

The Internet and its Democratic Virtues

Dominique Cardon

What are the political characteristics of the internet revolution? Plunging into “internet democracy,” Dominique Cardon explores the tensions running through this vast network of networks, including the radical equality of its users, their very conspicuous subjectivity, the creation of new kinds of solidarity, and the construction of legitimacy.

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What role does the internet play in the changing shape of democracy? There are many and contradictory answers to that question. After all, the internet is all at once a technical object, a medium of communication, a public space, and a political prop or device, so in considering it as a whole there is a risk that we might fuse together things that are so different that any generalization will just slide across this unlikely object, without managing to come up with any precise rendering of it. Nevertheless I want to take that risk, by suggesting, without much in the way of caution, six propositions about democratic experience on the internet.

Because of its history, the technological choices made at its conception, the governance imagined for it by developer communities, and the kinds of uses that have been developed for it, the internet has come to incorporate a specific political code, a form of democratic life that is, if not simply unique, at least sufficiently idiosyncratic to be identified with it. It goes without saying that the diversity of political practices on the internet rules out having a single model of them. Yet it does seem that within this multiplicity we can identify an infrastructure of the whole and a common normative horizon, and that our efforts here will not be in vain, if they help us identify the most virtuous characteristics of the *internet as political form*, in the context of ongoing changes.

In order to do this, I will pick out six democratic virtues of the internet, describing them with the assistance of the criticisms made about them from the point of view of the categories of the representative political space. In contrasting the internet’s political form with the traditional, representative form, I hope to identify the virtues and the pitfalls. Many studies, especially those based on the biographies and the images of the internet’s pioneers, have already clearly demonstrated the internet’s “libertarian-

liberal” ideology.¹ Others have deployed in various contexts the metaphor of the network as rhizome in order to sketch the contours of a different politics of the web, a politics made up of subjectivities, exiles and new forms of the common. Here I want rather to dwell on the special treatment that the internet reserves to *speech*.

The Six Political Virtues of the Internet

Virtues	Pitfalls
1 the presumption of equality	the exclusion of the passive
2 the liberation of subjectivity	narcissistic depoliticization
3 a bottom-up public	the end of private life
4 the strength of weak cooperation	the fragility of commitments
5 self-organization	procedural bureaucracy
6 ex post legitimacy	crushing diversity

Looking at the internet’s political form, the first three democratic virtues that I focus on are consequences of its promotion of the radical enlargement of the public space. In fact, this is the role that the internet is most often credited with. It has loosened up tightly controlled and contained public expression, by opening it up to new voices. The web has liberated speech and given the impression of challenging the authority of those who had previously enjoyed a monopoly of access to the public space – journalists, politicians and experts. From this enlargement we can draw three lessons, to do with the definition of publics (*the presumption of equality*), the diversity of expression (*the liberation of subjectivity*), and the porosity between ordinary conversation and public discussion (*a bottom-up public*).

1. The presumption of equality

The internet manifests the democratic ideal of “the presumption of equality” to the greatest extent when it asserts “the share of those who have no share” in public speech.² Authority or status are only faintly legitimate, when they are not subject to conscious suspension or implicit challenge. However, this presumption of equality is not, as it is in elections, a useful fiction designed to conceal individual socio-economic characteristics inside a voting booth, in order to produce an egalitarian counting of opinions.

¹ For example, see Patrice Flichy, *The Internet Imaginaire*, Cambridge (MA) and London, MIT Press, 2007, translated by Liz Carey-Libbrecht from the French original (*L’imaginaire d’Internet*, Paris, La Découverte, 2001). Or, more recently, Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Steward Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2006.

² Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2004, translated by Julie Rose from the French original (*La mésentente: Politique et philosophie*, Paris, Galilée, 1995).

On the internet, the presumption of equality – Wikipedia is a good example here – aims to measure and to rank people only by what they do, produce or say, and not by who or what they are. The internet has appreciably embodied this democratic ideal that invites all and sundry to apply their talents, however diverse. This is the first democratic lesson that we owe to the internet experience. By presupposing the equality of all, it pursues as far as possible the refusal to consider people’s statuses and positions, and at the same time it establishes procedures for socialization and correction, in order to include new entrants in the internet’s space for expression without condescension or paternalism.

