at great distances, more or less simultaneously, at zero or low cost.

Making the Private Public

Second trend: communicative abundance stirs up spirited controversies about the definition and ethical significance of the public-private division. Gone are the days when privacy could be regarded as ‘natural’, as a given bedrock or sub-stratum of ‘a priori’ taken-for-granted experiences and meanings, as the ‘world of everyday life’ (*Lebenswelt*) as it was analysed by Edmund Husserl and the young Jürgen Habermas. Today, in media-saturated societies, private life has ceased in principle to be private. Cheap and user-friendly methods of reproduction and access to networked tools of communication ensure that we live in the age of hyper-coverage. Everything that happens in the fields of power stretching from the bedroom and bathroom to the boardroom to the battlefield seems to be up for media grabs. With the flick of a switch or the click of a camera, the world of the private can suddenly be made public. Unmediated privacy has become a thing of the past.

These are times in which the private lives of celebrities - their romances, parties, weight problems, quarrels, and divorces - are the interest and fantasy objects of millions of people. There is also (thanks to such genres as Twitter and TV talk shows and talkback radio) an endless procession of ‘ordinary people’ talking publicly about what privately turns them on, or off. We live in times in which millions of people act as if they are celebrities by displaying details of their intimate selves on Facebook; and times in which a German media scandal led initially by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and centred on the abuse of children by the Roman Catholic church is triggered by a German citizen who discovered, quite by accident, online pictures of the Essen priest (Herr Hullermann) who had molested him in private three decades earlier.

Of course, the age of media saturation and hyper-coverage of the private triggers a backlash. Some accuse high-pressure media coverage of killer instincts (an accusation first spelled out by Janet Malcolm in *The Journalist and the Murderer* and oft-repeated following the death of Princess Diana). Others, sensing that a private life is
vital for cultivating a sound sense of self, make considered decisions *not* to send
tweets, not to purchase a smart phone, or perhaps even not to use e-mail; there are
legal challenges to invasive junk mail, calls for the paparazzi to exercise moral self-
restraint, and published legal codes of media conduct to dissuade journalists from
unlimited digging and fishing expeditions (this is the subject of major case brought
before the European Court of Human Rights by Max Mosley against the News of the
World for its headline story that he had engaged in a ‘sick Nazi orgy with 5 hookers’).
There is great interest in the development of privacy-enhancing
technologies (PETs); and companies such as Google, Twitter and Facebook find
themselves on the front lines of a tug of war between the protection of privacy and
law enforcement agencies demanding private information.

All these developments suggest that communicative abundance exposes the
contingency and deep ambiguity of the private-public distinction famously defended
on First Principle grounds by John Stuart Mill and Germany’s greatest philosopher of
liberty, Wilhelm von Humboldt. Communicative abundance encourages individuals
and groups within civil society to think more flexibly, more contextually, more
contingently about the public and the private. They are made aware that their ‘private’
judgments about matters of public importance can be distinguished from both actually
existing and preferable, publicly shared norms. They learn to accept that some things
should be kept private; but when confronted with mendacious politicians or men who
are duplicitous about their sexual preference or leaders (in Italy) desperate to confirm
that they are men, they also learn that privacy can be a refuge for scoundrels, so that
embarrassing publicity given to ‘private’ actions - ‘outing’ - is entirely justified.

*The New Muckraking*

Third: the politicisation of definitions of the private-public underpins another key
trend of our times: high-intensity efforts to bombard power elites with ‘publicity’, to
expose them publicly. This third trend might be described as muckraking, a charming
Americanism, an earthy neologism from the late nineteenth-century, when it referred
to a style of journalism associated with Nelly Bly and other reporters who bravely
fought for the cause of publicly exposing corruption and injustice.
The new muckrakers put their finger on a perennial problem for which democracy is a solution: the power of elites always thrives on secrecy, silence and invisibility; gathering behind closed doors and deciding things in peace and private quiet is their specialty. Little wonder then that in the age of communicative abundance, to put things paradoxically, unexpected revelations become predictably commonplace. Being is constantly ruptured by ‘events’ (Alain Badiou). It is not just that stuff happens; media users ensure that shit happens. Muckraking becomes rife. Sometimes it feels as if the whole world is run by rogues.

