

INVESTIGATING THE RADICAL DEMOCRATIC  
POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE BY NEW  
SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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INVESTIGATING THE RADICAL DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL  
OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE BY NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN  
SOUTH AFRICA

By

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# DECLARATION

I, Carla Zdanow (205021158), hereby declare that the thesis for Doctor of Philosophy: Media Studies (Research) is my own work and that it has not previously been submitted for assessment or completion of any postgraduate qualification to another University or for another qualification.

4 December 2014

Carla Zdanow

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## Summary

Since its inception, the internet – and in particular Web 2.0 – have been valorized as potentially revolutionary democratic spaces. Despite the emergence of concerns over the progressively neoliberal orientation and narcissistic effects of the internet, evidence of the radical democratic potential of this media has received considerable attention. This thesis is orientated around both an exploration of such evidence, and a consideration of its relevance for South Africa. In this regard, the thesis commences with an exploration of the neoliberal underpinnings of the internet and the growing translation of dominant neoliberal discourses into the online practices of mainstream liberal democratic politics. Focus then shifts toward the mounting influence of alternative radical democratic positions online, through an investigation of the virtual manifestations of *deliberative*, *autonomous*, and *agonistic* approaches to radical democracy. And following an examination of the online political practices of selected recent global social movements, the primacy of agonism in online expressions of radical democracy is advanced. In turn, resonances and dissonances between the online activity and practices of such global social movements, and the use of the internet and social media by well-known South African new social movements, are explored. Finally, this thesis concludes by recommending a fourfold new media approach through which the agonistic radical democratic potential of the internet can be realized more fully by the new social movements of South Africa.

Key words: radical democracy, social media, new social movements, neoliberalism, agonism

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## List of acronyms

AbM	Abahlali baseMjondolo
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ANC	African National Congress
API	Applications Programming Interface
ARPANET	Advanced Research Projects Agency Network
ARV	Anti-Retroviral
BBS	Bulletin Board System
CER	Centre for Environmental Rights
CERN	Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucleaire
CMC	Computer Mediated Communication
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CP	Conservative Party
CSO	Civil Society Organization
ELA	Earthlife Africa
EMG	Environmental Monitoring Group
EZLN	Zapatista Army of National Liberation
FoEI	Friends of the Earth International
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
FTAA	Free Trade Area of the Americas
GA	General Assembly
GATT	General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEAR	Growth, Employment and Redistribution programme
GEM	Group for Environmental Monitoring
GUI	Graphical User Interface
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus



ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IFP	Inkatha Freedom Party
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
IRC	Internet Relay Chat
LGEP	Lesbian Gay Equality Project
MK	Umkhonto Wesizwe
MMORPG	Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game
MOO	Multi-User Object-Orientated Domains
MSF	Medecins Sans Frontieres
MUD	Multi-User Dungeons
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCSA	National Centre for Supercomputing Applications
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NP	National Party
NYDF	National Youth Development Forum
NYGA	New York General Assembly
PAC	Pan African Congress
PMA	Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association
PPA	Poor People's Alliance
RAWA	Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SACP	South African Communist Party
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SANCO	South African National Civics Organization
SANNC	South African Native National Congress

SAP	Structural Adjustment Program
SMI	Social Movement Indaba
TAC	Treatment Action Campaign
TED	Technology Education Design
TPB	The Pirate Bay
UDF	United Democratic Front
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WNC	Women's National Coalition
WSF	World Social Forum
WTO	World Trade Organization

## Introduction

Social media and new media technologies have become an increasingly influential component of contemporary society. From Facebook to Twitter and YouTube, interactive web- and mobile-based media technologies are steadily becoming more accessible, and thus more popular forms of online communication. However, although already prevalent within personal, community, and business environments, social media use is also becoming increasingly evident in the realm of political communication and social movement activism. Indeed, few, if any, technological developments over the past decades have garnered as much interest as digital Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) – in particular the internet and social media – for their transformative political potential. As Margolis and Moreno-Riaño note, the internet has been viewed by many as holding a democratic “promise for bringing about a broader political community with increased international solidarity, and greater human empowerment” (2013:1). Consequently, related arguments supporting the use of the internet to promote, facilitate, and extend democratic values and practices are widespread, as are understandings of the internet, on the one hand, as an indispensable tool in the creation of an engaged and active citizenry, and on the other hand, as an open and decentralized space in which challenges to anti-democratic discourses and hegemonic power can be put forward. That is, not only has the internet been lauded for its potential to initiate greater participation in traditional politics; in addition, it has also been valorized for its potential to offer minority and marginalized groups greater opportunities for political participation, in a way that allows established political interests to be challenged (Hauben and Hauben 1997; Morris 1999; Rheingold 1993; Shapiro 1999). Admittedly, in contrast to such optimism, ambivalence and skepticism related to the democratic potential of the internet and social media have also emerged. That is, despite theorization of the political dynamism of such media, concerns related to their widespread co-optation by neoliberalism frequently arise, insofar as some critics question the ability of this media to escape the control of established systems of power, while others argue that online interaction does little more than continue to promote and support current dominant discourses. And these theorists tend to reject the potential of the internet to support democracy, and instead highlight its capacity to advance anti-democratic, racist, capitalist, and fundamentalist discourses and ideas, and to promote consumerist, narcissistic and alienated individuality. Yet, notwithstanding these concerns, growing examples of internet and social media use by new social movements to communicate, organize, and mobilize around calls for social justice and democracy, at local,

national and international levels, continue to spark interest. Consequently, the debate around the democratic potential of online and mobile media rages on, especially in relation to the potential of online media to support the promotion of alternative or radical forms of democracy. In terms of this, recent developments in social media and ICT use around the world have received much thematization. As De la Barra and Dello Buono argue, “the explosion of blogs and other websites create[s]...dynamic new virtual spaces” for progressive social movements, and “these spaces accompany the day to day communications of people who are socially networking with an agenda for social transformation” (2009:239). Indeed, this increased connectivity between divergent social movements, and the accompanying challenges of anti-democratic practices (both online and offline), has led not only to an explosion of online activist sites and networks, but also to greater opportunities for political participation and democratic change. In relation to this, certain theorists have advanced that, despite the overarching online influence of neoliberalism, the internet and communication-focused new media technologies may still provide a contemporary platform for the promotion and facilitation of radical forms of democracy. That is, forms of democracy focused on an ever greater approximation of the original democratic ideas of liberty and equality. Arguably this has been evinced through the use of social media technologies by recent major social movements around the world, as a means to communicate their various politico-economic and socio-cultural positions. And while reflections of *deliberative*, *autonomous* and *agonistic* forms of radical democracy have emerged through such online means, in many ways, it is toward the agonistic radical democracy advanced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe that such online politics have gravitated. Accordingly, this raises the question of the radical democratic potential of the use of social media by new social movements in South Africa, and the extent to which they approximate an online agonistic public space that can deepen and expand the democratic ideals of liberty and equality in the country, and facilitate the formation of something akin to the left-wing hegemony spoken of by Laclau and Mouffe.

In the interest of exploring the above issues in more detail, Chapter One will commence with a consideration of the evolution of the internet, from Cold War military ‘packet-switching’ technologies through to the development of Web 2.0 and the emergence of the internet as it is known today. Then, following a brief discussion of the participatory possibilities of the various social media platforms available today, the neoliberal and consumerist underpinnings of contemporary online activities will be elaborated upon. In particular, in relation to Dan Schiller’s notion of digital capitalism (2000), the role of neoliberalism as a driving force behind the expansion of the internet will be discussed, with a view to highlighting the progressive corporate colonization of cyberspace. Next, the impact of

the internet and new media technologies on human identity, communication, and interaction, will be discussed in relation to various conflicting scholarly perspectives. That is, positive appraisals of the potential of such media to build communities, increase participation in public life, and expand freedom in society – as advanced by Rheingold (1994), Turkle (1995), Poster (1995), and Jenkins (2006), will be detailed. After this, the more circumspect and ambivalent perspective of Castells (1996, 1997, 1998), who both promotes certain aspects of online networks and denounces others, will be explored. Finally, the skeptical and negative appraisals of new media technologies for their promotion of narcissistic individualism and alienation from society, as advanced in Buffardi (2008), Campbell (2008), Twenge (2009) and Turkle in her most recent work (2011) will be examined. This will be done in order to elaborate on the current debate surrounding the influence of the internet and new media technologies on identity, society, and democracy, and to provide insight into both the opportunities and challenges that new media, respectively, afford and pose to digitally-connected people in the contemporary era.

Next, Chapter Two will begin with an exploration of the online dynamics of mainstream political new media use. In this regard, the use of the internet and social media to encourage and enhance mainstream political participation in contemporary society will be considered in relation to the social media campaign of the 2008 US presidential elections. Following on from this, concerns related to the orientation of such mainstream online political practices around a standardized neoliberal-consumer model of politics, which promotes uncritical, individualized, and consumer-orientated political dynamics, will be explored in relation to the respective arguments of Davis (1999), Resnick and Margolis (2000), Schlosberg (2006), and Gutmann and Thompson (2004), among others. Then, moving away from the use of the internet and social media in mainstream politics, the latter part of this chapter will investigate the use of such media by proponents of alternative radical democratic politics. That is, the use of the internet and social media technologies by advocates of radical forms of democracy will be examined, with a view to highlighting the potential of this media to promote and propagate alternative visions of democracy. In this regard, following a brief introduction to the theory and practice of radical democracy, the deliberative democratic position, which has largely been attributed to the ideas of John Rawls (1993) and Jürgen Habermas (1996), and which proposes that reasonable discussions and objective and rational consensus-based decision-making are precursors to democratic transformations of society, will be considered. After this, the potential of the internet to advance this form of radical democracy via a range of deliberative online platforms will be explored. Next, the autonomous approach to radical democracy, which highlights the role of community, self-

determination, and freedom from centralized systems of power in democratic practice, will be examined. This will be done with particular reference, on the one hand, to the works of Castoriadis (1991, 1997), who calls for a system of self-government and highlights the need for a return to a society committed to autonomy and the ‘original’ meaning of democracy, and on the other hand, to the works of Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004), who denounce the current liberal democratic system as a neoliberal ‘Empire’ and call for both a political revolution against the power of capitalism, and the creation of autonomous community and organization. Subsequently, a consideration of autonomous democratic use of the internet and new media networks to challenge neoliberal discourses and power, to bypass centralized forms of control and capitalist systems, and to allow for an online formation and extension of a ‘commons,’ will be investigated. In short, in this chapter, the ‘traditional’ liberal consumer model of online politics and e-democracy will be contrasted with the potential of the internet and social media to offer a platform or arena for the realization of alternative – deliberative and autonomous – forms of radical democracy.

