

## Communication, Power and Counter-power in the Network Society<sup>1</sup>

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This article presents a set of grounded hypotheses on the interplay between communication and power relationships in the technological context that characterizes the network society. Based on a selected body of communication literature, and of a number of case studies and examples, it argues that the media have become the social space where power is decided. It shows the direct link between politics, media politics, the politics of scandal, and the crisis of political legitimacy in a global perspective. It also puts forward the notion that the development of interactive, horizontal networks of communication has induced the rise of a new form of communication, mass self-communication, over the Internet and wireless communication networks. Under these conditions, insurgent politics and social movements are able to intervene more decisively in the new communication space. However, corporate media and mainstream politics have also invested in this new communication space. As a result of these processes, mass media and horizontal communication networks are converging. The net outcome of this evolution is a historical shift of the public sphere from the institutional realm to the new communication space.

### Introduction: Power making by mind framing

Throughout history communication and information have been fundamental sources of power and counter-power, of domination and social change. This is because the fundamental battle being fought in society is the battle over the minds of the people. The way people think determines the fate of norms and values on which societies are constructed. While coercion and fear are critical sources for imposing the will of the dominants over the dominated, few institutional systems can last long if they are predominantly based on sheer repression. Torturing bodies is less effective than shaping minds. If a majority of people think in ways that are contradictory to the values and norms institutionalized in the state and enshrined in

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the law and regulations, ultimately the system will change, although not necessarily to fulfill the hopes of the agents of social change. But change will happen. It will just take time, and suffering, much suffering. Because communication, and particularly socialized communication, the one that exists in the public realm, provides the support for the social production of meaning, the battle of the human mind is largely played out in the processes of communication. And this is more so in the network society, characterized by the pervasiveness of communication networks in a multimodal hypertext. Indeed, the ongoing transformation of communication technology in the digital age extends the reach of communication media to all domains of social life in a network that is at the same time global and local, generic and customized in an ever-changing pattern. As a result, power relations, that is the relations that constitute the foundation of all societies, as well as the processes challenging institutionalized power relations are increasingly shaped and decided in the communication field.

I understand power to be the structural capacity of a social actor to impose its will over other social actor(s). All institutional systems reflect power relations, as well as the limits to these power relations as negotiated by a historical process of domination and counter-domination. Thus, I will also analyze the process of formation of counter-power, which I understand to be the capacity of a social actor to resist and challenge power relations that are institutionalized. Indeed, power relations are by nature conflictive, as societies are diverse and contradictory. Therefore, the relationship between technology, communication, and power reflects opposing values and interests, and engages a plurality of social actors in conflict.

Both the powers that be and the subjects of counter-power projects operate nowadays in a new technological framework; and this has consequences for the ways, means, and goals of their conflictive practice. In this article I will present some hypotheses on the transformation of this relationship, as a result of several trends that are connected but independent:

- the predominant role of media politics and its interaction with the crisis of political legitimacy in most countries around the world;
- the key role of segmented, customized mass media in the production of culture;
- the emergence of a new form of communication related to the culture and technology of the network society, and based on horizontal networks of communication: what I call mass self-communication;
- and the uses of both one-directional mass communication and mass self-communication in the relationship between power and counter-power, in formal politics, in insurgent politics, and in the new manifestations of social movements.

The understanding of this transformation between communication and power must be placed in a social context characterized by several major trends:

- a) The state, traditionally the main site of power, is being challenged all over the world by:
  - globalization that limits its sovereign decision making
  - market pressures toward deregulation that diminish its capacity to intervene

- a crisis of political legitimacy that weakens its influence over its citizens<sup>2</sup>
- b) Cultural industries and business media are characterized at the same time by business concentration and market segmentation, leading toward heightened oligopolistic competition, customized delivery of messages, and vertical networking of the multimedia industry<sup>3</sup>
- c) Around the world, the opposition between communalism and individualism defines the culture of societies as identity construction works at the same time with materials inherited from history and geography and from the projects of human subjects. The culture of communalism roots itself in religion, nation, territoriality, ethnicity, gender, and environment.<sup>4</sup> The culture of individualism spreads in different forms<sup>5</sup>:
- as market-driven consumerism,
  - as a new pattern of sociability based on networked individualism, and
  - as the desire for individual autonomy based on self-defined projects of life.

In spite of this complex, multidimensional social evolution, the decisive process shaping society, both individually and collectively, is the dynamics of power relations. And power relations, in our social and technological context, are largely dependent on the process of socialized communication in ways that I will now analyze sequentially.

### **Mass Communication and Media Politics**

Politics is based on socialized communication, on the capacity to influence people's minds. The main channel of communication between the political system and citizens is the mass media system, first of all television. Until recently, and even nowadays to a large extent, the media constitute an articulated system, in which, usually, the print press produces original information, TV diffuses to a mass audience, and radio customizes the interaction.<sup>6</sup> In our society, politics is primarily media politics. The workings of the political system are staged for the media so as to obtain the support, or at least the lesser hostility, of citizens who become the consumers in the political market.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> (Beck, 2006; Castells, 2005, and Held & McGrew, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> (Crouteau & Hoynes, 2006; Hesmondhalgh, 2007; and Klinenberg, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> (Castells, 2004; and Ong, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> (Barber, forthcoming; Touraine, 2006; and Wellman & Haythornwaite, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> (Bennett, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Mazzoleni refers to the increased centrality of the media in Italian politics as "a Copernican revolution" in political communication: "yesterday everything circled around the parties, today everything circles around and in the space of, the media (1995, p. 308)." See also Curran (2002) and Graber (2007).

Of course, this does not mean that power is in the hands of the media. Political actors exercise considerable influence over the media.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the current 24-hours news cycle increases the importance of politicians for the media, as media have to feed content relentlessly.

Neither that the audience simply follows what the media say. The concept of the active audience is now well established in communication research. And media have their own internal controls in terms of their capacity to influence the audience, because they are primarily a business, and they must win the audience; they are usually plural and competitive; they must keep their credibility in front of their competitors; and they have some internal limits to the management of information coming from the professionalism of journalists.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, we should remember the current rise of ideological, militant journalism in all countries (actually a good business model in the U.S., e.g. Fox news or in Spain, e.g. El Mundo), as well as the diminishing autonomy of journalists vis-à-vis their companies, and the intertwining between media corporations and governments.<sup>10</sup>

The practice of what Bennett (1990) has named "indexing," in which journalists and editors limit the range of political viewpoints and issues that they report upon to those expressed within the mainstream political establishment, weighs heavily on the process of events-driven reporting.

Yet, the main issue is not the shaping of the minds by explicit messages in the media, but the absence of a given content in the media. What does not exist in the media does not exist in the public mind, even if it could have a fragmented presence in individual minds.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, a political message is necessarily a media message. And whenever a politically related message is conveyed through the media, it must be couched in the specific language of the media. This means television language in many cases.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Thus, Hallin (1986), in his classical study of public opinion concerning the Vietnam War, argued that the vast majority of American media were largely uncritical of the war effort until after the 1968 Tet Offensive, and that this turn was "intimately related to the unity and clarity of the government itself, as well as to the degree of consensus in the society at large (p. 213)." In the same vein, Mermin (1997) demystifies the notion that the media induced the decision by the U.S. to intervene in Somalia by showing that while journalists ultimately made the decision to cover the crisis, that key media coverage on network television followed rather than preceded attention to the issue by key Washington officials (p. 392). See also: Entman (2003) in which he provides evidence for a theory of "cascading activation," in which media frames activate elite policy decisions and vice versa .

