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**THE NEW SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE RESHAPING OF COMMUNICATION
IN THE 21ST CENTURY:
CHANCE OR CHALLENGE FOR DIALOGUE?**

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A summary of this analysis was presented at the 10th Annual Session of the Rhodes Forum (6 October 2012) and at the 9th Doha Conference on Interfaith Dialogue (25 October 2011).

ABSTRACT

The advent of the internet has been hailed as the beginning of an era of virtually unlimited communication where the human potential can be more fully explored. However, in view of the literally “worldwide” political ramifications, a reality check seems appropriate, especially as regards the impact of the new interactive tools on the perception of social reality. The *instrumental* nature of Web 2.0, and with it the *ambiguity* of its use, often appears to be overlooked. In actual fact, typical characteristics of crowd behaviour such as suggestibility, impulsiveness, or irritability, tend to be magnified in the framework of the “digital crowd.” Those phenomena, diagnosed by Gustave Le Bon more than a century ago, may also be an unintended consequence of automated communication and news distribution. The features of the new technology tend to encourage advocacy or propaganda, rallying around a common cause on the basis of an emotional mindset of “us versus the others,” and to a much lesser extent a balanced or neutral attitude. If we want to assess the new media’s potential for dialogue, which is the essence of communication, we will first have to evaluate their consequences, unintended or not, in terms of mass psychology. Internet literacy has to be complemented by an awareness of the net’s social impact and a new ethics of communication.

(I) Idea and reality of communication

At the beginning of the 21st century it has become fashionable to describe, and propagate, the new interactive tools of communication, referred to as “Web 2.0,” as a kind of recipe for the advancement of democracy and human rights, the furthering of dialogue among social groups, and, ultimately, for the achievement of peace at the global level. The electronic media that enable users to be consumers and producers of information at the same time are portrayed almost as a magic wand that could change the very nature of human society. As Marshall McLuhan did in the 1960s, the cyber-utopians of today again seem to confuse method and content, the technical means of communication (which have no intrinsic value as such) and the message that is conveyed through them. Asserting that “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action,”¹ McLuhan appears to have overlooked (or deliberately ignored?) the human being’s conscious control, and moral responsibility, for how the medium is used. His prophetic slogan – “The medium is the message”² – resonates in today’s many proclamations of a paradigm change supposedly brought about in terms of the construction of social life, or the “reinvention” of man as ζῷον πολιτικόν (*zoon politikón*) in this era of global connectivity.

The tendency to overestimate the social empowerment due to the use of internet technology was also evident in programmatic remarks of U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: “Once you’re on the internet, you don’t need to be a tycoon or a rock star to have a huge impact on society.”³ Similarly, in an interview for the German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*, William Dutton,⁴ reflecting on the events that triggered the “Arab spring,” recognized as typical feature of the assumedly *egalitarian* worldwide web that an individual person, almost instantaneously, is in a position to use an infrastructure that is available to all at the same time.⁵ In his analysis, the internet crowd has become a power *sui generis*, independent also from the mainstream media. He even refers to the internet as the “Fifth Estate,” able to challenge the established powers at any moment, and making democracy more “pluralistic.”⁶ Similarly, Google’s Jared Cohen,⁷ in remarks to the New York Times’ Roger Cohen, describes the “impact” of the “unstoppable connectivity” of the internet as

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The extensions of man*. London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2001, p. 9.

² Op. cit., title of Part I, Chapter 1.

³ “Remarks on Internet Freedom.” *Remarks / Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, The Newseum, Washington, DC, January 21, 2010*, www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm, accessed on 6 August 2011.

⁴ William Dutton is Director of the Oxford Internet Institute (UK).

⁵ “Macht der tausend Augen.” Spiegel-Gespräch, *Der Spiegel* 31/2011, p. 101.

⁶ Loc. cit., p. 102.

⁷ Jared Cohen is Director of Google Ideas. Previously he served as a member of the Policy Planning Staff of the U.S. Secretary of State.

“completely disruptive to every polity.”⁸ The question remains, however, whether Roger Cohen’s tempting equations – “connectivity equals organization” and “technology equals empowerment”⁹ – are not just an expression of cyber-utopia, namely of an illusionary perception of what the “online sophistication”¹⁰ of today’s youth may realistically achieve. In actual fact, “connectivity” may equally be linked to a state of chaos, the very opposite of “organization,” and “technology” may as well equal dependency, the opposite of “empowerment.” Both – connectivity as well as technology – will have to be seen in their *instrumental*, thus ambiguous, dimension, not out of context and with only a desired ideal result in mind.