The exclusion of the passive

However, the internet’s presupposition of equality overemphasizes the individual responsibility of its active users. As in any network, promotion of the actors is quite excluding. The active exclude the passive. The agile skirt around the entrenched. The doers take the place of the conscientious and modest craftsmen. Specific to networked spheres,³ this tension is so profoundly built into the very infrastructure of the forms of engagement with the internet that its effects are rarely highlighted. Does this mean that in fact every invitation to active participation contains an exclusion of the silent and the passive? Behind the democratic horizon of “participation for all” resurface the inequalities originating in the unequal distribution of sociocultural capital in our societies.

Still, it is possible to make adjustments to these hidden inequalities if we agree to broaden the idea of participation to include less socially and culturally demanding forms of expression. In this respect, the democratic lesson suggested by this presupposition of the universality of talents is the rehabilitation of tiny, incomplete, superficial and quiet forms of participation. The internet teaches us that it is possible to encourage a greater variety of definitions of people’s qualities without immediately plotting them on a graph of legitimacy, thus producing symbolic exclusions.

2. The liberation of subjectivity

In the traditional public space – the press, books, radio and television – the emphasis on distance is so strong that it has also proved to be a way of excluding many of the more subjective, interested, irresponsible, funny and violent forms of speech.⁴ The price to pay for internet’s broader access to the public space has been a lower emphasis on the distance that was fundamental to public discourse (political, journalistic, and intellectual) because it placed it in the controlling world of reason, self-control, argument and detachment with regard to individual interests. Without breaking with these controlling ideas (in fact, they are sometimes reinforced and enhanced by certain types of internet debates), the internet has also received, made visible and encouraged all sorts of expressions of subjectivity. This is clearly a new “Distribution of the Sensible” (to borrow Jacques Rancière’s phrase), that has promoted the internet by suddenly making visible – much to the chagrin of many – a previously invisible

³ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999.

⁴ This issue has been particularly well highlighted by the feminist critique of Jürgen Habermas’ account of the public sphere. See Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 1992, pp. 109–142.

plurality and diversity of expression. The internet has taught us that in order to widen the circle of public expression, we must tolerate first-person declarations, confident points of view and frail voices, rants, peremptory assertions, and remarks that can be hazardous, poetic, crazy, funny or vibrant.

The web is therefore neither an unambiguous, transparent or smooth public space. Its high degree of plasticity has allowed its users to construct very different ways of linking their identity with information. “Distanced” pairing of civic identity with general-interest information, of the sort that constitutes the legitimate form of public expression in our concept of the public space, only occupies a small, though visible slot. It would be dangerous and reductive to look at the web from this perspective alone, and to see it only as a space for information, circulation of ideas, and critical evaluation.

Clearly, “citizen” participation on the internet is inhabited by constant critical vigilance regarding the conduct of public actors. But internet users have also learned that some kinds of speech are better kept hidden in obscure and closed parts of the web, and that other kinds can flourish in intermediate and shadowy spaces, where though public they are so difficult to find that they retain a semi-clandestine character.⁵ One cannot but emphasize that this plasticity in the forms of visibility is the foundation of the diversity, vitality and creativity of the conversational games exhibited by users since the invention of the world wide web; no doubt these semi-obscure zones have also sheltered the richest stylistic experiments and narratives. This is why complete transparency of the internet itself, which would abolish semi-obscure spaces and bring them into the light of search engines, would constitute a real threat to such types of speech that have emerged and proliferated only because they knew they had limited visibility.

Narcissistic depoliticization

This openness to a greater diversity of speech – reinforced by anonymity, a very effective way of lowering inhibitions – seems to have opened Pandora’s box, letting out types of speech with uncertain, unknown, prohibited, or unprecedented statuses into the traditional public space. But do such subjectivities really have a place in the public space? Are we not opening the space of common visibility to speech that is private, personal or familiar, normally associated with sociability between close friends and family, and not relevant to a public space? The decompartmentalization of speech has indeed thrown up expressions with a form, character and interest that seems quite far removed from any public concern. Should the subjective effervescence of the web be seen therefore as the sign of a form of political disengagement, resulting in a narcissistic and consumerist cult of a triumphant individuality?

