

Some Social, Political and Theological Perspectives on the New Media

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The electronic media or Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), which are associated with computers, the internet and the web, are leading to significant transformation of the economy, both in production and in consumption, and consequently of wider aspects of life.

A few years ago this transformation was exaggerated, with unrealistic and inflated expectations, some over-optimistic and others over-pessimistic (including the anticipated collapse of capitalism – is that over-optimistic or over-pessimistic?). This has been followed by a deflation of expectation, in part associated with the bursting of the e-investment bubble. Now there is a danger of *underestimating* the actual and potential transformation both of economy and of life.

The development of the technologies is rapid, and although access to them is far from universal, being uneven and largely confined to the ‘north’ or ‘developed’ world, it is also expanding rapidly. The technological advance is such that those in their teens are leaving behind those in their twenties and so on through the deciles.

The uses and effects of ICTs, as of all tools, are a matter of human choice and can be either benign or malign, though it may be that good outcomes take more human effort than

bad. For example, the individual citizen may use them in order to be open to a wide range of information and so to be much engaged in the affairs of the world; equally she may use them to select a narrow range of information and filter out all else, reading only 'The Daily Me', and thus be *disengaged* from the affairs of the world. Similarly they may be instruments in the hands of citizens who wish to change the power relations in their society or instruments in the hands of their rulers who wish to maintain the existing relations. In other words, they will tend to reflect the environing pattern of power, whether it be in flux or stable.

One illustration of this concerns the civil service. For a long time in representative democracy there have been two classes, the political class, that is, the parliamentarians, whose members have been visible and removable, and an administrative class, that is, the civil service, whose members have been invisible and immovable. The wider the franchise has become, the more entrenched the latter have become. But ICTs are now making them and their work transparent and accountable, bringing them out into the public domain. This may reduce their relative power; alternatively they may respond to it by engaging with the public in a way which leaves the politicians behind, thus forming a *new configuration of power*.

The over-optimism and over-pessimism attached to ICTs have been associated with large philosophies or world-views. Along with other modern technologies, they have played a role in both utopian and 'dystopian' thinking. The utopian visions of their potential have at times had a mystical or millennial quality, with their apparent transcendence of physicality and their 'virtual' character even being interpreted as promising infinite knowledge and immortal existence, and there have almost been echoes of Plato's forms or Teilhard de Chardin's noösphere. In this way the disenchantment associated with modernity has

been reversed in a re-enchantment. At the same time and by contrast, these modern technologies have been regarded as highly dangerous, sources of darkness rather than light, enslaving rather than liberating, as in Heidegger's writings in the 1950s on the nihilistic 'darkening of the world' through the demonic reification of technology so that it becomes master not servant. Such dystopian thinking is a deepening of disenchantment.

The truth is probably in neither of these views. The hopes of the one and the fears of the other are alike excessive. There is a position on the nature of the relationship of human beings to their technology which is somewhere in the middle, between instrumentalism, according to which technology is merely human beings' instrument and therefore subordinate to them, and determinism, according to which technology determines their life, rendering them subordinate to it. According to this middle position, human beings have a 'reflexive' or 'substantive' relation with both their environment and their technology, so that the three – humans, nature and machines – are all interconnected. Human personhood is not separate or detached from materiality (in a 'defended self' or 'essential humanity'); personhood is defined by space, time and bodily boundaries. So there is a mutual embeddedness or complicity between humans, nature and machines. Humans invest and embed themselves in their technologies, so that machines can be said to be full of human beings because full of human labour; then in the reciprocity of interaction the technologies embed themselves in the humans, shaping their environment, their culture and their life; the relation of technology to humanity is thus not determinist but determinate. If there is this kind of blending interaction between humans and machines and between humans and nature, there is a not dissimilar blending between machines and nature.

This discussion of the relation between human beings and their tools could be further illuminated by a very early

yet highly sophisticated human tool, namely, language, an instrument which is clearly also a culture and an environment and therefore an important item of human embedding in both the active and the passive senses.

