Media Decadence
and
Democracy*

John Keane

Ladies and gentlemen:

We live in an age of communicative abundance. As in every previous communication revolution, new products and processes - satellite broadcasting, iPhones, electronic books, tweets, cloud computing - have spawned fascination, fear and trembling, excitement, bold talk of online publics, cybercitizens, e-democracy and even wiki-government. In the spirit of the revolution, many people presume that there's a 'natural' affinity between communicative abundance and democracy, understood as a type of government and a way of life in which power is subject to permanent public scrutiny, chastening and control by citizens and their representatives. Communicative abundance and democracy are thought to be conjoined twins: the stunning process and product innovations happening in the field of communication media drive the process of dispersal and public accountability of power, or so it is supposed.

In this lecture I'd like to examine this presumption, and to do so by exploring a conjecture first broached by the Canadian political economist Harold Innis: the idea that communication media fundamentally shape the sense of time and space and power relations of any society. It is true that Innis (and his more famous pupil Marshall McLuhan) was not much interested in the subject of democracy and media, so I'd like to put my boots on and go it alone, initially to offer a rough working formula: the first historical phase of democracy, assembly-based democracy, belonged to an era dominated by the *spoken word*, backed up by laws written on papyrus and stone, and by messages dispatched by foot, or by donkey and horse. Democracy and speech were twins. The next historical phase, representative democracy, sprang up in the era of *print culture* - the book, pamphlet and newspaper, and telegraphed and mailed messages; its demise and near-terminal crisis coincided with the advent of early mass broadcasting media, led by radio and cinema and (in its infancy) television. By contrast, monitory democracy, a new historical form of democracy born of the post-1945 era, is tied closely to the growth of *multi-media-saturated societies*; in contrast to the two previous ages of democracy, parliamentary and extra-parliamentary mechanisms heavily depend upon a new galaxy of media defined by the spirit of *communicative abundance*.

How much mileage is there in this rough working formula, the claim that there's a tight link between communicative abundance and the democracy of our times, a new historical form of democracy that I have christened 'monitory democracy'? The era of limited spectrum broadcasting, mass entertainment and representative democracy is certainly over, along with (I recall) the days when children were compulsorily flung into the bath and scrubbed behind the ears, sat down in their dressing gowns and told to listen in silence to ABC radio and (later) television. But have we (for instance) left behind the days when millions of people, huddled together as masses, were captivated by demagogues and their skilfully orchestrated radio and film performances? And are we – by contrast - entering times in which the public chastening and public control of power by citizens and representatives is underwritten by a mode of communication that has intrinsically democratic effects? I am genuinely in two minds, and so in this lecture I'd like to explain my ambivalence by standing back from the day-to-day rough-and-tumble of media politics, to develop some conjectures that - with a bit of luck - help us find our bearings, or at least provoke discussion and disagreement.

Communicative abundance

Let me begin with the positive, exciting, intoxicating trends.

Compared with the now-distant era of representative democracy, when print culture and limited spectrum audio-visual media were closely aligned with political parties, elections and governments, and flows of communication took the form of broadcasting confined within state borders, our times are different. Global communication has become a reality. So have global publics, and global politics. Choice of how and when to communicate with others has become well entrenched. Established patterns of broadcasting have been interrupted by dispersed communications and narrowcasting. New, wide divisions have opened up between parties, parliaments, politicians and the available means of communication. Oiled by communicative abundance, we live in times in which there are constant power spats over who gets what, when and how. It seems as if no organisation or leader within the fields of government or social life is ever immune from political trouble. These changes have been shaped by a variety of forces, including the decline of journalism proud of its commitment to fact-based 'objectivity' (an ideal born of the age of

representative democracy) and the rise of adversarial and 'gotcha' styles of commercial journalism driven by ratings, sales and hits. Technical factors, such as electronic memory, tighter channel spacing, new frequency allocation, direct satellite broadcasting, digital tuning, and advanced compression techniques, have also been important. But chief among these technical factors is the advent of cable- and satellite-linked, computerized communications, which from the end of the 1960s triggered both product and process innovations in virtually every field of an increasingly commercialised media. This new galaxy of communication has no historical precedent. Gone is the tyranny of distance and its slow-time connections (I remind you that in the colony of New South Wales it took the astonishing news of Governor Bligh's arrest on the 26th January 1808 until September of that year to reach London). Gone too are the days of spectrum scarcity; of mass broadcasting; and of prime-time national audiences. Symbolised by the Internet (Figure 1), the age of communicative abundance is a whole new world system of overlapping and interlinked media devices that for the first time in history integrate texts, sounds and images and enable communication to take place through multiple user points, in chosen time, either real or delayed, within modularized and ultimately global networks that are affordable and accessible to many hundreds of millions of people scattered across the globe.

All monitory institutions in the business of scrutinising power - parliaments, courts, human rights and professional organisations, civic initiatives, blogs and other web-based monitors - rely heavily on these media innovations. If the new galaxy of communicative abundance suddenly imploded, monitory democracy would not last long. Monitory democracy and computerised media networks behave as if they are an inseparable pair. True, the new age of communicative abundance produces widening power gaps between communication rich and poor, who seem almost unneeded as communicators, or as consumers of media products. A majority of the world's people is still too poor to make a telephone call; only a small minority has access to the Internet. The divide between media rich and media poor citizens blights all monitory democracies; it contradicts their basic principle that all citizens equally are entitled to communicate their opinions, and periodically to give elected and unelected representatives a rough ride. Yet despite such contradictions and disappointments -

I'll return to them shortly - there are new and important things happening inside the swirling galaxy of communicative abundance.