Following on from this, Chapter Three will draw particular attention to a third category of radical democracy, namely agonistic democracy. Offering an alternative to deliberative and autonomous approaches, the theory of agonistic democracy will be discussed generally in relation to the ideas of Connelly (1991), Tully (2002), Honig (1996), and Owen (2002), who advance the importance of conflict, difference, identity, and contestation in democratic transformations. After this, specific focus will fall on Laclau and Mouffe’s influential conception of agonistic radical democracy – as expressed through their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001), and via their individual theoretical works – which comprises one of the most succinct and cogent articulations of political agonism. In short, the reasons for their rejection of deliberative and autonomous approaches to radical democracy will be elaborated upon, before their promotion of a new political strategy of left-wing hegemony and radical democracy will be examined. In the latter regard, stressing the overarching presence of antagonisms and differences in contemporary politics, Laclau and Mouffe advance that democracy should not be about achieving consensus, but rather about providing a platform for the confrontation of inevitable differences, and the constant renegotiation of issues based on these conflicts. Furthermore, their assertion that previously unconnected or dissimilar groups should recognize the similarities in their *progressive* struggles or ideas, and come together to support the radically democratic purpose of deepening and extending liberty and equality, will be engaged with. Finally, their promotion of co-operation between civil society and social movements as essential to the development of such a ‘left-wing hegemonic’ project, and as imperative to the formation of agonistic forms of

radical democracy, will be considered along with some of the criticisms which their ideas have received.

Building on the theory of the previous chapter, in Chapter Four, existing general theorizations of online agonism will be thematized, before specific investigations into the salient agonistic use of the internet by recent major global social movements will be undertaken. That is, to begin with, the potential of the internet and social media to function as an agonistic domain and platform, will be examined in relation to the works of Kahn and Kellner (2006), Kowal (2002), Downey and Fenton (2003), Moghadam (2013), Rahimi (2011), Langman (2005), Cammaerts (2008), Hands (2007) and Dahlberg (2007a, 2007b, 2007c). After this, specific examples of the radical democratic use of the internet will be explored, via an investigation into the online political practices of the Zapatista, the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan (RAWA), the alter-globalization movement, and the Occupy movement. This will be done with a view to highlighting the resonances between the online politics and practices of these movements, and the dynamics of agonistic democracy. Accordingly, what will be advanced is the potential of the above social movements' respective internet and social media use to function as something akin to an online agonistic public space in which, firstly, counter-publics can be developed, secondly, diverse groups and people can come together to network and articulate collective identities, and thirdly, counter-public contestation of dominant discourses can emerge. Finally, the implications of such online agonistic dynamics for the realization of Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical perspectives will be considered.

In turn, with a view to discovering whether or not such global online developments have a local component, Chapter Five will explore the radical democratic use of the internet and social media by new social movements in South Africa. That is, following a brief discussion of the South African political landscape and history, the ANC's neoliberal turn in 1994, and the subsequent emergence of post-apartheid new social movements, the online activities of three new social movement categories – namely 'right to *life*,' 'right to a *better* life' and 'right to a better life for *all*' – will be analyzed and discussed, and the radical democratic potential of their current social media use will be considered. In this regard, selected South African new social movements' online activity will be explored with a view to determining, firstly, the extent of their respective digital connectivity evinced by their use of the internet and social media, secondly, their respective proximity to the radically democratic ideals of agonistic democracy, and thirdly, both the current possibilities for – and the limitations to – their use of this media (i) to support the development of counter-publics and counter-discourses, (ii) to allow for the articulation of collective identities and the

strengthening of oppositional strategies, and (iii) to facilitate contestations of dominant discourses, and the establishment of something akin to a left-wing hegemony and radical democracy in the country. In short, the above mentioned movements' current use of the internet and social media will be examined in relation to their levels of engagement, participation, and contestation, before the potential of such media use to function effectively as an online agonistic public space will be considered.

Finally, in the Conclusion, tentative recommendations for how the internet and social media can more effectively be used as online agonistic public spaces in the promotion of radical democracy in South Africa, will be advanced, particularly in relation to concerns surrounding the current predominant use of these media by new social movements as 'technological tools' for information dissemination, rather than as 'cultural technologies' for change. That is against the backdrop of wariness about the neoliberal underpinnings of the internet, which propagate alienation and commodity-based narcissism rather than social or community engagement, a fourfold new media approach will be proposed. This will involve, firstly, the augmentation of existing dialogic functions at a cyber-structural level; secondly, the active and enthusiastic engendering of virtual discursive momentum; thirdly, the provision of a critical buffer against online neoliberal influences as the digital divide is progressively overcome in South Africa; and fourthly, the exploration and progressive utilization of alternative software that constitutes a more democratic and safer means of social networking than current commercial sites and applications. In short, this thesis will advance that social media increasingly constitute a potentially valuable platform for the deepening and strengthening of democracy in South Africa, the importance of which needs to be underscored in light of current challenges to new social movement communications and organization.

In terms of methodology, this thesis is based on information obtained from both primary and secondary academic sources, and from the websites, blogs, and social media pages of selected new social movements and activist groups. Thus, this exploratory study – couched in an interpretative approach – will use qualitative data to produce its findings. Qualitative studies usually aim for depth rather than “quantity of understanding” (Henning 2004:3), insofar as they involve in-depth analysis of the data in question. In terms of this, Cheek explains discourse analysis as providing “insight into the functioning of bodies of knowledge in their specific situated contexts by generating interpretive claims with regard to the power effects of a discourse on groups of people” (1997:23-27). However, this study will be couched in terms of Foucauldian discourse analysis. For Foucault, discourse analysis involves the analysis of power relations within social situations, and via his genealogical works he illustrates and argues that power does not belong to any particular agent, but is



instead spread out across a variety of social practices. Accordingly, he maintains that power should be viewed as both a constraining and a productive force; that is, power

does not only weigh on us as a force that says no, but...it [also] traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose [only] function is repression. (Foucault 1980:119)

Consequently, for Foucault, “power provides the conditions of possibility for the social” (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002:13), because power does not come from one central point and cannot be possessed, but is rather produced at all levels of social relations by individuals, groups, institutions, and so forth. In short “power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault 1980:93), such that domination, resistance, and freedom are all interconnected. Indeed, where there is power there is resistance, and resistance can occur at any point in a web of relations, to produce new social arrangements.

On the one hand, “micro-discourse analysis looks in fine-focus at specific instances of talk and text, and seeks to understand what is going on in particular interactions...when people talk to each other, in speech and writing.” On the other hand, Foucauldian discourse analysis, or “macro-discourse analysis is more concerned with identifying different discourses in play around a particular topic or phenomenon or social action.” In this regard, “macro-discourse analysis starts from [a]...taxonomy, mapping out the discourses in play in rhetorical competition between competing ways of ‘making sense’” (Stainton Rodges 2011:132). As such, “the task of Foucauldian discourse analysis is the *analysis of discourses*. This is a very different enterprise from the fine-grained investigation of talk and texts undertaken in discourse analysis and discursive psychology” (Wooffitt 2005:146). Accordingly, in this thesis, a taxonomy of three classes of new social movements in South Africa, namely the ‘right to *life*,’ ‘right to a *better* life,’ and ‘right to a better life for *all*’ will be constructed, their representative candidates will be identified, and their online activities – as facilitated by cyber-infrastructure – will be analyzed.

This will be undertaken, moreover, in relation to Laclau and Mouffe’s ideas of radical democracy, which were developed against the backdrop of Foucault’s emphasis on the importance of resisting dominant socio-cultural norms. Echoing Foucault, “they recognize that wherever there is power there is resistance,” and that this “resistance can take many forms” (Smith 1998:6). Thus, since “Foucault’s works are one of the main sources of

inspiration for Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe” (Dowding 2011:193), *related* discourse analysis is an appropriate method through which to examine the potential of the internet and social media to offer a space for current South African power relations to shift, through collective resistance that facilitates cracks or fissures in the dominant neoliberal discourse of the country.

While this thesis will examine discursive patterns and trends that have emerged in South African new social movements’ use of the internet and social media as a form of activist communication, the rationale of such research is to contribute toward the strengthening of new social movement strategy and influence, with a view to deepening and expanding the democratic project in our country.

# **Chapter One: An Overview of the Emergence of New Media, and Its Socio-cultural and Politico-economic Impact**

## **1.1 Introduction**

The dawn of the Information Age and the emergence of new media have radically altered the world in which we live, and indeed how we see ourselves within that world. That is, despite its relatively short history, the rise of the internet in the contemporary era has had an extraordinary impact on society, insofar as it has made possible a move away from the largely passive reception of information via industrial age media – such as television and radio – toward increasing degrees of interactive response and exchange of information. Understandably, this has been indissociable from a broad array of socio-cultural and politico-economic changes, and in the interest of exploring these – with a view to laying a conceptual foundation for all the subsequent chapters of this thesis – in what follows, an overview of the emergence and impact of new media will be proffered.

This chapter will commence with a brief exploration of the origins of the internet as a Cold War communications tool. That is, the internet as we know it will be discussed in relation to early developments in Cold War communications strategies and packet switching technologies. These were developed in the United States in reaction to growing tensions between it and the Soviet Union, and in response to the need for a decentralized communication system which could ensure uninterrupted connections between military and government organizations in the event of a Soviet nuclear strike.

Next, the commercial growth of these technologies into the World Wide Web in the 1990s will be discussed, before the development of Web 2.0 and its impact on the evolution of this technology into the internet as it is known today, will be thematized. In this regard, Web 2.0 will be examined in terms of its facilitation of growing possibilities for interaction and participation. Moreover, the related forms of social media – including virtual worlds, blogs, social networks, collaborative sites and content communities – will also be explored with a view to highlighting the interactive possibilities offered by such new media communication technologies.