Such questions are increasingly the starting point for critiques that point out the standardization of amateur works on the internet and the deflection of their political potential into an anesthetizing self-centredness. Massification of popular expressiveness on the web is considered to be alienating the subjectivity of individuals, on the one hand, under pretenses of conformist, strategic and exhibitionist expressiveness, and commodifying these voluntary individual works, on the other hand, thus profiting the

⁵ On semi-clandestinity on the web, see Dominique Cardon, “Le design de la visibilité: Un essai de cartographie du web 2.0,” *Réseaux*, no. 152, 2008, pp. 93-137.

new vehicles of informational capitalism.⁶ In doing away so lightly with the barrier between private and public expression, these critiques reflect a very narrow and homogenizing concept of citizen participation, treating the public space simply as an extension of the representative space of government and media towards a select circle of enlightened citizens. On the contrary, the internet's new forms of expression do not just seek to open up the "oligarchic" public space by extending it into the periphery to bring in new speakers. Rather, they pluralize and re-allocate forms of political speech, using types of language and inhabiting spaces that conventional politics often cannot recognize.

3. A bottom-up public

In many participatory uses of the internet, especially in social networking, users do not address the public as it appears in normative architectures of the public space, as an aggregate of anonymous people unified in an abstract and dominating fiction; instead, they address a fairly circumscribed group of people, their nearest and dearest. Of course, they are speaking in public. But in their eyes, this public, though it does not have absolutely sealed borders, is limited to an area of mutual acquaintance, a pretty closed place, a territory that preserves their words within its perimeter and then lets them evaporate. The internet's public space is made up of a swarm of conversations, all tangled up, and they relate to each other by unpredictable principles of assembly. This blurring of the levels of visibility is at the heart of the activity of expression on the internet. What was once sent out through different channels – interpersonal communication on the one hand, public speaking on the other – is now (partially) united by individuals in a process of identity creation that couples relating to oneself with relating to the world.

On Facebook pages, blogs and Twitter accounts, users talk about personal or family events and at the same time comment on current events, circulate information, and enrich public discussion. They mix up levels of language, types of discourse, and different publics; this makes more visible and more public various centres of interest, opinions and events that are not – or are only badly – appreciated by the media agenda of professionals. This porosity between conversational space and public space is also the basis of new forms of mobilization and organization of collective action. So the internet's political form teaches us to challenge a unitary and heroic concept of the "public," and to pay attention to the aggregation of publics driven by the dynamics of entangled conversations that expand and coalesce, thereby leaving their enclosures and receiving general attention.⁷

The end of private life

However, this porosity between a space for socializing and the public space comes at a price: the danger of seeing personal information exposed to everyone's gaze.

⁶ As often in debates on the quality of popular cultural productions, this criticism can take a conservative turn (Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: How blogs, MySpace, YouTube and the rest of today's user-generated media are killing our culture and economy*, New York, Doubleday, 2007) or a "progressive" one (Søren Mørk Petersen, "Loser Generated Content: From Participation to Exploitation," *First Monday*, vol. 13, no. 3, 3 March 2008).

⁷ See Bruno Latour, "Le fantôme de l'esprit public. Des illusions de la démocratie aux réalités de ses apparitions," Preface to Walter Lippman, *Le public fantôme* [*The Phantom Public*, 1925], Paris, Demopolis, 2008.

A new kind of “interpersonal surveillance” is added to the “institutional surveillance” of the state and business firms – around which the core of the debate about personal information is organized.⁸ With the “democratization” of the observation instruments provided by social network platforms to their users (Facebook’s News Feed is clearly the leading example of this new horizontal panopticon), self-exhibition means taking a risk in front of close friends, family, colleagues, employers, lovers, and neighbours.

Gilles Deleuze’s prophecy of the shift from a disciplinarian society to a society of control comes into its own here: when it is decentralized and shared out, surveillance – of others and of oneself – becomes a monitoring activity that everyone is constantly engaging in. Thus, one of the political difficulties confronting whistleblowers in a surveillance society is that they now have to take on board the fact that political or commercial monitoring is more and more deeply rooted in the strange *hubris* of the surveilled themselves. How can we really count on citizens’ support for pointing out the risks of institutional surveillance when they themselves are deliberately and conscientiously making personal information public, and developing an insatiable curiosity for the information provided by others?

