

## CHAPTER 1

### DEMOCRACY, GLOBAL PUBLICS AND WORLD OPINION

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#### Democracy, global publics and world opinion

'In politics communication makes possible public opinion', wrote the prominent American sociologist Charles Horton Cooley in 1909, 'which, when organized, is democracy'. At the dawn of the last century, observing a rapidly developing system of global communication based upon 'the telegraph, the newspaper and the fast mail' (1909: 85), Cooley discerned an important connection between the revolution in communication and the rise of democracy, arguing that the latter was promoted, not because of changes in the formal Constitution, but rather 'as the outcome of conditions which make it natural for the people to have and to express a consciousness regarding questions of the day' (1909: 86). Ever the optimist, he opined that popular education and progressive developments in the media would enlarge and quicken social organisation, fostering an international consciousness in literature, science and politics, and promising 'indefinite enlargement of justice and amity'.

Although his optimism strikes one as rather naïve and proved, if nothing else, to be ill-timed – within a decade of Cooley's writing, Europe, Asia and North America would plunge into World War I – his words nonetheless have quite a modern ring, echoing the sometimes breathless language one encounters today in discussions of the global revolution in communication, the ascendancy of new forms of global civil society and the consequent upsetting of national structures.

*One is often impressed with the thought that there ought to be some wider name than democracy for the modern movement, a name that should more distinctly suggest the enlargement and quickening of the general mind, of which the formal rule of the people is only one among many manifestations. The current of new life that is sweeping with augmenting force through the older structures of society, now carrying them away, now leaving them outwardly undisturbed, has no adequate name. (Cooley 1909: 86–7).*

Even if what Cooley wrote a century ago was perhaps not entirely justified, such language may be appropriate in 2007. Developments in digital and network technologies have been particularly dramatic over the past several decades, helping to create widely dispersed and decentralised systems of communication that are nonetheless thoroughly interconnected, with media flows increasingly crossing national and continental borders. The largely centralised, national, limited-channel mass media systems of the twentieth century have given way to much more variegated, multi-channel systems embracing a wide range of alternative media reaching across geopolitical borders. These changes in communication are generally viewed as significant for their democratising potential and are linked in various ways to a flowering of civil society on an increasingly global scale, and to an expansion of popular political participation.

On the other hand, present optimism may seem to readers a century hence just as naïve and ill-timed as Cooley's. As Kaldor argues in this volume, despite the diffusion of free market economic practices and national elections, people are increasingly subject to the effects of commercial and political decisions made outside their countries, let alone their local communities (see Chapter 2 of this volume). Hence the propagation of democratic procedure may not signal a true expansion of popular influence over collective action.

What can be stated perhaps more confidently, Kaldor proposes, is that the congruence has broken down between the state, its people, economy and territory. With the worldwide expansion of media and commerce, nations around the world are increasingly subject to informal but consequential global constraints. National governments forced to contend with an expanding web of international agreements are less able to control flows of information and opinion and, in the face of global social norms and pressures, must now take into account not only public opinion within their borders, but the opinions of



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*How does global public opinion shape state actions?*

external constituencies as well. States have always been responsive to informal public pressure, but usually within their own jurisdictional boundaries: foreign pressures were usually mediated almost entirely by states. Now international pressures are felt more directly through externally controlled media, organised non-governmental groups, attentive international publics and their opinions.

The rise of so-called 'public diplomacy' illustrates the emergent order, testifying both to the perception of global public opinion as a powerful new field of political forces and to the predictable impulse of states to gain control over these forces. Traditional diplomacy used to be a matter of governments engaging one another through a system of formally negotiated contacts, with embassy officials representing state interests in the host countries. Public diplomacy, by contrast, is oriented toward informal constellations of individuals and non-governmental organisation (NGOs). 'Global public opinion,' explains the website of the UK Foreign Policy Centre (2007), 'is increasingly a strategic concern for states acting on the world stage'. The expanding reach of communication networks enables such opinion to form and influence state behaviour. However, communicative influence flows in both directions, for as the Centre points out, new media

systems increasingly provide governments 'with the ability to bypass heads of foreign states to pursue their foreign policy agendas'.