Following this, since the politico-economic paradigm of neoliberalism has been an important driving force behind internet expansion, this chapter will explore the neoliberal underpinnings of the internet, by examining, on the one hand, the influence that the growth of neoliberalism has had on the popularization and commodification of the internet, and on the

other hand, the impact that such neoliberal underpinnings have had on the contemporary use of this media. In this regard, through the role of neoliberalism in facilitating the imbrication of the internet and new media technologies into the everyday life of contemporary society, use of such technology has, to a large extent, been subject to related capitalist axiological inflection. And this has been viewed in both a positive and negative light. Consequently, the latter part of this chapter will focus on the various conflicting perspectives surrounding the perceived values and threats that the internet, social media and new media technologies hold for contemporary life. That is, positive appraisals of the potential of such media will be examined in relation to the works of Rheingold (1993), Turkle (1995), Poster (1995), and Jenkins (2006), before the more circumspect ambivalence of Castells will be explored. Hereafter, the negative appraisals of new media technologies will be discussed in relation to the arguments of Buffardi (2008), Campbell (2008), Twenge (2009), and Turkle's most recent work (2011).

All of the above will be undertaken in order to elaborate on the current debates surrounding the influence of the internet and new media technologies on society, and to provide insight into both the opportunities and challenges that such media present to digitally-connected people in the contemporary era.

## **1.2 The rise of the internet**

In his 1945 *Atlantic Monthly* article, Vannevar Bush insisted that inadequacies in the exchange of new theories and ideas were slowing down scientific progress in America. In response to these inadequacies, Bush visualized a "system of rapid dissemination and organization of information" that would be instantly available to anyone who sought to find it. He called this system the Memex. The Memex, he proposed, would offer a "transparent plateau" on which books, journals, articles, images, and so forth, would be accessible around the world (Sherry and Brown 2004:114). Fifty years later, the introduction of the World Wide Web and its internet technologies saw Bush's vision emerge as a reality.

For many contemporary users of new media, it is difficult to imagine that the internet – with which their social and business lives are so inextricably intertwined – arose as a consequence of the growing need for an integrated communication network in America. According to Sherry and Brown, early computing technologies had two goals. Firstly, the desire to "increase the ease of communication across distance," and secondly, the "desire to provide resources...[to] assist the efficient processing of information" (2004:114). While these desires were already prevalent in the early twentieth century, it was the tensions related to the Cold War that initiated momentum for the realization of these goals.

The Cold War (1945-1991) was a period of sustained tension between the United States (US) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and it was both a struggle for physical control of certain territories (Germany, the Middle East, Northeast and Southeast Asia), and an ideological “contest to prove the superiority of contending political and economic systems in generating power and well-being” (Harper 2011:1). Although there was relatively little by way of direct military combat between the two superpowers – as a result of the threat posed by the nuclear weapons that both sides possessed – numerous tensions and proxy wars emerged in various parts of the world during this period (Sheehan 2003:4).<sup>1</sup>

Within this context of growing political pressure and related positioning, one of the major components of the Cold War was intelligence gathering and espionage.<sup>2</sup> As a result, communication technologies and information transfer capabilities became a primary concern for both sides. Such concern received significant augmentation during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962,<sup>3</sup> when the possibility of a nuclear confrontation between the US and the USSR seemed inevitable. In reaction to this, the US began to explore ways in which they would be able to communicate after a nuclear attack had eliminated key infrastructural centers. Since it was highly conceivable that neither basic military command and control networks, nor long-distance telephone systems, would survive a nuclear attack, it became apparent that an alternative form of communication would be required – one which was nodal instead of centralized. At the same time that Cold War defense measures became a hot topic on the

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<sup>1</sup> These proxy wars and conflicts included the Berlin Blockade (1948–1949), the Korean War (1950–1953), the Suez Crisis (1956), the Berlin Crisis (1961), the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), the Vietnam War (1959–1975), the Yom Kippur War (1973), the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979–1989), the Soviet downing of Korean Air Lines Flight 007 (1983), and the “Able Archer” NATO military exercises (1983). For more on this see: Lightbody, B. 1999. *The Cold War*. London: Routledge; and Arnold, J., and Wiener, R. 2012. *Cold War: Essential Reference Guide*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO.

<sup>2</sup> According to Knightley, “the hardest and most bitterly fought confrontation between the Soviet Union and the western democracies during the 50 years of the Cold War was on the espionage front. In this arena the KGB, the ‘sword and the shield’ of the USSR, pitted its wits against its principal adversaries – the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States (CIA) and the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS)” (2011:1).

<sup>3</sup> The Cuban missile crisis occurred between the USA, USSR and Cuba on 15 October 1962. According to Green, “photographs taken by US spy planes indicated that Soviet missile bases were being built in Cuba. The revelations triggered a high-stakes standoff between the USA and USSR...[commonly referred to as] ‘the days the world held its breath’” (2010:20). During this time, post nuclear attack communication possibilities were considered and the need for a decentralized communication network was recognized. As will be indicated in what follows, the development of this decentralized communication network ultimately led to the creation of the internet.

American political agenda, the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the first man-made satellite. With fears that the Soviet Union was out-performing America in space technology, and consequently national defense, the Eisenhower administration committed to providing significant support to defense research. The Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) was developed in reaction to the above fears, and was officially established as the US government's key space and defense technology research agency in 1958. While the ARPA received significant funding for space and military technology development, it also gave scientists working with the agency the opportunity to advance their academic pursuits – many of which involved computer science and information processing (Abbate 1999).

In 1960, building on Bush's ideas of the Memex, Joseph Licklider, a mathematician and behavioral psychologist hired as the head of the ARPA's control and command division, proposed the concept of *interactive computing*. In addition to this, he was the first person to envision the linking of numerous computers at various distant locations. In his essay entitled "Man-Computer Symbiosis," he wrote:

It seems reasonable to envision...a "thinking center" that will incorporate the functions of present-day libraries together with anticipated advances in information storage and retrieval...The picture readily enlarges itself into a network of such centers, connected to one another by wide-band communication lines and to individual users by leased-wire services. In such a system, the speed of the computers would be balanced, and the cost of the gigantic memories and the sophisticated programs would be divided by the number of users. (Licklider 1960:15)

Licklider's idea of an interactive network of computers offered an intriguing possibility for computing in the 1960s, and based on this idea, Robert Taylor, the director of the Information Processing Techniques Office, suggested the building of a system which could link researchers' computers electronically, irrespective of geographical location or distance – soon to be known as the ARPANET (Hafner and Lyon 1996). However, the technology of the time did not support this notion of extended networks. According to Sherry and Brown, two obstacles to the creation of such a network existed. Firstly, problems emerged relating to the ability to "receive and process data over existing telephone lines fast enough to allow efficient, real-time processing," and secondly, issues developed relating to "creating a network that could support the unique needs involved in the exchange of computer generated data" (2004:116). Yet in 1960, Kleinrock proposed a new computer technology that could possibly overcome these obstacles. This technology would later become known as packet

switching. Based on the ideas of redundancy and digital technology,<sup>4</sup> packet switching was “a rapid store-and-forward design.” According to the Research and Development (RAND) Corporation, packet switching worked in the following way: “when a node receives a packet it stores it, determines the best route to its destination, and sends it to the next node on that path. If there was a problem with a node (or if it had been destroyed) packets would simply be routed around it” (RAND 1964). According to Flew, packet switching allowed long messages to be broken down into smaller ‘packets,’ messages to be rerouted, and messages to be sent in an asynchronous mode whereby the message was only received by the receiver after some time (Flew 2008:5). This introduction of packet switching not only helped to reduce the limitations of circuit-switched telephone networking, but also assisted in the establishment of a decentralized network with no single point of control – an important element of Cold War military defense. This decentralization, together with the use of digital technology, Gillies and Cailliau insist, was central to the development of the internet (2000:18-25).

However, it is important to remember that the path toward the internet as it exists today, was not linear but rather involved a series of technological detours. Based on the principle of packet switching, the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, or ARPANET (a national long-distance computer network), was established in 1969 and the first electronic mail (email) was delivered in 1971 (Curtis 2011). Subsequently, the first small virtual community emerged with Christensen and Suess’s creation of the non-commercial computerized ‘bulletin board system’ (BBS), which was used to “inform friends of meetings, make announcements and share information” (Bennett 2012). After this, between 1978 and 1989, a variety of commercial developments, such as Usenet, Prodigy, America Online (AOL), and Internet Relay Chat (IRC), further advanced the communication capabilities of the internet.<sup>5</sup> However, it was ultimately the development of the World Wide Web in the 1990s that launched the internet as it is known today. That is, Tim Berners-Lee’s 1989 notion

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<sup>4</sup> Redundancy, which allows for the duplication of critical components of a design, eliminates any need for reliance on one communication link, and thereby prevents a network from being destroyed.

<sup>5</sup> Resembling the bulletin board system, Usenet is an international internet discussion platform that involves a combination of email and web forums, and which encourages users to read or post messages to various content categories. Prodigy was an online facility that allowed members with a valid subscription to gain access to a variety of networked services, including news, shopping, games, banking, travel, stocks, weather, columns, and so forth. AOL is an American brand company that invests in and grows, brands and websites (Lunden 2012). AOL’s business is based online and offers consumers, advertisers, and publishers, a variety of products, contents and services. IRC is a service that offers real-time internet chat facilities. Although it was designed specifically to allow group communication in the form of discussion forums, private messaging, data transfer and file sharing are also now allowed (Kalt 2000:4).

of the World Wide Web,<sup>6</sup> and its development by Berners-Lee and CERN (Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucleaire) from 1991 onward,<sup>7</sup> resulted in a dramatic transformation of the communication possibilities of the internet (Flew 2008:6-7). And the significance of this transformation became increasingly apparent in 1992, when the National Centre for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA) at the University of Illinois developed *Mosaic*, the first *graphical* browser, which has been credited with bringing the World Wide Web into the public domain (Vossen and Hagemann 2007:2; Bennett 2012). This graphical user interface (GUI) provided user-friendly access to the internet, and thereby allowed individuals who were not experienced in the technical elements of computing to gain access to data and information. According to Forrest (2003), *Mosaic's* graphical capabilities acted to capture individuals' attention and laid the foundation for all future browsers.<sup>8</sup> *Mosaic* was renamed Netscape in 1994, and was soon competing with Internet Explorer, an alternative browser released by Microsoft in 1995. That the emergence of these multimedia graphical user interfaces led to the mass popularization of the internet is evinced by the incredibly rapid growth in the number of users.<sup>9</sup> Also, during this time, a variety of additional applications were developed which allowed users to create their own websites and user profiles, and which thereby gave birth to blogging.<sup>10</sup> In turn, Google opened as a major internet search engine in 1998,<sup>11</sup> and Friends

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<sup>6</sup> The World Wide Web (WWW) was conceived as a "global networked environment of interconnected documents and data accessible through the internet" (McPherson 2010:5).