By making speech forms much more plastic and porous, the internet facilitates the flow of information, aiming at a greater “transparency” in society. It promotes the sharing of content that was previously held back by technical, legal, institutional and commercial barriers. But this release of content, which subverts traditional boundaries in economies and in knowledge⁹ and expands the space of criticism by providing new sources for “citizen” verification, is also inseparable from a greater circulation of information on individuals. In fact, one aspect of the forms of exchange that have been expanded on the internet is that persons and content are more attached to each other, and that it is precisely these attachments that are promoted by the effects of circulation, sharing and diffusion. Even if – contrary to what is sometimes feared – personal information shown on the internet, rather than disclosing personal privacy, is more often than not strategically stage-managed, it is undeniable that the internet’s expansion of the public space is counter to both information secrecy and personal invisibility.

Discovering the common

Building on this expansion of the public space, three other democratic virtues of the internet have to do with the way in which collective forms on the web appear (*the strength of weak cooperation*), function (*self-organization*), and acquire their legitimacy (*ex-post legitimacy*). In fact, the internet produces collectives that are quite different from those that emerge in the real world. It also accepts traditional collective forms, by reproducing them on the web. But our goal here is to push the specific features of the internet form to their limit. And it is through this production of solidarities in a context of expressive individualization that the internet can claim to have its own specific political form. Its most innovative trademark is in the almost systematic inversion of the steps in the process of group formation. Filtering, selection, aggregation, coordination, individuals’ incorporation of common values, and legitimation in the public space, all

⁸ Peter Bradwell and Niamh Gallagher, *We no longer control what others know about us, but we don’t yet understand the consequences*, London, Demos, 2007.

⁹ Yann Moulier Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012, translated from the French original (*Le capitalisme cognitif: La nouvelle grande transformation*, Paris, Éditions Amsterdam, 2007).

occur not *a priori* but *a posteriori*.¹⁰ If we really pay close attention to this, we'll see that this reversal has very powerful effects on the economics of collective action.

4. The strength of weak cooperation

Internet “communities” are *voluntary*. They bear no resemblance to the village and tribal images that some people try to revive by using the term communitarian, in order to give internet collectives a soul or territorial rootedness. They appear rather as the collective result of a set of individual actions that were not (or were very little) guided by the kind of intentions that are ordinarily associated with commitment to the shared values of a community. So they do not conform to the traditional model of a community of destiny, of identity or of belonging, which presupposes individuals with a value or an attribute incorporated in their person prior to their commitment to the community.

Most major internet collectives are results of opportunistic interactions premised on individuals' exhibition of their identity, tastes, activities and works. Individuals begin by making their expressive interests public. Others grab hold of the handles offered by the exposed individuals to start interacting with them. In this way “weak” cooperation gets underway.¹¹ The fabric of commitments that people get caught up in helps reveal to them the interests and the intentions that they did not recognize or could not formulate initially. Thus they let themselves be redefined by interdependencies kindled by their individuality being made visible. Only rarely does this “weak cooperation,” at the end of a long effort to consolidate and to reinforce ties among the participants, reveal norms and values that the actors will endorse as attributes of their identity, explicitly committing themselves to taking on collective tasks.¹² The “weak” cooperation can then actually become “strong,” and, like real-world collectives, acquire resources and means for taking action.

The fragility of commitments

We can see in this model of collective action a weakening of the intentional character of completed actions, which has inspired criticisms of instrumental rationality, and has encouraged a rehabilitation of the creative dimensions of activity.¹³ Blurring the instrumental aspects of action and emphasizing its expressive components, web

¹⁰ On this transformation towards a “publish, then filter” model, see Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, New York, The Penguin Press, 2008, chap. 4.

¹¹ Christophe Aguiton and Dominique Cardon, “The Strength of Weak Cooperation: an Attempt to Understand the Meaning of Web2.0,” *Communications & Strategies*, no. 65, 2007, pp. 51-65. With slight differences, this is the same kind of model for building internet “communities” that is suggested by the expression “networked individualism” in Barry Wellman, “Physical Place and Cyberplace: The Rise of Personalised Networking,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, no. 25, June 2001, pp. 227-252, and Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹² This process has been described very well with reference to the way in which the engagement of individuals in writing *Wikipedia* articles is gradually transformed into an assumption of responsibility by the collective interests of the community of encyclopedists. See Susan L. Bryant, Andrea Forte and Amy Bruckman, “Becoming Wikipedian: Transformation of Participation in a Collaborative Online Encyclopaedia,” *GROUP 05: Proceedings of the 2005 International ACM SIGGROUP Conference on Supporting Group Work*, New York, ACM, 2005, pp. 1-10.