How then, might we understand global publics and world opinion and their role in constraining or shaping state actions? The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, we explore the concept of world opinion. Drawing from discursive conceptualisations of publics and public opinion, we distinguish global publics from global civil society. The latter is primarily a structural concept, represented by a variety of non-state institutions and organisations, while the former is of a more virtual and ephemeral nature, a complex function of widespread discussion and emergent patterns of association. Second, we turn to global media systems, examining the ways in which world publics depend upon these systems for their modes of interaction and development. Here we briefly consider recent trends in communication and their implications for the behaviour of publics on a global scale.

### Conceptualising world opinion

Are 'world opinion' or 'global public opinion' merely rhetorical expressions, or do they express important sociological realities? In a fundamental way, the concepts are imaginary in nature and yet they may have quite real manifestations and effects. At its core,



the idea of world opinion refers to a means of informal social control, whereby the ability of leaders, organisations or governments to act as they wish rises or falls, expands or constricts, due to their perceived standing or reputation among interested publics around the globe. Both the reputational standing and the publics involved are in the order of 'useful fictions', widely believed and hence taken into account in calculations about what can be done, by whom, with what possible political consequences.

### Imaginary aspects of world opinion

Since its earliest deployment, the idea of public opinion has retained a dual character, referring to the imagined views of imagined communities, but also to the very real power of such imaginings to constrain, and even to direct, state actions. With the diminution of European royal power during the eighteenth century, both monarchs and their opponents began to invoke 'the public' as a new source of authority and legitimacy for their competing claims (Ozouf 1988; Baker 1990). The term was at that time, like the world public of today, ill-defined and without a readily identifiable sociological referent. Though it was linked with the viewpoints circulating among educated men of financial means, it often acquired (as in the writings

of Rousseau in 1762/1968) an abstract and almost superhuman quality as an expression of the common will, divined through reasoned debate and framed as the paramount source of political legitimacy.

Central to the concept was the widening reach of political information and discussion through newspapers, pamphlets and other media, which brought an increasingly diverse group of non-state actors into closer familiarity with state affairs. Coupled with the growth of the merchant classes and a growing awareness of the monarchy's dependence upon these classes for financial support, the reach of the political media fostered a growing awareness of a new, virtual assembly of citizens who asserted the right to have their opinions on state affairs taken into account. According to Peters (1995), the European Enlightenment transformed the classical, Athenian assembly of the people into a mass-mediated, fictive body constituted by newspapers that could bring people together, not in physical space, but in shared conversations at a distance. Today, such virtual assemblies are constituted by a wide range of media – radio, television, print media, the Internet and worldwide web as well as mobile telephony – and have consequently grown beyond national and regional dimensions, acquiring transnational and transcontinental scale.

To acknowledge the virtual and imaginary qualities of world opinion, however, is not to deny that the concept captures new empirical realities as well. As Peters (1995: 16) put it in discussing the Enlightenment, 'in acting upon symbolic representations of "the public" the public can come to exist as a real actor'. The eighteenth-century concept of public opinion had more than merely rhetorical qualities: it signalled the emerging social customs, manners and later, shared political views of an ascendant class of literate and well-read European merchants, courtiers and intellectuals congregating in new popular institutions such as salons and coffee houses (Speier 1950). World opinion today signals the social customs, perceptions and opinions of more diverse classes of people throughout the world, following global events and issues and congregating in Internet exchanges, demonstrations and, occasionally, world forums.

### Sociological aspects of world opinion

When sociological writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries began to give public opinion more systematic attention as a phenomenon of social behaviour, they framed the public as an elemental, spontaneously developing collective that arises in reaction to an issue and which is organised into factions through discussion over time. Park (1904/1972) distinguished the public from the crowd, another spontaneous form of collective action organised through communication (as described, for instance, by LeBon 1895/1960). Both were social groupings that were loosely organised in reaction to some common object of attention or concern, and that thus lacked features characteristic of a society, such as shared norms, to direct their collective action. Both took shape through communication among members. However, their defining means of organisation differed, in Park's view. In a crowd, the organising principle is a dominant, widely shared emotion, communicated from one person to another via imitation and contagion. Crowds are thus uniform and impulsive in their action. In a public, on the other hand, the organising principle is disagreement, communicated through discussion. The public actively decides its action through debate.