Especially striking is the way every nook and cranny of power becomes the potential target of 'publicity' and 'public exposure'; monitory democracy threatens to expose the quiet discriminations and injustices that happen behind closed doors and in the world of everyday life. Not much is sacrosanct. Our (great) grandparents would find the whole process astonishing in its democratic intensity and global scale. 'Bad news' accounts of contemporary media – the belief that everything is going to the dogs, or being 'dumbed down' - typically miss this brawling, rowdy quality (essentially because they rely upon 'freeze frame' pictures of particular moments or aspects of media effects that can only be captured properly using dynamic terms, concepts and methods that have 'Cubist' qualities). So: with the click of a camera, or the flick of a switch, the world of the private can suddenly be made public. Everything from the bedroom to the boardroom, the bureaucracy and the battlefield, seems to be up for media grabs. This is an age in which private text messages rebound publicly, to reveal the duplicity and force the resignation of a government minister (as happened in Finland in April 2008 after foreign minister Ilkka Kanerva was discovered by a tabloid newspaper to have sent several hundred text messages, some of them raunchy, to an erotic dancer. He tried unsuccessfully to defend himself by saying: 'I would not present them in Sunday School, but they are not totally out of line either'). It is an era in which a citizens' initiative, for instance the Space Hijackers, wins publicity by driving a tank to an arms fair in London's Docklands (ostensibly to test its 'roadworthiness') and more publicity for frequenting wine bars where bankers and stockbrokers hang out then convincing them after a few drinks to play midnight cricket in the City of London (an action to highlight the privatisation of space by corporations). These are times in which during elections Sony hand-held cameras are used by off-air reporters, known as 'embeds', to file ongoing videos and blogs featuring candidates live, unplugged and unscripted. This is the age in which a French Interior Minister (Brice Hortefeux) agrees to be photographed with a young Arab supporter and (according to video footage quickly uploaded onto LeMonde.fr) responds to an onlooker's joke about 'our little Arab' as a symbol of integration with the words: 'There always has to be one. When there's one, it's ok. It's when there are a lot of them that there are problems.' And this is also the age in which video footage

proves that soldiers in war zones raped women, terrorised children, and tortured innocent civilians. Communicative abundance cuts like a knife into the power relations of government and civil society. Little wonder that public objections to wrongdoing and corruption become commonplace. In the era of monitory democracy, there seems to be no end of scandals; and there are even times when so-called '-gate' scandals, like earthquakes, rumble beneath the feet of whole governments.

Viral Politics

Media controversies and '-gate' scandals remind us of a perennial problem facing monitory democracy: there is no shortage of organised efforts by the powerful to manipulate people beneath them. That is why the political dirty business of dragging power from the shadows and flinging it into the blazing halogen of publicity remains fundamentally important. Nobody should be kidded into thinking that the world of monitory democracy, with its many power-scrutinising institutions, is a level playing field - a paradise of equality of opportunity among all its citizens and their elected and unelected representatives. And yet historical comparisons show that the combination of monitory democracy and communicative abundance is without precedent. It produces permanent flux, an unending restlessness driven by complex combinations of different interacting players and institutions, permanently pushing and pulling, heaving and straining, sometimes working together, at other times in opposition to one another. Elected and unelected representatives routinely strive to define and to determine who gets what, when and how; but the represented, taking advantage of various power-scrutinising devices, keep tabs on their representatives - sometimes with surprising success. Monitory processes of various kinds have the effect, thanks to communicative abundance, of continuously stirring up questions about who gets what, when and how, as well as holding publicly responsible those who exercise power, wherever they are situated. Monitory democracies are richly conflicted. Politics does not wither away.

There is in fact something utterly novel about the whole trend. From its origins in the ancient assemblies of Syria-Mesopotamia, democracy has always cut through habit and prejudice and hierarchies of power. It has stirred up the sense that people can shape and re-shape their lives as equals; not surprisingly, it has often brought

commotion into the world. Monitory democracy is special: it is the most energetic, most dynamic form of democracy ever. Politics comes to have a definite 'viral' quality. Power disputes follow surprising paths and have unexpected outcomes. Governments at all levels are grilled on a wide range of matters, from their human rights records, their energy production plans to the quality of the drinking water of their cities. Private companies are given stick about their services and products, their investment plans, how they treat their employees, and the size of their impact upon the biosphere. Power-monitoring bodies like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International join in. There are even bodies (like the Democratic Audit network, the Global Accountability Project and Transparency International) that specialise in providing public assessments of the quality of existing power-scrutinising mechanisms and the degree to which they fairly represent citizens' interests.

When various watchdogs and guide dogs and barking dogs are constantly on the job, pressing for greater public accountability of those who exercise power, the powerful come to feel the constant pinch of the powerless. When they do their job well, monitory mechanisms have many positive effects, ranging from greater openness and justice within markets and blowing the whistle on foolish government decisions to the general enrichment of public deliberation and the empowerment of citizens and their chosen representatives through meaningful schemes of participation. Power monitoring can be ineffective, or counterproductive, of course. Campaigns misfire or are poorly targeted; the powerful cleverly find loopholes and ways of rebutting or simply ignoring or waiting out their opponents. And there are times when large numbers of citizens find the monitory strategies of organisations too timid, or confused, or simply irrelevant to their lives as consumers, workers, parents, community residents, or as young and elderly citizens.