<sup>9</sup> Hallin and Mancini (2004) include a model of media systems based on a survey of 18 countries.

<sup>10</sup> Tumber and Webster (2006) explore the tensions between nationalism, journalism, globalization, warfare, and outline how nation states can and cannot navigate the altered power dynamics.

<sup>11</sup> This is in line with Thompson's (2005) analysis of mediated visibility.

<sup>12</sup> The Pew Research Center (2006a) documents the fact that television continues to be the dominant source of news in America. In fact the increase in the number of people going online for news has slowed considerably since 2000. The 2006 survey found that 57% accessed Television "yesterday" (compared to 56% in 2000 and 60% in 2004) for their news as compared to 23% accessing the Internet (compared to 24% in 2004). Moreover, people not only tend to access television more often for their news and information, they spend more time consuming it. Only 9% of those who access news on the Internet

The need to format the message in its media form has considerable implications, as it has been established by a long tradition in communication research.<sup>13</sup> It is not entirely true that the medium is the message, empirically speaking, but it certainly has substantial influence on the form and effect of the message.

So, in sum: the media are not the holders of power, but they constitute by and large the space where power is decided. In our society, politics is dependent on media politics. The language of media has its rules. It is largely built around images, not necessarily visual, but images. The most powerful message is a simple message attached to an image. The simplest message in politics is a human face. Media politics leads to the personalization of politics around leaders that can be adequately sold in the political market. This should not be trivialized as the color of the tie or the looks of a face. It is the symbolic embodiment of a message of trust around a person, around the character of the person, and then in terms of the image projection of this character.<sup>14</sup>

The importance of personality politics is related to the evolution of electoral politics, usually determined by independent or undecided voters that switch the balance, in every country, between the right or center-right and the center-left. Thus, although there are substantial differences between parties and candidates in most countries, programs and promises are tailored toward the center and the undecided, often by the same political advertising companies and political marketing consultants working across party lines in alternating years.<sup>15</sup> However, more critical than political marketing techniques and the tailoring of political platforms, is the values associated with and drawn upon by different candidates. As George Lakoff writes, "issues are real, as are the facts of the matter. But issues are also symbolic of values and of trustworthiness. Effective campaigns must communicate the candidates values and use issues symbolically, as indicative of their moral values and their trustworthiness."<sup>16</sup> Citizens do not read candidate platforms. They rely on media reports of the candidates' positions; and ultimately their voting

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spent a half-hour or more online looking at news (Pew Research Center, 2006a, p. 2). News consumption patterns of course varies by age and this difference in behavior has important connotations for the role of the Internet vis-à-vis television in the future: 30% of 18-24 year olds regularly get their news online (up 1% from 2000) compared to 42% of 25-29 year olds (up 11% from 2000), 47% of 30-34 year olds (up 17% from 2000), 37% of 35-49 year olds (up 12% from 2000), and 31% of 50-64 year-olds (up 12% from 2000) (Ibid.). However, there do appear to be greater increases in people accessing the Internet for campaign news during election times (still around 20%). A post-election, nationwide survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project shows that the online political news consumer population grew dramatically from 18% of the U.S. population in 2000 to 29% in 2004. There was also a striking increase in the number who cited the Internet as one of their primary sources of news about the presidential campaign: 11% of registered voters said that the Internet was a primary source of political news in 2000 and 18% said that in 2004 (Raine, Horrigan & Cornfield, 2005). Yet, television continues to be the primary source.

<sup>13</sup> See for example: Norris and Sanders (2003).

<sup>14</sup> For more analysis on parasocial interaction, see Giles (2002).

<sup>15</sup> (Farrell, Kolodny & Medvic, 2001; Jamieson, 1996; and Thurber & Nelson 2000).

<sup>16</sup> (Lakoff, 2006, p.7).

decision is a function of the trust they deposit in a given candidate. Therefore, character, as portrayed in the media, becomes essential; because values--what matters the most for the majority of people--are embodied in the persons of the candidates. Politicians are the faces of politics.

If credibility, trust, and character become critical issues in deciding the political outcome, the destruction of credibility and character assassination become the most potent political weapons. Because all parties resort to it, all parties need to stockpile ammunition in this battle. As a consequence a market of intermediaries proliferates, finding damaging information about the opponent, manipulating information, or simply fabricating information for that purpose. Furthermore, media politics is expensive, and legal means of party financing are insufficient to pay for all advertising, pollsters, phone banks, consultants, and the like. Thus, regardless of the morality of individual politicians, political agents are on sale for lobbyists with different degrees of morality. This is so even in European countries in which the finance of politics is public and regulated, because parties find ways to circumvent the controls by receiving donations from undisclosed donors. These funds are used for discrete forms of political campaigning, such as paying informants and producers of information. So, more often than not, it is not difficult to find wrongdoing and damaging material for most parties and candidates. Since it is rare that personal lives are without shadows, and given the tendency of many people, particularly men, to brag and be indiscrete, personal sins and political corruption brew a powerful cocktail of intrigues and gossip that become the daily staple of media politics. Thus, media politics, and personality politics lead to scandal politics, as analyzed by scholars and researchers, such as Thompson (2000), Tumber and Waisboard (2004), Esser and Hartung (2004), Liebes and Blum-Kulka (2004), Lawrence and Bennett (2001), and Williams and Delli Carpini (2004) to mention a few. Scandal politics is credited with bringing down a large number of politicians, governments, and even regimes around the world, as shown in the global account of scandal politics and political crises compiled by Amelia Arsenault (forthcoming).

### **Media Politics, Scandal Politics, and the Crisis of Political Legitimacy**

Scandal politics has two kinds of effects on the political system. First, it may affect the process of election and decision-making by weakening the credibility of those subjected to scandal. However, this kind of effect varies in its impact. Some times, it is the saturation of dirty politics in the public mind that provokes reaction or indifference among the public. In other instances, the public becomes so cynical that it includes all politicians in their low level of appreciation, thus they choose among all the immorals the kind of immoral that they find more akin or closer to their interests. Furthermore people some times consider the exposure of inappropriate behavior as good entertainment, while not drawing political implications from it. This seems to be the process that explains the high level of popularity of Clinton at the end of his presidency, based on his policy record, in spite of his televised lying act to the country.<sup>17</sup> However, some interesting research by Renshon (2002) seems to indicate that the second order effect of this low morality had the consequence of bringing additional votes in the 2000 election to George W. Bush, the candidate that appeared to be, at that time, more principled than the incumbent administration.

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<sup>17</sup> (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004).