Park argued that publics and crowds are alike in one key respect: they are proto-societal forms of collective action resulting when societal norms and structures are not in place to direct behaviour. The



*A public or a crowd?*

public is, particularly in its earliest forms, an ephemeral grouping rather than a social organisation *per se*; however, in the course of acting the public becomes increasingly organised through shared attention, discussion, opinion formation and political action. Factions emerge, coalitions form and interrelated processes of ideological and social organisation unfold as shared viewpoints become associated with definable subgroups (Price 1992).

The twentieth century brought considerable sociological attention to a third form of elemental collective behaviour, the mass (Kornhauser 1959). Like the crowd and the public, the mass is proto-societal in nature, constituted through communication and generating its own emergent norms (Blumer 1946). However, in contrast to the crowd, which is constituted through shared emotion, or the public, which is constituted through debate and discussion, the mass is generated merely through giving shared attention to the same object, person or event. This shared attention is all that aggregates people into a mass; they respond as anonymous individuals according to their diverse needs and interests, and do not interact to determine a course of action. Consequently masses form no common will, as do publics or crowds. Masses, for this reason, tend to be quite heterogeneous in their make-up, being largely contiguous with the audiences of various media of mass communication. Whether or not global media systems today have fostered the growth of worldwide crowds or publics, they almost certainly have expanded the size of mass audiences attending to, for instance, World Cup football, the Olympics, international politics, popular celebrities, and disasters both natural and man-made, such as the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center or the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.



### Temporal and spatial aspects of world opinion

According to the discursive model (Foote and Hart 1953; Price 1992), public opinion is understood as developing through each of these various forms of communication – mass attention, public discussion and emotional contagion – unfolding over time as part of a multi-faceted social response to widely shared problems recognised as issues. There are inevitably fuzzy boundaries to the crowds, publics and masses surrounding any single issue, boundaries that are continuously reconfigured as the problem is at first recognised, then becomes the object of media attention, the subject of discussion, the focus of more formal policy debates and, eventually, the object of organised collective action.

The discursive model proposes that the public is highly differentiated in terms of the roles various members play in the processes of public debate and decision. A small minority plays a distinct leadership role, aggressively pursuing its favoured actions, while at the other end of the participatory continuum are much larger mass audiences that do little more than receive information about the issue and retain some

of it. Price and Neijens (1997) distinguish six different types of actors in public debate, arrayed roughly from the smallest and most active groups to the largest and least active aggregates. Political leaders, policy experts and interest groups comprise the ‘elites’, both within and outside the sphere of formal government who play active roles throughout all the phases of decision making (we place NGOs and public advocacy groups in the last of these categories). Members of the press serve as critical conduits for information and opinion exchange between these elites, as well as to their followers in attentive publics, made up of people following the issue, discussing it and forming opinions and, finally, to more expansive but minimally engaged mass audiences.

Publics may be conceived then, as a complex blending of active and passive segments, of engaged citizens and mere spectators (Lippmann 1922; Blumer 1946). The size, composition and geographic scope of these segments change across issues and over time. As problems confronting citizens around the world are increasingly global in their nature and effects – immigration, global warming, transnational dislocations of service industries and the like – they should accordingly evoke discursive reactions unfolding on a worldwide scale. Hence a ‘world public’ is an exceedingly difficult entity to identify precisely. Like all publics, it is loosely organised around a particular issue through communication, includes both active and passive strata, and changes in size, geographic reach and social make-up as it passes into and out of existence with the lifecycle of a given issue (Price 1992: 33).