The kind of wishful thinking that idealizes the effect of interactive networks on society as a whole, also seems to have informed the assessment of Alec Ross, Senior Advisor for Innovation to the U.S. Secretary of State, for whom “the very existence of social networks is a net good.”¹¹ In such a context of information-age euphoria, we should nonetheless bear in mind the possible instrumentalization and manipulation of the “free” flow of information for *political* interests. This tendency is obvious, for instance, in the assessment of then US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, for whom “the freedom of communication and the nature of it is a huge strategic asset for the United States.”¹²

In view of the apotheosis of Web 2.0 as harbinger of a just and peaceful world, a reality check may be appropriate. The value and plausibility of an ideal or goal of societal development – in our case: universal connectivity in tandem with interactive communication – will only be proven in the *actual*, not in the *desired* results.

It is an established historical fact that the arrival of new tools of information, beginning with the invention of scripture and later typography, has not necessarily favored, or brought about, a climate of tolerance or peaceful interaction (not to speak of “dialogue” between cultures and civilizations). New information techniques have often produced the opposite result. More recently, with the onset of globalization, neither satellite TV nor the internet phenomenon, with the “new social media” as its most salient feature, have brought us any nearer to a “new world order” of peace

⁸ Roger Cohen, “The Death of Diplomacy.” *The New York Times / Der Standard* (Vienna), Monday, June 27, 2011, p. 2. – This effect is not only evident in the dramatic events of the “Arab spring;” with the seemingly unstoppable expansion of web-based communication tools, it is increasingly felt in the Western industrialized countries too. The English summer riots of 2011 are a case in point.

⁹ Loc. cit.

¹⁰ Loc. cit.

¹¹ Quoted according to Noah Shachtman, “Social Networks as Foreign Policy.” *The New York Times*, December 13, 2009, query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=950DE7DC1E39F930A25751C1A96F9C8B63, accessed on 6 August 2011.

¹² “Press Conference with Secretary Gates and Adm. Mullen.” United States Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, *News Transcript*, June 18, 2009, www.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=4435, accessed on 8 August 2011.

and justice. In actual fact, during the last decades, social rifts have become even deeper and prejudice and hatred along civilizational lines appear to be more profound at the beginning of the 21st century than they were in the preceding postcolonial era (i.e. in the late years of East-West rivalry).

The reasons for this, in the eyes of cyber-optimists counterintuitive, trend are manifold and lie essentially in what can be described as the (existential) “insecurity of the life-world.”¹³ It is an anthropological truth that the human race is not quasi-automatically prepared for the effects of every new technology. It has often proven to be resilient to technologically induced forms of social engineering or “reinventing” man. As regards the effects of an ever more complex information technology on the construction of social identity, people are simply overwhelmed by the simultaneous presence of a multitude of diverse world-perceptions (and at different stages of their development)¹⁴, which they often feel to be incompatible with their own. Not surprisingly, in today’s global information village,¹⁵ citizens may feel their (cultural, social, national) identity constantly being challenged and their “communal security” threatened. In a prescient and far-reaching analysis of the anthropological implications of the electronic media, written almost half a century ago, at the dawn of the modern information age, Marshall McLuhan explained that, wherever they may be located, social groups of all types “can no longer be *contained*, in the political sense of limited association. They are now *involved* in our lives, as we in theirs, thanks to the electric media.”¹⁶

In the decades that have passed since this diagnosis, we certainly have learned more about the socio-cultural effects of this new form of interdependence, simultaneity and interaction among a multitude of “life-worlds.”¹⁷ In a pointed critique of the dominant trend among commentators of web-related social developments, Evgeny Morozov has drawn our attention to “the mostly untested cyber-utopian assumption that more connections and more networks necessarily lead to more freedom or more democracy.”¹⁸ What is required, in the context of the contemporary discourse on “internet freedom” and its effects, desirable or not, on social order, domestically as well as internationally, is a fresh look at how use of the interactive technologies of Web 2.0 impacts on our

¹³ For a general analysis of the *conditio humana* in today’s global context see Hans Köchler, “Philosophical Aspects of Globalization – Basic Theses on the Interrelation of Economics, Politics, Morals and Metaphysics in a Globalized World,” in: Hans Köchler (ed.), *Globality versus Democracy? The Changing Nature of International Relations in the Era of Globalization*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. XXV. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2000, pp. 11ff.

¹⁴ To describe this dilemma of multiculturalism in today’s globalized environment, the author has used the term “non-simultaneous simultaneity.” Cf. Hans Köchler, “The Philosophy and Politics of Dialogue.” *Centre for Dialogue Working Paper Series*, No. 2010/1, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 2010, chapter II, point a.

¹⁵ Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase “global village.” Cf. op. cit., p. 5: “As electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village.”

¹⁶ Marshall McLuhan, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁷ We understand the term in the phenomenological sense as defined by Edmund Husserl. See his *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Tans. David Carr. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970.