There is a second kind of effect of scandal politics, one that may have lasting consequences on the practice of democracy. Because everybody does something wrong, and there is generalized mudslinging, citizens end up putting all politicians in the same bag, as they distrust electoral promises, parties, and political leaders.<sup>18</sup> The crisis of political legitimacy in most of the world cannot be attributed exclusively, by any means, to scandal politics and to media politics. Yet, scandals are most likely at the very least a precipitating factor in triggering political change in the short term and in rooting skepticism vis-à-vis formal politics in the long term.<sup>19</sup> It would seem that the pace and shape of media politics stimulate the disbelief in the democratic process.<sup>20</sup> This is not to blame the media, since in fact political actors and their consultants are more often than not the source of the leaks and damaging information. Again, media are the space of power making, not the source of power holding.

At any rate, we do observe a widespread crisis of political legitimacy in practically all countries with the partial exception of Scandinavia. Two thirds of citizens in the world, according to the polls commissioned in 2000 and 2002 by the U.N. secretariat and by the World Economic Forum, believed that their country was not governed by the will of the people, the percentage for the U.S. being 59% and for the EU 61%. In recent years, the Eurobarometer, the UNDP Study on Democracy in Latin America, the

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<sup>18</sup> Treisman (1997) using data from the World Values Survey finds a relationship between levels of perceived corruption and low levels of trust in the political system. Newer studies find similar trends. For example, Chang and Chu (2006) discovered similar results in the Asian case (Japan, Thailand, Philippines, Taiwan, & South Korea). Using data from 16 Western and Eastern European countries, Anderson and Tverdova (2003) found that citizens in corrupt countries express lower levels of political trust. Similarly, using cross-national survey data from four Latin American countries, Seligson (2002) found that exposure to corruption correlates with erosion in belief in the political system and interpersonal trust. To be sure, perceived corruption is not the same as scandal, but it is the raw material from where scandals are fabricated.

<sup>19</sup> There is some question of causality here: whether there is greater corruption or perceived corruption in societies that are distrustful or whether people tend to trust less when they perceive that corruption is high. However, Treisman (2000) and Uslaner (2004) are just a few scholars that find greater evidence for the latter.

<sup>20</sup> There is disagreement about whether scandal politics directly influence voting behavior. However, in the United States, a Pew Research Center for the People and the Press survey conducted in March 2006 documented the fact that news of corruption influences voting behaviors, although not necessarily political orientation. Sixty-nine percent of those who reported that they followed media coverage of corruption and scandal in Congress closely believed that most sitting members of Congress should be voted in the elections of Fall 2006, compared to 36% of those who reported following the media very little or not closely at all. This trend was even more pronounced in Independent voters (a critical force in American politics): 77% of Independents who followed media scandals closely thought that most of Congress should be voted out in 2006 (Pew Center for the People and the Press, 2006b). Other studies have illustrated that scandal politics may be linked to trust in the system overall but not to how individuals vote for their particular representative. However, it is clear that scandal politics have altered both the form and the method of political and journalistic practices (Tumber & Waisboard, 2004; Thompson, 2002; and Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004).

World Values Survey, and various polls from Gallup, the Field Institute, and the Pew Institute in the United States, all point toward a significant level of distrust of citizens vis-à-vis politicians, political parties, parliaments, and to a lesser extent, governments.<sup>21</sup> This partially explains why everywhere a majority of the people tend to vote against rather than for, electing the lesser of two evils, or switch to third party or protest candidates who are often propelled by a colorful presence in the media that makes for good footage or noteworthy news, opening the way to demagogic politics.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, distrust of the system does not equate depoliticization.<sup>23</sup> A number of studies, including the World Values Survey, indicate that many citizens believe they can influence the world with their mobilization.<sup>24</sup> They just do not

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<sup>21</sup> A GlobeScan poll commissioned by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2005 finds declining levels of trust in every country measured except for Russia across a variety of institutions (NGOs, the United Nations, National Governments, Global Corporations, and National Corporations). In only six of the sixteen countries for which data was available did more citizens trust their national governments than distrust them (GlobeScan/WEF, 2006); According to the 2005 Gallup International Voice of the People survey also commissioned by the WEF, 61% of people surveyed viewed politicians as dishonest (Gallup/WEF, 2006); According to the latest Eurobarometer survey only 33% of Europeans surveyed trust their national government and 39% trust parliament (2006, p. 25). And trust in the European Union institutions continues to decline across the board (Eurobarometer 2006, p. 72); According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 65% of Americans say they trust the government only sometimes or never (2006b, p. 11); The latest Latinobarometro does show slight declines in trust between 2002-2005. However, there is a clear break between trust in governmental institutions and trust in elites. Trust in government is generally higher overall, but trust in elites has risen slightly while trust in government has dropped slightly. For example, in the wake of the Lula scandal, trust in government institutions dropped 20% to 47%, but he retained the support of over half the population (Latinobarometro, 2005, p. 10). See also: Dalton (2004), Dalton (2005), and Inglehart and Catterberg (2002) for analyses of the World Values Survey data on levels of government trust.

<sup>22</sup> Using various election survey data from around the world, Dalton (2004) documents serious declines in party bonds in countries around the world. New Zealand has exhibited the highest decline in partisanship (33%), followed by Ireland (32%). Other countries with evidence of declining partisanship include: the United States (17%), Japan (22%), France (19%), and Germany (10%). The Eurobarometer data released in June 2006 showed that only 19% of the sample population trust their political parties; Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer finds that in a survey of 62 countries, political parties are perceived by far to be the most corrupt institutions in society (Transparency International, 2006, p. 3).

<sup>23</sup> Dalton (2005) using data from the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems presents an argument that Americans and indeed citizens around the World remain engaged in politics: "Why have past analyses—excluding Tocqueville's—missed the continuing participatory nature of Americans? We suspect that part of the reason is the changing nature of participation in the United States. Those factors that are easiest to count—turnout in national elections and formal membership in large national associations—are showing decreased activity levels." In other words, social and political mobilization remain significant, both in the U.S. and in the world at large, in contrast to participation in civic associations and electoral turnout.

<sup>24</sup> According to the 2005 Center for the Digital Future Report: in 2005, 39.8% (up from 27.3% in the previous study) of Internet users believe "that going online can give people more political power." And,



think that they can do it through politics as usual. Thus, at this point in the analysis, I will consider turn to the emergence of processes of counter-power linked to social movements and social mobilization.

However, any political intervention in the public space requires presence in the media space. And since the media space is largely shaped by business and governments that set the political parameters in terms of the formal political system, albeit in its plurality, the rise of insurgent politics cannot be separated from the emergence of a new kind of media space: the space created around the process of mass self-communication.

### **The rise of mass self-communication**

The diffusion of Internet, mobile communication, digital media, and a variety of tools of social software have prompted the development of horizontal networks of interactive communication that connect local and global in chosen time. The communication system of the industrial society was centered around the mass media, characterized by the mass distribution of a one-way message from one to many. The communication foundation of the network society is the global web of horizontal communication networks that include the multimodal exchange of interactive messages from many to many both synchronous and asynchronous. Of course, the Internet is an old technology, first deployed in 1969. But it is only in the last decade that reached out throughout the world to exceed now 1 billion users.<sup>25</sup> Mobile communication has exploded reaching over 2 billion mobile phone subscribers in 2006 in contrast to 16 million in 1991.<sup>26</sup> So, even accounting for the differential diffusion in developing countries and poor regions, a very high proportion of the population of the planet has access to mobile communication, some times in areas where there is no electricity but there is some form of coverage and mobile chargers of mobile batteries in the form of merchant bicycles. Wifi and wimax networks are helping to set up networked communities. With the convergence between Internet and mobile communication and the gradual diffusion of broadband capacity, the communicating power of the Internet is being distributed in all realms of social life, as the electrical grid and the electrical engine distributed energy in the industrial society.<sup>27</sup> Appropriating the new forms of communication, people have built their own system of mass

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61.7% of all respondents (both Internet users and nonusers) believe that going online "has become important to political campaigns (2005, p. 102)." Castells, Tubella, Sancho, Diaz de Isla, and Wellman (2003), in a survey of 3,000 persons, representative of the population of Catalonia, found that while only 1% were involved in activities of political parties, and the majority did not trust parties or governments, one third were engaged in associations and movements of various kinds, and over 70% thought that they could "influence the world" by their own social mobilizations.

