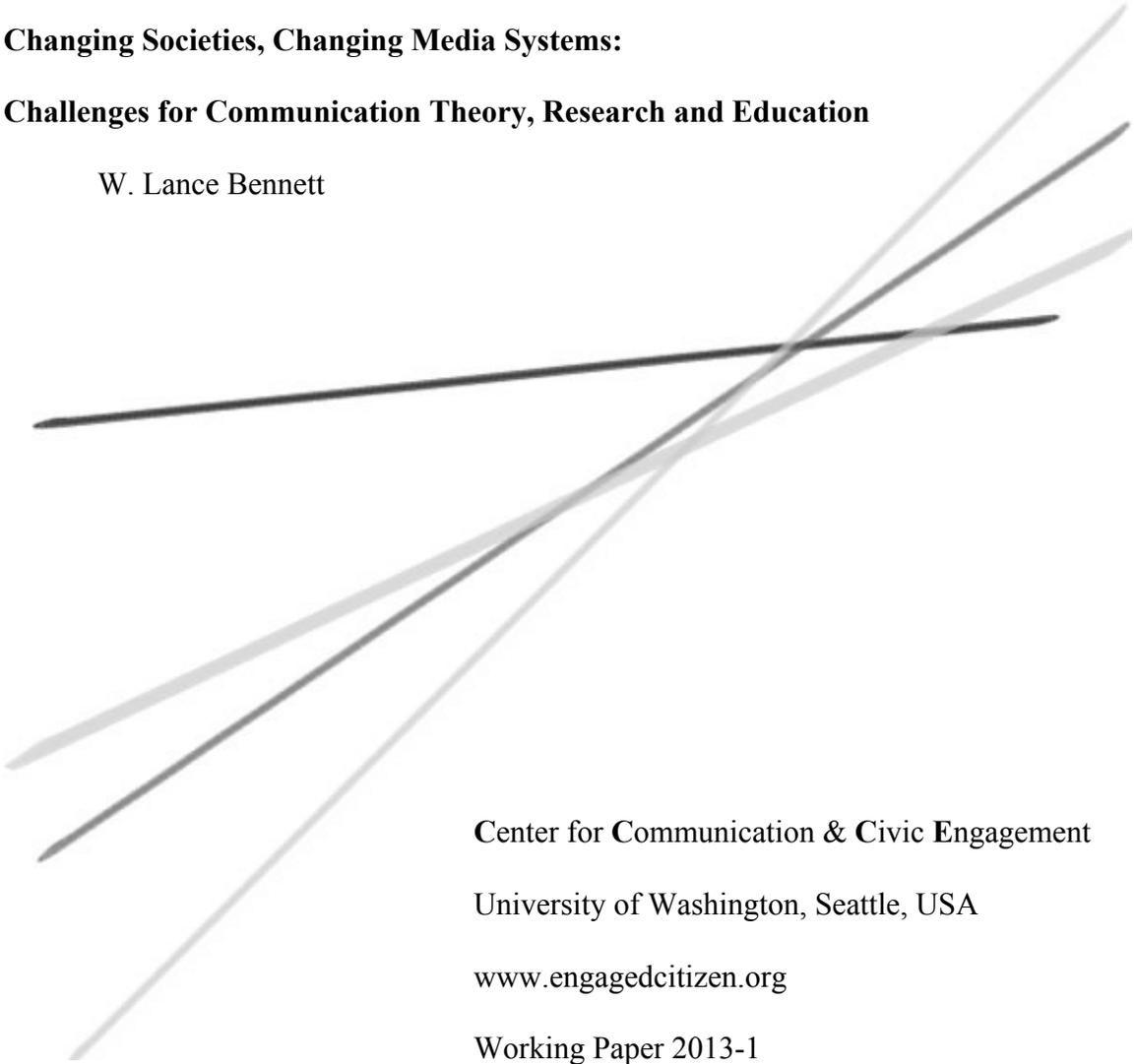Center for
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Changing Societies, Changing Media Systems:

Challenges for Communication Theory, Research and Education

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The current era of economic crisis and political turmoil comes in the aftermath of four decades of social and economic change, commonly lumped under the heading "globalization." Critics of this era typically refer to its guiding ethos as neo-liberalism, which broadly refers to an ideology of market deregulation that was typically sold politically with the promise that individuals would experience great freedom of choice in an enhanced consumer marketplace. The political marketing slogan for this broad transformation of public and private life is typically a variation on "free markets, free people." The global trend to deregulate markets even touched many once protected public goods and services such as health care, education, public broadcasting funding and public utilities. As these policy reforms swept through various societies, they were accompanied by a number of secondary (and often unimagined) consequences, including: the fragmentation of social institutions, the individuation or separation of people from those social institutions, and the gradual replacement of modern social structures based on groups, class, and common memberships and status with more fluid social relations, ushering in an era that has been described variously as "liquid modernity" (Baumann 2000) and the "networked society" (Castells 2010). Noting that these networked forms of social economic and political relations are often made stable and effective through innovative communication technologies, Bimber (2003) has termed the emerging era a "post bureaucratic society." This paper explores how this broad reorganization of society and personal life affects communication processes and how we study them.

The fragmentation and personalization of social structures -- along with the proliferation of communication technologies and information sources -- have changed communication processes in many societies. There are, of course, also important

variations across those societies. In addition, the legacy media of modern society continue to exist, which may distract scholars from attending to what is changing. For example, there are still plenty of newspapers and television news programs carrying the messages from elites sources and the spin from legions of communication and image consultants that Jay Blumler and his colleagues associated with the last era of political communication (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). But those institutional authorities and their spin-doctors face more challenging messaging and targeting problems due to less reachable and less responsive audiences in more dispersed societies, resulting in soaring costs and diminishing returns.

One explanation of the shifting logic of communication from modernist, mass communication based systems to late modern, more fragmented systems is that technologies and information sources have multiplied. The result is that audiences are no longer captives of a few mass media channels (Prior 2007). To this, it seems important to add that younger generations nearly everywhere have moved away from traditional news and political attention patterns, and toward more lifestyle-oriented issue engagement facilitated by social networks and specialized online media. Those who think that younger citizens will return to more traditional patterns of civic engagement as they grow older have apparently missed the over-time generational studies showing that successive age cohorts attend to conventional information sources at diminishing rates. Audience studies also generally show that the media most popular among younger demographics seldom feature "quality news" about public officials and their activities. These patterns appear in countries as different as Sweden, Norway, Germany, and the U.S.

This does not mean that younger generations are necessarily apathetic or cut off from important issues. However, they are less likely to seek information from official institutional channels and more likely to define their interests in terms of personal lifestyle values and related activities such as buying fair trade products or changing personal living habits to address environmental concerns. What seems missing in many nations is a natural connection between these lifestyle issues and conventional political attachments through parties and voting. In addition to finding more diverse information sources and political outlets, increasing numbers of citizens of all ages seek like-minded information sources (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). The selective exposure pattern may hold more for the U.S. than other societies, but better research is needed on where scattered audiences are getting their political information.

The changes that distinguish late modern societies from more coherent modern social systems include three three broad and interrelated areas that invite thinking differently about the nature of communication in contemporary public life.

- The fragmentation of public life

    Including the breakdown of broad social membership institutions such as unions, churches, public education systems, and related shifts in political party loyalties. This fragmentation of mass society corresponds to the rise of large-scale networked publics, which contributes to…

- Changing media systems and communication processes

    New technologies and channels enable more fine-grained "many-to-many" communication within fragmenting societies. Communication has become increasingly personalized, both in the way messages are framed, and how they

are shared across social networks. Individuals become active agents in the

production and transmission of information, which leads to…

- Communication as political organization (that goes beyond messages, framing, and effects)

    Younger generations prefer networked participation that relies less on formal

    organization than on peer recommendation and peer production of ideas and

    plans. In these technology-enabled networks, communication often goes

    beyond message transmission to become an organizational process.

The extent of these changes varies in different societies. Some countries such as

the US and the UK have embraced them more fully than others, such as Germany, which

still displays a higher degree of modernist social structure and communication. Current

frameworks for comparing media systems note general similarities and differences

(Hallin and Mancini 2004), the change processes transforming communication systems in

the digital age are not yet well established in theory, research or teaching. Not only is the

volume of public information in the so-called digital age unsurpassed in human history,

but its production, distribution and consumption patterns are changing in ways that also

outpace current communication theories and research methods, with a few notable

exceptions (Bimber 2003; Benkler 2006; Coleman and Blumler 2009). This analysis

sketches the broad changes, illustrates them with examples from different countries, and

shows how they impact communication and journalism research and education.