Publics may also be conceived as a complex blending of stable organisational relationships and newly formed social associations, opinion alignments and political cleavages. Publics can be distinguished from civil society along these lines. The latter refers to a structure of organised group relationships ranging from informal but stable community groups to formal organisations operating as interest groups or advocacy groups, or in modern parlance, NGOs or social movement organisations.<sup>1</sup>

Public discussion and opinion formation naturally follow existing channels of social organisation, but issues divide and recombine these organised relationships in new ways. Global publics are, in this sense, at the leading edge of global civil society. They are highly variable in their composition, depending

upon the issue at hand, and they change in size and shape as issues are first recognised, understood, debated and decided upon. The discursive opinion-formation process unfolds in two interrelated ways: one is primarily ideological in nature and has to do with the various perspectives or frames of reference on an issue as these come to be widely understood by members of a public, and the other is primarily sociological in nature and has to do with the 'sides' of an issue, defined by the types of people and groups adopting different positions. Once a particular issue has been debated and decided, communication about it gradually dissipates.

However, the highly active and organised groups within the public can continue to function, taking on quasi-institutional forms as advocacy groups or developing, through continued successive coalitions arising through public debate, into political parties representing views on multiple issues. As Price (1992) notes, the organisational remnants of one issue become the backdrop for the next. Publics allow political organisations to adapt and change and they also permit new associations to be formed. World publics thus have the effect of globalising existing national parties through, for example, coalitions such as the Global Greens, for advocacy of environmentalism and grassroots democracy, or the International Democrat Union, for advocacy of conservative and Christian democratic values. They also give rise to novel transnational social movements (known as TSMOs; Smith et al. 1997), some of which become formally organised to pursue particular global issues and spanning multiple countries, such as Greenpeace or Amnesty International.

### Observing global publics and world opinion

The history of international opinion research stretches back at least 50 years to the founding of World Association for Public Opinion Research, established in 1947 to promote the opinion research around the world and to foster international cooperation and

exchange among academic and commercial researchers. However, attempts to assess world opinion have increased dramatically over the past years. Virtually all of these efforts have involved comparative national opinion surveys. For example, the Gallup World Poll, a proprietary venture of the Gallup Organization, carries out random-digit-dial and face-to-face surveys (using clustered sampling designs) in dozens of countries around the world. Gallup completed a poll of the Islamic World with surveys of nine predominantly Muslim countries in 2002 and of 19 sub-Saharan African nations in 2006.

Other efforts along these lines include WorldPublicOpinion.org (URL), launched in 2006 by the Program on International Policy Attitudes of the University of Maryland, which relies upon a network of survey research centres and commercial forms in 25 countries to conduct studies of view across the globe, and the Pew Global Attitudes Project, which recently surveyed 13 countries from March to May 2006. The problems involved in conducting such comparative surveys – stemming from language differences, non-equivalent sampling designs and survey modes, the difficulties of maintaining consistently rigorous fieldwork across vastly different geographical and cultural settings – are considerable, but they can be reduced through careful design and implementation. For example, the World Values Survey, an outgrowth of comparative studies undertaken by the European Value Systems Study Group beginning in the late 1970s (Moor 1995), is now a formal consortium of member organisations that agree to field a common questionnaire (a translation from a standard English version upon which the entire member group has agreed) and adhere to a set of shared technical and methodological specifications.

These efforts have been significant and highly informative, for example, in assessing how the populations of many nations perceive other countries or the degree to which they oppose the US-led war in Iraq. However, they assess mass opinion, as conceptualised above, and hence capture only one aspect – and perhaps not the most telling aspect – of world opinion. As the modern field of public opinion research emerged and gained prominence in the latter part of the twentieth century, and particularly as it adopted probability-sampling and survey methods as its main research techniques, it evoked persistent criticism for having implicitly embraced mass opinion rather than

<sup>1</sup> *This conceptualisation of global civil society in structural terms helps to distinguish it from publics, crowds and masses, as explicated here. Others have adopted more expansive definitions of global civil society, subsuming all the proto-societal processes of primary interest here. As Anheier et al. (2001: 17) note, 'part of the attraction of the term "global civil society" is that different people feel at home with different conceptions of it'.*



*'Issue publics' follow particular issues closely, demanding responsiveness and accountability from political leaders*

public opinion as its primary object of study (Blumer 1948; Bogart 1972; Graber 1982).