<sup>25</sup> The Pew Global Attitudes Project (2006a) documents significant increases in Internet usage in all countries (Western and non-Western) in which historical comparisons are available; The Center for the Digital Future (2005) reports similar trends for the United States.

<sup>26</sup> Current statistics are available from the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), <http://www.itu.int>.

<sup>27</sup> See for example: Castells, Qui, Fernandez-Ardevol, and Sey (2006) and Castells (Ed, 2004). However, while some level of connectivity is increasingly available everywhere, the diffusion of broadband connectivity remains highly uneven along traditional lines of inequality, with income, geography

communication, via SMS, blogs, vlogs, podcasts, wikis, and the like.<sup>28</sup> File sharing and p2p (i.e. peer-to-peer) networks make possible the circulation and reformatting of any digitally formatted content. As of October 2006, Technorati was tracking 57.3 million blogs, up from 26 million in January. On average 75,000 new blogs are created every day. There are about 1.2 million posts daily, or about 50,000 blog updates an hour. Many bloggers update their blogs regularly: against a usual belief, 55% of bloggers are still posting 3 months after their blogs are created.<sup>29</sup> Again, according to Technorati, the blogosphere in 2006 was 60 times bigger than in 2003, and doubles every six months. It is a multilingual and international communication space, where English, dominant in the early stages of blog development, accounted in March 2006 for less than a third of blog posts, with Japanese representing 37% of blogs, followed by English (31%) and Chinese (15%). Spanish, Italian, Russian, French, Portuguese, Dutch, German, and most likely Korean are the languages that follow in numbers of posts.<sup>30</sup>

Most blogs are of personal character. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, 52% of bloggers say that they blog mostly for themselves, while 32% blog for their audience.<sup>31</sup> Thus, to some extent, a good share of this form of mass self-communication is closer to “electronic autism” than to actual communication. Yet, any post in the Internet, regardless of the intention of its author, becomes a bottle drifting in the ocean of global communication, a message susceptible of being received and reprocessed in unexpected ways. Furthermore, RSS feeds allow the integration and linking of content everywhere. Some version of the Nelsonian Xanadu has now been constituted in the form of a global multimodal hypertext. This includes: low power FM radio stations; TV street networks; an explosion of mobile phones; the low cost, production and distribution capacity of digital video and audio; and nonlinear computer based video editing systems that take advantage of the declining cost of memory space. Key developments are: the growing diffusion of IPTV, p2p video streaming, vlogs (i.e. a blog that includes video), and a flurry of social software programs that have made possible the blossoming of online communities and Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs). There is a growing use of these horizontal networks of communication in the field of mass communication. Certainly, mainstream media are using blogs and interactive networks to distribute their content and interact with their audience, mixing vertical and horizontal communication modes. But there are also a wealth of examples in which the traditional media, such as cable TV, are fed by autonomous production of content using the digital capacity to produce and distribute. In the U.S., one of the best-known examples of this kind is Al Gore’s Current TV, in which content originated by the users, and professionally edited, already accounts for about one-third of the content of the station.<sup>32</sup> Internet-based news media, such as Jinbonet and Ohmy News in

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(urban/rural location), race/ethnicity, gender, level of education, and age remaining significant predictors of broadband Internet access and skill levels. See for example: Tolbert and Mossberger (2006).

<sup>28</sup> (De Rosnay & Faily, 2006; Gillmor, 2004; Drezner & Farrell, 2004; and Cerezo, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> This data was retrieved on Oct. 22, 2006 from [www.technorati.com/about](http://www.technorati.com/about).

<sup>30</sup> (Sifry, 2006).

<sup>31</sup> Moreover, also according to the same Pew survey only 11% of new blogs are for politics (Lenhart & Fox, 2006, p. ii-iii).

<sup>32</sup> Current TV is available on DirectTV, TimeWarner, and Comcast in the United States (in top tier cable packages) and a British version has launched on BSkyB in the United Kingdom. Current also has deals

Korea or Vilaweb in Barcelona, are becoming reliable and innovative sources of information on a mass scale.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the growing interaction between horizontal and vertical networks of communication does not mean that the mainstream media are taking over the new, autonomous forms of content generation and distribution. It means that there is a contradictory process that gives birth to a new media reality whose contours and effects will ultimately be decided through a series of political and business power struggles, as the owners of the telecommunication networks are already positioning themselves to control access and traffic in favor of their business partners, and preferred customers.

The growing interest of corporate media for Internet-based forms of communication is in fact the reflection of **the rise of a new form of socialized communication: mass self-communication**. It is mass communication because it reaches potentially a global audience through the p2p networks and Internet connection. It is multimodal, as the digitization of content and advanced social software, often based on open source that can be downloaded free, allows the reformatting of almost any content in almost any form, increasingly distributed via wireless networks. **And it is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many.** We are indeed in a new communication realm, and ultimately in a new medium, whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive. True, the medium, even a medium as revolutionary as this one, does not determine the content and effect of its messages. But it makes possible the unlimited diversity and the largely autonomous origin of most of the communication flows that construct, and reconstruct every second the global and local production of meaning in the public mind.

### **Mass self-communication and counter-power**

By counter-power I understand the capacity by social actors to challenge and eventually change the power relations institutionalized in society. In all known societies, counter-power exists under different forms and with variable intensity, as one of the few natural laws of society, verified throughout history, asserts that wherever is domination, there is resistance to domination, be it political, cultural, economic, psychological, or otherwise. In recent years, in parallel with the growing crisis of political legitimacy, we have witnessed in most of the world the growth of social movements, coming in very different forms and with sharply contrasted systems of values and beliefs, yet opposed to what they often define as global capitalism.<sup>34</sup> Many also challenge patriarchy on behalf of the rights of women, children and sexual minorities, and oppose to productivism in defense of a holistic vision of the natural

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with Google to update its searches hourly and a content provision contract for four broadband channels with Yahoo video (see: <http://video.yahoo.com/currenttv>).

<sup>33</sup> Jinbonet is South Korea's progressive media network, and is the primary tool for South Korean civil society and social movement communication. However, OhMy News has moved steadily toward centrist politics and a traditional vertical news organization structure. Kim and Hamilton (2006) present an analysis of OhMy news illustrating how it replicates many of the consumerist-based practices of mainstream news publications even as it markets itself as an alternative voice of social activism.