The Reorganization of Public Life

As publics became persuaded of the merits of deregulated markets, consumer

lifestyles and economic growth that seemed limitless before the financial crash of 2008,

even many of the parties on the left rushed toward so–called "third way" thinking about reduced commitments to labor protections, public goods, and social welfare. In many cases, parties on the left actually led the way with market reforms in core public sectors such as social services, health care and education. The ironic result was a political boomerang that benefited center right parties who charged the social democratic left (with some good reason) with becoming a pale imitation of the freedom loving center right. And so, the 21st Century opened with the helpless drift of the legacy socialist parties in the UK, Sweden, Italy, Germany and elsewhere. The resulting race to re-brand seemingly empty political vessels led to further disillusionment with the political process for many younger citizens.

The separation of younger generations from guiding institutions such as parties and the press (which derives a good deal of its content from parties and government) left citizens with few stable models for managing distress and confusion. As many social scientists observed, individuals experienced an increased sense of personal risk and responsibility for managing their own life chances during these times of rapid social change (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). Cast adrift from broad party agendas, younger citizens increasingly attached themselves to issues connected to their lifestyles and personal values (Inglehart 1997; Bennett 1998). These shifting identifications produced a fluid politics that resisted easy ideological order: environmental protection might rest easily alongside human rights in Tibet and support for gay marriage, or libertarian values supporting free marijuana might combine with support for defense spending and fiscal austerity.

Coherent mass communication from parties and institutions becomes ever more challenging in the face of such personalized politics. And once in power, governments face serious challenges to satisfy the personal expectations of citizens who voted them in. As governments are perceived to be less capable of solving problems, individuals further shift their political repertoires away from programmatic orientations based in social position, class or ideologies, and toward concerns about issues that affect their lives in more immediate ways, such as environment, education or health care. These lifestyle politics put further strain on political parties of the left because they cannot mobilize resources and broad public support to solve them, while parties on the right suffer under the suspicion that their preferred market solutions may have caused or exacerbated these problems in the first place. Under these conditions the usual sources of information such as mass media news become increasingly doubted, and in the case of younger generations, abandoned. The result is a series of changes in media systems and how people use them.

Changing Media Systems

Citizens seeking more relevant coverage of their personal issue clusters create growing strains on journalism, which, in most places, continues to deliver government agenda-driven news to broad audiences. The legacy modern press system persists of course, but is followed mainly by older and more affluent demographics that support the old institutional order into which they were born. Meanwhile, younger citizens are turning to alternative sources of information, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that create information rich environments around their issues, and often personalize their communication through environmental policy messages using cute baby

animals or fair trade and development policies pegged to endorsements from rock stars and actors. The emergence of vibrant issue communities on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites also suggests different kinds of information production and distribution than commonly studied in conventional approaches to news production and framing.

Even when young people report following the news through publications or online 'zines,' the communication formats typically involve narratives shaped around lifestyle concerns, rather than with reports of conventional politics, politicians and parties. For example, lifestyle zines such as *Neon* in Germany have captured large segments of the young audience demographic now being lost to newspapers and public service broadcasting. The *Neon* formula is an explicitly youth oriented mix of music, shopping, technology gear, reader profiles, meeting places, and pages of direct video and photo blog posts from readers about the cool things they do. Interspersed in this lifestyle cocktail are selected political stories designed to tap interest in the world beyond. Here is how a founding editor of *Neon* explains what kinds of stories are interesting to his audience:

> We're searching for something to identify with, where people would say 'I like that' or 'this is like me or like I want to be.'…

> We don't have a policy of 'elected officials are a no-go.' However, I think that most young people are not interested in politics. They are interested in political issues or topics though. But in Germany …there is a great distance and almost cynical attitude toward this party spectacle…A story such as 'The New Shooting Star of the FDP – I think people couldn't care less. But political topics in general, dealing with problems in our society, do engage people very much. It's either the question of 'what

has it to do with my life?' or 'I've heard so much about it, I want to learn a little bit more.'[1]

As noted earlier, longitudinal studies of generation cohorts show that conventional newspaper readership and television news viewership has declined with each generation in most of the OECD nations, particularly in public service and "quality" journalism sectors. Despite persistent faith among journalists (and more than a few scholars) that younger citizens will acquire a taste for quality news when they grow older, most longitudinal cohort studies show that younger citizens do not return to the fold of dutiful citizenship later in life. These discouraging trends in public service broadcasting audiences provoked the CEO of Sweden public television to proclaim on the front page of a leading Stockholm daily: "Swedish Television has a problem with viewers between 25 and 55." (Hamilton 2010) Similar concerns afflict the BBC, German public service broadcasting, and other systems that find their audiences for both news and entertainment fare aging and, even more alarmingly, dying off.