Alternatively, analysts have sometimes turned to studies of elites or organisational leaders, attempting to examine opinion among those who have a significant stake or influence in the matter at hand. Just such an effort is now underway by the commercial firm Environics, under the auspices of the 2020 Fund, to identify and survey stakeholders concerned with globalisation and its underlying economic, environmental and social equity challenges (2020 Fund 2007). The traditional sociological conception of the public related above, frames it not as any fixed geopolitical entity, however, but as a loosely organised subset of the mass, akin to what is sometimes known in political science as an 'issue public' or 'special public' (Almond 1950; Key 1961; Converse 1964). These are people who follow particular issues with close and relatively continuous attention, engage political leaders and the media over these issues and demand some degree of elite responsiveness and accountability.

How are we to define these fluid segments of the world population? Typical and reasonable starting points involve identifying those who are most knowledgeable about the particular issue at hand, those with the most intense opinions, or those who vote with their feet by getting involved in political action (Devine 1970; Krosnick 1990). However, Price et al. (2006) found in a recent study of health care reform in the US that that knowledge about health care,

strong opinions on health care issues and health-related political activity were relatively independent, pointing to a need for a very careful consideration of how membership in issue publics might be variously defined and studied. All three of these dimensions are implicated in political movements. Knowledge facilitates the reception and comprehension of information and enables the effective advocacy of one's position. But in the absence of well-formed opinions and motivations to engage politically, knowledge may not translate into effective public opinion. For both theoretical and practical reasons then, we are well advised to avoid overly simplified observational models of issue publics.

Beyond general population surveys, we can also turn to content analyses of world media (Rusciano et al. 1997), interviews with non-governmental elites (in NGOs and businesses) and data monitoring of Internet exchanges (such as in blogs and discussion boards). No matter what observational techniques are used, over time arrays of data are necessary to capture dynamic public opinion processes and to establish the manner in which it interacts with state policy outputs. These observational tasks may well seem daunting to the point of near impossibility; though we do well to bear in mind that the assemblage of elaborate cross-national poll data, which is becoming increasingly routine today, would have seemed similarly fantastic just a few decades ago.

### **Conceptualising the role of global media systems**

The discursive model accords communication systems and practices a number of central roles in the development of publics and public opinion. In their watchdog role, the media act as surveillance agents, monitoring the behaviour of political elites, alerting audiences to potential problems and enabling attentive publics to form around elite disagreements. Even more critically, they act as a means of correlating and coordinating disparate internal responses to these problems by bringing together contrasting views, offering a forum for airing the debate through which the public develops and helping opinion coalitions to form (Laswell 1948). Less obviously but no less important, the media perform these same functions for political elites (Price 1992).

Media characterisations of opinion in the attentive public, for example, may serve to help correlate the

public's responses, but at the same time they also serve a surveillance function for political elites (by allowing them to monitor the public's behaviour). Likewise, news of about other political actors permits political elites to learn about, understand and react to one another (and hence correlating elite responses to problems). Thus, the same piece of news or information conveyed by the media may perform different functions for different actors in the process, depending upon one's point of view. By conveying information from elites to publics and vice versa and by connecting popular wishes to elite decisions the media serve a linkage function (performing on a continual and informal basis, though much less precisely, what electoral systems seek to accomplish).

Without some mass system of communication, only relatively small attention aggregates could ever form around particular objects, events, or issues. The broader the reach of media systems, the larger the potential scale of attention and interest aggregation. The more interactive and conversational the system, the greater its potential to facilitate interest aggregates that begin to talk, to form and to exchange opinions, that is, to form publics in the sense outlined above. The global reach and conversational capacities of contemporary media systems should, at least in theory, foster international or global public awareness, opinion formation and political participation – just as Cooley proposed a hundred years ago.

On the matter of scale, there is little doubt that the increasingly global reach of the media has produced correspondingly large attention aggregates (for example, the World Cup draws a television audience in the hundreds of millions). Whether global media systems foster public debate, however, or facilitate the formation and development of autonomous world publics, are much more difficult questions to address. Critics have raised a number of concerns about how well twentieth-century mass media carried out these public functions, and these concerns are useful to bear in mind. To many analysts and observers, the press – particularly the commercial news media – has been far more dedicated to gaining audience attention than to serving as an effective watchdog, much less a vital forum for free-flowing disagreement and debate or as an agitator spurring widespread public action (Laswell 1948: Carey 1978).