This 'middle' position is congruent with a theology of humanity or theological anthropology based on the *imago dei*. On this view, humans are both originate and derivative, being both creative and creaturely (or cocreative), both free and dependent, both capable and fragile.

A major social change, which has been taking place in North America, Europe, Japan and Australia, has been described as 'dispersal of community'; this is a change from *groups* to *networks*. The inner structure of these societies is becoming less a set of discrete groups relating to one another as groups and more a set of diffused and overlapping networks in which individuals relate to one another as individuals. In this new pattern, people's identities are multiple rather than singular, as they tend to belong to many networks rather than to one group and do so more loosely. This is accompanied by a movement 'indoors', with a shift of the location of the significant social component from workplace to household to individual. ICTs appear to be consonant with this development; they do not cause it, for it is a wider phenomenon and it started earlier; but they assist it.

This 'dispersal of community' and its replacement by networks awaits assessment for gains and losses. One apparent loss is suggested by the Pauline image of the physical body for a community such as the Church; according to this image, multiple functions are integrally combined in a working unity of diversity. The possibility of such interfunctionality or acting as a body is fairly clear in, say, a church congregation, but not in a network. This is one question over networks, whether in general or more specifically associated with ICTs.

Analysis of the ownership and usage of ICTs around the world shows a number of 'digital divides'; in other words some categories of people have access while other do not. Three main factors are socio-economic status, political liberty and knowledge of English; for lack of access is associated with being poor or living in an illiberal society or not knowing English (which has become overwhelmingly the main medium).

Two other factors which were initially significant but are becoming less so are age and gender; what tended earlier to be the preserve of young males now involves old as well as young and women as well as men (though in Scotland there is still a male preponderance and a noticeable absence of over-60s). Level of education is becoming less important. Doubtless there are other factors, which may or may not have been measured. It seems, for example, that in Scotland single people are greater users than the married and cohabitant. Owners are not to be equated with users; one estimate in North America is that out of half a billion people 'on-line' a quarter billion do not use the facility. Given the great variations between countries in culture and custom, there is likely to be considerable variation in ICT usage; for example, in Catalonia, though 35 per cent are on-line, usage is low, which may reflect the popular custom of eating out in the evening!

Research into the social effects of ICTs is largely confined to North America (with the notable exception of the University of Essex) and is inevitably tentative given the relative newness of this development. However, it has had some fairly clear results. A main feature of the effects on social interaction is that ICT links have not replaced either telephone or face-to-face links but have been added to them, with the latter continuing substantially at the same level. So social linkages have grown in volume and velocity. (It has been noted that a high proportion of email communication, as well as by mobile telephone, is personal

i.e. between kin and friends.) It appears that this growth in the quantity of interaction has not adversely affected its quality, except that it seems that communication by email, with its absence of visual contact, is rather harsher. By contrast, there is evidence of some reduction in the quality of intra-household relations, with less face-to-face communication and some strain on relations.

The use of ICTs for citizen participation in the political process could be called e-democracy. There is a view that e-democracy and parliamentary democracy do not readily mix, because parliamentary democracy, at least as at present, is a process for centralising politics, managing its demands and simplifying its complexity, by reducing choices and aggregating opinions and generally gatekeeping, and is therefore resistant to the unmanageable, decentralising and complexifying potential of e-democracy, which would tend to break the circle of the electoral chain of command, which involves tight links of representation from-elector-to-parliament-to-government and thence of accountability from-government-to-parliament-to-elector.

If there is such a conflict, ICTs may be used by the present political system to control political communication, to influence public opinion and to keep electors under surveillance. Contrariwise they may be used by those dissatisfied with the present system to produce a new politics that reflects the richness and complexity of life and the negotiated, multiple and transnational nature of identities and communities.