¹⁸ Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: How Not to Liberate The World*. London: Allen Lane, 2011, p. 253.

social identity, and what kinds of community, or polity, result from, and are shaped by, the “new social media.” In view of the political developments that are said to having been triggered, or at least bolstered or supported, by the use of the new technology, considerations of mass psychology may again become relevant. In particular, we will have to pay attention to the *psychological nature* of the manifold “groups” through which people interact in the virtual world, and their influence on the “real” world. Without such an assessment we shall not be able to evaluate those groups’ potential for dialogue,¹⁹ whether *within* a given multicultural society (domestically) or at the global level. The newspeak of Facebook or Twitter “revolutions” has to be scrutinized as to the actual psychological conditions under which these social processes have supposedly been triggered or reinforced.²⁰

(II) The virtual crowd

In his seminal work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895), Gustave Le Bon analyzes the characteristics of social behavior under conditions of mass action.²¹ He explains that, under certain given circumstances, “an agglomeration of men presents new characteristics very different from those of the individuals composing it,”²² eventually reaching a state of interaction that “puts them in possession of a sort of collective mind.”²³ He defines the kind of social grouping where this “uniformity” (or mental unity) is achieved as an “organized crowd” or a “psychological crowd.”²⁴ He describes in detail how, in the collective mind, “the intellectual aptitudes of the individuals, and in consequence their individuality, are weakened.”²⁵ As causes of this phenomenon he identifies (a) a “sentiment of **invincible power**,” owed to numerical considerations, which allows the individual “to yield to instincts which, had he been alone, he would perforce have kept under restraint;” (b) “**contagion**” in terms of sentiments and impulses to act; and, most importantly, (c) “**suggestibility**” of which contagion is considered an effect.²⁶ In the chapter entitled “The Sentiments and Morality of

¹⁹ For a case study see Paul Reilly, *Facebook for Peace? An exploration of the dialogic potential of Web 2.0 in Northern Irish interface areas*. Invited seminar presentation to Geography Department, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK, 27 May 2010. News release at swww2.le.ac.uk:8443/uol/ebulletin/news/press-releases/2010-2019/2010/05/nparticle.2010-05-13.3830889644, accessed on 9 August 2011.

²⁰ For the author’s assessment of the Arab uprisings of 2011 see *Der Aufstand der Araber – Interview mit Hans Köchler*. (Questions by Hamid Lechhab.) International Progress Organization, News Service, 24 March 2011, www.i-p-o.org/Koehler-Al_Ahdath-al_Maghribiya-German-24Mar2011.htm. (Arabic version: الأحدثات المغربية, Casablanca, Morocco, 4 April 2011, p. 12.)

²¹ Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001. (Original French edition: *La psychologie des foules*, 1895.)

²² Op. cit., p. 13.

²³ Op. cit., p. 15.

²⁴ Op. cit., p. 13.

²⁵ Op. cit., p. 17.

²⁶ Op. cit., pp. 17f. Emphases added.

Crowds,”²⁷ Le Bon further enumerates as some of the “special characteristics” of crowds their “impulsiveness,” “irritability,” “incapacity to reason,” and the “exaggeration of the sentiments.”²⁸ Of particular relevance for the understanding of the political impact of mass phenomena is his classification of homogeneous and heterogeneous crowds, with the “anonymous crowd” as a sub-category of the latter.²⁹ In structural terms, however, *anonymity* is a general characteristic that distinguishes the individual’s mental position in a crowd from that in a group, which, in Le Bon’s analysis, is detrimental to the “sentiment of responsibility.”³⁰

Gustave Le Bon’s *mass psychology* had a decisive influence on the nascent discipline of “public relations” in the United States in the first half of the 20th century, especially on the ideas of Edward Bernays.³¹ It has acquired an entirely new relevance under the conditions of today’s global information society. The devices of virtually unrestricted communication that may, intentionally or accidentally, trigger processes that lead to the formation of crowds (in the real as well as the virtual world) have never been more diverse and at the same time powerful, and the logistical means, or organizational tools, for the manipulation of crowds have never been more sophisticated. Under these circumstances, Le Bon’s proclamation, at the end of the 19th century, of the “era of the crowds,” appears prophetic.³² He was well aware that a “crowd” in the *psychological* sense, as defined by him,³³ does “not always involve the simultaneous presence of a number of individuals on one spot. Thousands of isolated individuals may acquire at certain moments, and under the influence of certain violent emotions – such as, for example, a great national event – the characteristics of a psychological crowd.”³⁴ Today, this will be the case with many of the internet “user groups” (chat groups, “Facebook Communities,” etc.),³⁵ whether they are formed around specific catalytic events at the local or, with the aim to promote wider political causes, at the national level.