<sup>7</sup> In 1991 Berners-Lee and CERN made the World Wide Web available on the internet. According to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), "by giving the specifications for HyperText Markup Language (HTML: the code in which Web sites are written), HyperText Transfer Protocol (HTTP: the code by which sites are moved into and out of the Web), and UDIs (now a.k.a. URLs), Berners-Lee made it fairly easy for anyone with Internet access to contribute, as well as collect, information" (1999).

<sup>8</sup> *Mosaic* offered its users a graphical interface that included full-color images, sound and textual formatting. This graphical interface was unlike any other internet format and, according to Forrest, "once users discovered that perusing documents in cyberspace could be fun and relatively easy, more people started getting interested in using the Internet and the number of Web pages available began to multiply exponentially. Businesses also began taking notice of the Internet and its potential as a marketplace and advertising medium" (2003).

<sup>9</sup> Increasing significantly from six hundred websites in 1993 to ten thousand in 1994, and from there to half a million in 1996, the influence of graphical user interface browsers on internet growth is immense (Marshall 2012).

<sup>10</sup> A blog (short for Weblog) is a website on which individuals (or a group of people) upload information or discussions in reverse chronological order. Blogs usually follow the format of a diary entry and often link up to other blogs or websites. The contents of blogs can vary dramatically, and a comment function at the end of most blogs allows readers to interact with the writer, ask questions and state their own ideas or opinions related to the blog topic. According to Rettberg, blogging is "a part of the history of communication and literacy, and



Reunited emerged in 2000 as the first social networking site to gain widespread popularity. By 2000, seventy million computers were connected to the internet (Curtis 2011; Bennett 2012), and from 2001 onward, numerous new media forms such as social networking sites, virtual communities, and online communication networks, have continued to emerge. According to Mandiberg, these new media technologies, which further engendered a decentralization process, “focused squarely on active audience participation” and allowed “formally passive media consumers to make and disseminate their own media” (2012:1). As such, the internet can be defined as “the electronic network of networks that links people and information through computers and other digital devices allowing person-to-person communication and information retrieval” (DiMaggio et al. 2001:307).

### **1.3 The emergence of Web 2.0**

Directly related to the emergence of new media as a socio-cultural and politico-economic catalytic force, is the event of Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is the name given to the aspect of the World Wide Web that emerged just over ten years after its genesis, and which is characterized by “interactive applications that allow users to participate in contributing, organizing, and creating their [own] content” (Shelly and Frydenberg 2010:1). The term ‘Web 2.0’ was first introduced in 2003, and conferences related to the idea were held by O’Reilly Media in 2004. Tim O’Reilly, a key advocate of Web 2.0, defined it as

the business revolution in the computer industry caused by the move to the internet as platform, and an attempt to understand the rules for success on that new platform. Chief among those rules is this: Build applications that harness network effects to get better the more people use them...[via] harnessing collective intelligence. (O’Reilly 2006)

To this end, Web 2.0 posits that as the use of such sites increase, so too will the quality of the sites improve. According to Flew, the core principles of internet sites that conform to Web 2.0 are: many-to-many connectivity, user focus, simple design, lightweight administration, start-up and development costs, decentered organization, openness, and constant evolution (2008:17). Through such principles, Web 2.0 allows for large amounts of users to connect and

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emblematic of a shift from uni-directional mass media to participatory media, where viewers and readers become creators of media” (2008:1).

<sup>11</sup> Google is now ranked as the number one search engine in the world with approximately 1.17 billion unique users every month (eBizMBA 2014). Established in 1998, Google aimed to “make huge quantities of information available to everyone” (Google Beta Inc. 1999).

communicate with each other, it focuses on user interaction and experience, is easy to use, and offers a cost effective communication medium. Furthermore, it is decentralized in terms of control, and open in relation to technology standards and Applications Programming Interface (API). Finally, Web 2.0 is constantly evolving and changing as users make modifications to the various sites. Some of the fastest growing websites based on these principles include virtual worlds such as the gaming site World of Warcraft and the social world Second Life, blog and micro-blogging sites such as Blogger and Twitter, social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, collaborative projects and online encyclopedia's such as Wikipedia, and content communities such as photography sites Instagram and Flickr, and the user-generated video site YouTube, among many others. These new interactive forms of media are commonly referred to as social media, and have become an essential part of much of popular culture around the world.

The first examples of online interaction involving social media communication were, of course, already seen in the construction of virtual games and virtual worlds during the development of integrated network systems and the internet. That is, although virtual social spaces have been around since the mid-1970s – games such as Maze War introduced the idea of online interaction on ARPANET – virtual *worlds* first appeared on the internet in the form of MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons/Domains) in the late 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>12</sup> MUDs offered an online virtual world where many players could participate in various forms of text-based role playing games, in real time. And the popularity and growth of MUDs led to their expansion into MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games),<sup>13</sup> which have informed the virtual game and social worlds that are now so much in vogue. As an important dimension of social media, online virtual worlds provide users with three dimensional online environments where they are able to create personal avatars and interact with the avatars of others in a 'real life' setting. It has been argued that virtual worlds "are probably the ultimate manifestation of social media, as they provide the highest level of social presence and media richness" (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010:64). Virtual worlds are usually divided into two forms. The first form is the virtual game world, where users are required to

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<sup>12</sup> According to Steed and Oliveria, Maze War was the first 'first-person shooter' game to work on the internet (2010:23). Developed in 1973 at NASA Ames Research Centre, Maze War evolved from a "single-player game where the player had to find the exit to the maze," to an eight-player game where players were able to shoot each other inside the maze (Thompson 2004, in Steed and Oliveira 2010:23).

<sup>13</sup> Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are a genre of online virtual games in which thousands of players are able to connect to the internet and interact, communicate, and role-play in the same virtual environment, in real-time.

abide by strict rules related to the massively multiplayer online role-playing game they are engaged in. World of Warcraft along with EverQuest,<sup>14</sup> are popular examples of such games. The second form is the virtual social world. In these worlds, users are not limited by rules and are encouraged to live their ‘lives’ as they please – either in conformity with, or in contrast to, their real life. Second Life is arguably the most well-known example of such a virtual social world, and Kaplan and Haenlein describe it in the following way:

Besides doing everything that is possible in real life (e.g., speaking to other avatars, taking a walk, enjoying the virtual sunshine), Second Life also allows users to create content (e.g., to design virtual clothing or furniture items) and to sell this content to others in exchange for Linden Dollars, a virtual currency traded against the U.S. Dollar on the Second Life Exchange. (2010:64)

Virtual worlds are moreover connected to other forms of social media in that they all offer a certain degree of virtual communication and interaction (Papp 2010:3). Other forms of social media differ from virtual worlds, however, in that users do not need to create an avatar to interact with each other in these mediums, and most interactions take place “asynchronously with a time delay” (Papp 2010:3). Blogs, social networks, collaborative projects, and content communities are indicative of this difference and offer a wide variety of alternative forms of online interaction.

As one of the earliest forms of social media, blogs are becoming increasingly popular,<sup>15</sup> with microblogging gaining widespread acceptance in the past few years as an effective communication platform. As already mentioned, blogs are “types of websites that usually display date-stamped entries in reverse chronological order” (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010:63), and they usually relate to an individual’s life, beliefs, interests, and so forth. They also invite interaction in the form of comments and responses from others within networked

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<sup>14</sup> World of Warcraft (WoW) is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) with almost seven million subscribers as of August 2014 (Makuch 2014). WoW allows players to log-in to the online world and, via their avatar, explore their surroundings, fight monsters, complete quests, and interact with other players. Certain rules are set by the game, but the direction of play is mostly led by the player. Similar to WoW, EverQuest is a 3D MMORPG that is set in the fantasy world of Norrath. In this game, players must select an avatar (commonly known as a char or toon) from a wide array of options, including humans, elves, trolls, frog-people, dragon-people, and so forth, and must then select an occupation, patron deity, and starting city. Players then use their avatars to explore the world of Norrath, fight enemies, find treasures, and master trade skills.

<sup>15</sup> The first blog appeared in 1994 when college student Justin Hall launched his website, *Justin’s Links from the Underground*. His blog was published for eleven years and he became widely known as the ‘founding father of personal blogging’ (cited in Hayden and Tomal 2012).

communities. Moreover, blogs often offer links to similar subjects on other blogs or websites, and may provide links to video and photo related blogs. Bruns and Jacobs argue that “the social networking of blogs and the[ir] potential for collaboration...[offer] a decidedly human dimension to the publishing and publicising of information” (2006:5). This dimension, they assert, allows an author to connect to and communicate with an audience that was never before available to them. Figures leave little doubt concerning the immense appeal of this platform. By the end of 2013, there were roughly 152 million active blogs online, with Tumblr and Wordpress standing out in terms of popularity (Gaille 2013).

However, in 2006, microblogging, a derivative of blogging which focuses on short, character restricted updates that are sent out to people who subscribe to the posts, was launched. In terms of microblogging, *Twitter* is the most popular site, with approximately 271 million monthly active users worldwide (Twitter 2014).<sup>16</sup> Twitter is a simple application that is conducive to immediate updates in breaking news, celebrity watch, and the latest events, and with roughly one million accounts being added to Twitter every day, this microblogging facility’s influence over and penetration into society cannot be overlooked (Bullas 2012).<sup>17</sup>

Soon after blogging appeared on the social media landscape, one of the most widely used and well-known forms of social media, namely social networking media, was introduced into ‘cyber-society.’ In this regard, the 1995 Classmate.com, a social networking site that was designed to help people reconnect with friends and classmates from primary school, high school, college, and so forth, paved the way for the creation of the numerous social networking sites available today. These social networks commonly provide an interactive space for online communication between people with similar interests or backgrounds (Mazer

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<sup>16</sup> Hands defines Twitter as “a microblogging service on the worldwide web in which users post messages of up to 140 characters to their account page or ‘profile.’ Their messages can then be viewed by any other account holder, or users can choose to ‘follow’ each other, in which case messages are streamed instantly to the accounts of their followers.” This, she argues “produces a form of virtual network that can quickly expand to allow large numbers of users to communicate simultaneously and in near-real time” (2011:191).