There is little doubt in my mind that latter-day public disaffection with politicians, political parties, parliaments and official ‘politics’ in general has much to do with the practise of muckraking under conditions of communicative abundance. Politicians are sitting ducks. The limited media presence and media vulnerability of parliaments is striking. Despite efforts at harnessing new social media, parties have been left flat-footed; they neither own nor control their media outlets and they have lost the astonishing energy displayed at the end of the 19th century by parties such as the SPD, which was the greatest political party machine on the face of the earth, in no small measure because it was a great champion of literacy and a leading publisher of books, pamphlets and newspapers in its own right.

By contrast, we live in times when the core institutions and characters of representative democracy become easy targets of rough riding. Here are a few samples from a twelve-month media cycle (2008-9) within the world’s democracies: a male legislator in the Florida state assembly is spotted watching on-line porn while fellow legislators are debating the subject of abortion. During a fiercely fought presidential election campaign one of the candidates (Barack Obama) switches to damage control mode after calling a female journalist ‘sweety’; he leaves her a voice mail apology: ‘I am duly chastened’. In Japan, a seasoned Japanese politician (Masatoshi Wakabayashi) is forced to resign from the Diet after being caught on camera during a budget debate pressing the voting button of a parliamentary colleague who had earlier left the chamber. Meanwhile, in France, according to video footage quickly uploaded onto LeMonde.fr, a French Interior Minister (Brice Hortefeux) agreed to be photographed with a young Arab supporter and responded to an onlooker’s joke about ‘our little Arab’ as a symbol of integration with the words:
‘There always has to be one. When there’s one, it’s ok. It’s when there are a lot of them that there are problems.’

Our great grandparents would find the whole process astonishing in its democratic intensity. But who or what drives these muckraking public disputes? Certainly not the medium alone, as believers in technological determinism might suppose, but within the infrastructure of communicative abundance there is something special about its distributed networks. In contrast, say, to centralised state-run broadcasting systems of the past, the spider’s web linkages among many different nodes within a distributed network make them intrinsically more resistant to centralised control. Networks function according to the logic of packet switching: information flows, or acts of communication pass through many points en route to their destination. If they meet resistance at any point within the system of nodes then the information flows are simply diverted automatically, re-routed in the direction of their intended destination. Messages go viral. It is this networked character of media-saturated societies that makes them prone to dissonance. Some observers go further, to claim that a new understanding of power as ‘mutually shared weakness’ (Navarria) is required in order to make sense of the impact of networks on the distribution of power within any given social order, that the powerless readily find the networked communicative means through which to take their revenge on the powerful. The trend is summarised by the American scholar Clay Shirky: when compared to the eras dominated by newspapers, the telegraph, radio and television, the age of communicative abundance, he says, is an age where ‘group action just got easier’ because, thanks to networked communications and easy-to-use tools, the ‘expressive capability’ of citizens is raised to unprecedented levels.

The whole muckraking trend is reinforced by other causes and causers. For instance, the days when journalism was proud of its commitment to fact-based ‘objectivity’, an ideal that was born of the age of representative democracy, are passing. In its place we see the rise of adversarial and ‘gotcha’ styles of commercial journalism, forms of writing that are driven by ratings, sales and hits. We witness the growth of enclaves of self-redaction (John Hartley), of challenges to professional journalism and the spread of so-called citizen journalism. And there is another explanatory factor of at least
equal importance to the spread of digital networks and the daring of journalists. I refer here to the long-term growth of power-monitoring institutions, which have played a vital role in stirring up questions of power. The communications revolution of our time powerfully reinforces the post-1945 shift from representative democracy in territorial state form towards a new historical form of democracy – monitory democracy I have called it – in which many hundreds and thousands of monitory institutions – watch dog, guide dog and barking dog institutions such as courts, human rights networks, professional organisations, civic initiatives, bloggers and other web-based monitors - are in the business of scrutinising power. These monitors rely heavily on the new galaxy of communicative abundance. Monitory democracy and computerised media networks function are fused systems. The consequence, speaking figuratively, is that communicative abundance cuts like a knife into the power relations of government and civil society. It stirs up the sense that people are entitled to shape and to re-shape their lives as equals. Little wonder that public objections to wrongdoing and corruption become commonplace. In the era of media saturation there seems to be no end of scandals; there are times when so-called ‘-gate’ scandals, like earthquakes, rumble beneath the feet of whole governments. Corporations are given stick about their services and products, their investment plans, how they treat their employees, and their damaging impact upon the biosphere. Power-monitoring bodies like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International regularly do the same, usually with help from networks of supporters spread around the globe. There are even bodies (like the Democratic Audit network, the Global Accountability Project and Transparency International) that specialise in providing public assessments of the quality of existing power-scrutinising mechanisms and the degree to which they fairly represent citizens’ interests. At all levels, governments are grilled on a wide range of matters, from their human rights records, their energy production plans and transport systems to the quality of the drinking water of their cities. Even their arms procurement policies - notoriously shrouded in secrecy - run into trouble, thanks to media-savvy citizens’ initiatives guided by the spirit of monitory democracy.