With the arrival of the internet has dawned a new era of communication in a *mass society* where the *virtual crowd* (or “digital crowd”) has become a decisive political factor. Lest it will become irrelevant, mass psychology in the digital age cannot ignore the pervasive impact of the new social media on virtually all aspects of life. This involves a recreation, if not reinvention, of civil society along criteria defined by digital technology, and the “empowerment” of the individual,

²⁷ Op. cit., pp. 20ff.

²⁸ Op. cit., p. 20.

²⁹ Op. cit., pp. 90ff.

³⁰ Op. cit., p. 17.

³¹ Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1928.

³² Op. cit., “Introduction,” p. 7.

³³ “The psychological crowd is a provisional being formed of heterogeneous elements, which for a moment are combined, exactly as the cells which constitute a living body form by their reunion a new being which displays characteristics very different from those possessed by each of the cells singly.” (Op. cit., p. 15.)

³⁴ Op. cit., pp. 13f.

³⁵ According to Le Bon’s analysis, these “groups” would fall under the category of “crowds.”

whether real or perceived, through the many features of interactive electronic communication. Along the lines of Marshall McLuhan's earlier analysis, Peter Beaumont has highlighted the problematic implications of this development in terms of the very nature of communication, namely its *integrity*: "The medium that carries the message shapes and defines as well the message itself."³⁶ Apart from the issue of authenticity, this raises new questions about the meaning of "freedom" of information and the autonomous status of the individual as subject or object in this process, as master or slave of information technology.

Information techniques such as SMS or email, communication interfaces such as Facebook or Twitter or the many chat programs, web logs and video sharing sites such as YouTube have become powerful tools of *individual* and *collective* action at the same time. The distinction between the private and public spheres, between individual and collective action, has increasingly become blurred, and the new devices and programs have dramatically changed the scope and reach of communication. Those technologies have had the effect of a magnifying glass for societal trends; they also have had an amplifying effect on the forces that trigger the formation of crowds, whether digitally or locally assembled, and on their means of expression and action, i.e. their eventual political impact. The aspects of "digital empowerment" (if it is indeed a genuine phenomenon) are varied and numerous. They all illustrate the renewed relevance of mass psychology – the analysis of the dynamics and mechanisms of psychological crowds as defined by Le Bon – for the understanding of politics and society under the conditions of globalized information technology.

Here we can only mention a few of the most salient features of today's "virtual public":

- In the "virtual crowd," information is transmitted almost "**in real time**" (a catchphrase of the industry), and without any geographical limitations (except in cases of governmental interference).
- The **transmission of information in visual or audio-visual form** has become one of the basic features of the new social media. Unlike the more abstract written word (the interpretation of which requires a certain amount of analysis and intellectual rigor), the image appeals to the *emotions* and, thus, to the *suggestibility* of individuals in a crowd. Neil Postman's earlier concerns about the predominance of television, with the "unintended

³⁶ "The truth about Twitter, Facebook and the uprisings in the Arab world." *The Guardian*, UK, Friday 25 February 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/feb/25/twitter-facebook-uprisings-arab-libya, accessed on 8 August 2011.

consequence of a dramatic change in our modes of public conversation,”³⁷ are even more relevant in the context of today’s interactive media.

- As compared to the dissemination of information via (satellite) TV or radio, the **interactivity** of the social media has brought a qualitatively new dimension, which goes beyond the more conventional viewers’/listeners’ participation through telephony (whether visual or not) where the input is moderated by an editor/presenter.
- Because of the multiplying effect of computer technology, the numbers of people involved, and affected, are much larger than in conventional crowds. Due to the interactivity of the new media, a virtual ἀγορά (*agorá*) is a **collective mental reality** that may at any moment result in concerted action in the real world, but in a manner that is unpredictable for the general public. The phenomenon of the so-called “flash mob”³⁸ drastically illustrates this effect.
- The aspect of **anonymity** – with the resulting lack of individual responsibility and accountability, a characteristic of the crowd in the traditional sense – is much more salient in the virtual crowd.
- The trend towards anonymity in the virtual crowd raises the question as to the **“invisible hands,”** or vested interests, that may hide behind the amorphous masses, staging (or “moderating”) civil society campaigns and launching (dis)information according to a strategy that is neither publicly declared nor democratically validated.³⁹ Edward Bernays’ “invisible government” that “molds” our minds, “forms” our tastes and “suggests” our ideas,⁴⁰ and which he considered compatible with, even indispensable for, a modern democratic society, would find the circumstances of the new social media much more conducive to the

³⁷ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. (New Introduction by Andrew Postman.) Penguin Books: London, 2006, p. 157. (First published 1985.)

³⁸ For a report on an early, non-violent incident see “Facebook flashmob shuts down station.” *CNN World*, February 09, 2009, articles.cnn.com/2009-02-09/world/uk.station.flashmob_1_facebook-user-dancing-liverpool-street-station?_s=PM:WORLD, accessed on 8 August 2011. In recent months, violent flash mobs have appeared in several U.S. cities such as Chicago, Cleveland and Philadelphia. See, *inter alia*, “Flash mobs go violent: Criminals using social media to organize fights, robberies and chaos.” *Associated Press*, Wednesday, August 10, 2011, www.timesunion.com/news/article/Flash-mobs-go-violent-1807724.php.