Despite such weaknesses, the political dynamics and overall 'feel' of monitory democracies are very different from the era of representative democracy. Politics in the age of monitory democracy has a definite 'viral' quality about it. The power controversies stirred up by monitory mechanisms follow unexpected paths and reach surprising destinations. Groups using mobile phones, bulletin boards, news groups, wikkies and blogs sometimes manage, against considerable odds, to embarrass publicly politicians, parties and parliaments, or even whole governments. Power-

monitoring bodies like Greenpeace or Amnesty International regularly do the same, usually with help from networks of supporters. Think for a moment about any current public controversy that attracts widespread attention: news about its contours and commentaries and disputes about its significance are typically relayed by many power-monitoring organisations, large, medium and small. In the world of monitory democracy, that kind of latticed - viral, networked - pattern is typical, not exceptional. It has profound implications for the state-framed institutions of the old representative democracy, which find themselves more and more enmeshed in 'sticky' webs of power-scrutinising institutions that often hit their target, sometimes from long distances, often by means of boomerang effects.

In the age of monitory democracy, bossy power can no longer hide comfortably behind private masks; power relations everywhere are subjected to organised efforts by some, with the help of media, to tell others - publics of various sizes - about matters that previously had been hidden away, 'in private'. This denaturing of power is usually messy business, and it often comes wrapped in hype, certainly. But the unmasking of power resonates strongly with the power-scrutinising spirit of monitory democracy. The whole process is reinforced by the growing availability of cheap tools of communication (multi-purpose mobile phones, digital cameras, video recorders, the Internet) to individuals and groups and organisations; and communicative abundance multiplies the genres of programming, information, and storytelling that are available to audiences and publics. News, chat shows, political oratory, bitter legal spats, comedy, infotainment, drama, music, advertising, blogs - all of this, and much more, constantly clamour and jostle for public attention.

Some people complain about effects like 'information overload', but from the point of view of monitory democracy, communicative abundance on balance has positive consequences. In spite of all its hype and spin, the new media galaxy nudges and broadens people's horizons. It tutors their sense of pluralism and prods them into taking greater responsibility for how, when and why they communicate. Message-saturated democracies encourage people's suspicions of unaccountable power. All of the king's horses and all the king's men are unlikely to reverse the trend – or so there are good reasons for thinking. Within the age of communicative abundance and monitory democracy, people are coming to learn that they must keep an eye on power

and its representatives; they see that prevailing power relationships are not 'natural', but contingent. Communicative abundance and monitory institutions combine to promote something of a 'Gestalt switch' in the perception of power. The metaphysical idea of an objective, out-there-at-a-distance 'reality' is weakened; so too is the presumption that stubborn 'factual truth' is superior to power. The fabled distinction between what people can see with their eyes and what they are told about the emperor's clothes breaks down. 'Reality', including the 'reality' promoted by the powerful, comes to be understood as always 'produced reality', a matter of interpretation - and the power to force particular interpretations of the world down others' throats.

Media Decadence

In recent decades, as the British-American political scientist Pippa Norris has shown, there is an accumulating body of survey evidence that suggests that citizens in many established democracies, although they strongly identify with democratic ideals, have grown more distrustful of politicians, doubtful about governing institutions, and disillusioned with leaders in the public sector. There is little doubt that the older inherited institutions of representative democracy - parties, parliaments, politicians - are for the moment suffering under the pressures of the trends towards communicative abundance. It is as if these institutions have been caught with their pants down. Parliaments have a limited media presence. Parties neither own nor control their media outlets. Journalists hand politicians a hard time. I submit that public disaffection with politicians, political parties, parliaments and official 'politics' in general are symptoms of a long-term, double historical transition that is taking place: a transition fuelled by the growth of communicative abundance and the invention of scores of monitory institutions that have wrong-footed the institutions of parliamentary democracy – and are doing so irreversibly, in my view.

Some observers say that the 2008 election victory of Barack Obama proves otherwise, but I find that unconvincing, simply because Mr Obama is the first great elected representative to get the hang of the entirely new dynamics, to grasp that politicians, parties, legislatures and whole governments have to adopt new tactics and rhetorical styles that work with, and not against, the kaleidoscopic or 'viral' qualities of politics

in the age of monitory democracy. Mr Obama may also be the first great elected representative to be skewered by these dynamics. The difficulties he is currently experiencing in matters of war and health care reform suggest that in the era of monitory democracy - here I begin to examine the decline, blight, atrophy - political communication is constantly the subject of dissembling, negotiation, compromise, power conflicts, in a phrase, a matter of political battling. Communicative abundance does not somehow automatically ensure the triumph of either the spirit or institutions of monitory democracy.

Message-saturated societies can and do have effects that are harmful for democracy. Some of them are easily spotted. In some quarters, most obviously, media saturation triggers citizens' inattention to events. While they are expected as good citizens to keep their eyes on public affairs, to take an interest in the world beyond their immediate household and neighbourhood, more than a few find it ever harder to pay attention to the media's vast outpourings. Profusion breeds confusion. Monitory democracy certainly feeds upon communicative abundance, but one of its more perverse effects is to encourage individuals to escape the great complexity of the world by sticking their heads, like Don Quixote, into the sands of wilful ignorance, or to float cynically upon the swirling tides and waves and eddies of fashion - to change their minds, to speak and act flippantly, to embrace or even celebrate opposites, to bid farewell to veracity, to slip into the arms of what one of the best and most careful contemporary philosophers, Harry Frankfurt, and Australians in general, call 'bullshit'.