<sup>34</sup> (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; O'Brien, Goetz, Scholte, & Williams, 2000; Kaldor, 2003; Juris, 2004; and Amore, ed., 2005).

environment and an alternative way of life. In much of the world, identity, be it religious, ethnic, territorial, or national, has become source of meaning and inspiration for alternative projects of social organization and institution building. Very often, social movements and insurgent politics reaffirm traditional values and forms, e.g. religion, the patriarchal family or the nation, that they feel betrayed in practice in spite of being inscribed in the forefront of the institutions. In other words, social movements may be progressive or reactionary or just alternative without adjectives. But in all cases they are purposive collective actions aimed at changing the values and interests institutionalized in society, what is tantamount to modify the power relations.<sup>35</sup>

Social movements are a permanent feature of society. But they adopt values and take up organizational forms that are specific to the kind of society where they take place. So, there is a great deal of cultural and political diversity around the world. At the same time, because power relations are structured nowadays in a global network and played out in the realm of socialized communication, social movements also act on this global network structure and enter the battle over the minds by intervening in the global communication process. They think local, rooted in their society, and act global, confronting the power where the power holders are, in the global networks of power and in the communication sphere.<sup>36</sup>

The emergence of mass self-communication offers an extraordinary medium for social movements and rebellious individuals to build their autonomy and confront the institutions of society in their own terms and around their own projects. Naturally, social movements are not originated by technology, they use technology. But technology is not simply a tool, it is a medium, it is a social construction, with its own implications. Furthermore, the development of the technology of self-communication is also the product of our culture, a culture that emphasizes individual autonomy, and the self-construction of the project of the social actor. In fact, my own empirical studies on the uses of the Internet in the Catalan society show that the more an individual has a project of autonomy (personal, professional, socio-political, communicative), the more she uses the Internet. And in a time sequence, the more he/she uses the Internet, the more autonomous she becomes vis-à-vis societal rules and institutions.<sup>37</sup>

Under this cultural and technological paradigm, the social movements of the information age, and the new forms of political mobilization are widely using the means of mass self-communication, although they also intervene in the mainstream mass media as they try to influence public opinion at large. From the survey of communication practices of social movements around the world that we have carried out with Sasha Costanza-Chock, it appears that without the means and ways of mass self-communication, the new movements and new forms of insurgent politics could not be conceived. Of course, there is a long history of communication activism, and social movements have not waited for Internet connection in order to struggle for their goals using every available communication medium.<sup>38</sup> Yet, currently the new means

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<sup>35</sup> (Castells, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> (Juris, 2004; Couldry and Curran, eds., 2003).

<sup>37</sup> (Castells, Tubella et al, 2003; Castells, Tubella et al, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> For a theoretical and historical overview of social movements in communication, see for example: Downing (2001). I also refer here to the proceedings of the International Workshop on Horizontal

of digital communication constitute their most decisive organizational form, in a clear break with the traditional forms of organization of parties, unions and associations of the industrial society, albeit these social actors are now evolving toward the new organizational model built around networked communication. For new social movements, the Internet provides the essential platform for debate, their means of acting on people's mind, and ultimately serves as their most potent political weapon. But social movements do not exist only in the Internet. Local radio and TV stations, autonomous groups of video production and distribution, p2p networks, blogs, and podcasts constitute a variegated interactive network that connects the movement with itself, connects social actors with society at large, and acts on the entire realm of cultural manifestations. Furthermore, movements, in their wide diversity, also root themselves in their local lives, and in face-to-face interaction. And when they act, they mobilize in specific places, often mirroring the places of the power institutions, as when they challenge meetings of WTO, the IMF or the G8 group in the localities of the meetings.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the space of the new social movements of the digital age is not a virtual space, it is a composite of the space of flows and of the space of places, as I tried to argue time ago in my general analysis of the network society.<sup>40</sup> Social movements escaped their confinement in the fragmented space of places and seized the global space of flows, while not virtualizing themselves to death, keeping their local experience and the landing sites of their struggle as the material foundation of their ultimate goal: the restoration of meaning in the new space/time of our existence, made of both flows, places and their interaction. That is building networks of meaning in opposition to networks of instrumentality.

This analysis is supported by a number of recent social trends such as:

- The existence of the global movement against corporate globalization in the Internet, in the network of communication built around Indymedia and its affiliated networks, as forms of information, organization, debate, and action planning.<sup>41</sup> But also the use of symbolic, direct action against the sites of power to impact the mainstream media and through them the mainstream public opinion.

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Networks of Communication, convened by the Annenberg Research Network on International Communication, at the Annenberg Center for Communication, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, Oct. 6-7, 2006.

<sup>39</sup> All of this takes place even though different movement actors have different levels of access to the advanced communication networks. For example, Burch, León, and Tamayo (2004) document how campesino and indigenous organizations in Latin America are connected, but primarily only through email. Furthermore, their email use is often limited to movement leaders at the national or regional level.

<sup>40</sup> (Castells, 2000).

<sup>41</sup> Academic study of online news has so far mostly ignored Indymedia, which is odd given that traffic to the Indymedia network of sites in 2006 is similar to that of the U.S. top-ranked political blog DailyKos. Existing publications on Indymedia include, work by Kidd (2003); Downing (2003); and Juris (2004). Indymedia relies on a global network of committed reporters, that some times pay their service with their lives, as it was the case of Brad Will, an American Indymedia reporter shot and killed by the Mexican gunmen at the service of the governor Ulises Ruiz, while capturing in video the violent repression of grassroots activists in the city of Oaxaca on Oct. 28, 2006.

- The building of autonomous communication networks to challenge the power of the globalized media industry and of government and business controlled media. As it has been the case in Italy with pirate radio stations and street television (e.g. Tele Orfeo), fed by audiovisual material via p2p networks and RSS feeds, to counter the monopoly of Berlusconi over both private and public television networks. Or the spread of activist neighborhood TVs such as Zalea TV in Paris, Okupem les Ones in Barcelona, TV Piquetera in Buenos Aires, and numerous similar experiences around the world.<sup>42</sup>
- The development of autonomous forms of political organizing in political campaigns, including fund raising and mobilization of volunteers to get out the vote, as exemplified in the U.S. presidential primaries by the Howard Dean Campaign in 2003-2004 following the analysis we conducted with Araba Sey.<sup>43</sup> Initiatives such as Dean supporters' use of MeetUp exemplified the ability of networks of affinity to leverage the Internet and to translate virtual affinity into physical vicinity, and community action.<sup>44</sup> True, the defeat of Howard Dean in the primaries showed the strength of traditional media politics vis-à-vis the fragile forms of Internet-based mobilization. But we should not extrapolate too much from a limited experience in which other variables, such as the limitations of the candidate himself, as well as the concern about terrorism in a country at war, also weigh heavily in the voters decision.
- The spread of instant political mobilizations by using mobile phones, supported by the Internet, is changing the landscape of politics. It becomes increasingly difficult for governments to hide or manipulate information. The manipulation plots are immediately picked up and challenged by a myriad of "eye balls," as debate and mobilization are called upon by thousands of people, without central coordination, but with a shared purpose, often focusing on asking or forcing the resignation of governments or government officials. With Mireia Fernandez, Jack Qiu, and Araba Sey, we have analyzed recent experiences of mobilization around the world, from Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, and Nepal to Ecuador, Ukraine, or France, with results as dramatic as the prompting of the electoral defeat of Prime Minister Aznar in Spain on March 14th, 2004, after his attempt to manipulate the public opinion lying about the authors of something as tragic as the Madrid massacre on March 11th backfired at the last minute, thanks to the spontaneous mobilization of Spanish youth armed with their cell phones. But this is not a technological effect, but the ability of network technology to distribute horizontally messages that resonate with the public consciousness in ways that are trustworthy.<sup>45</sup> In December 2005 the first Mobile Active conference met in Canada, bringing activist from around the world to share experience, skills, tools, and tactics on the new landscape of socio-political activism.<sup>46</sup> Action research networks

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<sup>42</sup> O'Connor (2004), Opel (2004), Soley (1999), Tyson (1999), and Ward (2004) among others have documented the long history of the role of pirate or free radios in social movements. There is non-academic work on free TV stations, see the article "Telestreet Movement" by Web of Struggles (2006).