Then there are those initiatives that lunge at the heart of secretive, sovereign power. WikiLeaks is so far the boldest and most controversial experiment in the public monitoring of secretive military power. Pundits are saying that it is the novel defining story of our times, but that fudges the point that its spirit and methods belong firmly
and squarely to the age of communicative abundance. Engaged in a radical form of muckraking motivated by conscience and supported by a shadowy small band of technically sophisticated activists led by a charismatic public figure, Julian Assange, WikiLeaks takes full advantage of all the defining qualities of communicative abundance: low-cost digital reproduction, easy-access multi-media integration organised through networks, capable of transmitting vast quantities of data around the world, virally, more or less instantly. You are well aware that it sprang to fame by releasing video footage of an American helicopter gunship crew firing on unarmed civilians and journalists; and that, posing as a lumpen outsider in the world of information, it then released sprauls, hundreds of thousands of top-secret documents appertaining to the diplomatic and military strategies of the United States and its allies and enemies. With the help of mainstream media, WikiLeaks did so by mastering the art of total anonymity through military-grade encryption, using software systems known as ‘re-mailing’; for the first time on a global scale, WikiLeaks created a viable custom-made social infrastructure for encouraging knowledgeable muckrakers within organisations to release classified data on a confidential basis, initially for storage in a camouflaged cloud of servers, then to push that bullet-proofed information into public circulation, as an act of radical transparency, across multiple jurisdictions – what Assange calls an ‘intelligence agency of the people’.

WikiLeaks is guided as well by a theory of hypocrisy. It supposes that individuals are motivated to act as whistleblowers not merely because their identities are protected by encryption but above all because of the intolerable gaps between their organisation’s publicly professed aims and its private modus operandi. Hypocrisy is the night soil of muckrakers. Its rakes in the Augean stables of government and business have a double effect: they multiply the amount of muck circulated under the noses of interested or astonished publics, whose own sense of living in muck is consequently sharpened. Muckraking in the style of WikiLeaks has yet another source, which helps explain why, even if its platform is criminalised and forcibly shut down, it will have many successors (in addition to OpenLeaks, BalkanLeaks and EuroLeaks, which have already happened). Put simply, WikiLeaks feeds upon a contradiction deeply structured within the digital information systems of all large-scale complex organisations. Organisations such as states and business corporations take advantage of the communications revolution of our time by going digital and staying digital.
They do so to enhance their internal efficiency and external effectiveness, to improve their capacity for handling complex, difficult or unexpected situations swiftly and flexibly. In other words, and contrary to Max Weber, the data banks and data processing of these organisations cannot be hampered by red tape, stringent security rules and compartmentalised data sets, all of which have the effect of making these organisations slow and clumsy. So they opt for dynamic and time-sensitive data sharing across the boundaries of departments and whole organisations. Vast streams of classified material flow freely - which serves to boost the chances of leaks into the courts of public opinion. If organisations then respond by tightening internal controls on their own information flows, a move that Assange has described as the imposition of a ‘secrecy tax’, the chances are that these same organisations will both trigger their own ‘cognitive decline’, their capacity to handle complex situations swiftly and effectively, as well as boost the chances of resistance to the secrecy tax by motivated employees who are convinced of the hypocrisy and injustice of the organisations which are unrepresentative of their views.