Foolish illusions, cynicism and disaffection are among the leading temptations of our times. Their corrosiveness suggests that all of the king's horses and all the king's men might after all succeed in undoing democratic accountability, especially when the current-day growth of *media decadence* is taken into consideration. As a rule, new historical forms or galaxies of media typically generate cycles of clarification and confusion, excitement and disaffection fuelled by negative trends. The rule applies to the effects of the printing press, the telegraph, radio and television. Our age is no different. Surprisingly, little attention has so far been paid to the decadent media developments that weaken and potentially reverse the growth of monitory democracy.

So what is *media decadence*? And exactly which decadent trends are today threatening the growth of monitory democracy?

When I speak of media decadence I refer to the wide gaps between the rosy ideals of free and fair public contestation of power, the openness and plurality of opinions and public commitment of representatives to the inclusion and treatment of all citizens as equals - the ideals of monitory democracy - and a tarnished, rougher reality in which communication media promote intolerance of opinions, the restriction of public scrutiny of power and the blind acceptance of the way things are heading. Decadence is of course a word with harshly negative connotations of luxurious self-indulgence. I choose it deliberately. Decay amidst abundance is what I have in mind; but I do not suppose that the manifestations of decline are permanent, or irreversible. Fatalism, the belief that the world has its own ways, and that everything rises before falling into decay, is not what I have in mind. Whether the decadent trends I'm about to discuss prove fatal for the democratic energies within the galaxy of communicative abundance I treat as an open question. Time and circumstance, creative inventions, new institution building, good fortune and political courage of citizens and representatives, journalists and owners of media capital will decide what happens. For the moment, there are nevertheless several overlapping types of media decadence that are becoming plain for all to see, and which ought to furrow the brows of every thinking democrat.

Gated Communities

Media-saturated societies are visibly suffering the growth of a communication landscape with distinctively 'mediaeval' qualities. To understand the trend we need to see that whole sub-systems of web-based communication can be immobilised by clever new forms of interference. A recent court case in Adelaide centred on a young man charged with infecting more than 3,000 computers around the world with a virus designed to capture banking and credit card data and - a quite unrelated local example - the current protest tactic of immobilising Australian government sites through 'flooding' or denial of service attacks (they are known as DDoS in the trade), remind us of the bigger picture, the utter fragility of open communication systems in the age

of communicative abundance – their vulnerability to acts of unauthorised interference, otherwise known as hacking.

A spicy example comes from France, whose political scene is currently heaving with controversy about a legal investigation of an alleged large-scale case of hacking featuring the world's largest operator of nuclear power plants, Électricité de France. The controversy has all the trappings of a breathtaking media event, with 'viral' qualities typical of the age of communicative abundance - a thrilling drama featuring a cast of extraordinary characters that includes a disgraced testosterone-doped American cycling champion (Floyd Landis), laboratory officials, former French spies and military men operating in the shadows of corporate power, Greenpeace activists, the media and telecommunications conglomerate Vivendi, and a top judge (Thomas Cassuto) whose untiring investigations resemble an odyssey or (better) a textbook case of monitory democracy in action.

Cassuto's enquiry began after the Tour de France in 2006 in a sports doping laboratory (whose records had been hacked by a Trojan horse programme that enabled outsiders to remotely download files of records that were then altered and passed to news media and other labs, apparently in support of the disgraced cyclist and with the aim of discrediting the handling of test samples). The investigation quickly moved on to target a computer specialist, Alain Quiros, who was tracked down in Morocco by a special cybercrime unit of the French Interior Ministry. Monsieur Quiros confessed to having been paid a modest sum (up to 3,000 euros) for hacking the lab; but he also revealed that a shadowy corporate intelligence company, Kargus Consultants, had spearheaded the attack. Really interesting stuff then happened; things grew much more dramatic when the cybercrime police found on the computer of Quiros the hard drives of Yannick Jadot, the former campaign director of Greenpeace, and Frédérik-Karel Canoy, a French lawyer and shareholder rights activist seasoned by many campaigns against some of the largest French companies, including Vivendi and European Aeronautic Defence and Space, the parent company of the aircraft manufacturer Airbus. The corporate intelligence company Kargus Consultants subsequently alleged that it was employed by Électricité de France to spy on anti-nuclear campaigners, not only in France but also in Spain, Belgium and Britain, where EDF last year bought the largest nuclear power company, British Energy. Électricité

de France officials vehemently deny any wrongdoing. Vivendi, raided by cyberpolice on suspicion of conducting 'corporate intelligence' raids, also remains silent. Suspicion grows that Trojan horse attacks are things of the past - that much more sophisticated, automated targeting of the 'cloud' of information that people and organisations generate through their online activities is quickly becoming the norm. The power monitoring exercise continues.

France is not the only democracy experiencing political difficulties with hacking and spying. The days are over when we could suppose in comfort that we were safe from attacks if we kept away from the online porn circuit or never responded to messages from the widowed wife of the central bank governor of the Central African Republic itching to transfer a few million dollars into our account. Every monitory democracy knows routine online disruptions: the password to the personal e-mail account of a Twitter employee was recently guessed by an American hacker, who thus managed to extract their Google password and so gain access to a bundle of Twitter's corporate documents stored in 'the cloud'. Websites testing positive for adware, spyware, spam, phishing, viruses and other noxious stuff are multiplying. Two years ago, Google engineers noted that about 10 percent of many millions of Web pages were engaged in 'drive-by downloads' of malware. Today the figure has jumped to 330,000 malicious websites, up from 150,000 a year ago. The injection of malice into complex organisations and media systems and personal accounts is more than of news gossip value. For the plain fact is that it is driving a decadent trend: the rapid formation of 'gated communities' or 'private fiefdoms' that have medieval effects by weakening the principle and fact of freedom of movement, 'open grazing' and universal access to the 'public commons' of communication with others.