With the loss of audiences and related loss of advertising revenue or public budget support, conventional news organizations in many countries are in crisis. In 2010 the OECD issued a report on problems facing journalism in its member democracies, noting substantial circulation and revenue declines in all countries (led by the US and the UK) compounded by long term erosion of journalism jobs, with countries such as Germany and the Netherlands high on the list (OECD 2010). The dramatic loss of journalism jobs led a prominent US Journalism review run this feature story: "Is there Life After Newspapers?" (Hodierne 2009) Indeed, the cuts in the US have been staggering, estimated at 30% in 2011 alone.[2] While keeping a characteristically stiff upper lip in

public, the BBC has also suffered huge revenue cuts, creating evident loss of quality, particularly in its international coverage. As journalism becomes spread ever thinner, reporting suffers in terms of breadth and depth. The 2013 Pew report on the state of journalism in the US showed that after years of reductions in newsrooms and closures of news organizations, the spiral of audience defection has grown severe – ironically, due to perceived lack of quality and decreasing coverage of issues perceived important by publics (Pew Research Center 2013). Even the venerable New York Times announced the closure of its environment desk in 2013.

There is, of course, some evidence that young people encounter news online, but the trends are less than clear in terms of the quality and volume of the information. The modes of encounter may involve passing by headlines on the way through Internet service portals, or sharing relevant lifestyle issues with friends on Facebook. When I asked a large undergraduate class at my university in the U.S. if they had watched a nightly news program recently, barely 25 percent raised their hands. When I asked if they had seen a Youtube video "KONY 2012" about a mercenary army and child slavery in Africa, nearly all of them raised their hands.[3]

These shifting demographic trends in traditional information production and consumption have many implications for the communication processes we study and how we conceive of them. Among the most notable areas of change involve the gatekeeping or authoritative filtering of public information, upon which much of the research on media effects, persuasion, cueing, agenda setting, and public opinion formation depends (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). As publics invest less authority in officials, journalists, and professionally spun communication (which defined the heart of the modernist mass

media public sphere), information is increasingly self selected and constructed by social networks and shared via trusted recommendations from friends.

Some European scholars -- particularly those living with still healthy public service broadcasters -- tend to dismiss these trends as not applying to their countries. There are of course national variations, but few studies are able to explain the persistent shifts in the attention patterns of disaffected younger citizens. What often passes for defense of civic media traditions in some European systems are studies showing that quality journalism still exists, and that those who consume it continue to behave as ever before (de Vreese, Albaek, van Dalen and Jebril 2013). Yet both the audiences supporting these findings are aging and shrinking, putting the findings more in the service of reifying old modernist communication paradigms than helping to understand the new trends. The efforts to plug the dikes of multiplying information flows and fragmenting audiences are understandable, but they do not prepare us for handling change processes either theoretically or empirically.

As publics become more responsible for their own gatekeeping and authority schemes, the results are, not surprisingly, rather uneven. In some cases such as Wikipedia, the product is high quality information on a larger array of topics than ever before found in one source, or previously shared across language and culture divides. In other cases, however, information reaching large numbers of people reflects severe political views bordering on delusion. Witness, for example, the years of public discussion in the U.S. about whether Barack Obama was really born in the U.S. and in the view of those who doubted the authenticity of his birth certificate, whether he was legally qualified to be president. Such seemingly absurd beliefs can become magnified beyond

anything that would have been admitted into the public sphere in conventional modern press systems that kept the gates of public information for much of the modern era. In the U.S., the controversies about the legal status of Barack Obama's birth raged on the Internet and were carried regularly into the quality news by politicians and celebrities who recognized the ease with which they could make news just by simply echoing the question. Other countries have suffered similar breakdowns of gatekeeping. In Sweden, a racist, anti-immigrant campaign ad by the Sweden Democrats in the 2010 election was rejected for television broadcast as violating election communication standards, but it received more than a million views on Youtube, and a similar volume of commentary online. These examples suggest how the rise of digital networks can rival conventional media reach, while undermining the old gatekeeping process.