Unelected Representatives

Speaking of representation, there is a fourth trend I want to emphasise: in the age of communicative abundance, the political geography of representation undergoes profound changes. Unelected representatives multiply, sometimes to the point where serious doubts surface about the legitimacy and viability of elected representation as the central organising principle of democracy. The phrase ‘unelected representatives’ is of course unfamiliar. It grates on democratic ears, so it is important to understand carefully its meaning, and the trend it describes.

Unelected representatives are public figures who get media attention; they are often extroverted characters. They enjoy public notoriety; they are famous but they are not simply ‘celebrities’, a term which is too wide and too loose and too normatively burdened to capture their core quality of being unelected representatives of others’ views. Unelected representatives are not just famous, or fame seekers, or ‘million-horsepowered entities’ (McLuhan). They are not in it for the money. They are not exaltations of superficiality; they do not thrive on smutty probes into their private lives; and they do not pander to celebrity bloggers, gossip columnists and tabloid
paparazzi. The figure of the unelected representative is not what Germans call a *hochstapler*, an imposter who boasts a lot. Unelected representatives instead stand for something outside and beyond their particular niche. More exactly: as public representatives they simultaneously ‘mirror’ the tastes and views of their public admirers as well as fire their imaginations and sympathies by displaying leadership in matters of the wider public good.

Unelected representatives widen the horizons of the political even though they are not chosen in the same way as parliamentary representatives, who are subject to formal periodic elections. True, unelected representatives such as Wangari Muta Maathai, the first African woman to win the Nobel Prize and the founder of the pan-African grassroots Green Belt Movement, sometimes decide to reinvest their fame, to make a lateral move into formal politics and go on to win elections, as she did in Kenya. Others, Mary Robinson, Jimmy Carter, Nelson Mandela, Al Gore, Heiner Geissler and others, do exactly the reverse, by pursuing public leadership roles after office. They demonstrate positively that the age is over when former leaders lapsed into mediocrity, or spent their time ‘taking pills and dedicating libraries’ (as Herbert Hoover put it), sometimes bathed in self-pity (‘after the White House what is there to do but drink?’, Franklin Pierce reportedly quipped).

Elections are not the normal destiny or career path of unelected representatives, however. What is interesting is that they most often shun political parties, parliaments and government; they do not like to be seen as politicians and they often cross swords with them. Paradoxically, that does not make them any less ‘chosen’ or legitimate in the eyes, hearts and minds of their followers. It often has the opposite effect. For unelected representatives draw breath from communicative abundance. That is why there are so many different types of these representatives. Some draw their legitimacy from the fact that they are widely regarded as models of *public virtue*. Figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Princess Diana and Han Han (China’s hottest blogger) are seen to be ‘good’ or ‘decent’ or ‘wise’ or ‘daring’ people who bring honesty, fairness and other valuable things to the world. Others - Mother Teresa or Desmond Tutu win legitimacy because of their *spiritual* or *religious commitments*. There are also unelected representatives whose status is based on *merit*; they are nobodies who become somebody because they are reckoned to have achieved great things. Amitabh
Bhachan (India’s screen star whose early reputation was built on playing the role of fighter against injustice), Colombian-born Shakira Mebarak and the Berliner Philharmoniker (the latter two are Goodwill Ambassadors of UNICEF) belong in this category of achievers. Still other figures are deemed representatives of suffering, courage and survival in this world (the Dalai Lama is an example). There are other unelected representatives – in contrast to political party leaders and governments who ‘fudge’ issues – who draw their legitimacy from the fact that they have taken a principled stand on a particular issue, on which they campaign vigorously, in the process appealing for public support in the form of donations and subscriptions. Bodies like Amnesty International are of this type: their legitimacy is mediated not by votes, but by means of a monetary contract that can be cancelled at any time by admiring supporters and subscribers.