The American scholar Jonathan Zittrain has tackled this trend at length in his *The Future of the Internet - And How to Stop It*. For my taste, Zittrain invests too much trust in an all-American 'can do' nativism, a 21st-century version of a 19th-century Ralph Waldo Emerson faith in the ability of individuals to reach unfathomable places through moral force and creative intelligence, guided by the rule that the less government we have the better. Symptomatic of this Emersonian attitude is his remark that 'the Net is quite literally what we make it' (the identity of the subject 'we' is unclear) and his defence of what he calls 'the procrastination principle' ('create an

infrastructure that is both simple and generative, stand back, and see what happens, fixing most major substantive problems only as they arise, rather than anticipating them from the start'). This is to say that his work puts too much trust in competitive market forces; and that it contains too little emphasis on the political need to strengthen the sense of public ownership of multi-media communications media – to institutionalise, preferably on a cross-border basis, a 21st-century equivalent of the public service broadcasting principle that was invented during the 1920s.

But - surely - Zittrain is right about the market- and government security-driven enclosure movement that is going on under our noses. The iPhone is a symbol of the trend: launched in January 2007, it is a masterpiece of beauty, a brilliantly engineered device that combines three products into one: 'an iPod, with the highest-quality screen Apple had ever produced; a phone, with cleverly integrated functionality, such as voice-mail that came wrapped as separately accessible messages; and a device to access the Internet, with a smart and elegant browser, and with built-in map, weather, stock, and e-mail capabilities.' The trouble for Zittrain is that the device is 'sterile'. It has no 'generativity'. Unlike (say) Pledgebank, Wikipedia or Meetup, it does not invite or enable users to tinker with it, to improve upon it, to adapt it to their particular needs. 'Rather than a platform that invites innovation, the iPhone comes pre-programmed. You are not allowed to add programs to the all-in-one device…Its functionality is locked in, though Apple can change it through remote updates. Indeed, to those who managed to tinker with the code to enable the iPhone to support more or different applications, Apple threatened (and then delivered on the threat) to transform the iPhone into an iBrick.'

The key point here is that hacking, identity theft, plus viruses, spam (from 'spiced ham', that wonderful neologism from the 1930s made famous by Monty Python), crashes and other dysfunctions are an unwelcome consequence of the freedom built into the generative PC. Zittrain puts this well: 'Today's viruses and spyware are not merely annoyances to be ignored as one might tune out loud conversations at nearby tables in a restaurant', he writes. 'They will not be fixed by some new round of patches to bug-filled PC operating systems, or by abandoning now-ubiquitous Windows for Mac. Rather, they pose a fundamental dilemma: as long as people control the code that runs on their machines, they can make mistakes and be tricked

into running dangerous code. As more people use PCs and make them more accessible to the outside world through broadband, the value of corrupting these users' decisions is increasing. That value is derived from stealing people's attention, PC processing cycles, network bandwidth, or online preferences. And the fact that a Web page can be and often is rendered on the fly by drawing upon hundreds of different sources scattered across the Net – a page may pull in content from its owner, advertisements from a syndicate, and links from various other feeds – means that bad code can infect huge swaths of the Web in a heartbeat.'

Exactly this bad code trend is now driving the invention and application of *sterile* or *tethered* tools and processes that are bound by rules of safety, central control and (typically) private ownership and control of the means of communication. The trend is understandable, especially under market conditions. For my taste, Zittrain understates the ways in which enclosure is fuelled by risk- and profit-propelled corporate strategies, whose power to privatise or 'medievalise' the galaxy of communicative abundance is evident in News Corporation's current plans to charge online readers of its various news sources, such as The Times in the UK, the Fox News website and PNG's Post-Courier. Another example of the privatising effects of market power is the move by more than 500 commercial newspapers and magazines to band together through Journalism Online, a portfolio of news from various providers' websites and electronic platforms.

Driven by market forces and security and reliability considerations, the enclosure movement is lamentable, especially when seen from the point of view of monitory democracy and its future. Democracy is a form of self-government in which the means of deciding who gets what when and how are in public hands. The privatisation of the means of making decisions is antithetical to its spirit and substance. The same rule applies to the means of communication: when governments and/or monopoly or oligopoly businesses or private associations have exclusive control of media then the chances are high that democracy will suffer. The remarkable thing about the advent of the mass media-saturated galaxy of communicative abundance is that its generative rules – analogous to the generative rules of a grammar that enables speakers to utter infinite numbers of different sentences – encourage openness, dynamism, pluralism, experimentation, a strong sense of the contingency of things, all of them qualities that

have a strong affinity with democracy. The counter-trend, the spread of regulatory surveillance and walled-off and locked-down areas where only the privileged can enter, wander and linger, represents a new form of 'medievalisation', the growth of a hotchpotch of closed, overlapping communities that are vertically arranged, and definitely skewed in favour of those who can afford access charges. That is why it is to be regarded as a decadent trend - and somehow to be resisted.

Government Media Management

In the era of communicative abundance, ownership of the means of communication remains crucial, and large corporate control of media remains a problem, as it did in the era of representative democracy. The thumbprints of giant conglomerates like Bertelsmann, News Corporation and Vivendi are all over monitory democracy and its media infrastructure. The American media researcher Ben Bagdikian has shown, for the case of the United States, that in 1984 some 50 large companies controlled all media; that by 1987 that number had dropped to 26; then dropped further to around 10 in 1996; and that by 2004 there were only a Big Five - Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, News Corporation and Viacom - that now control the lion's share of the media industry.