³⁹ In this regard, Evgeny Morozov has alerted us about the “mostly invisible revolving door between Silicon Valley and Washington.” As a case in point he mentions Jared Cohen’s transition from the U.S. State Department to Google. “The 20th century roots of 21st century statecraft.” *Foreign Policy* (FP), 7 September 2010, neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2010/09/07/the_20th_century_roots_of_the_21st_century_statecraft. – In June 2009, Cohen, still on the staff of the U.S. State Department, had intervened with the administration of Twitter concerning the availability of that service in Iran. For details see Gil Kaufman, “Iranians Keep Twittering Thanks To Young Obama Official: Twitter postpones maintenance, as site remains main news source on protests in Iran.” *MTV News*, 17 June 2009, www.mtv.com/news/articles/1614177/young-obama-administration-official-helped-keep-twitter-on-iran.jhtml.

⁴⁰ Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*, Chapter I: “Organizing Chaos,” p. 37. – Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud and considered the “father of public relations,” served with the United States “Committee on Public Information” during World War I and was subsequently invited by President Woodrow Wilson to attend the Peace Conference in Paris.

advancement of this purpose.⁴¹ The anonymous editing, by national intelligence services, of certain Wikipedia pages testifies, for instance, to this tendency and highlights the risks of the new technology in terms of democracy and the rule of law.⁴²

- **Volatility of trends** is much higher in the virtual crowd. Unpredictable and erratic behavior, a general characteristic of crowds, tends to be more extreme under the anonymous conditions of the worldwide web. (This has again become evident in the use of BBM, Blackberry’s coded messaging service, by individuals who took part in the London riots of August 2011.)⁴³
- Related to the aspects of anonymity and volatility is the structural problem of **unreliability** of crowd behavior and of the information conveyed in such a framework. Mere rumors may be transmitted and retransmitted almost infinitely, and often without a realistic chance of correction or refutation of false or libelous information.⁴⁴ The distinction between “information” and “propaganda” (which is essential for genuine democracy)⁴⁵ is increasingly becoming blurred.
- The **simultaneity** and **ubiquity** of interactive communication may make of any trend a megatrend, and almost instantaneously. There are no checks and balances in the virtual world that could ensure a “reality check.” To the contrary, the new media provide such leverage for their users, even if they are few in number, that they may feel enabled to *create* new social

⁴¹ In his analysis of organized crowds, Gustave Le Bon proved – more than a century ago – that he was well aware of those “invisible hands.” In Book II (“The Opinions and Beliefs of Crowds”) of his work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, he wrote: “The outburst and putting in practice of certain ideas among crowds present at times a startling suddenness. This is only a superficial effect, behind which must be sought a preliminary and preparatory action of long duration.” (P. 47.)

⁴² For a case study (relating to the coverage of the Lockerbie case) see Ludwig De Braeckeleeer, “Wikipedia and the Intelligence Services – Is the Net’s popular encyclopedia marred by disinformation?,” in: *OhmyNews International*, Seoul, Korea, 26 July 2007, english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?at_code=424653, accessed on 23 August 2011.

⁴³ For details see “Street Slang and BBM used by London Rioters to Outsmart the Police.” *City Journalist Directory*, London, 9 August 2011, www.cityjournalistdirectory.com/event/street_slang_and_bbm_used_by_london_rioters_to_outsmart_the_police_15533/; “London has ringside seat at 2011 BBM riots.” *TelecomTV One – News*, London, 9 August 2011, www.telecomtv.com/comspace_newsDetail.aspx?n=47930&id=e9381817-0593-417a-8639-c4c53e2a2a10, accessed on 25 August 2011.

⁴⁴ Cases in point for the ease with which false rumours can be spread, and of the gullibility of the internet public, were the fictitious blog of a “gay girl” in Syria (who was reported to have commented on the uprising from Damascus), or the partly false information about the Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi (who was not a University graduate and had no degree in computer science).