¹³ Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1996. Translated by Jeremy Gaines and Paul Keast from the German original (*Die Kreativität des Handelns*, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992).

commitments promote a rationale of self-realization, even while managing to connect this rationale to the formation of public collectives. The idea that actors discover in interaction the meaning of their commitments and thereby produce their identity is at the heart of the ethics of discussion, and fuels current debates on recognition.

But what makes the internet possible is a creative pairing of expressive affirmation and collective action, two things one is more often accustomed to seeing as opposed to each other when focusing on “strong cooperation.” In fact, this model of action gives such an important place to expressive affirmation that it seems to weaken and to gloss over the collective intentionality of subjects’ consciousness. The cost of exposure is forgetting the collective, as so many critics of individualistic culture and its unstable, liquid commitments have lamented.¹⁴ This way of constituting voluntary, self-organized, horizontal collectives may appear essentially fragile and unorganized. The sometimes quite illusory claim of producing case-by-case combinations on a voluntary and optional basis, and promoting self-limited, ad hoc mobilization, is extreme as a description of most web-supported processes of collective action. However, it does not help to oppose expressiveness and communitarian concern to each other, by dramatizing the opposition between the individual and the collective. In fact it would seem to be relevant to emphasize the way in which “expressivism,”¹⁵ rather than being solipsistic narcissism, always includes interaction with and recognition of others. Therefore, it can lead to new and original ways of sharing.

5. Self-organization

Previously, the market and the state monopolized the organization of major forms of collective action; with the internet, the dramatic reduction in the cost of establishing large-scale self-organized systems allows individuals to create collective forms in which neither the market nor the state takes the initiative. Clay Shirky argues that the digital world upsets the temporal sequence of collective action. In the traditional model for the formation of collectives, individuals who at first share common values go on to establish coordination mechanisms, with a view finally to sharing resources. In the “weak cooperation” model, the sequence is reversed: individuals systematically share their resources, with a view to discovering people with whom to coordinate, to produce together some common values.

However, Shirky argues that this reversal makes it possible to have larger-scale coordination, and on topics that are neither perceived nor envisaged in the world of planned collective action. In the first place, coordination is much more expensive than resource sharing, because it requires the alignment of action plans and imposes time constraints on related activities.¹⁶ In real-world formation of collectives, coordination is carried out before resource sharing. What will be shared is determined exclusively by the products of each member’s actions, as planned in the previous work of coordination. But on the internet, resource sharing is prior to coordination, because what is made visible, public and accessible to everyone has not been subject to initial deliberations. It is on this principle that the most innovative social forms of the internet – Wikipedia,

¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Life*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2005.

¹⁵ Laurence Allard and Frédéric Vandenberghe, “Express Yourself! Les pages perso entre légitimation techno-politique de l’individualisme expressif et authenticité réflexive peer-to-peer,” *Réseaux*, no. 117, 2003, pp. 191-219.

¹⁶ Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody*, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

Creative Commons, open APIs (application programming interfaces), and so on – have been developed, to fashion from heterogeneous commitments something common. In the second place, collective consciousness is more expensive than coordination, insofar as it assumes that a regulatory body might impose a collective interest on individual interests.¹⁷ In the real world, collectives “hold” because each of the individuals that they assemble already has values and interests that are sufficiently close to the others’ to encourage coordination. But in the digital world, these shared values are a product emerging from interactions of the participants, who gradually incorporate collective identities and beliefs. More importantly, because of the diversity and heterogeneity of the participants, internet collectives are defined more by shared values than by common procedures.

In fact, internet collectives develop modes of institutionalization and monitoring systems that distinguish them from ordinary political collectives by this high degree of proceduralization.¹⁸ In the first place, the scope of these collectives is particularly vague, and the variability of the levels of commitment within them is very strong. This weakening of the collective’s boundaries is the result of the heterogeneity of the actors, the low cost of entry, and the diversity of the membership criteria. In the second place, these collectives are (relatively) acentric, and they very rarely give to the centre the right to speak for and to represent the collective. Finally, most of the decision-making procedures take the form of consensus and compromise.

These characteristics lead to the establishment of an essentially procedural regulation, it being in general difficult to define positively the substantial values of the community. Wikipedia has the highest, most refined and subtle form of procedural regulation.¹⁹ But this model is also found in the internet’s technical standards areas (ICANN, IETF, W3C, and so on), in the open software community, and in many communitarian forms appearing on the web.