The growth of media oligopolies certainly makes parties, politicians, parliaments and whole governments vulnerable to media seduction; interference, nobbling, threats and vetoes become a constant possibility. We know well about the corrupting effects of big media business in Australia. An early example is documented in Bruce Page's *The Murdoch Archipelago*, which recalls how the mysterious disappearance in mid-December 1967 of Prime Minister Harold Holt triggered an intense struggle behind the scenes to determine his successor. Rupert Murdoch, still a young media empire builder in Adelaide, entered the fray and played a vital role in its resolution. In Canberra's Hotel Kurrajong, five days before the selection of John Gorton as Prime Minister, Murdoch agreed to meet in secret with the Acting Prime Minister, 'Black Jack' McEwen. For quite different reasons both favoured Gorton (Murdoch did so because he judged, correctly, that he would be more pliable and sympathetic to allowing Murdoch to move capital out of Australia, in search of acquisitions in the United Kingdom). So together they decided that the best way of achieving their

respective goals was to discredit a close associate of Billy McMahon, Gorton's main rival. They targeted a man named Max Newton, who was accused publicly of being a Japanese foreign agent. Just several days before the vital selection of the new Prime Minister, Murdoch's *Australian* carried the crude headline: 'WHY MCEWEN VETOES MCMAHON: FOREIGN AGENT IS THE MAN BETWEEN THE LEADERS'. Crudity worked. The allegation was utterly false, but within the governing parties it tipped the balance in favour of John Gorton.

Vulgar political interference is neither typical of how large media firms operate nor of Rupert Murdoch's behaviour when it comes to government policies (he has a habit of using politicians and shaping governments from the near distance, rather than from close range). Far more worrying, in my assessment, is the present-day tendency of corporate media and government control methods to merge, especially in those contexts where for constitutional and political reasons mergers and alliances effectively blur the division between state and market. China, Russia and Iran, authoritarian states with functioning markets, are three cases at one end of a spectrum that now includes (for instance) Italy, an unhappy country where Mr Berlusconi controls far too much media for anybody's good and happens to be a Prime Minister who has not only conned and connived his way into legal immunity from prosecution but has built a power base of supporters, not merely through favours and crude deals but (as Umberto Eco and Paul Ginsborg have so well explained) by using state-of-the-art rhetorical methods - oiled by the instincts of a salesman whose sales pitches contain something for nearly everybody because their aim is to convince people that his interests are identical with theirs, so turning them into the satisfied and admiring People that he says they are.

I should like to emphasise that this second decadent trend, the merger of government and corporate media and the will of incumbent governments and states to control communication flows – to invent and 'arrest' audiences - is not a repeat of the 1920s and 1930s, the decades which witnessed the crystallisation of the fascist and Bolshevik models of state-controlled broadcasting media. Shaped by communicative abundance and monitory democracy, our times are different. Less obvious is the point that the second trend is not just a Chinese, Iranian or Russian problem. It's a dangerous and decadent trend that has taken root *within the most advanced monitory*

democracies. The reasons are not as obvious as they might appear; they are not simply or primarily to do with corporate control of government, or with government 'spin', as is commonly thought. The process is more complicated, and it requires some fresh thinking. It has two sides. Let me try, briefly, to explain them in turn.

In the era of monitory democracy, government media management is partly a 'top down' process. Governments hack in to the system of communicative abundance using various instruments, blunt and sharp. In recent years, John Howard did this to a worryingly unconventional degree. The formula of his governments' media strategy is clearer in retrospect: build a team of tough-minded public relations people who are good at spinning everything. Get them to cultivate the image of the Prime Minister as a dedicated, hard-working, self-made man, a leader in whom everyone can recognise something of themselves, and what they want to be. Grant access of journalists to government plans in return for favourable coverage. Put senior bureaucrats on notice that they are required to report all contacts with journalists to the Prime Minister's office. Stop leaks from retired or serving bureaucrats (Howard called it 'democratic sabotage', and explained that leaking is bad because it wrecks the tradition of fidelity and confidentiality upon which the provision of frank and fearless advice by civil servants to politicians depends). If necessary, get the police to turn up on doorsteps to ask questions of suspected infidels. Pass legislation to slap bans on reporting high-priority matters, detention without trial of suspects and witnesses, for instance. Pursue journalists who are troublemakers, especially those who refuse to divulge their sources. Threaten them with prosecution for libel, or contempt of court. Cultivate deaf ears for requests for disclosure of information. Keep trusted commentators at the ready, on duty at all times. Ignore calls by lawyers' groups, NGOs and the press for new freedom of information laws, or their reform. Say often that you favour 'freedom of communication', but make it clear that there are strong grounds for withholding information, such as security, public order, fair play, the rights of business, the protection of the vulnerable, the needs of government.

Lest you think this formula is a party-political matter, it is sobering to remember that Tony Blair did much the same in Britain, though he liked to justify it using the alibi of a 'feral beast' media. In his widely publicised farewell speech at Reuters (12 June 2007), Blair rounded on journalists for their aggression, for their degradation of public

life. He accused the media of hunting in packs, obliterating the vital distinction between 'opinion' and 'fact', sensationalising everything. It was the usual thing, but for the unusual purpose of portraying governments as under siege from a media that is both 'overwhelming' and hungry for the kill. 'When I fought the 1997 election', said Blair, 'we took an issue a day. In 2005, we had to have one for the morning, another for the afternoon and by the evening the agenda had already moved on. You have to respond to stories also in real time.' He added: 'Frequently the problem is as much assembling the facts as giving them. Make a mistake and you quickly transfer from drama into crisis. In the 1960s the government would sometimes, on a serious issue, have a Cabinet lasting two days. It would be laughable to think you could do that now without the heavens falling in before lunch on the first day. Things harden within minutes. I mean, you can't let speculation stay out there for longer than an instant.' None of this is good for democracy and that is why, Blair concluded, governments have to put their armour on: 'not to have a proper press operation nowadays is like asking a batsman to face bodyline bowling without pads or headgear.'