Whatever may be thought of their reputation, unelected representatives play a vital role in monitory democracies. Especially in times when politicians as representatives are suffering (to put it mildly) a mounting credibility gap, unelected representatives can do good works for democracy. They stretch the boundaries and meaning of political representation, especially by putting on-message parties, parliaments and government executives on their toes. They draw the attention of publics to the violation of public standards by governments, their policy failures, or their general lack of political imagination in handling so-called ‘wicked’ problems that have no readily agreed upon definition, let alone straightforward solutions. Unelected representatives also serve as an important reminder that during the course of the past century the word leadership was excessively politicised, to the point where we have forgotten that the words leader and leaderess, from the time of their first usage in English, were routinely applied to those who coordinated such bodies as singing choirs, bands of dancers and musicians and religious congregations.

Unelected leaders are having profoundly transformative effects on the meaning of leadership itself. Leadership no longer only means (as it meant ultimately in Max Weber’s classic state-centred analysis) bossing and strength backed ultimately by cunning and the fist and other means of state power – a Realpolitik understanding of leadership that slides towards political authoritarianism (and until today has given the
words Führer and Führerschaft a bad name in countries such as Germany). Leadership instead comes to be understood as the capacity to mobilise ‘persuasive power’ (as Archbishop Desmond Tutu likes to say). It is the ability to motivate citizens to do things for themselves. It is the learned capacity to win public respect by cultivating ‘narrative intelligence’ that includes (when unelected representatives are at their best) a mix of formal qualities, such as level-headed focus; inner calm; courteousness; the refusal to be biddable; the ability to listen to others; poking fun at oneself; and a certain radiance of style (one of the confidants of Nelson Mandela once explained to me his remarkable ability to create ‘many Nelson Mandelas around him’; the same thing is still commonly said of Jawaharlal Nehru). Such qualities also include the power to use media to combine contradictory qualities (strength and vulnerability; singularity and typicality, etc.) simultaneously, and apparently without effort, as if leadership is the art of gestalt switching; and, above all, an awareness that leaders are always deeply dependent upon the people known as the led - that true leaders lead because they manage to get people to look up to them, rather than hauling them by the nose.

Cross-border Publics

1 Max Weber’s famous account of the qualities of competent political leadership (Führerschaft) in parliamentary democracies is sketched in ‘Politik als Beruf’ (originally delivered as a speech at Munich University in the revolutionary winter of 1918/1919), in Gesammelte Politische Schriften (Tübingen 1958), pp. 493-548. During the speech, Weber said that democracies require leaders to display at least three decisive qualities. Genuine leadership first of all necessitates a passionate devotion to a cause, the will to make history, to set new values for others, nourished from feeling. Such passion must not succumb to what he called (Weber here drew upon Georg Simmel) ‘sterile excitation’. Authentic leaders - this is the second imperative - must avoid ‘self-intoxication’ all the while cultivating a sense of personal responsibility for their achievements, and their failures. While (finally) this implies that leaders are not merely the mandated mouthpieces of their masters, the electors, leaders’ actions must embody a ‘cool sense of proportion’: the ability to grant due weight to realities, to take them soberly and calmly into account. Passionate, responsible and experienced leaders, Weber urged, must be relentless in ‘viewing the realities of life’ and must have ‘the ability to face such realities and … measure up to them inwardly’. Effective leadership is synonymous with neither demagoguery nor the worship of power for its own sake. Passionate and responsible leaders shun the blind pursuit of ultimate goals; such blindness, Weber noted sarcastically, ‘does rightly and leaves the results with the Lord’. Mature leaders must be guided instead by the ‘ethic of responsibility’. Recognising the average deficiencies of people, they must continually strive, using state power, to take account of the foreseeable effects of particular actions that aim to realize particular goals through the reliance upon particular means. Responsible leaders must therefore incorporate into their actions the prickly fact, in many contexts, that the attainment of good ends is dependent upon (and therefore jeopardized by) the use of ethically doubtful or (in the case of violence) even dangerous means.
Finally: communicative abundance makes possible the growth of cross-border publics whose footprint is potentially or actually global in scope.