As gatekeeping becomes less functional, one of the challenges to traditional communication research involves the dissolving boundaries between citizen-generated information and journalism. In many cases, as in the protests following the 2009 Iranian elections, or the massive uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, and the U.S. in 2010-2012, direct citizen reports offer the best (or only) source material available to journalists who must relax their usual standards of news sourcing and adopt the role of curators rather than editors and reporters. In some cases, news organizations settle into new hybrid information forms, as when Wikileaks shared anonymous and controversial source material with prominent news organizations that added their editorial and distribution capacities in processing huge volumes of material (Chadwick 2013). The many examples of changing genres of news and public information raise questions about the continuing role and status of old media regimes (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011).

Despite the many examples of new and divergent communication processes, many media scholars continue to be caught in the sway of ideas such as "mediatization," which loosely suggests that much of social order is bent to a singular, pervasive and somehow "convergent" media logic that structures institutions and public behavior. There is surely some merit to the idea that there are identifiable media logics, as anyone who has watched the shrinking news sound bite would agree. However, as Jay Blumler and his co-authors suggested long ago, those logics are as much shaped by the formulas of communication professionals and adopted as news formats, as the other way around (Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). Moreover, the idea of a singular or convergent logic seems a poor account of the current era of digital media and networked societies, where many different media logics seem to be in play. Thus, imputing too much power to some vague media logic risks losing the variety of content and social organization produced by creative uses of personal communication technologies (Castells 2012). Indeed, the more that people disconnect from legacy information systems, the more creative communication processes enable new patterns of participation and organization.

Communication as Organization: Beyond Messages and Effects

The changing information tastes of fragmenting audiences reflect changing styles of citizenship. Citizenship has changed historically, reflecting surrounding political, economic and social changes, and those changes have been expressed via different communication processes (Schudson 1998). Citizenship is undergoing transformation in the current era as well, with the most evident changes occurring among younger generations that experience the full impact of the social, economic and communication changes described above (Bennett 1998, 2008, 2012). Indeed, younger citizens in many

countries are more averse to joining parties and other civic organizations, more inclined to choose personal issues to support, and inclined to seek alternative channels of information and modes of engagement that mix information with the capacity to take action.

Communication theory has lagged in understanding new forms of political engagement, information acquisition, and public opinion formation. The recent period has witnessed series of the largest direct actions in human history, from the global protests against the Iraq War in 2003 to series of mobilizations pressing for stronger climate change policies, overthrow of corrupt regimes, fairness in finance and trade policies, and people-friendly solutions to the financial crisis (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Scholars locked into modernist frameworks dismiss these kinds of citizen engagement as somehow marginal compared to voting and other legacy participation categories. Yet many younger activists see the capacities of conventional party and election politics as closed to their demands as political parties and national sovereignty have become bent to the pressures of neoliberal economics and the overbearing influence of business on government. The disaffection from governance institutions also propels many young citizens toward massive direct action, from online petitioning (Earl and Kimport 2011), to large-scale occupations. Those action varieties are often enabled by commonly available personal technologies from mobile phones to social networks. Not only are the communication processes underlying these mobilizations less centrally managed than most institutional communication, but the ways in which content is generated and how it travels over these digital networks requires new theories and methods to understand (Bennett and Segerberg 2013).

An important development in understanding the properties of technology-enabled

networks is to see how communication often becomes an organizational process rather

than just messaging and information acquisition. Organization theorists have developed

the idea that communication is constitutive of organizations (Putnam and Nicotera 2009).

However, there are broad areas of society beyond the bounds of formal organizations that

also display organizational properties constituted importantly through communication

networks. The idea of communication as organization means that networks anchored in

hardware and software of various sorts enable people to stay connected to issues and to

each other, sometimes with the moderating role of formal organizations, and sometimes

largely through the coordinating capacities of crowds that develop intentionality and

focus (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Among other things, the organizational capacities of

crowds may alter how we think about public opinion formation, as powerful frames may

emerge from crowds and travel virally within and across societies. This occurred, for

example, with the "We Are the 99%" meme that emerged during the Occupy Wall Street

protests in the US. This frame touched broadly across society and became a media topic

that raised the long buried issue of inequality in social discourse. Not only did the issue

rise on the media agenda but it rose on the elite agenda as well (Bennett 2012).

By following the traces left by technology in crowd-enabled organization, we are

able to see public opinion that arises outside of polling more clearly than ever before.