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, in his book, *Twitter and Microblogging: Instant Communication With 140 Characters or Less* (2012), Colin Wilkinson advances that “Twitter has proved that it has enormous practical, professional, personal and social value.” He further asserts that “Twitter has an ability to instantly reach an enormous number of users worldwide,” and this “has made it popular with news outlets, sports marketers, advertisers, events promoters, celebrities, political and advocacy groups, retailers, museums, entertainment media and many other groups seeking to share information, sell products, and raise awareness” (2012:21). In addition to this, Breslin and his colleagues assert that microblogging “is useful for interacting with your community or communities of interest” (2009:86), while at the same time it is increasingly being used in the corporate environment in “facilitating informal communication, learning and knowledge exchange” (2009:87).

et al. 2007; Pempek et al. 2009). Furthermore, they provide the opportunity for users to participate in identity construction and presentation. Social networks therefore offer a different experience to blogs, which are a form of online diary entry and which focus on a specific topic and encourage feedback related to that topic. Instead, social networks allow people who have similar interests to interact and form connections online that are not necessarily topic related. Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace are all good examples of social networks and each have tremendous followings around the world, with millions of users logging in regularly to interact with each other. Indeed, as of February 2014, Facebook – the most widely used social networking service – had approximately 1.23 billion *active* users, with 170 million users being added in one year (Kiss 2014).<sup>18</sup> And as of July 2014, Facebook’s net worth reached 33.1 billion dollars. Facebook was created by Harvard University student Mark Zuckerberg in February 2004,<sup>19</sup> and the name of the site was derived from printed handbooks – known as ‘face books’ – that were given out to students at the beginning of the university year. These ‘face books’ allow students to become acquainted with each other, thus the idea behind the Facebook website was similarly to create an online version of these directories, where students could produce, personalize, and update their own profiles (Awl 2009:4). Available to anyone with a legal email address, Facebook allows users to create a personal profile, list personal information, interests, and contact details, invite friends, communicate using private or public messages and chat features, add photos, play games, and join groups, among many other things. Popular for the immense possibilities of social interaction it makes available, Facebook is currently the leading social networking website based on monthly unique users. LinkedIn, a popular professional business social network, has approximately 332 million users, with two new members joining every second (Smith 2014), while MySpace, reached thirty-six million users in October 2013 (McHugh 2013).

In 2000, collaborative projects became another popular form of social media. According to Kaplan, “collaborative projects enable the joint creation of content by many end-users” (2010). In this regard, collaborative projects consist either of wikis, such as *Wikipedia*, which allows users to add, remove, edit, and change text-based content, or

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<sup>18</sup> The use of the internet via mobile phones is also becoming increasingly popular. In fact, of the approximately seven billion mobile phone subscriptions currently in use, 2.096 billion of them allow for internet access (Mobiforge 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Although Zuckerberg has largely been advanced as the creator of Facebook, it must be noted that this site was developed with the help of fellow computer science students, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes (Harris 2012:7).

bookmarking sites, such as *Delicious*, which allow users to collect and rate internet links and media content as a group, among others. Collaborative sites differ from social networking sites in various ways. As Byrne points out, while networking allows users to “discover, discuss and brainstorm” different ideas and information, collaboration sites allow users to “organise” and “formalise” this information (cited in Franklin 2011). Thus, networking can be seen as “more preliminary and exploratory, where collaboration tends to formalize and act upon the results of networking” (Franklin 2011).

Content communities are another form of social media. While blogs focus on topics, social networks focus on interest, and collaborative projects focus on organization, content communities focus on content. That is, their core purpose is to share information or content between users, and there are many different varieties of such content communities, each focusing on a specific form of media. For example, YouTube is a video sharing content community with one billion unique users per month and over 100 hours of video uploaded to its archives every minute (YouTube 2014). Consequently, many branders have caught on to the popularity of YouTube, and have “seized on its power...[as] a viral media that augments traditional advertising media such as TV” (Bullas 2012). In addition, Flickr and Instagram allow users to share photos, while Slideshare encourages the sharing of PowerPoint presentations. Pinterest is another example of a content community, whereby information and ideas are uploaded onto a virtual ‘pin board,’ shared and commented on. Understandably, the growing popularity of content communities makes them an attractive platform for individuals, organizations, businesses, and marketers to gain and spread various forms of information.

As a component of new media, the term social media, as illustrated in the above discussion, is popularly used to describe online tools that allow online communication of information, collaboration, and participation (Newson et al. 2009:49). Lievrouw defines new and social media as “the combination of material artefacts, people’s practices, and the social and organizational arrangements involved in the process of human communication” (2011:15). These new media, she asserts, differ in four important ways from traditional media: (1) They are recombinant, insofar as they are central to all aspects of digital media but are constantly changing and being changed. (2) They are networked by virtue of their widespread connections and sharing capabilities. (3) They are ubiquitous, on account of the fact that they are found throughout the World Wide Web and are available wherever an internet connection can be made. Finally, (4) they are interactive because of their possibilities for collaboration (Lievrouw 2011:15). These four characteristics can further be related to the ways in which digitally-connected contemporary people differ from those unacquainted with new media. The digitally-connected are similarly recombinant, insofar as their lives are

influenced by and have evolved out of a combination of their immediate life-worlds and the virtual new media technologies that constantly shape it. They are networked through the internet and new media and are able to be ‘virtually’ anywhere at any time. They are ubiquitous, insofar as their resulting sense of identity is spread out through an array of investments – from financial to political and from relational to private. Finally, and most importantly, they are interactive, insofar as they use new media to interact, communicate, and participate in the virtual world made possible by the internet. Yet, such recombinant, networked, ubiquitous, and interactive subjectivity is by no means free, insofar as the technical and politico-economic infrastructure required for its realization entails not only immense wealth, but also the belief in the possibility of infinite wealth generation through rapacious and single-minded capitalist competition. In a word, neoliberalism, and the consequence of this is a related capitalist axiological inflection of such subjectivity, albeit to different degrees in different cases. With a view to exploring this issue, it is necessary at this point to consider the neoliberal underpinnings of the internet and new/social media.

## 1.4 Neoliberalism and the internet

As alluded to earlier, although the technology used in the development of the internet was initially created and funded respectively through the US military and government, funding soon shifted from the public to the private sector, with big business and corporations beginning to invest significantly in digital network development. That is, despite the internet’s development in response to the nuclear threat posed by the Cuban missile crisis, and the corresponding need for second strike capability, its period of non-commercial use was of relatively short duration, and its subsequent history has largely been determined by its growth in an expanding *neoliberal* political economy. One involving a deregulated zone open to market forces orientated around the single aim of generating profit through information sharing.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike Keynesianism,<sup>21</sup> which allowed government intervention in the economy in times of crisis, neoliberalism is a politico-economic movement which shifts the control of

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<sup>20</sup> According to McChesney, “the early Internet was not only noncommercial, it was anticommercial. Computers were regarded by many of the 1960s and 70s generation as harbingers of egalitarianism and cooperation, not competition and profits” (2013:111).

<sup>21</sup> Introduced by twentieth-century economist John Maynard Keynes, primarily in his book *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, Keynesianism involves economic policies which encourage government intervention and public investment in the economy (Dillard 1948:2). This approach was widely adopted as an

market factors from the public to the private sector. In short, promoting economic liberalization and free trade, neoliberalism advances that governments should protect private property, decrease deficit spending, restructure tax law to broaden the tax base, limit trade protectionism, eliminate fixed exchange rates (which otherwise ensure the stability of a currency by securing it against another fixed currency, or marker such as gold), support deregulation of trade, limit grants, and privatize state-run businesses (Harvey 2005; Braedley and Luxton 2010). According to Kotz, neoliberalism is hence “both a body of economic theory and a policy stance” (2002:1), orientated around the idea

that a largely unregulated capitalist system not only embodies the ideal of free individual choice but also achieves optimum economic performance with respect to efficiency, economic growth, technical progress, and distributional justice. The state is assigned a very limited economic role: defining property rights, enforcing contracts, and regulating the money supply. State intervention to correct market failures is viewed with suspicion, on the ground that such intervention is likely to create more problems than it solves. (Kotz 2002:1)

Steger and Roy point out that the term neoliberalism was first introduced in post-World War One Germany “by a small circle of economists and legal scholars affiliated with the ‘Freiburg School,’ to refer to their moderate programme of reviving classical neoliberalism” (2010:ix). Following this introduction, neoliberalism remained a relatively academic concept for a long time, only being applied in isolated cases, such as the 1970s adoption of the term *neoliberalismo* by a group of Latin American economists, to explain their pro-market economic model (Steger and Roy 2010:x). A good example of the implementation of such *neoliberalismo* was Augusto Pinochet’s economic approach following his 1973 military coup in Chile. Nineteen days after being appointed commander-in-chief of the Chilean Army, Pinochet lead a CIA-supported military coup that ousted the democratically elected president Salvador Allende and his socialist government. Following the bombing of the presidential palace, “martial law” was declared and parliament and the media were closed. After the arrest and deportation of “thousands of Allende supporters, many of whom were subsequently executed by the military” (Solimano 2012:23), Pinochet immediately began to implement an aggressive policy of neoliberalism in the country. Inspired by the theories of the Chicago school economist Milton Friedman, Chile’s military-enforced neoliberalism was introduced

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economic model after World War II, and continued to gain popularity during the global economic expansion experienced between 1945 and 1973. Advocating theories related to government monetary and fiscal policy that aimed to increase employment and stimulate business activity, Keynesianism rejected previous *laissez faire* economic policy and insisted instead that, at times, government intervention was imperative.



by a group of economists known as the Chicago Boys, who developed a “500-page economic blueprint for the country’s economy...which called for extensive and immediate deregulation and privatization measures as well as deep cuts to social spending, the reduction of tariffs, and the lifting of price controls” (Steger and Roy 2010).<sup>22</sup> According to Winn, this “highly ideological version [of neoliberalism] made it a vehicle for aggressive attack on Chile’s workers,” in terms of both an “economic assault on the gains of wages, benefits, and working conditions that workers had won since the 1930s,” and “violent repression of labor unions and worker activists” (2004:3).