The unfolding communications revolution of our time includes the networked growth of globe-girdling media whose time-space conquering effects are arguably of epochal significance. The Canadian Scholar Harold Innis famously showed that communications media like the wheel and the printing press and the telegraph had distance-shrinking effects, but genuinely globalised communication only began (during the nineteenth century) with inventions like overland and underwater telegraphy and the early development of international news agencies like Reuters. The process is currently undergoing an evolutionary jump, thanks to the development of a combination of forces: wide-footprint geo-stationary satellites, weblogs and other specialist computer-networked media, the growth of global journalism and the expanding and merging flows of international news, electronic data exchange and entertainment and education materials controlled by giant firms like Thorn-EMI, AOL/Time-Warner, News Corporation International, the BBC, Al Jazeera, Disney, Bertelsmann, Microsoft, Sony and CNN.

I am aware that global media integration has its downsides for democracy. It has undoubtedly deepened visceral feelings among millions of people (somewhere I estimate between 5% and 25% of the world’s population) that our worldly interdependence requires humans to share responsibility for its fate. Yet global media linkages have encouraged loose and misleading talk of the end of barriers to communication (John Perry Barlow). Global media is said to be responsible for the rise of a ‘McWorld’ (Benjamin Barber) dominated by consumers who dance to the music of logos, advertising slogans, sponsorship, brand names, trademarks and jingles. We should also remember the cruel facts of communication poverty: a majority of the world's population (now totalling nearly 7 billion) are too poor to buy a book; less than half have never made a phone call in their lives; and only around one-quarter have access to the Internet, whose distribution patterns are highly uneven. And even in the most media-saturated societies, such as the United States, pockets of parochialism flourish; citizens who read local ‘content engine’ newspapers like The Desert Sun in Palm Springs, Cheyenne's Wyoming Tribune-Eagle or Pensacola's Gulf
Herald (I learned from my time as an Annenberg commissioner) are fed a starvation diet of global stories, which typically occupy no more than about 2% of column space. And not to be overlooked is the way governments distort global information flows. Protected by what in Washington are called ‘flack packs’ and dissimulation experts, governments cultivate links with trusted or ‘embedded’ journalists, organise press briefings and advertising campaigns, so framing - and wilfully distorting and censoring - global events to suit current government policies.

All these fickle counter-trends are sobering, but they do not form the whole story. For in the age of communicative abundance there are signs that the grip of parochialism upon citizens is not absolute, and that from roughly around the time of the world-wide protest of youth against the Vietnam War the global integration of media is having an unanticipated political effect: by nurturing a world stage or theatrum mundi, global journalism has slowly but surely contributed to the growth of global media events and, with them, a plurality of differently sized public spheres, some of them genuinely global, in which many millions of people scattered across the earth witness mediated controversies about who gets what, when, and how, on a world scale.

Of course, not all global media events - sporting fixtures, blockbuster movies, media awards, for instance - sustain global publics, which is to say that audiences are not publics and public spheres are not simply domains of entertainment or play. Strictly speaking, global publics are scenes of the political. Within global publics, millions of people at various points on the earth witness the powers of governmental and non-governmental organisations being publicly named, monitored, praised, challenged, and condemned by journalists, in defiance of the old tyrannies of time and space and publicly unaccountable power.

It is true that global publics are neither strongly institutionalised nor effectively linked to mechanisms of representative government. This lack is a great challenge for democratic thinking and democratic politics. Global publics are voices without a
coherent body politic; it is as if they try to show the world that it resembles a chrysalis capable of hatching the butterfly of cross-border democracy - despite the fact that we currently have no good account of what ‘regional’ or ‘global’ or ‘cross border’ democratic representation might mean in practice. Still, in spite of everything, global publics have marked effects, for instance on the suit-and-tie worlds of diplomacy, global business, inter-governmental meetings and independent non-governmental organizations. Every great global issue since 1945 - human rights, the dangers of nuclear war, continuing discrimination against women, the greening of politics - every one of these issues first crystallised within these publics. Global publics have other effects, sometimes ‘meta-political’ effects, in the sense that they work in favour of creating citizens of a new global order, in effect telling people that unless they find some means of showing that the wider world is not theirs, they are witnesses and participants in this wider world. The speech addressed to ‘global citizens’ by Barack Obama at the Siegessaule in the Tiergarten in July 2008 is a powerful case in point, a harbinger of a remarkable trend in which those who are caught up within global publics learn that the boundaries between native and foreigner are blurred. They learn that their commitments have become a touch more multiversal. They become footloose. They live here and there; they learn to distance themselves from themselves; they discover that there are different temporal rhythms, other places, other problems, many different ways of living. They discover the ‘foreigner’ within themselves; they are invited to question their own dogmas, even to extend ordinary standards of civility - courtesy, politeness, respect - to others whom they will never meet.