Procedural bureaucracy

Although they are made necessary out of respect for the pluralism of identities and the diversity of commitments, internet collectives’ forms of self-organization sometimes have kinds of authority and governance that are problematic and difficult to defend. At first they create a constant instability in the rules governing operations and community decisions. Then they promote the formation of inequalities between those most committed to the life of the community and the rest. Finally they generate a procedural bureaucracy that can seem difficult to tolerate, especially for new entrants.²⁰

Particularly in the world of open software, but also in online communities more generally, the threat of a “fork,” i.e. the division of the community into projects that are

¹⁷ This connection between the institutionalization of collective governance and the interiorization of communal values has been highlighted in the debate on the tragedy of the commons.

¹⁸ In this regard, the political collectives that are closest to this mode of regulating internet cooperatives are the political structures invented by militant altermondialists by means of social forums. See Christophe Aguiton and Dominique Cardon, “De la cooptation à l’agglutination: Culture participative et formes organisationnelles des forums sociaux,” in Catherine Neveu, *Cultures et pratiques participatives: Perspectives comparatives*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2007, pp. 55-74.

¹⁹ Dominique Cardon and Julien Levrel, “La vigilance participative: Une interprétation de la gouvernance de Wikipédia,” *Réseaux*, no. 154, 2009, pp. 51-89.

²⁰ Mathieu O’Neil, *Cyberchiefs: Autonomy and Authority in Online Tribes*, London, Pluto Press, 2009.

parallel but under different forms of governance, is an omnipresent horizon for all internet collectives. In criticism of the internet's disorder and its fundamentally dispersed, multiple and proliferating nature, one can always find nostalgia for an absent authority,²¹ as in the repeated and always failed attempts (Nupedia, Citizendium, and so on) to bring Wikipedia articles to heel by asking experts to put an end to the incessant participation by the unwashed. In fact, the purpose of the procedural devices in the internet's collective spaces is to replace the substantial forms of authority that govern the division of roles and powers in the "oligarchic" public space.

6. Ex post legitimacy

The traditional public space is the result of a long process of professionalization and domestication of speakers, which has given rise to special statuses for public speakers, professional associations in press and publishing, and legal devices to protect the freedom of expression. Strict rules of publication applied a priori control (the sacrosanct role of media and publishing gatekeepers) to statements before they were made visible. The traditional public space was *public* because information made *visible* to everyone had been subject to prior selection by professionals obeying deontological norms that were constructed at the same time as the right to punish speech contravening these rules by rendering it *invisible*. This production of the public space by modern information media thus ensured both visibility and publicity of statements.

What the arrival of the internet brings into play with regard to our traditional concepts of the public space is precisely a decoupling of these two notions. Statements can be accessible (i.e. potentially *visible*) without immediately and intrinsically (by default, one could say) acquiring a *public* character. With the abolition of the double hurdle of selection by the quality of speakers plus a priori control over their statements, visibility and publicity are no longer empirical synonyms.

Importance given to a statement results not from prior selection by a specialized body, but from an ex post ranking accomplished by users in accordance with their positions in the structure of web reputations.²² It is the work done by the users to link or promote statements that creates this form of particular visibility in which "legitimate" speech acts are those that appear high up in the hierarchies (of search engines, blog rankings, feeds on information portals, news aggregators, and so on). The speech acts that are stuck low down in these hierarchies, unlinked, so hardly seen at all, do not acquire the same public character.

So it is the act of reading, and the decision to link and to circulate this statement rather than that one – i.e. its reception – that designates to others which statements are worthy of being recognized as having a public, shareable character. To establish a link is to cast a vote.²³ Grading produced by this process of "crowd ranking" certainly has a

²¹ David Weinberger, *Everything is Miscellaneous: The Power of the New Digital Disorder*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, Times Books, 2007.

²² For a detailed analysis of this mechanism, see Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006.

²³ Benjamin Loveluck, "Internet, vers la démocratie radicale?" *Le Débat*, no. 151, September-October 2008; Gloria Origgi, "Designing wisdom through the Web: The passion of ranking," *Books & Ideas*, 30 September 2008, <http://www.booksandideas.net/Designing-wisdom-through-the-Web.html>.

numerical basis,²⁴ but the counting is not done, as it is in measuring television audiences, by consulting a representative base. In fact it comes down to a summation of voluntary and more or less “considerate” Actions. The internet’s numerical hierarchies add up actions of appreciation and judgement, and not the stimuli. This manner of producing collective evaluations on the internet is in a way its practical reason, and one of its most precious - and most threatened - treasures.