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### Can the great society be a great community?

The democratic character of public communication and opinion formation can be difficult to maintain even in small decision-making bodies, as status and knowledge differences emerge, where those with unpopular views may prove reticent, and where racial, religious, or other cleavages prevent open and equitable exchanges (Mansbridge 1983). As communication systems expand, as participants in that system become heterogeneous and widely dispersed and as the problems at stake become more specialised and distant, the difficulties become all the more significant.

A fair, open, bottom-up discursive process incorporating widespread popular participation is

<sup>2</sup> *Writings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries tended to valorize the public as rational and deliberative, defining it as a kind of counter-concept to the crowd, which was thought to reflect baser emotional impulses that tended to corrupt public opinion (Price 1992). The privileging of rational discourse has been heavily criticised by scholars of many stripes, including feminist scholars, who argue that this bias often serves elite interests and marginalises as unreasonable critical views expressed emotionally. As noted above, the discursive model of public opinion formation frames it as developing through a confluence of multiple, interacting communicative processes, incorporating discussion, mass attention and crowd behaviour, unfolding over time around issues (see Foote and Hart 1953, or, for a similar argument about understanding crowds in the development of social movements, Oliver 1989).*



viewed by most as a desirable goal for public communication. Views about the capacities of both the media and of citizens, and hence of the quality of mass-mediated public opinion, however, vary considerably. Early twentieth-century analysts were often fearful that the rational, discursive behaviour of publics, in particular, might be easily subverted by propagandistic emotional appeals and thus that in so many ways publics would devolve into crowds (Park 1904/1972).<sup>2</sup> Lippmann (1922), for instance, expressed profound doubts about the ability of the news media to convey much more than fragmentary and simplistic accounts of the complex issues facing modern citizens, who, in turn, have little time or inclination to acquire accurate knowledge of the political world. He thus placed very little faith in the wisdom of public opinion in the 'great society' (Wallas 1914), which he saw as shallow and based upon incomplete and inadequate stereotypes.

Lippmann argued that collective decision making unfolds best when it is a carefully managed, elite and technocratic affair, with elected leaders and expert policy advisors deciding the course of collective action and then organising public opinion for the masses. Others, while not necessarily more sanguine about the quality of the standard commercial news media, expressed far greater confidence in the capacities of ordinary citizens. In response to Lippmann, Dewey (1927) argued that, while the 'great society' would never possess all the desirable qualities of a local community, a 'great community' of true democratic character was nevertheless achievable. '[T]he essential need' for such a great community, Dewey posited, was improved 'methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion' (1927: 208). Given 'artful presentations' circulated through a sort of community-based social science, people would – given sufficient education – indeed be able to develop sound, independent opinions and provide useful guidance to policy makers.

Numerous writers on public opinion and the media expressed deep concern, particularly after World War II, that publics had been displaced by mass behaviour. Mass communication, as opposed to true public communication, is characterised by strong vertical (usually downward) flows of information and opinion and weak or non-existent citizen-to-citizen or horizontal exchanges of any meaningful kind. Critics of mid-twentieth-century communication systems

(such as Mills 1956) and of the burgeoning field of opinion polling (Blumer 1948) saw them both as substituting mass opinion for public opinion. The latter is autonomous and emerges from the give-and-take of public discussion, while the former is merely a product of numerous coincidental but uncoordinated individual responses to the mass media. It is thus media-dependent, poorly reasoned and impulsive. Publics fall prey to the media that act as part of a manipulative culture industry (Kellner 2000) which, owing largely to commercial imperatives, constitutes the public, not as an actively deliberating body, but instead as a passive, spectator-like body of political consumers (Ginsberg 1986). Habermas (1962/1989) captured many of these concerns in his influential thesis that the public sphere – an open, sovereign and egalitarian arena of popular debate operating independently of the state and commercial spheres – had largely collapsed in modern welfare states, having been thoroughly suffused with state and commercial influence.