Global public spheres centred on ground-breaking media events like Live-Aid (in 1985 it attracted an estimated one billion viewers) can be spaces of fun, in which millions taste something of the joy of acting publicly with and against others for some defined common purpose. When they come in the form of televised world news of the suffering of distant strangers, as in coverage of disasters or the photos from Abu Ghraib prison, global publics can also highlight cruelty. They render false the old maxim that half the world never knows how the other half lives. These publics make possible what Hannah Arendt once called the ‘politics of pity’. And especially during dramatic media events - like the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl, the Tiananmen massacre, the 1989 revolutions in central-eastern Europe, the overthrow and arrest of
Slobodan Milosevic, the terrorist attacks on New York, Pennsylvania and Washington, massive earthquakes in Chile and China, the overthrow of a dictator in Tunisia - public spheres intensify audiences’ shared sense of living their lives contingently, on a knife edge, in the subjunctive tense. The witnesses of such events (contrary to McLuhan and others) do not enter a ‘global village’ dressed in the skins of humankind and thinking in the terms of a primordial ‘village or tribal outlook’. When they are members of a public sphere, audiences do not experience uninterrupted togetherness. They instead come to feel the pinch of the world’s power relations; they sense that our ‘small world’ is an arena of struggle, the resultant of moves and counter-moves, controversy and consent, compromise and resistance, peace and war.

Exactly because of their propensity to monitor the exercise of power those who champion global publics, when they do their job well, put matters like representation, accountability and legitimacy on the political agenda. They pose important questions: who benefits and who loses from the contemporary global order? Who currently speaks for whom in its multiple and overlapping power structures? Whose voices are heard, or half-heard, and whose interests and concerns are ignominiously shoved aside? And these publics imply more positive and far-reaching questions: can there be greater equality among the voices that emerge from the nooks and crannies of our global order? Through which institutional procedures could these voices be represented? Might it be possible to design alternatives that could inch our little blue and white planet towards greater openness and humility, potentially to the point where power, whenever and wherever it is exercised across borders, would come to feel more ‘biodegradable’, a bit more responsive to those whose lives it currently shapes and reshapes, secures or wrecks?

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen: my conjecture has been that the unfinished communications revolution of our time contains breathtaking dynamics that are not just without precedent, but which are also having transformative effects on the spirit and institutions and meaning of democracy. I have suggested that democracy can no longer be understood (as it is still in most textbooks and among many government policymakers) as synonymous with periodic elections in territorial state form; that in
our times the fugitive power-questioning spirit of democracy is manifested in fair and free elections and the ongoing public scrutiny of power elites, from a variety of sites, cross-border settings included; and I have tried to highlight the positive elective affinities between this emergent monitory democracy and the advent of communicative abundance, with its democratisation of information, erosion of the public/private division, muckraking, unelected representatives and cross-border publics. Behind this conjecture stands a bigger claim: that each historical form of democracy is structured by, draws strength from and shapes and re-shapes a particular mode of communication. Think of things in this way. Classical assembly democracies of the Greek world were embedded in the spoken word and messages carved in stone or written on papyrus and relayed by foot runners and donkeys. The age of representative democracy was nurtured by the advent of print culture and its books, pamphlets, novels, daily newspapers, letters and printed messages conveyed by telegraph; it was no mere coincidence that representative democracy, as a political form and way of life, was very nearly in its entirety killed off, or committed ‘democide’, during decades rocked and ruined by the coming of radio broadcasting, film and early television and the rise of parties and leaders and whole regimes convinced that millions of people could be seduced into servitude.