<sup>43</sup> (Sey & Castells 2004).

<sup>44</sup> For a detailed insider description of this process see: Trippi (2004).

<sup>45</sup> (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qui, & Sey, 2004).

<sup>46</sup> See <http://www.mobileactive.org>. More recent developments in the use of mobile phones by social movements involve the enhanced ability of phones to create and transmit content other than SMS. Higher quality photo and video capability in the newest generation of mobile phones has led to several software

are being formed, such as Our Media/Nuestr@s Medios, to diffuse tools, research, and ideas being produced by the new social movements of the information age.<sup>47</sup>

### **The grand convergence: power relations in the new communication space**

The distinction between mass media and mass self-communication has analytical value, but only on the condition to add that the two modes of communication are interacting in the practice of communication, as communication technologies converge. Media businesses aim at positioning themselves in the Internet-mediated communication realm; mainstream media set up direct links to the horizontal network of communication and to their users, so becoming less one-directional in their communication flows, as they relentlessly scan the blogosphere to select themes and issues of potential interest for their audience; actors striving for social change often use the Internet platform as a way to influence the information agenda of mainstream media; and political elites, across the entire political spectrum, increasingly use the ways and means of mass self-communication, because their flexibility, instantaneity, and unfettered capacity to diffuse any kind of material are particularly relevant for the practice of media politics in real time. Therefore, the study of the transformation of power relations in the new communication space must consider the interaction between political actors, social actors, and media business in both the mass media and networked media, as well as in the interconnection between different media that are quickly becoming articulated in a reconfigured media system. I will illustrate these new developments with some examples, while trying to make analytical sense of observed trends with the support of contributions from communication scholars.

#### *Business Media Strategies*

The clearest evidence that corporate media are redirecting their strategies toward the Internet is via their investments. For instance, in 2006 NewsCorp (the media conglomerate headed by Rupert Murdoch) acquired MySpace, a network of virtual communities and personal pages that by mid-2006 counted with over 100 million pages and 77 million subscribers. At a NewsCorp shareholders meeting on Oct. 20, 2006, Murdoch heralded the company's move into the Internet: "to some in the traditional media business, these are the most stressful of times. But to us, these are great times. Technology is liberating us from old constraints, lowering key costs, easing access to new customers and markets, and multiplying the choices we can offer."<sup>48</sup> However, NewsCorp's strategy includes an understanding of the new rules of the game. The key to successfully integrating MySpace into the overall NewsCorp strategy, is to allow MySpace communities to remain free, and set up their own rules, indeed inventing new forms of expression and communication. By attracting millions of people to MySpace, NewsCorp amasses a huge potential advertising market. But this potential has to be used with prudence so that users feel as at home as their parents feel while consuming advertising from television networks in the privacy of their living

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tools that allow people to publish photos, audio, and videos from mobilizations directly to social movement websites.

<sup>47</sup> See <http://www.ourmedianet.org>.

<sup>48</sup> (Murdoch, 2006).

room. As long as NewsCorp does not inhibit the already established pattern of customizability that made MySpace popular in the first place, users may accept the commercialization of their online space.<sup>49</sup>

Other instances of major business deals that merge old and new media for either purchasing or content provision include Google's acquisition of YouTube in October 2006 for 1.6 billion dollars. While at the time of purchase, YouTube, generated little if any revenue, its potential as an advertising venue provided a key source of attraction for Google. In the weeks following the purchase corporations have flocked to YouTube. For example, Burger King launched its own channel on YouTube; Warner Music recently signed a deal to provide music videos via YouTube with embedded advertising; and NBC, who formerly led the charge in forcing YouTube to remove copyrighted content, recently signed a major cross-promotional deal with YouTube. Other media giants are planning to launch similar sites to YouTube. Microsoft is developing its own version; and Kazaa and EBay are developing the Venice Project, a video sharing service built upon p2p technology rather than streaming video.<sup>50</sup>

Corporate investment into YouTube and attempts to control these networks financially also help to ensure the continued success of mainstream media. Now that YouTube has the financial backing of Google, media conglomerates can pressure it to remove copyrighted content (previously YouTube had very little assets so there was nothing to sue). Similarly, MySpace is now a place where NewsCorp can provide and market its movies, television programs, and other content. Moreover, ABC and other mainstream stations are now adapting to the trend toward convergence by providing streaming their televised content free online with embedded advertising.

However, this process of consolidation of networking sites around a few major corporations is not inevitable. There is evidence that smaller less commercial networking sites are becoming increasingly popular and that young people are migrating from larger networks like MySpace (where amassing the largest number of friends/acquaintances was previously the trend) to smaller more elitist networks not readily accessible or locatable by all, (most importantly the parents trying to monitor them).<sup>51</sup>

What we are observing is the coexistence and interconnection of mainstream media, corporately owned new media, and autonomous Internet sites. Here again, the autonomy of networking sites does not imply competition against mainstream media. In fact, networking services can boost the power of traditional media outlets. For example, Digg (now the 24<sup>th</sup> most popular site on the web) can help articles posted on FoxNews.com or the New York Times website move up in the search engine rankings. Because the Digg's demographic is almost entirely upwardly mobile and male (a key advertising target) several

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<sup>49</sup> (Boyd, 2006a; and Newman, 2006); Rupert Murdoch discusses his Internet strategy in a recent interview with *Wired Magazine* (Reiss, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> There are numerous other examples in which mainstream media and Internet companies are seeking to capitalize on the success of start-up Internet-based social communication networks. Yahoo! recently purchased Flickr.com (a photo sharing site), Del.icio.us.com (a social bookmarking website), and is reported to be interested in Digg.com (the hybridized social bookmarking/ news aggregation service).

<sup>51</sup> (Boyd 2006a; and Boyd 2006b).



major companies were trying to buy it at the time of this writing.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Facebook just brokered a deal with mainstream news providers like the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to provide a new service for users that allows them to easily link and feature articles and photos from these sites on their personal pages.