### **New hopes for global media**

Against this backdrop of traditional doubt and concern, recent trends in media systems have given renewed hope for expanded public discourse, freer flows of information and newly invigorated publics. The past decades have witnessed dramatic declines in the cost of producing and distributing messages and, with satellite communications, especially dramatic declines in the sensitivity of cost to geographical distance. As communication bandwidth has expanded, multi-channel media systems have become the norm in many parts of the world, significantly reducing the gatekeeping authority of traditional broadcasting organisations. The social-networking capabilities of new media systems have also facilitated the organisation and coordination of political action across geographical boundaries.

When combined with the liberalisation of media ownership in many nations, these trends have contributed to an apparent blossoming of alternative media willing to challenge mainstream news organisations, along with a growing sense of basic 'rights to communicate' around the world (see chapter 8 of this volume). The ability of ordinary citizens to publish online and to participate in creating and editing news reports using collaborative Wiki software has led to speculation about new forms of grassroots citizen



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*Will dramatic changes in media systems foster public debate or develop public opinion?*

journalism. The success of meet-ups and flash mobs arranged through the Internet or via mobile phones has fuelled predictions of revolutionary changes in social and political organisation (Rheingold 2002; Trippi 2004). An array of e-government and e-democracy initiatives has been launched, with the goal of improving government responsiveness to ordinary citizens and improving public accountability. Advocates of civic journalism and deliberative democracy have been working aggressively to advance a variety of media reforms, including active support for programmes of community discussion sponsored by news organisations, the growth of alternative, community-based and community-operated media and other ways of activating and engaging readers, listeners and viewers.

At the same time, it is unclear for a number of reasons whether recent trends in global media systems will have the hoped-for effects on publics or on the quality of public opinion. First, the deployment of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) will in all likelihood exhibit clear path dependencies (Pierson 2004). Innovation and the diffusion of political and communication practices are likely to follow lines of established cultural compatibility, locking-in on modifications of current practice and compromising potentially valuable alternative designs. Both scholars and practitioners in

the new information society tend to carry a number of implicit assumptions in their largely technocratic and market-focused vision of the future (Pyati 2005; Sarikakas 2004). Emerging economic and structural relationships are viewed as inevitable, with many viewing private–public partnerships as a necessary part of the future. Thus, judgements are likely to be made about the democratic value of ICTs without due consideration of the paths *not* taken – for example, publicly controlled, rather than commercially developed and controlled media.

We may just as easily fall prey to faulty assumptions about the inherent democratic propensities of new, open media systems. Despite a general sense that the Internet significantly expands access to audiences by lowering barriers to market entry, for example, recent studies actually find a remarkable degree of market concentration in audience traffic to political websites. Indeed, Hindman et al. (2003) find that the online audiences may even exhibit more and not less concentration than those of the traditional media such as broadcasting. While the Internet has without question increased access to electronic publishing, Hindman et al. (2003) argue that the rapid expansion of online content has increased the importance of filtering and search mechanisms like Google, channelling the bulk of users to the same restricted set of sites rising to the top of the ‘Googlearchy’ (sites that are in large

part produced by conventional media corporations).

There are other ways in which the new interactive media, despite in theory offering an opening for new voices in public debate, can simply reproduce business as usual. There are of course well-known digital divides between those with and without access to ICTs; but even when such access is equitable, more enduring divides may persist between those knowledgeable or interested enough to engage in politics and those who are, for one reason or another, never drawn into play. Hindman (2006), noting the much touted ability of the 'blogosphere' to counter the mainstream media, finds from an analysis of the top 80 political blogs in the US that these sites are produced by a group that is overwhelmingly male (93 per cent), virtually all white and drawn from the professional ranks of lawyers, political consultants, journalists and policy experts.