In your capacity as thoughtful and politically experienced officials of the Council of Europe, you will rightly raise many questions about the whole approach of my lecture. You will ask: why in all your talk of communicative abundance did you not mention the decadent trends? Are there not wide and possibly widening gaps between the rosy ideals of the free and fair public contestation of power, the unforced plurality of opinions and the inclusion and treatment of all citizens as equals - roughly, the ideals of monitory democracy - and a harsher reality of media decadence, in which communication media are used to promote intolerant opinions, protect inequalities of wealth and income, restrict the public scrutiny of power and promote the blind acceptance of the way things are heading? What about the rumour firestorms, media bombing, mean-spirited bloggers and ‘digital Maoists’ of our time? Aren’t Google and its secret algorithms making us stupid? What about the troubling experiments with software, like Geotime, that can keep track of nearly every move of suspects by
bodies such as the United States military, or London’s metropolitan police? Or the immobilisation of organisations by spiteful hacking and spying and distributed denial of service attacks (known in the trade as DDoS)? Surely the Internet is becoming the ‘splinternet’, so that for growing numbers of people the experience of using smart phones, tablets, e-readers and other new gadgets to access the Web is governed by platforms designed by Microsoft and Apple and other hyper-giant corporations to corner and confine users within an ecosystem of pre-determined gadgets, content and advertising? Why was there no mention of media tycoons like Rupert Murdoch and Silvio Berlusconi? Or the silence about experimental media cities like Abu Dhabi, the new Hollywood without the old California? What about lobbyists and PR agencies (like Quadriga University in Berlin) and the sly politicians skilled at the arts of telling lies and releasing bad news on busy days (what Tony Blair’s tacticians called ‘throwing out the bodies’)? There was no recognition of the low grade news, flat earth news and no earth news produced by what in England is called ‘churnalism’. And not a single word about China, the new global power which is more than just the hub of the world’s telecommunications industry, but (according to Reporters Without Borders) the world’s biggest prison for netizens and a giant political laboratory in which crafty methods of harnessing and manipulating digital communication might just succeed in securing a uniquely 21st-century post-democratic order?

Ladies and gentlemen, it’s true. You would be quite right to raise such questions. All of them are legitimate and I admit in this hour to being overwhelmed by them, cowed into silence by their complexity and power. So I beg to be rescued and now turn to you for frank reactions, positive suggestions, perhaps even on-the-spot answers to urgent questions that without doubt bear vitally upon the future of democracy…
Experts who expressed optimism often voiced concerns about democracy in the digital age. This section includes comments about problems. Jonathan Taplin, author of "Move Fast and Break Things: How Google, Facebook and Amazon Cornered Culture and Undermined Democracy," said, "Social media will continue to enable new and more-sophisticated forms of propaganda and disinformation. Artificial intelligence will enable deepfake videos that the average citizen will be taken in by. Facebook, YouTube and Twitter will continue to enable this content in their unending chase for revenue. Democracy in the Age of Google, Facebook and WikiLeaks, Disclosure, Free Speech and Democracy: New Media and the Fourth Estate. Jan 2012. J Robinson. Robinson, J. (2012) 'WikiLeaks, Disclosure, Free Speech and Democracy: New Media and the Fourth Estate' in More of Less: Democracy and the New Media (Sydney: Future Leaders). WikiLeaks is delinquent and anti-democratic', Telegraph. Dec 2010. Week 3 SeminarFriday 4 February5 pmDemocracy in the Age of Google, Wikileaks and FacebookJohn Keane(Professor of Politics, University of New South Wales)Commentators:Marc Plattner( Journal of Democracy / International Forum for Democratic Studies)Radosław Markowski(Polish Academy of Sciences / Warsaw School of Social Sciences and Humanities). Date and Time. The Age of Transparency is here not because of one transnational online network dedicated to open information and whistleblowing named WikiLeaks but because the knowledge of how to build and maintain such networks is widespread. The End of Secrecy Let's posit that what Assange is doing is "radical transparency," i.e., publishing everything he can get his hands on. Well before Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and thumb-size memory sticks, Moynihan foresaw that the information age would make the culture of government secrecy untenable, even picturing a time when fourteen-year-old hackers in Australia or Newfoundland could penetrate the government's most sensitive secrets.