Indeed, the organic qualities of technology assisted association and information sharing

become compelling to study, but often defy conventional analytical frameworks.

Communication scholars may continue to use and adapt alternative frameworks such as

Latour's Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005). Yet the sheer scale and complexity of

technology equipped crowd organization suggests the need for new theories of crowd-sourced information and related methods for handling the volume of "big data" they generate. The very logic of communication changes in contexts of large-scale peer production (Bimber 2003; Benkler 2006; Bennett and Segerberg 2013).

The increasing prominence of crowd-sourced information flows invite developing new models and standards for public communication processes. In some cases, crowds are prey to rumor and misinformation, and may embrace them as fact. It may be prudent for journalism organizations to act as secondary filters on these crowd dynamics, helping to feed back outside perspectives into the crowd. This happened, for example, during the Occupy Wall Street protests in the U.S., as millions of tweets revealed a balance between links to first hand individual accounts and links to news reports containing pronouncements from political officials, police, and others outside the mobilizations (Agarwal, Bennett, Johnson, and Walker, 2012; Bennett, Segerberg, and Walker 2013).

Figuring out how to connect news organizations with crowds is a challenging prospect for journalism education. How do reporters use social media feeds? How do they assess their credibility? What are the central tendencies and trends in rapidly changing pubic networks? These questions are more than just about standards and evaluation; they also contain implications for how journalists gather and process information. News organizations may need to become adept at gathering and processing big data and filtering crowd information flows in real time.

Despite the evidence of changing information systems, communication scholars lack much theoretical guidance for research and normative assessment of these processes. Yet reality does not wait. For example, a major journalism award (The Polk Award in the

U.S.) has now been given to an anonymous citizen who used a phone to record events during protests following the 2009 Iranian elections, including the death of a young protester named Neda Agha-Soltan (Stelter 2010). The "Neda video" was posted on Youtube, where it received a huge global audience, and was subsequently amplified by numerous television and newspaper journalism channels. The growing importance of news from the crowd means that journalism is changing and that both scholars and journalism educators must update their thinking about just what counts as news and how to address questions such as sourcing, credibility, and the changing interface between news organizations and political actors.

Conclusion: Challenges for communication research and journalism education

Few nations have escaped these patterns of social fragmentation, media market deregulation, dispersal of audiences, upheavals in party identifications and interests, and the rise of new technologies that merge information production with social and political organization. There are of course important national variations in these developments, but most nations are grappling with them. Media research is showing signs of shifting its paradigms as well, although there continues to be understandable reluctance to adjust the boundaries or yield the supremacy of legacy fields such as journalism, audience behavior, media effects, persuasion and public opinion, among others (Bennett and Iyengar 2008). Nonetheless, more attention is being paid to new information technologies, as they change the delivery and distribution of information, and enable citizens to become producers of news and public information. However, with a few notable exceptions, this emerging research is largely descriptive and unguided by theory that captures the social, psychological and political contexts in which these technologies operate.

Despite the evident changes, the conventional wisdom is still that the mass media should be the center of political communication research, based on the assumption that what elites say in the news establishes a feedback loop to citizens who vote for, or otherwise confer legitimacy on those elites. This is an old notion of the public sphere in which a system of well connected institutions (party, press, cultural and civil society organizations) maintain the information gates through with citizens receive news and ideas about who they are and how society is working.

In the current era many citizens are actively creating their own channels and methods to communicate directly with each other and to make that communication increasingly hard for both elites and the mass media to ignore or marginalize. The emergence of networked public spheres involves re-thinking the relationship between communication content and the organization processes that produce and distribute it. Put simply, communication processes are changing in ways that variously complement, compete with and in some cases, replace the forms that defined modern societies. What is more challenging still is that both modern and late modern systems are in play at the same time, meaning that new models must take into account the interaction of both kinds of communication processes (hierarchical/bureaucratic and distributed/networked) as they shape power, participation and public life in various societies. A fourth era of personalized, technology-enabled communication is clearly emerging, and our challenge is to understand it.

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[1] Neon editor Timm Klotzek quoted in Wolf (2010).

[2] http://newsosaur.blogspot.de/2011/12/newspaper-job-cuts-surged-30-in-2011.html
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[3] Kony 2012 is a half hour documentary framed around childhood in "our world"

contrasted with the nightmare of a mercenary army enslaving children in Africa. This

video had received nearly 100 million views at the time of writing

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