A major reason for the persistence of relatively autonomous social networking sites, regardless of their connections for new media corporate strategies is that the *authentic* nature of these social networking services seems to be critical. For example, AOL tried to launch a rival to Digg by offering the 50 top contributors \$1,000 to start participating in their version. It failed. Users want to trust their spaces of sociability, and feel a personal connection to their sites. Furthermore, the “cool factor,” that is the cultural construction of the social space to the taste of its users, is of essence. Companies trying to position themselves into this new media market brand the websites they acquire very discretely, or not at all, so that users while exposed to new ads will not be fully aware they are using a corporate product and are less likely to migrate elsewhere. Therefore, it seems to be a better business strategy for old media companies to buy innovative networking services than to initiate them. The result is that rather than separation between old and new media, or absorption of the latter by the former, we observe their networking.

#### *Electoral Politics in the Age of the Multimodal Internet*

In the traditional theory of political communication political influence through the media is largely determined by the interaction between the political elites (in their plurality) and professional journalists. Media act as gatekeepers of the information flows that shape public opinion.<sup>53</sup> Elihu Katz (1997) emphasized the transformation of the media environment through the fragmentation of the audience, and the increasing control that new communication technologies give to the consumers of the media. The growing role of on-line, multimodal social networking accelerates this transformation. According to Williams and Delli Carpini (2004), the new media environment disrupts the traditional “single axis system” of political influence and creates a fluid “multi-axis” of power in three ways: (1) The expansion of politically relevant media and the blurring of news and entertainment has led to a struggle within the media itself for the role of authoritative gatekeeper of scandals. (2) The expansion of media outlets and the move to a 24-hour news cycle have created new opportunities for non-mainstream political actors to influence the setting and framing of the political agenda (as in the case of Matt Drudge bypassing the mainstream media via his Drudge Report on-line, to start the Monica Lewinsky scandal that CBS and other media suppressed for about two weeks). Twenty-four hour cable news outlets now not only gather news as fast as possible but also broadcast it rapidly as well, effectively eliminating the role of editors in the news production process. And (3) this changed media environment has created new opportunities and pitfalls for the public to enter and interpret the political world. According to Williams and Delli Carpini, the rise of cell phones, videogames, ipods, and other new technologies has broken down the binary between media and the rest of everyday life on which most of political communication used to rest.

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<sup>52</sup> Digg is a user-powered news content site – users post news stories and links. Other users vote on them – pushing some up on the site and others deemed less interesting irrelevant (Lacy & Hempel 2006).

<sup>53</sup> (Peterson, 1956; Iyengar, 1994).

In line with this analysis, observation of recent trends shows that the political uses of the Internet have substantially increased with the diffusion of broadband, and the increasing pervasiveness of social networking in the Internet.<sup>54</sup> Some times the aim of political actors in using the Internet is to bypass the media and quickly distribute a message. In the majority of cases the purpose is to provoke media exposure by posting a message or an image in the hope that the media will pick it up. The 2006 U.S. Congressional election was marked by a sudden explosion of new media uses by candidates, parties, and pressure groups across the entire political spectrum. The sharp polarization of the country around the Iraq war and around issues of social values coincided with the generalization of mass self-communication networks. Thus, the campaign marked a turning point in the forms of media politics in the United States and probably in the world at large. Countless politicians (most notably, Congressman Nancy Pelosi) posted videos on Youtube and set up pages on Myspace.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, there is increasing use by the political agency of these networks—using them as a tool—particularly for scandal politics. A common practice consists in sending trackers to shadow the opponents' public appearances, recording his words and gestures, in the hope to produce a damaging video that is immediately posted on a popular website. It has become customary to post either on Youtube or similar sites embarrassing clips of opponent, some times recording a direct hit on the targeted candidate.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> (Sey & Castells, 2004)

<sup>55</sup> (Cassidy, July 11, 2006). There are multiple examples of politicians using YouTube either as a position platform or an weapon against their opponent with varying levels of success. For example, in the United Kingdom, Conservative leader David Cameron has launched his own vlog called WebCameron ([www.webcameron.org.uk](http://www.webcameron.org.uk)) networked via YouTube in which he talks about the new Conservative platform while conducting mundane tasks like washing the dishes or tending to his baby. In early October 2006, a Labor party backbencher Sion Simon posted a spoof of WebCameron on YouTube. After the Guardian picked up the story the number of views of the spoof video skyrocketed from 250 to 50,000 in under 24 hours time (Sweney, Oct. 13, 2006). In late October another anonymous spoof site [www.webcameron.org](http://www.webcameron.org) appeared. The site provides links to YouTube spoofs and sites its mission as "seeking to expose the shallow, insincere image-politics of David Cameron." In another example of the political uses of YouTube, in Minnesota, E-Democracy hosted the first-ever exclusively online Gubernatorial debate on YouTube between Oct. 9-19, 2006. All candidates participated via video streaming and were asked to debate four major themes and then to answer 10 questions provided by citizens. Citizens were then invited to comment on their statements either via text message, video response, or comment posting (see <http://www.e-democracy.org/edebatemn06/>).

<sup>56</sup> The most high profile case of "YouTube politics" involved the posting of a video in which Virginia Senator George Allen says to a man of Indian descent "Let's give a welcome to Macaca [a racially charged term for Monkey] here. Welcome to America." The video unleashed a full-fledged mainstream media scandal and facilitated investigations into Allen's racist past. In another example, Florida Congressional Republican candidate Tramm Hudson lost his primary after a video of him was posted on [redstate.com](http://redstate.com) (a networking and blog site for republicans). In the video he said: "I know this from my own experience that blacks are not the greatest swimmers or may not even know how to swim." The video was posted on a Thursday, made headlines in the local media by Friday, and on Tuesday, the once-unknown Tramm Hudson was already a punch line on "The Daily Show." in TV (CBS.com, September 26, 2006); YouTube politics may also have implications for transnational politics. For example, a short clip of George W. Bush rubbing the

The new media politics shows remarkable capacity to innovate, following the steps of the culture of social networking reinvented every day by web users. For instance, in October 2006, political strategists in the U.S. launched HotSoup.com an online community that allows users to create profiles, publish messages, and post images. Its first homepage featured five panelists sharing their viewpoints on a single issue. HotSoup.com's founders include former Clinton press secretary Joe Lockhart, and Matthew Dowd, chief strategist for the 2004 Bush presidential campaign, in a significant attempt by political professionals to ride the tiger of "youtube politics." MSNBC recently signed a partnership deal with HotSoup involving the creation of a cross-linked political forum where users can debate issues and the regular appearance of HotSoup panelists on MSNBC programs. In another expression of the migration of media politics into the Internet' social space, MySpace.com set up a voter registration drive in the weeks preceding the 2006 election.<sup>57</sup>

Overall, electoral campaigns have become, using Philip Howard's (2006) term, "hypermedia campaigns", thus changing the dynamics, forms, and content of media politics.