The existing system of parliamentary democracy is in fact being criticised, because of its centralising, controlling, narrowing and oversimplifying tendencies, coupled with more particular features such as powerful party discipline, the subordination of parliament to executive, the displacement of much decision-making to policy networks, as well as the excessive influence of the unelected media.

The system of parliamentary democracy is also being questioned in a more radical way by those who wish the state to be slimmed down. To some it should be no more than an arbiter of what is just. To others justice itself is no more than an agreed set of procedures and the state therefore no more than an aggregation of those procedures. To yet others – the out-and-out postmodernists – both justice and the state dissolve even further into mutual respect for incommensurable interests and views.

Associated with this is a radical redefinition of citizenship. It is claimed that whereas nineteenth-century models of citizenship presupposed a single omniscient state jurisdiction, each individual is now a citizen of a multiplicity of constituencies, geographical and non-geographical, some of which come and go. It might be retorted that membership of multiple and fluid constituencies does not mean multiple and fluid citizenship, since citizenship implies some overall polity and constituency, without which power cannot be authorised and accountable, indeed without which the common world and the common good dissolve.

However, two less extreme and probably more widely held views are that e-democracy and parliamentary democracy, though to some extent in conflict, can coexist, uncomfortably perhaps but nonetheless creatively, or that there is no conflict at all between them, so that ICTs can quite smoothly bring benefits to parliamentary democracy.

On the assumption that there can be such a creative and beneficial relationship between ICTs and existing political processes and that in this sense ICTs can enhance representative democracy, making it also participatory democracy or citizen democracy, what are the beneficial uses? Again, opinion is broadly divided in two, between more modest and more ambitious hopes, that is, between 'revivalists' who see ICTs putting new life and vigour into the *existing* practices and procedures and 'reformers' or

perhaps 'transformers' who see them creating quite *new* practices and procedures. (One should add that a third and even more radical view, associated with the already mentioned view that the state is obsolete, is that ICTs should neither revitalise nor reform existing political processes but replace them entirely.)

Four kinds of ICT enhancement of parliamentary democracy can be envisaged. They form a progression or ladder, moving from intra-parliamentary mode to increasingly intense extra-parliamentary modes in the sense of interaction between parliament and citizens.

The first mode of ICT use improves internal parliamentary procedures by giving parliamentarians electronic access to (1) library and information services (2) expert sources (3) agendas, minutes, draft bills, etc., and, through electronic voting for both (4) parliamentary votes and (5) (externally) parliamentary elections.

The second mode improves communication from parliament to citizens by giving the latter electronic information about (1) parliamentarians' availability, voting, positions (2) parties' manifestos and their candidates' positions (3) parliamentary proceedings, votes, documents, drafts and reports, and by webcasting parliamentary proceedings.

The third mode improves interaction between parliament and citizens, that is, two-way communication between them, by (1) exchange of e-mail correspondence between parliamentarians and citizens and (2) on-line mutual advice bureaux.

The fourth mode involves more intense interaction or two-way communication whereby citizens become participative and in that sense more internal to the process and less on the outside looking in. Its forms can include on-line participation in (1) election hustings (2) petitions and campaigns (3) focus groups (4) discussion forums (5) citizen juries and deliberative panels (6) proceedings of parliamentary committees.

ICTs are called the *new* media to contrast them with the not-so-new media of press and broadcasting. The latter have certainly become central to the political process and not necessarily to its benefit. It has been said that this form of mass media, at least as it has developed, has become like a rushing torrent or self-consuming wave, that it is monopolistic and narcissistic, that it commodifies information and, worst of all, that it blots out thought and memory. It is claimed that by contrast ICTs, which can keep a complete archive, can be instruments of thought and memory (working indeed with a different kind of time), can be genuinely interactive, can overcome the national myopia of most of the mass media, and above all can break the latter's monopoly. The strongest critics of the mass media claim that they are eroding public culture, whereas ICTs have the capacity to enhance it.