Third, the advent of highly flexible, multi-channel media systems, which in principle allow for greater circulation of public affairs information, may conceivably have the effect of reducing rather than expanding the broad distribution of news and information. Recent research by Prior (2002) and others suggests that increasing consumer choice, at least in the US media market, has come largely at the expense of news, the audience for which has been dwindling as entertainment-oriented outlets draw readers, viewers and listeners away in significant numbers. Tewksbury (2003) finds a similar pattern in studies tracking users of news websites. With their newfound freedom to navigate media sites, users tend to seek entertainment and celebrity-related information in place of national or international news and public affairs. At the same time, the remaining audience for public affairs programming has fractured, as people look for news and opinions that match their own ideological commitments and judge the credibility of the press from their own ideological viewpoints (Pew Research Center 2004). Such findings fuel concerns about the centrifugal forces at work in new media systems, which may produce a pattern of one-sided information consumption and a widening gulf between the politically engaged and unengaged and thereby reduce the deliberative character of public opinion.

Finally, changes in media systems are confounded with numerous other global changes, seriously complicating judgments about the effects of communication *per se*. The adaptation of new

technologies is ongoing and ever evolving, with ICTs put to many different purposes by myriad users, advocacy groups and governments. This has produced a wide open field of experimental application. Anecdotal stories of success may be found, but these successful deployments of the new media are not easily separated from the larger, democratically oriented efforts in which they are embedded. Thus, the same ends might well have been achieved by other means. The effects of new communication technologies then, are difficult to disentangle from the effects of other ongoing processes, such as the liberalisation of markets, the reform of education, or infusions of foreign subsidies. Communication effects, even if they can be isolated, are also not constant over the course of diffusion. Complex systems are very difficult to observe, given changes in what is done (that is, the introduction of new behaviour), changes in how things are done (performing existing functions in new ways) and changes in who does things and with whom.

There remain then, a number of key questions to address in discussing the nature of the information society. It is unclear at present whether the changes in communication systems will indeed produce entirely new forms of organisation, as Rhinegold (2002) and Trippi (2004) have proposed, or instead, much more modest extensions and refinements of current political practice (as proposed by Bimber 2003). Even less clear is whether these organisations will behave in a democratic fashion. Exactly what sort of leverage can reasonably be exerted by ordinary citizens, vis-à-vis the well-funded and highly organised interests of governmental, commercial and often extra-local or extra-national NGOs?

### The road ahead

Elsewhere in this Yearbook authors consider whether globalisation, and in particular the globalisation of the media, has indeed fostered the development of larger, more inclusive publics and a widening of democratic discourse spanning nations and continents. Some propose that global civil society and international media development have served to open authoritarian regimes to greater public influence. Others take a somewhat darker view, focusing on the role of large, well-organised and heavily funded special interest groups in derailing open discourse and thwarting popular desires.

This Chapter has taken a purposefully broad view of

the connection between civil society and democratic practice, framing discursive publics as both 'democracy in practice' and 'civil society in the making.' Efforts to chart the changing contours of global civil society and monitor developments in the worldwide use of television, radio, newspapers and the Internet should continue, as should further development of international mass opinion surveys, stakeholder surveys, comparative content analyses and the like. If we are to understand properly the rise of global public opinion and its putative role in constraining key institutions and global actors, however, these efforts will need to be coordinated around particular issues and designed in such a way that they can be profitably examined as parallel time-series. Mapping the virtual, discursive terrain surrounding issues of global import and better understanding attentive publics and mass audiences worldwide will require both great imagination and sustained collaborative effort. We need more than simply improved snapshot assessments of mass opinion or opinion among the most attentive segments of the population, or NGO leaders or government officials, or of messages distributed via the media. Instead, what is needed is better empirical leverage on the interaction of these various phenomena around particular issues over time – some means of gauging the changing relationships between institutional behaviour, media behaviour and the behaviour of publics, crowds and masses as problems emerge and are contested. The ideal would be a set of linked and comparable observations spanning national borders and assessing comparative beliefs, feelings and opinions across each of these collective constituencies over the life-course of an issue. Such data would permit a dynamic appraisal of the influences flowing bottom-up or top-down, putting to test suppositions of democratic decision making. Data arrays are not presently available, but they are at least no longer inconceivable. Given the substantial costs and logistical difficulty, such data are not likely to emerge without the systematic coordination of the many, varied and inevitably partial efforts now underway worldwide. One hopes the Yearbook has fostered, and will in the future accelerate, coordination of this kind.

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