⁴⁵ We do not agree, in that regard, with the assessment of Bernays who sees propaganda as the “conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses” and considers this a “a logical result of the way in which our democratic society is organized.” (*Public Opinion*, p. 37.) For a critical evaluation of this position see also Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Harper Perennial / Modern Classics, 2006 (first published 1958), Chapter IV: “Propaganda in a Democratic Society,” pp. 29ff.

realities. This may also lead to an artificial sense of empowerment and to a false interpretation of one's own "life-world" or of one's position in the community.⁴⁶

- The social mobilizing power of media such as Facebook or Twitter rests on a **"snowball effect"** of information distribution, which is similar, in structure, to the traditional "chain letters," but with the speed of the information age. As evidenced in the trivial phenomenon of the so-called "Facebook parties," social events or gatherings may be triggered almost by accident. This may be just an inconvenience in cases of inadvertently announced birthday dates,⁴⁷ but it may do serious harm in a political context and completely undermine the process of democratic consultation that is indispensable in a functioning civil society.
- Although the outbreak of social revolts is a much more complex process that cannot be compared to some of the above mentioned trivial phenomena, and that will be preceded by the buildup of pervasive dissatisfaction or disillusionment among large sectors of society, and for a sustained period of time, questions remain as to the **sustainability** of "revolutions" or "uprisings" the course of which has been decisively determined by the use of social media. Their "real time effect" is proven to have often favored erratic, constantly fluctuating trends whose long-term impact is in doubt because of the "emotions of the moment." The widely celebrated "color revolutions" in post-Soviet countries⁴⁸ testify to this problem of sustainability and to the volatility of a "digitally enhanced" civil society.

The characteristics of crowd behavior under the conditions of the modern interactive media (of which the above enumeration is a non-exhaustive list) lead us to the question as to their anthropological implications. Do they mean a lasting *structural impact* on the individual's world perception and the construction of social reality (the "life-world")? Is MacLuhan's famous slogan "the medium is the message"⁴⁹ indeed a reflection of such a paradigm change? Does the mass

⁴⁶ On the impact of this essentially unreflected use of information technology on the mentality of youth see, *inter alia*, Larry D. Rosen, *Rewired: Understanding the iGeneration and the Way They Learn*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, ch. 5: "Real Life or Screen Life? The Educational Opportunities of Immersive Social Networking and Virtual Worlds," pp. 97ff.

⁴⁷ However, even trivial occasions may have serious implications in terms of public safety as German state interior ministers have emphasized: "Forderung nach Verbot: Innenminister sagen Facebook-Partys den Kampf an." *Der Spiegel*, 3 July 2011, www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/0,1518,772025,00.html.

⁴⁸ We refer here to events such as the Rose Revolution in the Republic of Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in the Ukraine (2004/2005), or the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005). For a case study see Joshua Goldstein, *The Role of Digital Networked Technologies in the Ukrainian Orange Revolution*. Internet & Democracy Case Study Series. Berkman Center Research Publication No. 2007-14. Harvard University, December 2007; and Patrick Philipp Meier, "Digital Resistance and the Orange Revolution." *IREvolution*, 18 February 2009, <http://irevolution.net/2009/02/18/digital-resistance-and-the-orange-revolution/>.

⁴⁹ *Understanding Media*, Part I, ch. 1.

communication potential of the internet structurally favor the formation of psychological crowds, and not of groups, as established terminology (e.g. “Facebook Groups”) would suggest?

The at times destabilizing and “subversive” (depending on the observer’s political or ideological position) effect on an existing political order cannot be denied; it is an aspect of the intrinsically “anarchic” character of the interactive processes in the virtual world. What does the new quality or dimension of social organization – at the general societal, state and legal levels – mean in terms of democratic maturity of a polity? Can the disappearance of the distinction between the private and public spheres⁵⁰ be reconciled with democratic empowerment? What are the implications of the ambiguity between *anonymous* and *public* action – that is typical for the virtual space – for civic responsibility and democratic accountability? These are some of the issues that more or less directly relate to the question of the new social media’s potential for, or compatibility with, dialogue.

(III) Chance or challenge for dialogue?

As we have seen, the psychological mechanisms of the virtual crowd are structurally similar to those of the physically assembled crowd. The typical organizational, or “logistical,” features of information technology intensify those psychological tendencies, and often by more than one order of magnitude. Under certain specific circumstances, the very emergence of crowds may be an unintended consequence of the use of interactive technology.

The social media have also become tools for *propaganda* in the literal Latin sense of the word,⁵¹ and in a hitherto unimaginable dimension, i.e. for the wide and instantaneous distribution of information including one’s personal viewpoints and value statements (without any filter or quality control). They have provided a framework for “networking” at the local, national and global levels, and for rallying around one shared point of view or cause. The modes of association are rather superficial, often even accidental, and do not allow for conceptual differentiation or deeper reflection. Simplistic declarations of support on the basis of yes or no (“I like this” as in Facebook) or a limitation of the number of characters in messages, allowing only rudimentary utterances (as in Twitter), can lead to over-simplification and black-and-white analysis that may reinforce existing stereotypes and emotions, instead of encouraging an evaluation of the content as to its veracity and/or acceptability (in terms of fundamental values). The blurring of the distinction between

⁵⁰ For an analysis of the paradigm change in terms of the public sphere see David Barney, “Invasions of Publicity: Digital Networks and the Privatization of the Public Sphere,” in: The Law Commission of Canada (ed.), *New Perspectives on the Public-Private Divide*. (Legal Dimensions Series.) Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2003, pp. 94-122.