Yet, notwithstanding this example of a militaristic authoritarian form of neoliberalism, by the early 1980s Chile faced its “worst economic crisis since the Great Depression” (Winn 2004:3), and its policy of aggressive, repressive neoliberalism was soon replaced by a form of neoliberalism more closely connected to that of Britain’s Prime Minister Margret Thatcher. In this regard, the rise of neoliberalism, as it is known today, is most notably associated with the efforts of Margaret Thatcher and US president Ronald Reagan. Margret Thatcher, who was elected as prime minister of Britain in 1979, initiated her office with a promise to reduce trade union power and eliminate the ‘stagflation’ that had been prominent in the country for the previous ten years (Harvey 2005:1).<sup>23</sup> Following the election of Ronald Regan into the presidency of the US in 1980, and the concomitant acceptance of Paul Volker’s new monetary policy,<sup>24</sup> together with additional policies to “curb the power of labour, deregulate industry, agriculture, and resource extraction, and to liberate the powers of finance both internally and on the world stage,” neoliberalism began to emerge as a significant politico-economic ideology on both sides of the Atlantic (Harvey 2005:1). And such strong political support, together with the continuation of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT),<sup>25</sup> and

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<sup>22</sup> The Chicago Boys was the name given to the group of economists who had all pursued postgraduate studies at the University of Chicago’s Department of Economics, and who were appointed by Pinochet to oversee the main economic positions in his post-coup neoliberal government.

<sup>23</sup> Stagflation is a term used in economics to explain the situation that develops when the inflation rate is high, the economic growth rate is low, and the unemployment rate is high (Johnston 2011:76).

<sup>24</sup> Paul Volker was selected as chairman of the Board of Governors for the Federal Reserve System in August 1979. He is widely credited with bringing an end to the stagflation crisis of the 1970s, by raising interest rates from 11.2% to 20% between 1979 and 1981 (Johnston 2011:78).

<sup>25</sup> The General Agreement on Trades and Tariffs (GATT) was an agreement on international trade which aimed to ensure a “substantial reduction of tariffs and other trade barriers and the elimination of preferences, on a reciprocal and mutually advantageous basis” (Dupey and Vignes 1991:510). The GATT was replaced by the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, which continues to pursue an analogous international agenda (Cherunilam 2006:587).

the 1980s debt crisis,<sup>26</sup> created a favorable climate for the introduction of neoliberalism around the world.

McChesney explains the concept and outcomes of contemporary neoliberalism particularly well, when he describes it as

the defining political economic paradigm of our time – it refers to the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life in order to maximise their personal profit...Neoliberalism has for the past two decades been the dominant global political economic trend adopted by political parties of the centre, much of the traditional left and the right. These parties and the policies they enact represent the immediate interests of extremely wealthy investors and less than 1000 large corporations. (1999:8)

In relation to this, Hands argues that the radical mobility of capital ushered in by neoliberalism has resulted in vast amounts of power being placed in the hands of a select group of unelected financial institutions and global corporations, which has led to the “disempowerment of local communities,” privatization on a global scale, commodification of previously common resources, and the “undermining of democratic governance” (2011:142). Similarly, Callinicos points out that it was through the latter in particular that “the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank [achieved] the leverage they needed to force Third World governments to accept neo-liberal programmes of ‘structural adjustment’” (2003:2).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Following the stagflation of the 1970s, “high inflation meant that real interest rates...were quite low, making borrowing appear to be cost free for many countries...Official debt – in other words, loans from governments and multilateral institutions – affected all parts of the developing world.” As such, “lenders at the time made the assumption that countries would not default and were aggressive in offering them loans.” Yet, “changes in the global economy made the loans increasingly difficult for poor countries to repay. In 1979, OPEC nations doubled the price of oil, and in response in 1981 the US Federal Reserve raised US interest rates above 20 percent to fight inflation.” As a result, “international interest rates rose,” thus “sparking a worldwide recession” (Clapp and Dauvergne 2005:194).

<sup>27</sup> Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the US and other powerful northern countries were involved in implementing a series of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) in countries of the global South. According to Oringer and Welch, “formulated as loan conditions by Northern governments and the International Financial Institutions (IFIs), SAPs mandate[d] macroeconomic policy changes that obligate[d] recipient nations to liberalize their trade and investment policies” (1998). Notwithstanding the economic growth benefits promised by the pundits of the SAPs, the adoption of neoliberal policies often resulted in Third World countries reducing their spending on education, healthcare, and development in favor of loan repayment, which ultimately perpetuated poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation within their borders (Reed and Sheng 1997,

The deleterious consequences of these SAPs notwithstanding, they were met with less and less critical resistance. And part of the reason for this was that the progressive collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union and Central and Eastern European countries, which had up until then presented an ideological challenge to neoliberalism, allowed for the further steady spread of neoliberalism around the globe. Indeed, the 1990s saw a swift economic and political transition from Communism to market economy and democracy even in Eastern Europe (Aligica and Evans 2009:1). In terms of this, mass privatization programs backed by western governments and financial institutions acted to solidify the new politico-economic conditions, and rapidly ushered Eastern Europe into the realm of neoliberalism. However, by the middle of the 1990s, “rising unemployment, inflation, deteriorating living standards, the collapse of social services, and soaring crime” resulted in growing frustrations with such global capitalist transformation (Amsden et al. 1994:vii). Although Kenety argues that the aim of the privatization process was to “guarantee a swift – and irreversible – transition to capitalism for the countries formerly behind the Iron Curtain,” instead of “ushering in a new era of prosperity, the mass privatization programs helped bankrupt Russia and other former Soviet bloc countries” (2012). According to Clark, “the level of economic output crashed throughout the region” and “the average fall in GDP was nearly 30% in the early 1990s...as Eastern Europe suffered a slump far worse than the Great Depression experienced by the US and the UK 60 years earlier” (2012). Yet, despite the failures of neoliberalism in many of the previously Communist Eastern European countries, the transformation of former state run socialist economies into neoliberal market economies became a priority. And within the increasingly complex market-orientated milieu which ensued, the development of new

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Westra and Werhane 1998:38). Instances of this can be seen throughout the developing world, Brazil, Peru, Ghana, and Malawi, to name but a few. The World Bank funded 1980 Polonoroeste highway development project in Brazil is a case in point, which resulted in the destruction of miles of Amazonian rainforest and the harassment and decimation of many indigenous communities (Goldman 2005:95). And while the economic crisis stemming from analogous early structural adjustment programs of the 1980s resulted in severe malnutrition and hunger in Peru (Sweetman 2002:75), Ghana’s adoption of SAPs between 1983 and 1986 were coterminous with the severe deforestation of the country. Indeed, Clapp and Dauvergne assert that the commercial logging attributed to the adoption of SAPs has “contributed to the shrinking of the country’s forest area to one-quarter of its original size” (2008:206). Furthermore, the lack of subsidized fertilizer in Malawi between 1984 and 1987 had negative impacts on smallholder farmers, and ultimately contributed to a growing nutritional deficit, and a subsequent susceptibility to HIV related seroconversion. In addition to this, increased school fees – as a result of reduced government spending – meant that many children in Malawi were no longer able to receive an education (Lewis et al. 2001:46).

information and communication technologies became utterly imperative, not only in Eastern Europe, but also in the neoliberalized countries of the global South, discussed earlier.

To be sure, although the economic implications of neoliberalism emerge as significant, it is important to note that neoliberalism is not simply an economic doctrine (Foucault 1978; Mirowski 2009). As Harvey points out in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, “neoliberalism...has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, line in, and understand the world” (2005:3). According to Read, neoliberalism “is an ideology that refers not only to the political realm, to an ideal of the state, but to the entirety of human existence.” That is, he insists that neoliberalism “claims to present not an ideal, but a reality;” in particular, a concept of “human nature” (Read 2009:2). This concept of human nature can be related to the work of Michel Foucault and his idea that “neoliberalism is not just a manner of governing states or economics, but is intimately tied to the government of the individual, to a particular manner of living” (Read 2009:3). Devoting a year of lectures at the *Collège de France* to the idea of neoliberalism, Foucault in 1978 drew attention to the notion of “governmentality;” a mentality through which people are governed and govern themselves (2008:185-214). According to Read,

the operative terms of this governmentality are no longer rights and laws but interest, investment and competition. Whereas rights exist to be exchanged, and are in some sense constituted through the original exchange of the social contract, interest is irreducible and inalienable, it cannot be exchanged. The state channels flows of interest and desire by making desirable activities inexpensive and undesirable activities costly, counting on the fact that subjects calculate their interests. As a form of governmentality, neoliberalism would seem paradoxically to govern without governing; that is, in order to function its subjects must have a great deal of freedom to act – to choose between competing strategies.<sup>28</sup> (2009:6-7)

As such, while neoliberalism is largely considered a politico-economic system, it can also be viewed in terms of its ability to infiltrate every aspect of human life, organizing modern knowledge, and influencing contemporary subjectivity.

In this regard, in the concluding chapter of *The Road From Mont Pèlerin* (2009), Mirowski insists that two things need to be remembered about neoliberalism. The first is that

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<sup>28</sup> Strinati elaborates on this idea when he discusses freedom within capitalistic societies. He asserts that people within capitalist society who think they are free, are not actively free in terms of being an autonomous, independent and consciously thinking human being. Rather, he argues, “their freedom is restricted to the freedom to choose between different consumer goods and different brands of the same goods” (2004:54).