This case for ICTs to make up for the deficiencies or even counteract the damaging effects of the more conventional media has been made particularly sharply in Scotland, on grounds of the unrepresentative political stance of many of the newspapers and the absence of appropriately localised television news coverage.

Scotland has been praised for its traditions of 'moral community' and 'democratic intellect'. These express the truth that politics and citizenship are an engagement that is both social and intellectual; they are about a people thinking together. This brings out that a major part of politics is deliberation. Of course it is also about decision-making and decision-implementing; but a prerequisite of both is deliberation, which provides them, as it were, with their oxygen. If this distinction is recognised, the fear of some parliamentarians, that participative or citizen democracy is a threat to representative democracy and therefore to them, can be dispelled. The fact that the many, the citizens, engage in deliberation is no infringement of the prerogative of the

few, the parliamentarians, to decide and to implement those decisions.

Scotland, as well as having a new parliament and executive, also has an instrument which is particularly designed to help develop citizen democracy or 'negotiated governance' and so specialises in deliberation. It is the Scottish Civic Forum, which is officially recognised by the Scottish Executive, though not as yet by the Scottish Parliament. Though constitutionally it is a partnership of non-governmental organisations, its function is not to represent those organisations far less to make representation ('lobby') on their behalf to the Parliament or the Executive. Its function is to be an open space, hence 'forum', for the widest possible public deliberation on public affairs, including but not solely those which are or may be the subject of legislation or other governmental or parliamentary action. This deliberation is open to all citizens, hence 'civic'; it follows from this that it is open to parliamentarians, who do not cease to be citizens on election. It could be said that the Forum's aim is to help surround politics with an atmosphere of public discourse, thus giving political decision-making the oxygen of civic deliberation. It has not so far given special attention to the use of ICTs in the service of citizen deliberation, but it is now being encouraged to do so and, as it were, to 'elongate' its forum sessions into a more continuous 'e-forum'.

The Scottish Parliament itself has a high level of ICT output, probably as high as any parliament anywhere, as Neal Ascherson's contribution to this volume indicates. This includes website, webcast, forums and public access points (in libraries). However, this high output is met with low uptake, through lack of publicity and of user-friendliness, with an absence of thematising and indexing and the like. It is arguable that information is confused with interaction and that there is a 'vomiting' of too much too undigested.

An interesting sidelight on the Scottish Parliament and ICT use is that ICT users in Scotland have greater confidence in the Scottish Parliament and Executive than non-users, and the more intense the usage, the greater the confidence. By contrast, the intensive users and the non-users have less confidence in the UK Parliament and Executive than the moderate users. One can only speculate on the reasons for this correlation between increasing ICT use and increasing confidence in the Scottish institutions; is it a consequence of the Scottish Parliament's own highly developed use of ICTs? or is it that the Scottish Parliament is living up to the widespread hope that it would be better than the UK Parliament at encouraging democratic participation? or what?

The Scottish Executive is also active in relation to ICTs. It has a 'Digital Inclusion' policy. Its unit for this purpose has six aims: educating the public, focusing on what ICTs can do (not how they work); increasing access, from Scotland's current level of 36 per cent (compared with England's 42 per cent and the USA's 50 per cent) to 100 per cent by 2005; developing skills; creating 'digital communities', at the time of writing as a pilot project freely giving the facilities to every household in one urban and one rural area; encouraging business use; creating public access points, in shops, banks, pubs, bus stations, etc., 200 at the time of writing, with a target of 1,000.