Crushing diversity

In fact, this mode of “crowd” legitimation cannot dispel the much more complex and interwoven reality of notoriety formation on the internet. The structure of links between sites shows an extremely inegalitarian and hierarchical landscape. The effects of the concentration of authorities (“hubs”), the visibility strategies developed by actors, and the unequal structuring of weblinks play a decisive role in digital grading.²⁵ The institutions of the traditional public space (press agents, online newspapers, influential bloggers close to the media world, internet portals of actors) have set themselves up on the web, and through their publication choices and links this strongly structures the hierarchy of the most visible statements. Therefore, if one pays attention only to the summit of the informational hierarchy, the internet’s agenda presents only minor differences from that of the Legacy Media.²⁶ The participative internet seems then to merely reproduce the legitimacy criteria of the traditional gatekeepers.

Moreover, the algorithms of “collaborative filtering,” which can be said to constitute the internet’s electoral arrangements, are increasingly subjected to systematic deformation because of pressure from the commercial interests of platforms pursuing an unpromising economic model. The web’s richness comes from having created beneath the dominant messages an intermediate space in which one can talk about, share and discuss subjects and content which previously did not circulate well in the public space. The danger of a “refeudalization of the public sphere”²⁷ of the internet is that we will see the hierarchy of the top-ranked crush the web’s diversity and corrupt the cooperative tools that make this diversity visible. Statements can be victims of a process of *invisibilization*, when disadvantaged by their inventiveness or their refusal to use the standard readability formats that are required on the web. One of the criticisms that should be made of the internet’s ranking techniques is the lack of tools subtle enough to enrich the diversity of the assessment criteria, and of ways of highlighting statements that do not correspond to the metrics of the reputational algorithms. Therefore we must hope for a development of critical analysis of ranking algorithms, in order help ensure

²⁴ On the connection between quantity and quality in the case of *Wikipedia*, see Dennis M. Wilkinson and Bernardo A. Huberman, “Assessing the value of cooperation in *Wikipedia*,” *First Monday*, vol. 12, no. 4, April 2007, <http://www.uic.edu/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1763/1643>.

²⁵ On these matters, see Alexander Halavais, *Search Engine Society*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009; and Ippolita, *La face cachée de Google*, Paris, Manuels Payot, 2008.

²⁶ See Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009; and Franck Rebillard, *Le web 2.0 en perspective: Une analyse socio-économique de l’Internet*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2007.

²⁷ This expression is used by Habermas to describe the moment when, in the second half of the nineteenth century, commercial interests and mass readerships limited, standardized and “commodified” the principle of “the public” that had appeared in the late eighteenth century. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 1989, translated by Thomas Burger (with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence) from the German original (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Darmstadt and Neuwied, Hermann Luchterhand Verlag, 1962).

that the “long tail” – the internet’s most radically “democratic” phenomenon – is not squeezed out (as has happened with some statements in the traditional public space) but instead is improved, enriched and enlivened.

The Theoretical Turn of the Massification of the Internet

The internet is being transformed by a deep and sudden massification of its use. The development of blogs and social networks, the general uses made of the web by young people from every social background, the penetration of digital tools into a number of quite important spheres of social life, the diversification of commercial, recreational, practical and functional uses of the internet, and, in short, the banalization of internet practices, constitute an important turning point and a decisive intellectual challenge.

Theories about the *internet as political form* strive to characterize it by extending its properties of cooperation, openness, and horizontality of infrastructure to its users.²⁸ Open software developers, digital commons activists, prophets of collective intelligence, advocates of download remixers, apostles of freedom of expression and disguised identity, and alternative information campaigners were the first theorists of the internet’s political form. In a way that was quite original, and probably very rare in the history of great technological inventions, they brought together a technical protocol, a model of collective innovation, a culture of exchange, a scheme for horizontal governance, legally open formats, a claim of extra-territoriality, and so on, in a political and cultural model that has had a very profound influence on the uses and the trajectory of the internet.