“neoliberalism masquerades as a radically populist philosophy, which begins with a set of philosophical theses about *knowledge* and its relationship to society” (2009:425). Drawing on Friedrich Hayek’s article *The Use of Knowledge in Society* (1945) – in which he denies the existence of objective knowledge and supports an idea of the market as a “prosthesis for [the] discovery of knowledge” – Mirowski notes the movement of neoliberalism toward the demeaning of “hard-won knowledge,” and the concomitant praise of market-like aggregations, or the “wisdom of crowds” (2009:425). Secondly, he argues that while such market-like aggregation of knowledge is praised, in those spaces where such “spontaneous participation is permitted, knowledge in fact degrades rather than improves” (2009:426). But this, he argues, is the point. This is because “the absolute validity of knowledge is not the true motive or objective” of neoliberalism, which is concerned instead with the “subordination of the overall process to corporate strategic imperatives that provide the real justification” for neoliberalism and its “economic foundation” (2009:426).

In relation to the emergence of the internet as an information sharing technology, Mirowski also highlights parallels between the market as an “information processor” and the internet and social media as highly complex inter-engagements of ideas. Indeed, drawing attention to Hayek’s argument concerning the use of knowledge in society (1945), Mirowski notes similarities between the respective roles of the market and the internet as a societal “information processor.” Based on this comparison, some have argued that the social significance of the internet has less to do with its promotion of individualism and consumerism, and more to do with its ability to orchestrate knowledge and communication in such a manner that the power of the dominant neoliberal system is ensured.

In this regard, Schiller points out, in his *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System* that the rise of neoliberalism would be largely unthinkable without the concomitant boom in the development of information sharing technologies, which lent immense impetus to a process of globalization predicated on common consumer interest (2000:11). That is, corporations began to spend large amounts of money on the development of information technologies that allowed for information sharing between corporations and individuals, and “between 1970 and 1996...the percentage of all US corporate capital investment allocated to information technology climbed steeply, from 7 percent to around 45 percent” (2000:16). In relation to this, Schiller examines the global political economy of cyberspace, and the shift from public to private integration of networks under neoliberalism. And he emphasizes his skepticism about the democratic potential of cyberspace, because of his belief that “cyberspace itself is being rapidly colonized by the familiar workings of the market system.” Furthermore, his examination of how the telecommunications system has

been imbued with a new commercial purpose as a result of its exposure to neoliberal and market related policies, highlights the concomitant empowerment of transnational corporations, the subsequent intensification of social inequalities, and the growing ability of cyberspace to cultivate consumerism on a transnational scale (2000:xiv). In effect, Schiller, among others,<sup>29</sup> argues that the new export orientation and transnational production strategies, which were unleashed by the end of the Cold War, required that the ideology of neoliberalism be spread across the world. Consequently, investment by US corporations in the development of information and communication technologies had a strong ideological component, because while neoliberalism funded the development of new media, at the same time the global reach of new media contributed to the extension of the belief in the viability of neoliberalism. Thus, although the corporate takeover of the internet wrested power from the hands of the US government and military, it nevertheless continued along their same ideological trajectory, insofar as it presented a ubiquitous, decentralized challenge to all non-capitalist ideas. In this regard, such aggressive corporate interest not only defended the American Dream better than the US government and military ever could. In addition, it also extended the ideological frontier of America to the rest of the world, by holding out the promise of consumer bliss to all who are digitally connected. But whether or not this version of the American Dream involves the correlative extension of democracy, through the engendering of a critically and socially engaged subjectivity, is an issue of significant debate.

## 1.5 Networked cyber-society: conflicting perspectives

For Hassan and Thomas, the idea that people are “living through a phase of technological, economic and cultural change is now undeniable,” and they insist that “deep-level computability transforms how we represent life through the ubiquity of mutable digital imagery.” And through doing so, it plays a role in transforming “life through the industries,

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<sup>29</sup> In *Democracy's Dilemma: Environment, Social Equity and the Global Economy*, Paehlke supports Schiller's concerns over digital capitalism when he uses the similar term *electronic capitalism* to identify “the emergent system of political economy characterised by increasing global economic and financial integration[,] and increasingly dominated politically, economically, and culturally by the use of electronic media and computers” (2003:27). Analogously, Dawson and Foster, in their article “Virtual Capitalism: The Political Economy of the Information Highway” (1996), refer to this role of new information technology in the concentration and centralization of capital as *virtual capitalism*, while Fitzpatrick refers to it as *informatics capitalism* in his article “Critical Theory, Information Society and Surveillance Technologies” (2002). In turn, Haug (2003) advances the concept of *high-tech capitalism* when issues surrounding the role of computers and ICT's in the creation of a globalized capitalist economy are discussed.

cultures, and institutions that produce and sustain our sense of being in the world” (Hassan and Thomas 2006:2). However, because these changes have been significantly informed by and orientated around the economic ideals of neoliberalism, in many cases, the use of such technology has been subject to correlative capitalist axiological inflection. Consequently, while, on the one hand, some argue that there now exist hitherto unimaginable virtual possibilities for democratic interactivity and global connectedness, on the other hand, others feel that a growing sense of extreme individualism, commoditization, self-indulgence, and narcissistic alienation, has been engendered through the use of such cyber-communication channels. In this regard, theorists such as Howard Rheingold, Sherry Turkle, Mark Poster, Henry Jenkins, Manuel Castells, Lauren Buffardi, Keith Campbell and Jean Twenge, among others, have contributed significantly to the debate concerning the internet and new media, and the impact it has had on contemporary identity, cultural, communal, and societal formation. In order to highlight the resonances and dissonances between these various theorists’ works and ideas, a weighing up of their positive and negative appraisals of the socio-cultural impact of new media technologies is required, and in what follows, such a schematization will be presented. In short, this will involve a discussion of the positive appraisals of Rheingold, Turkle, Poster, and Jenkins, followed by a consideration of the more cautious and ambivalent perspectives of Castells, before the negative appraisals of new media technologies found in the arguments of Buffardi, Campbell, Twenge, and in Turkle’s most recent work, are engaged with.

### **1.5.1. New media optimism**

To begin with, soon after the widespread integration of the internet and new media technologies into the daily lives of individuals and communities around the world, interest in the social psychology of new media use began to emerge. Often seen as a forerunner of new forms of identity, cultural, communal, and societal formations, new media technologies and the computer-mediated-communications (CMC) that they propagate became the object of various investigations. Some of these were focused on the ‘visionary utopian’ idea (Buckingham 2000:46), in terms of which people were construed as immersed within a digital environment that promised a more interactive, communicative, and democratic world than ever before (Rheingold 1993; Turkle 1995; Schuler 1996). For such theorists, new media was “playful, fun, interactive, socially progressive, and very possibly a better world than that of your ‘real’ or ‘offline’ social experience” (Flew 2008:50). Indeed, in one of the most well-known explorations of new media (CMC) based online cultures, Howard Rheingold’s *The*

*Virtual Community*, online communities are advanced as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on...public discussions [on the internet] long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (1994:5). That is, for Rheingold, virtual communities effectively offer possibilities for renewed forms of community-building and participation in public life, and he asserts, moreover, that these possibilities continue to grow due to the three inter-influential elements of new media technologies or CMCs. The first element is related to the creation of social networks and connections. According to Rheingold “as individual human beings, we have perceptions, thoughts, and personalities...that are affected by the ways we use the medium and the ways it uses us.” The effects of these influences on personality are evident, he argues, in the divergent connections and social networks that are emerging online. The second level of change, Rheingold asserts, is related to “person-to-person interactions where relationships, friendships, and communities happen.” The sharing of knowledge, information and experience through ‘online community’ interaction is at the heart of this level of possibility. Finally, the third level which creates the possibility for new media induced societal change is related to the new potential for political participation. In terms of this, Rheingold argues that “the political significance of CMC lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy’s monopoly on powerful communications media, and...thus revitalize citizen-based democracy” (1993:xxix). On the basis of his significant investigations into various virtual communities, Rheingold ultimately maintains that “the technology that makes virtual communities possible has the potential to bring enormous leverage to ordinary citizens at relatively little cost.” According to him, these include “intellectual leverage, social leverage, commercial leverage, and most importantly political leverage.” And because of these possibilities, Rheingold believes that the growth of new media technologies will have a profound influence on public life and culture. Indeed, he even insists that “because of its potential influence on so many peoples’ beliefs and perceptions, the future of the Net...[will be] connected to the future of community, democracy, education, science, and intellectual life” (1993:xxvii, xxix, xix).

Following on from and building upon Rheingold’s ideas of identity and community formations, Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, similarly described virtual communities as sites of play and performance, which unfolded via the creation of online identities. Focusing on the transition from modernity to post-modernity,<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> According to Aylesworth, postmodernism “can be described as a set of critical, strategic and rhetorical practices employing concepts such as difference, repetition, the trace, the simulacrum, and hyperreality to destabilize other concepts such as presence, identity, historical progress, epistemic certainty, and the univocity of



and relying significantly on psychoanalysis,<sup>31</sup> Turkle examined how members of virtual communities increasingly begin to see “real life” as merely one “window” through which a variety of personalities can be created and communicated (1995:13). Seen as a potentially liberating space, CMCs and ICTs offer a virtual platform, she argued, through which “the obese can become slender, the beautiful plain, [and] the ‘nerdy’ sophisticated” (Turkle 1995:12). In this regard, Turkle offered supporting insights into the positive impact of networked technologies on identity construction, by examining the interactions of participants in virtual communities – most notably those in MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) and MOOs (Multi-User Object-Orientated Domains)<sup>32</sup> – along with the differences between online personas and ‘real’ life social interactions. On the basis of these examinations, Turkle maintained that people were happy to adopt ‘multiple’ identities in multiple contexts, because, plurality, multiplicity and choice are at the center of identity formation. That is, people have always had many identities and have smoothly transitioned from one identity to the next, as required by the changing context within which they find themselves, and cyber-technologies and the interactions they facilitate simply emphasize this dynamic. Furthermore, Turkle suggested that the multiplicity and plurality of the relevant cyber-identities may have therapeutic value, in that internet users are able to express elements of their personalities and identities online that they feel obliged to hide in the ‘real’ world (Turkle 1995:263-264). In many respects, Robins corroborates Turkle’s idea when he argues similarly that many people see new media as a means of escaping from a dull everyday reality into a new, exciting, virtual reality (1995:39). This participation in, and idealization of, the new simulated online realities made possible by new media technologies, he suggests, are positive and “powerful expressions of fantasy and desire...articulated through the discourse of science and rationality” (Robins 1996:39). Siapera also supports this perspective when she says that

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meaning” (2005). Although first mentioned in Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard, among others, have all been associated with postmodern thought, in terms of which subjectivity is understood in non-essentialist terms and as something highly malleable.