I'm sure Mr Blair had a point. But one trouble with his diagnosis is the way it covers up the alarming extent to which all democratically elected governments are pro-actively involved in a clever, cunning struggle to kidnap their citizens mentally. These governments are not simply victims of communicative abundance. They are perpetrators of anti-democratic trends. Their deepening involvement in the business of manipulation of appearances – the tendency that leads us into 'the age of contrivance' (a phrase coined by the American historian Daniel Boorstin in *The Image* [1962]) – is perfectly obvious from just a cursory examination of the Blair governments' media management tactics. They took the art to new heights. They fed 'leaks' as exclusives ('you can have this, but only if you put it on page 1'). When embarrassing stories broke, they put out decoys. They tried to master the art of releasing bad news on busy days (they called it 'throwing out the bodies'). They denied. They lied. Several juicy stories confirm that the Blair governments certainly knew what they were doing. Alastair Campbell, Blair's chief tactician, regularly practiced the art of deception, and did so with cunning and finesse. His deputy (Lance Price) recalls that Campbell, testing the waters, deliberately told a *News of the World* journalist that Blair had stayed on the eighth floor of a hotel that in fact was only six storeys tall (the journalist never bothered to check); and that Campbell went to a Britney Spears concert and

managed to get her autograph, then bet somebody £200 he could get the *Evening Standard* to splash a story that she supported Labour. He won the bet that very day.

These anecdotes are no doubt trivial, but they nevertheless reveal a bigger picture that naturally raises the question: how exactly do governments manage to get their way in a world of communicative abundance?

What I want to say is that a basic - more troubling - difficulty with Blair's image of a 'feral beast' media is that it ignores its habitual docility. The word 'spin' doesn't accurately capture what is going on, for the problem is not just government top-down manipulation of media. There is an equally serious problem: the connivance of journalists and their 'churnalism' with the whole trend towards government media management. *Flat Earth News* by the English journalist Nick Davies presents in my view a fairly compelling picture of the roots of this docility.

Davies is aware that in age of communicative abundance there are widespread complaints about the way 'media', and journalists in particular, behave badly. They often stand accused of hunting in packs, their eyes on bad news, egged on by the newsroom saying that facts must never be allowed to get in the way of stories. Journalism loves titillation, draws upon un-attributed sources, fills news holes - in the age of communicative abundance news never sleeps - spins sensations, and concentrates too much on personalities, rather than time-bound contexts. It is said, especially by bookish types, that journalism is formulaic, that it gets bored too quickly and that it likes to bow down to corporate power and government press briefings.

Such generalisations are undoubtedly exaggerated. There are many hardworking, honest and ethically open-minded journalists; and besides, as Michael Schudson has recently pointed out in *Why Democracies Need an Unlovable Press*, bellyaching against journalists is on balance not such a bad thing for monitory democracy, especially if it sharpens the wits of citizens and encourages their healthy sense of scepticism about power, even the power of journalists to represent and define the world in which we live. The bellyaching nevertheless has had damaging effects; judging by their low popularity ratings, journalists are struggling to hold their own against politicians, real estate agents, car salesmen and bankers. Yet the problem is

worse than this, Davies shows, for such complaints are in fact symptomatic of a deeper problem, one that he grasps well. For reasons having to do with market pressures and top-down managerial control, most journalists no longer work 'off diary'. They have no time in which to go out and find their own stories and carefully check the material that they are handling. The consequence is that journalists become highly vulnerable to ingesting and reproducing the packages of information that are supplied to them by the public relations industry and governments. Like a human body lacking a properly functioning immune system, the media produce lots of distorted or pseudo-news, or pseudo-coverage about pseudo-events - lots of flat earth news. Equally worrying is the fact that 'churnalism' tends to produce and organise public silence. It could be called no earth news since it takes the form of important stories which journalists around the world simply fail to take an interest in, in no small measure because such subjects as the global surge in poverty, the arms trade and leveraging in the banking and credit sectors are complicated and perforce require intensive concentration and in-depth research to cover thoroughly, or to cover well.

Groupthink and Democracy

No earth news; flat earth news; cyber-attacks; moves to restrict freedom of information through online gatekeeping; mushrooming media oligopolies; Berlusconi-style mass media populism and organised media subservience in the face of unaccountable power: these are just some of the trends that bode ill for democracy in the age of communicative abundance. This lecture prompts some key questions about these trends – admittedly more questions than I can table, or sensibly address. But I ask: why do we have no comprehensive account of this media decadence and its worrying power to induce rigor mortis in the democratic body politic? To what extent is the decadence exacerbated by the collapse of newspaper business models, and by the new phenomenon of cost- and profit-conscious red-blooded journalism, which hunts in packs, its eyes on bad news, horned on by newsroom rules that include eye-catching titillation, reliance on official sources ('avoiding the electric fence'), give-'em-what-they want/what-they-want-to-believe, 'if we can sell it, we'll tell it' stories, and by the excessive concentration on personalities, rather than stories and analyses that are sensitive to time- and space-bound contexts? I could go on to ask what (if

anything) can be done about media decadence? And some disturbing questions: does the age of communicative abundance on balance proffer more risk than promise? Are there developing parallels with the early twentieth-century, when print journalism and radio and film broadcasting hastened the widespread collapse of parliamentary democracy? Are the media failures of our age the harbingers of profoundly authoritarian trends that might ultimately result in the birth of 'post-democracy' - polities in which governments claim to represent majorities that are artefacts of media, money, organisation and force of arms?