⁵¹ The verb *propagare* means “to disseminate” and, unlike the modern term derived from it, does not have a negative connotation.

meaning and nonsense has become another unintended consequence of direct and unrestricted global media access for all.

In spite of their widely advertised interactive character, these tools are more suitable for *advocacy* than for *dialogue* (which requires a balanced exchange of views).⁵² Interdependence among equal participants in an ideal communicative process (according to Habermas' lofty conception)⁵³ has remained an illusion in the framework of the virtual crowd. The snowball effect, due to the automated distribution of messages in real time, aggravates the problem even further and reduces, in view of the sheer numbers that can be mobilized for a common viewpoint or cause, the capability to critical thinking. Computer capacity simply overwhelms the human brain. The danger of manipulation by those who understand the "rules of the game" cannot be underestimated.

Here again we are confronted with a compatibility problem that results from structural issues of communication. Dialogue is a feature of *personal* interaction (which may also occur among individuals as group members or, analogously, among groups). It is not compatible with how people relate to each other as part of a psychological crowd whose dynamic is shaped around one common position that, in their collective logic, is to be defended against "the others." The *deliberative* element is almost totally missing in the interaction within the framework of the masses. As Aldous Huxley dryly observed, masses are "incapable of abstract thinking and uninterested in any fact outside the circle of their immediate experience."⁵⁴

Another decisive factor impacting on the potential for dialogue is the predominance of emotions in a crowd, whether virtual or real. In all forms of mass communication there exists the risk of a "*regressus ad emotionem*," a reduction of the argument to basic emotions underlying a certain message. The stronger emotional factor is not only due to the higher proportion of visual or audio-visual content in today's web-based communication (as compared to the more abstract nature of written words) but also due to the "real time factor," i.e. the enormous speed of the distribution of content which does not allow sufficient time for reflection. The recipient of the message will thus be tempted to defer judgment to his emotions, which, in turn, may be even more easily manipulated than opinions.

Dialogue, in contrast, requires more of a rational than an emotional approach since it depends on the appreciation of the other's position, or on a neutral, emotionally detached, comparison

⁵² The internet newspeak (e. g. "Twitter Followers") can be quite revealing. Users subscribing to the service are expected, or may feel under the pressure, to attract as many "followers" as possible; the term itself hints at an attitude that is more characteristic of subordination than of dialogue.

⁵³ Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*. Vol. 2: *Zur Kritik der funktionalistischen Vernunft*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2001 (5th print), esp. pp. 147ff.

⁵⁴ *Brave New World Revisited*, p. 40.

between different points of view.⁵⁵ It is one of the positive aspects of modern information technology that different worldviews have become accessible to a wider public. The question, however, will be what impact the increasing accessibility of an ever larger variety of different cultures and civilizations – the “simultaneity of the lifeworlds”⁵⁶ – will have on the mental disposition of the participants in the social networks, i.e. on how they will make use of this opportunity of dialogue, or whether they will eventually retreat into their own ethnic or cultural domain.

One of the central issues of “internet freedom,” exercised by the users of interactive media, will be in what sense and up to what extent the technology can be made consistent with the original nature of *communication*, which is dialogical. This would, first and foremost, require *genuine interdependence*, namely a balanced flow of information, including an advanced system of checks and balances (not only at the domestic, but at the regional and global levels) that can prevent deliberate campaigns of disinformation and defamation, and a general commitment to authenticity and truth.⁵⁷ If one celebrates the new social networks as something like the Fifth Estate (in addition to the establishment media as the Fourth Estate),⁵⁸ i. e. as integral part of the checks and balances in a democratic polity, one will have to agree on ethical guidelines and on clearly defined rules of “fair use” of the new technological devices. Internet literacy will have to be more than the ability to manage the technical and logistical features of an ever more sophisticated software. Freedom of information can only be defended, and a global system – “worldwide web” – of interactive media will only be sustainable, if abuses of that freedom can be curtailed and anarchy of self-expression, with the risk of entrenchment of enemy stereotypes,⁵⁹ can be prevented.⁶⁰

It remains to be seen how these lofty goals can be realized without the adoption of measures that in turn undermine individual freedom. The United Nations Organization and competent specialized organizations such as UNESCO should assume the task of drafting rules for an internet-

⁵⁵ On the principles and structure of dialogue see Hans Köchler, “The Philosophy and Politics of Dialogue.” *Centre for Dialogue Working Paper Series*, No. 2010/1, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 2010, pp. 4ff.

⁵⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁵⁷ For an earlier vision of such a system at the international level, before the arrival of the internet, see Hans Köchler (ed.), *The New International Information and Communication Order: Basis for Cultural Dialogue and Peaceful Coexistence among Nations*. Studies in International Relations, Vol. X. Vienna: International Progress Organization, 1985.