#### *GrassRoots Politics and the New Media*

Bennett (2003) has identified the changes facilitated by new media technologies in the realm of political communication. As he wrote, "mass media news outlets are struggling mightily with changing gatekeeping standards due to demands for interactive content produced by audiences themselves. As consumer-driven content progresses beyond chats and click polls, new possibilities arise for high-quality political information governed by more democratic and less elite standards. Technologically savvy activists are writing software that enables automated and democratic publishing and editing. Ordinary people are empowered to report on their political experiences while being held to high standards of information quality and community values. In the long run, these trends maybe the most revolutionary aspects of the new media environment."<sup>58</sup>

However, if there is such a revolution it may come in unexpected formats, not necessarily abiding to high standards of information quality. New media politics creates new political tricks. Thus, according to the Pew Internet and American Life project, the most frequent political use of the Internet by citizens is to search for information about candidates they have little knowledge. Bloggers and campaign staffers have responded to this trend by using Google Bombing – meaning that bloggers have launched frequent attempts to alter search term results by linking political issues to damning key words. For example, in

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel's shoulders originally screened on Russian television would most likely have remained out of the media sphere. However, after the clip was posted on YouTube it became an international news story. As of October 2006, if you put in the search terms Bush and Merkel, the YouTube video is the first thing to appear. Indeed, YouTube is not only a U.S. phenomenon. According to the Internet analysts ComScore, in July 2006, YouTube provided nearly 3 billion video streams worldwide, less than ¼ of which streamed to U.S. locations. On an average daily basis for the month, 96 million streams were served worldwide, and 21 million in the U.S.

<sup>57</sup> See <http://www.myspace.com/declareyourself>.

<sup>58</sup> (Bennett 2003, p. 35).

2002, bloggers posted numerous links between George W. Bush's biography and the search term "miserable failure" and Tony Blair is now indexed to the word "liar." In the U.S, in 2006, a sex columnist also launched a Google bomb against the publicly homophobic Senator Rick Santorum by urging other bloggers to use a new definition for the word Santorum that related to homosexual sex. A search for santorum will now result in the appearance of several highly ranked websites about homosexuality and sexual deviance. In France, groups opposed to the DADVSI copyright bill, proposed by minister Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, mounted a Google bombing campaign linking the bill to *ministre blanchisseur* ("laundering minister") and an article chronicling Donnedieu de Vabres' conviction for money laundering. While survey data shows that mainstream and corporate websites tend to be the most visited – this "Google bombing" in effect combats this trend by altering the perception, if not the reality of the most important news and views available to web users. Other expressions of this new form of alternative info-politics is the use of spoof websites: for example whitehouse.org is a anti-Bush humor website. Whitehouse.com was a pornography site until the Clinton's White House brought legal challenges.<sup>59</sup>

In broader terms, a number of studies, including Shah et. al (2005) find strong evidence that Internet usage facilitates civic engagement.

#### *The Interplay Between Political Actors in the New Communication Realm*

The observations presented above illustrate the interplay of business, political actors, and grassroots activists in the new forms of communication, increasingly articulated to the traditional mass media. Thus, there is double process of convergence: technological and political. All political actors are present in both the mass media and in the networks of mass self-communication, and all aim at finding bridges between the two media systems to maximize their influence on the public opinion. In this new context, Williams and Delli Carpini sum up the ongoing debate in the field of political communication when they write, "optimistically we believe that the erosion of gatekeeping and the emergence of multiple axes of information provide new opportunities for citizens to challenge elite control of political issues. Pessimistically we are skeptical of the ability of ordinary citizens to make use of these opportunities and suspicious of the degree to which even multiple axes of power are still shaped by more fundamental structures of economic and political power."<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, in this article I have shown that corporate media are fully present in the horizontal networks of communication, and that grassroots activists and social movements are not alone in the effective use of these networks to communicate among themselves and with society. Furthermore, the structures of power are rooted in the structure of society. However, these power structures are reproduced and challenged by cultural battles that are fought to a large extent in the communication realm. And it is plausible to think that the capacity of social actors to set up autonomously their political agenda is greater in the networks of mass self-communication than in the corporate world of the mass media. While the old struggle for social domination and counter-domination continues in the new media

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<sup>59</sup> See Greenfield (2006) for a description of plans by political bloggers to use Google bombs during the November 2006 election and Lizza (August 20, 2006) for journalistic analysis on YouTube politics.

<sup>60</sup> (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004, p. 1209).

space, the structural bias of this space toward the powers that be is being diminished every day by the new social practices of communication.

### **Conclusion: communication as the public space of the network society**

Societies evolve and change by deconstructing their institutions under the pressure of new power relationships and constructing new sets of institutions that allow people to live side by side without self-destroying, in spite of their contradictory interests and values. Societies exist as societies by constructing a public space in which private interests and projects can be negotiated to reach an always unstable point of shared decision making toward a common good, within a historically given social boundary. In the industrial society, this public space was built around the institutions of the nation-state that, under the pressure of democratic movements and class struggle, constructed an institutional public space based on the articulation between a democratic political system, an independent judiciary, and a civil society connected to the state.<sup>61</sup> The twin processes of globalization and the rise communal identities have challenged the boundaries of the nation state as the relevant unit to define a public space. Not that the nation-state disappears (quite the opposite), but its legitimacy has dwindled as governance is global and governments remain national. And the principle of citizenship conflicts with the principle of self-identification. The result is the observed crisis of political legitimacy. The crisis of legitimacy of the nation-state involves the crisis of the traditional forms of civil society, in the Gramscian sense, largely dependent upon the institutions of the state. But there is no social and political vacuum. Our societies continue to perform socially and politically by shifting the process of formation of the public mind from political institutions to the realm of communication, largely organized around the mass media. Ingrid Volkmer (2003) has theorized the emergence of communication as the public sphere in our kind of society and has investigated the emergence of global communication networks, built around mass media, as the incipient global public sphere. To a large extent, political legitimacy has been replaced by communication framing of the public mind in the network society, as Amelia Arsenault and myself have tried to argue empirically in an article on the communication strategy of the Bush Administration concerning the Iraq war.<sup>62</sup>

I am extending this analytical perspective to the historical dynamics of counter-power, as new forms of social change and alternative politics emerge, by using the opportunity offered by new horizontal communication networks of the digital age that is the technical and organizational infrastructure that is specific of the network society. Therefore, not only public space becomes largely defined in the space of communication, but this space is an increasingly contested terrain, as it expresses the new historical stage in which a new form of society is being given birth, as all previous societies, through conflict, struggle, pain, and often violence. New institutions will eventually develop, creating a new form of public space, still unknown to us, but they are not there yet. What scholarly research can observe is the attempt by the holders of power to reassert their domination into the communication realm, once they acknowledged the decreasing capacity of institutions to channel the projects and demands from people around the world. This attempt at new forms of control uses primarily the mass media. On the other hand, dominant elites are confronted by the social movements, individual autonomy projects, and insurgent politics that find a

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<sup>61</sup> (Habermas, 1976).

<sup>62</sup> (Arsenault & Castells, 2006).

more favorable terrain in the emerging realm of mass self-communication. Under such circumstances, a new round of power making in the communication space is taking place, as power holders have understood the need to enter the battle in the horizontal communication networks. This means surveilling the Internet as in the U.S., using manual control of email messages when robots cannot do the job, as in the latest developments in China, treating Internet users as pirates and cheaters, as in much of the legislation of the European Union, buying social networking web sites to tame their communities, owning the network infrastructure to differentiate access rights, and endless other means of policing and framing the newest form of communication space.

Thus, as in previous historical periods, the emerging public space, rooted in communication, is not predetermined in its form by any kind of historical fate or technological necessity. It will be the result of the new stage of the oldest struggle in humankind: the struggle to free our minds.

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