A sceptic might reply by pointing out that every historical form of communication has prompted intellectual bellyaching and resistance. After all, Plato objected to the deluded speech of the pnyx; in the age of representative democracy, John Stuart Mill worried about threats to liberty posed not by kings and tyrants but by the burgeoning 'public opinion' nurtured by newspapers, pamphlets, books and petitions; and during the 1920s and 1930s there were widespread complaints that Hollywood, radio and television were agents of mass deception. The failures of journalism and communication media, their propensity to let down citizens under democratic conditions, are surely a very old problem, the sceptic might add. After all, to pluck a random example out of thin air, global media carried nonsense stories at the end of the Second World War that Hitler was not dead, that he was a hermit in Italy, working as a waiter in Grenoble, as a shepherd in Switzerland, a fisherman in Ireland, and that he had fled to South America by submarine and plane. So – the sceptic might conclude – nothing much is new under the sun, which has ever managed to shine on democracy, allowing it to flourish into our times, helped along by brave journalists and independent media.

There is truth in these objections. But could it be that media decadence nowadays matters much more than during the past few decades? I believe it does, partly because (as I've tried to explain in *The Life and Death of Democracy*) we are living in times when most old arguments for democracy have worn thin and when as well there is a noticeable jump in the level of support for the view that democracy is a second-rate way of handling power because it seduces governments into pandering to piffle and public confusion, traps them in conflict and, hence, hinders governments from getting things done efficiently and effectively. There is another, equally important reason

why media decadence matters: we face a growing number of interconnected, cross-border, life-or-death problems whose definition, analysis and resolution require communication media that counter 'groupthink', folly and hubris by being on the ball, vigilant before the powerful, responsive and responsible to citizens and representatives alike.

These two reasons why media decadence should be worrying to democrats are tightly connected by the problem of hubris. Political arrogance tinged with blind mistakes bordering on stupidity - the problem of hubris – is arguably the greatest ultimate challenge that faces any system of concentrated and uncontested power. Those who wield power freed from the 'burden' of comment and criticism and negotiated compromise or compulsory veto may consider themselves lucky, as living on top of the world, or in heaven. They may believe absolutely in the harmonious effects of annually rising GDP; or that God blesses their power; or that a majority of people can be seduced by turning politics into B-movie show business. Consider the case of contemporary China, whose rulers have little or no political sympathy for democracy in monitory form. While they often praise 'the people' as the foundation of their own form of self-government with putative 'Chinese' characteristics, they reject democracy understood as the ongoing public scrutiny, chastening and humbling of power. Monitory democracy - detailed in the initiative called Charter '08 - is accused of speaking in tongues. It is said to produce far too many conflicting points of view that are in any case not of equal worth. Open public scrutiny of the Party and the state breeds confusion, dissension and disorder. It violates the principles of the Harmonious Society. It threatens the proven ability of the state to raise standards of material wellbeing and so to improve the quality of people's lives. China's rulers thus accuse their opponents of plotting chaos, resistance and 'counter-revolution'. Social harmony is said to require forceful leadership and intelligent government unconstrained by the vices of party competition, useless parliaments and querulous civil society organisations that represent nobody save their own interests, or the designs of 'foreign' powers.

Measured in terms of the history of democracy, many of these claims are of course well-worn tropes designed to distract attention from the brute fact that in practice they can have crippling effects, especially in circumstances in which the powerful fall

narcissistically in love with their own judgements. The radius of their circle of advisors shrinks. They denigrate, push aside or disappear their critics, and generally become dismissive of all opinions and evidence that run counter to their own views. They talk hot air; what they are doing and why they are doing this or that comes clothed in phantasms, to the point where problems, policy failures and enforced retreats either go unrecognised or are interpreted, falsely, as triumphs.

Four decades ago, the American psychologist Irving Janis (1918-1990) labelled such hubristic behaviour as 'groupthink', the tendency of decision makers operating in group settings to ignore counter-evidence in the interests of towing the line and getting things done. He showed (in *Victims of Groupthink* [1972]) how groupthink played a fundamental shaping role in the fiasco of the American invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. More recent examples of political decisions or non-decisions protected by groupthink spring to mind, among them the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and the negligence of many democratic governments in allowing banking and credit institutions to regulate their own affairs, unhindered by objections and fears that the large-scale 'leveraging' of risk in money markets would result eventually in giant market bubbles, whose bursting would produce a global great recession.

Policy bungles of this kind are no laughing matter. They damage the lives of growing numbers of people; for a variety of reasons to do with technological scale, mobility of capital and communicative abundance, their sensed global footprint is widening. Worldwide policy failures drive home the painful truth of the old proverb that fools never differ - that unchallenged power is dangerous, ultimately because it is blind to its dependence upon a universe of great complexity, great unknowns and great unintended consequences. Hubris nurtured by groupthink is the Achilles heel of publicly unaccountable power. The only known human cure for its toxic effects is the free circulation of differing viewpoints, courageous conjectures, corrective judgments, checks and balances, the institutional humbling of power. The robust public scrutiny of power is the wisest way of handling complexity, coping with uncertainty and anticipating, recognising and avoiding mistakes, or of acting to prevent the Big Mistake. That is why media decadence is a problem for monitory democracy – and why remedies for its undesirable effects need urgently to be found.