However, this intellectual configuration owed its strength to the ease with which it could match the norms of openness and creativity to the reality of user practices. That match was due in part to the proponents of an open and cooperative internet being also the first (and most skilled) users, as well a very homogeneous community of users (white, male, western and cultivated – as consistently shown by sociological studies of its vanguard, the developers of open software).

Today, mass use of the internet has required a change in scale, which, all things being equal, can be compared to the pressure brought to bear on “republican” educational ideals by the democratization of school attendance. The practicing space formerly occupied by a highly homogeneous social and cultural group has now been taken over by groups with more and more social and cultural heterogeneity. They multiply in all directions; they break into disparate worlds; they get mixed up in commerce; they expose various different facets of individuals; they encourage opportunistic, mimetic and infantile behaviour; they accelerate the appearance of works of high culture, but also of the most trivial, absurd and vulgar expressions; they facilitate cooperation as well as calculation, sham as well as talent, standardization as well as creativity. The political categories that had defined the internet at its origins have been put into an awkward position by the massification of its usage.

²⁸ Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks*, *op. cit.*; Lawrence Lessig, *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World*, New York, Random House, 2001.

From Wiki to Facebook

The rift that has opened up between the ideals of internet activists and the practices of new internet users has led to reconsiderations, uncertainties, and even a kind of conservative nostalgia, expelling the new users into the hell of commerce and cultural brutishness. Some of the most active campaigners for the open internet, once quick to see in the slightest technical or semiotic deviation a sign of subjective affirmation and resistance to assigned political and cultural positions, today deplore hetero-determination and commodification of individuals. With a strange intellectual pirouette, they have exchanged Deleuze-Guattari for Adorno-Horkheimer, without truly realizing how much this change of paradigm owed to the morphological transformation of the internet public brought about by the arrival of young users with a working-class background.²⁹

This mismatch between the political internet's ideals and actual web practices is not new. In a way it is part of the internet's history, constantly nourished by a fertile conflict between the commercial and the non-commercial internets. However, as Jonathan Zittrain has demonstrated,³⁰ the change in the scale of internet use has made this gap much more apparent. It has dramatically increased the danger of some of the most structuring technological decisions about the internet's organization being challenged in the name of security and quality, on the ground that the new entrants are less competent to deal with the technical vagaries of the internet. Thus growing tension is emerging between the first generation of internet activists and their children, between wiki participants and Facebook pokers, between community coders and MySpace page "customizers," and so on.

Admittedly, this generation gap has been greatly magnified by the arrival of commercial enterprises in the world of internet exchanges. And admittedly, there is often a long way from the ideals of creativity and collective intelligence, to the prosaic, sometimes narcissistic and often conformist dimensions of the new forms of expression. And admittedly, the new users' forms of public exposure of their personal identity, while not very different from those of their elders, pose risks to the protection of privacy, because of the change of scale in the volume of data being published, and the monopolization of this data by private actors.

But I would defend the argument that it is preferable to relearn and to reaffirm the principles of the original internet's political form, in order to accommodate the diversification of the internet's publics, rather than to oppose that diversification by adopting a reactionary, condescending or elitist attitude. For, looking more closely, the practices of the new internet publics are not unrelated to the pioneers' ideals. But in order to emphasize the continuity, we must draw some lessons from the work of cultural studies which in other areas has already confronted the issue of the relationship between vanguards and mass cultures. More than ever, the main political issue regarding the internet is clearly its democratization.

²⁹ Danah Boyd, "Viewing American class divisions through Facebook and MySpace", *Apophenia Blog Essay*, 24 June 2007, <http://www.danah.org/papers/essays/ClassDivisions.html>.

³⁰ Jonathan Zittrain, *The Future of the Internet – And How to Stop It*, New York, Yale University Press, 2008.

Some websites of interest:

- Wikipedia, the well-known free encyclopedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page
- The European Social Forum: <http://www.fse-esf.org/>
- La Quadrature du Net is an organization that defends the rights and freedoms of citizens on the internet: <http://www.laquadrature.net/>
- OpenStreetMap is making a map of the world under an Open Database License (ODbL): <http://www.openstreetmap.org/>
- Global Voices selects, translates and diffuses in 28 languages blogs from the whole world: <http://globalvoicesonline.org/>
- The Independent Media Center is a group that brings together independent media organizations: <http://www.indymedia.org/en/>
- Nettime creates mailing lists to form an international, networked discourse: <http://www.nettime.org>

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