⁵⁸ See also William Dutton’s optimistic assessment, fn. 6 above. – In view of the Fourth Estate’s dismal record (especially when it comes to covering controversial issues such as the “global war on terror”), it is understandable that expectations concerning the potential of the Fifth Estate are very high.

⁵⁹ The rise of Islamophobia in Europe and the United States is a case in point. See Emily Kianka, “Islamophobia and the Social Consequences of Social Media.” *Islamophobia Today*, Editorial, 28 July 2011, www.islamophobiatoday.com/2011/07/28/islamophobia-and-the-social-consequences-of-social-media/.

⁶⁰ In a rather ambiguous statement issued on 28 June 2011, Twitter co-founder Biz Stone and General Council Alexander Macgillivray addressed the issue of freedom of expression. They avoided to take a clear position on possible conflicts between individual and collective (community) rights and concentrated instead on their business commitment: “Our position on freedom of expression carries with it a mandate to protect our users’ right to speak freely and preserve their ability to contest having their private information revealed.” “The Tweets Must Flow.” Friday, January 28, 2011, blog.twitter.com/2011/01/tweets-must-flow.html.

age version of a “New International Information and Communication Order,”⁶¹ a global code of conduct for all users of information technology, including the interactive networks.

Undoubtedly, today’s social media have opened up new avenues for civil society and created an alternative public space. In many instances, determined users have been able to circumvent censorship and outwit the gatekeepers of the established order. This particularly relates to forms of “mind control” exercised by the mainstream media.⁶² It is no wonder that the potentially subversive effect of alternative structures of public opinion is so intensely feared in the circles of power. If responsibly used, alternative media may indeed provide the citizens with important additional means for a more comprehensive evaluation of what they are told by the establishment, and in particular for a comparison between different positions (which is indispensable for a mature judgment). As Aldous Huxley observed half a century ago, “The survival of democracy depends on the ability of large numbers of people to make realistic choices in the light of adequate information.”⁶³

However, in view of their potential for the formation of psychological crowds and their unpredictable social and political effects, euphoria over the new media’s possibilities is not justified. We must not be blinded by their novel character, as we should not overlook the essentially instrumental nature of information technology: offering hitherto unimaginable technical possibilities and organizational opportunities, it is a necessary, though not a sufficient, condition for social and political emancipation. Accordingly, we have to be aware of the *dual use aspect* of this as of any other technology. The new means of communication may not only be employed to stage trivial social manifestations (such as the so-called “flash mobs,” as long as they remain non-violent),⁶⁴ or in a way that triggers serious and far-reaching political developments (such as the Arab uprisings against authoritarian rule and injustice); in specific conflict situations, their use may also result in a

⁶¹ For details of the initial project, which Unesco had to abandon, see: *Address by Amadou Mahtar M’Bow, Director-General of Unesco, to the University of Bujumbura on the theme “Unesco and communication in the modern world.”* Bujumbura, 5 February 1980. Unesco Doc. DG/80/2. – For an overview of the wide-ranging debates see: *A New World Information and Communication Order: Towards a Wider and Better Balanced Flow of Information. A Bibliography of UNESCO Holdings, Supplement 1980-1981.* COM/82/WS/12, Paris: UNESCO, 1982.

⁶² The aspect of alternative information is of special significance as regards the mainstream version of the “global war on terror.” See the author’s analysis: “The Global War on Terror and the Metaphysical Enemy,” in: Hans Köchler (ed.), *The “Global War on Terror” and the Question of World Order.* (Studies in International Relations, Vol. XXX.) Vienna: International Progress Organization, 2008, ch. 1, pp. 13ff.

⁶³ *Brave New World Revisited*, chapter VI: “The Arts of Selling,” p. 47.

⁶⁴ As incidents such as the skirmishes around a July 4 fireworks display in Cleveland (USA) have demonstrated, there is a very thin borderline between a trivial social manifestation, as an expression of the “fun society,” and violent and disruptive behavior. See “Cleveland looks to stop unruly flash mobs before the start.” *newsnet5.com*, 20 July 2011, www.newsn5.com/dpp/news/local_news/cleveland_metro/cleveland-looks-to-stop-unruly-flash-mobs-before-they-start.

reinforcement of stereotypes or in violent and destructive action that can undermine the very fabric of a democratic society.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ The London riots of August 2011 are a case in point. — For a case study on the situation in Northern Ireland see Paul Reilly (University of Leicester), “‘Anti-social’ Networking in Northern Ireland: Policy Responses to Young People’s Use of Social Media for Organizing Anti-social Behavior,” in: *Policy & Internet*, Volume 3, Issue 1 (2011), Article 7.

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