A recurring theme in the discussion of the the use of ICTs is that they can be either an aid or an alibi for change and that they must be seen within the wider context of the many forms of human communication and interaction and relationship and above all in the context of human will. Change in institutions does not come easily, given their inherent inertia and the vested interests in the status quo. The Scottish Parliament and Executive, like other institutions, are liable to the temptation to treat ICTs as an alibi for citizen participation rather than as an aid to

it. This happens if in the other forms of communication, face-to-face, telephonic and other, the institutions are not open and transparent and engaging. One aspect of this is that ICTs can be, as it were, too cheap a form of communication for the sender in that a large proportion of responsibility and cost is with the recipient. None of this is to imply that ICT communication does not have its special contribution or to suggest that the different forms of communication can be easily put on a scale of value. For example, abused women may find ICT communication with the abuser preferable to face-to-face communication, and the Samaritans find that some desperate people prefer ICT to the telephone.

At least one Scottish parliamentarian (MSP) considers the main issue to be the need for change in the whole understanding and practice of interaction between politicians and the people. This MSP longs for politicians to have 'engagement *with*' and 'dialogue *with*' citizens rather than 'consultation *of*' or even 'participation *of*' them. The present consultations are unsatisfactory, as they are too many, too perfunctory and too paper based, and consequently overloading, mechanical and a 'comfort blanket' for the politicians with their semblance of openness. Real openness between politicians and citizens involves engagement and dialogue in a continuous or iterative process rather than in a disjointed series of isolated episodes (e.g. there should be use of the more sustained methods of market research rather than one-off requests for opinion). This criticism of the present practice of consultation is related to two other concerns. One is the danger of regarding the politicians' role as being simply to follow the public and not also to lead it; the politicians' response to the dialogue and engagement with citizens should be to *appropriate* what they hear, not necessarily to accept it (and presumably for the citizens to appropriate what *they* hear). The other is the tendency to focus too much attention on the process of

forming and legislating policy to the neglect of the process of *implementing* and making it operational.

Paradoxically, politicians' greater openness and information-*giving*, by exposing weaknesses of government, has undermined confidence in it; does a public that receives more information need more education in the use of it? At the same time, politicians' greater information-*receiving* through the advent of ICTs (those endless emails) has added to their time overload.

The MSP also considers that politicians are increasingly constrained by media that are cynical about politics and tend to misdescribe healthy debate and disagreement as unhealthy division and disloyalty. Excessive party discipline, which may reflect loss of party ideological identity, colludes with this debasement, trivialisation and oversimplification of political discourse.

Scottish standards for governance have been set by the Consultative Steering Group, a body which, at the time of the creation of the Scottish Parliament and Executive, laid out four criteria for them, namely, accessibility, accountability, equal opportunity and power sharing. This has tended to become, in the absence of a proper constitution, a surrogate one; it was never intended to be so, having a more specific and properly limited purpose. There is need for a genuine constitution or supreme law, if there is to be full citizen democracy (with 'citizens' not 'subjects'). In this regard, one proposal is that there be a Scottish Constitutional eConvention.

Questions of jurisdiction, authorisation and accountability may arise in relation to the governance of ICT communication. The International Committee for Assigned Names and Numbers is a potential instrument of governance of the internet in the interests of its users; but the method of election to it is uncertain and there is as yet no 'internet public' in any constituted sense. Some fear that in the absence of such a public or publics, large

corporations or large states may take over the effective governance.

If ICTs are to be a real help to citizen participation or e-democracy, in the sense of enabling citizens effectively to influence political decision-making, a great deal of work needs to be put into design. This is a clear message from www.openDemocracy.net, a London-based ICT global channel 'for knowledge, participation and understanding that gives a depth of coverage to the ideas and issues that shape society but are given only scant attention in conventional media'. In this context at least, content cannot be separated from form, which could be said to be the relationship that content has to people. Self-articulation by the many, as they 'find their voice', is essential, but it is not good enough if it does not advance the argument, if it is only 'noise'. To produce the quality that is required to make a difference, that is, to affect decision-making, it is necessary, for example, to edit or moderate the input without misrepresenting it, in order both to enable further development of the argument by the many and to assist the ultimate decision-making by the few. Designing ICT programmes for e-democracy is a high-level skill. Any new Scottish initiatives will require to give it great attention.