<sup>31</sup> Turkle’s interest in psychoanalysis was first reflected in her book *Psychoanalytic Politics* (1978, 1992), in which she “recognized a new decentering and an emerging conception of what it is to be human among computers” (Zheng 2010:2). See: Turkle, S. 1992. *Psychoanalytic Politics: Jacques Lacan and Freud’s French Revolution*. London: Free Association Books.

<sup>32</sup> A MOO is a coexistent text-based virtual environment that can be accessed by large numbers of people from a variety of locations at the same time (Khosrowpour 2007:459). According to Roberts and his colleagues (2006), MOOs are “a type of multi-user dimension based on object-orientated programming, enabling users to create and manipulate objects.”

the anonymity and disembodiment of online subjects lead to identities liberated from past concerns – online no one knows who you are, so...you can be anyone you want. At the same time there is no ‘real’ you, your identity cannot be reduced to one of your ‘avatars’ or online personas. (2012:175)

This idea of multiple identities can perhaps best be seen in the virtual social world of Second Life, in which people create an ‘avatar’ and live a second online life. For Turkle, this opportunity to experience a variety of identities (albeit only in a virtual space), allows individuals to live a more *complete* life, and accordingly gives them a greater sense of freedom (1995:263-264).<sup>33</sup>

In the same year that Turkle published *Life on the Screen*, Mark Poster in his book *The Second Media Age* argued that new media were reconstructing formations of the self and subjectivity. In this work he examines the shift from what he calls the first media age – namely the age of one-to-many communications, whereby a small number of producers disseminated information to numerous consumers – to the second media age, defined in terms of many-to-many communication and interactivity. Within the latter context, the opportunities offered by the internet for advanced communication has increased the power of media consumers and the public to influence contemporary culture in a more autonomous fashion. And accordingly, identity in the second media age is formed in reaction to various online interactions, and not simply in relation to uniform, media-generated conceptions. With regard to what he calls ‘thicker’ and ‘richer’ online interactivity, Poster states that

if you look at it on the screen where the conversation is, let’s say in the chat-mode in real time, the individuals are absorbed in their conversation and the interactivity is very different but very intense. Especially in the MOO form, things go very quickly. You are in that conversation and it takes an incredible amount of attention to maintain the flow of the conversation. So one could argue that it is more thick, a richer interaction than, say, an interaction of a family at a dinner table, where people are distracted and maybe the television set is on and people are not really paying attention or listening to one another. (Poster 1995:149)

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<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note that already in 1968, Licklider and Taylor predicted a similar impact of new media technologies and the internet, when they asserted that “life will be happier for the on-line individual because the people with who[m] one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity...[C]ommunication will be more effective and productive, and therefore more enjoyable” (1968:31).

Moreover, possibly drawing on Turkle's ideas of cyber role-play and internet communities, Poster goes on to suggest that the internet "needs to be thought of less as a communication tool and more as a social space in which roles are played, identities are formed and re-formed, and meaning is reconfigured" (1997:205). For him, "individuals are constructed as subjects or identities (as cultural selves) in linguistic practices[,]...and [i]n repeated enunciations individuals become interpellated and recognised as coherent selves who function in a social world" (1995:9). Consequently "twentieth century electronic media are supporting...[a] profound transformation of cultural identity" because "'multimedia' reconfigure words, sounds and images so as to cultivate new configurations of individuality" (1995:80). According to Murry, through the above, Poster in fact develops a "critique of the subject and its socio-cultural contexts through a sustained reflection on nationhood and identity in the age of global technology" (2004). In relation to this, Poster insists that human identities are now being reconstructed through the transmission of information via global communication technologies. And he emphasizes the importance of new online relationships and community building,<sup>34</sup> highlighting the integral role the new relational dynamics make possible in identity and subjectivity construction. Furthermore, Poster highlights the role of the internet in the democratization of communication, when he notes that "the magic of the internet is that it is a technology which puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of its participants" (2001:184). In effect, for Poster, "networked machines shift the scene in which the individual becomes and continues to practice selfhood" (1995:9), and this view remains instrumental to his theory of how the internet is playing a crucial role in the growth and development of contemporary culture and identity.

Expanding on Poster's argument that new media technologies in the second media age have created a shift in power relations between the media producer and consumer, Henry Jenkins examines this transformation in relation to the use of new media technologies among the Web 2.0 generation. In his book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Jenkins links the participation offered by new media technologies to the newfound power that people have to limit the often exploitative actions of media corporations. That is, for Jenkins, 'convergence culture' refers to the bringing together of old and new media into

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<sup>34</sup> In relation to the role of the internet in community building, Schuler also highlights the importance of the shift from traditional communities to new networked communities when he suggests that "the old concept of community is obsolete in many ways and needs to be updated to meet today's challenges." And he underscores the need for this by pointing to the fact that "the old or traditional community was often exclusive, inflexible, isolated, unchanging, monolithic, and homogeneous." In contrast, "a *new community* – one that is fundamentally devoted to democratic problem-solving – needs to be refashioned from the remnants of the old" (1996:9).

one single creation – the merging of all media into one format. And he moreover maintains that media convergence is an “ongoing process, occurring at various intersections of media technologies, industries, content and audiences” (2006a:154). Accordingly, he insists that “we are living in an age when changes in communications, storytelling, and information technologies are reshaping almost every aspect of contemporary life – including how we create, consume, learn, and interact with each other” (2006b). In particular, he sees such convergence culture and the connectivity that it brings as both a top down (corporate driven) and a bottom up (consumer driven) process, insofar as,

right now, convergence culture is getting defined top-down by decisions being made in corporate boardrooms and bottom-up by decisions made in teenagers’ bedrooms. It is [thus being] shaped by the desires of media conglomerates to expand their empires across multiple platforms and by the desires of consumers to have the media they want where they want it, when they want it, and in the format they want. (2006b)

Highlighting the convergence culture and participatory culture connected to Web 2.0, Jenkins explains that “consumers are learning how to use...different media technologies...and are fighting for the right to participate more fully in their culture” (2006a:18). To be sure, Jenkins admits that convergence culture is symptomatic of neoliberalism, yet he considers Web 2.0 as a place for both pleasure and exploitation, and a space of both participation and commoditization, “where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (2006a:2). Consequently, because it allows both consumers and corporations to create content, convergence [culture] allows for a blurring of the lines between corporate hegemony and powerless consumers. Drawing on Levy’s and de Kerckhove’s ideas of ‘collective intelligence,’<sup>35</sup> Jenkins’s concept of convergence culture thus focuses on the shift in the public’s relationship to media and the correlative blurring of boundaries between economic, technological, social, and cultural aspects of cyber-society. Emphasizing primarily the positive aspects of Web 2.0, Jenkins highlights how the individual choice, creativity, and

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<sup>35</sup> Collective intelligence is a term that was largely used by de Kerckhove (1998) and Levy (1999), and refers to a “ubiquitous intelligence which is continually being enhanced and coordinated in real time, an intelligence which mobilizes cognitive competencies” (Levy 1999:31). In relation to this, Flew describes collective intelligence as “the capacity of networked ICTs to exponentially enhance the collective pool of social knowledge by simultaneously expanding the extent of human interactions enabled by communications networks that can generate new knowledge, and greatly enhance[ing] capacity to codify, store and retrieve such knowledge through collective access to networked databases” (2008:21).

participation encouraged by new media technologies can improve society. Moreover, through examining different elements of popular culture, he illustrates how “the convergence of television, Internet and mobile technologies and affective economic strategies garnered popular support, loyalty from viewers and subjective identification through convergence technologies of participation” (cited in Shell 2009). As such, although he concentrates on user participation in consumerism, he also highlights the importance of such participation in the realization of individuality and identity construction, maintaining that identity can only be attained and understood through individual participation in contemporary consumer culture. Indeed, he even suggests that “social connectivity, creativity and learning [can only] take place through these various media-related experiences” (Jenkins 2006, cited in Wright 2006). Arguably, he is supported in this perspective by DasGupta, and by Brown and Adler, among others. That is, DasGupta asserts that the autonomy, interaction, and socialization promoted by Web 2.0, and the “user-controlled, peer-to-peer knowledge creation and network based enquiry” that is connected to it, result in the capitalization of “personalisation, participation and productivity.” And this ultimately leads to a learning experience that is “socially contextualized, engaging, and community based” (2006:430). Similarly, Brown and Adler argue that

the latest evolution of the internet, the so-called Web 2.0, has blurred the line between producers and consumers of content and has shifted attention from access to information towards access to other people. New kinds of online resources – such as social networking sites, blogs, wikis, and virtual communities – have allowed people with common interest to meet, share ideas, and collaborate in innovative ways. Indeed, the Web 2.0 is creating a new kind of participatory medium that is ideal for supporting multiple modes of learning. (2008:18)

To be sure, while the Web 1.0 technologies experienced by Rheingold, Turkle, and Poster were significantly different from the Web 2.0 capabilities examined by Jenkins, similarities between their optimism surrounding the potential of this newly developed, and continuously developing, medium acts to situate them within the same group of new media proponents.

### **1.5.2 New media ambivalence**

In contrast to the above positive accounts of new media inspired change, participation, freedom, interactivity, and cultural progression, a growing number of theorists have also adopted a more circumspect approach to such technology, and have expressed more ambivalence over its potential to transform contemporary society for the better. That is,

although new media technologies have become synonymous with an increase in communication possibilities, interactivity, participation, and social connection, concerns over new media individualization, commoditization, self-absorption, and alienation, continue to emerge. In this regard, in his three volume work *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (*The Rise of the Network Society*, *The Power of Identity*, and *End of Millennium*), Manuel Castells adopts a more moderate and cautious approach to the rise of digital networks and the growing influence of new media technologies in contemporary society.

In the first book of the trilogy, namely *The Rise of the Network Society*, Castells concedes that we live in a global network society that is shaped by new media and Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). And he shows how dominant functions and processes are increasingly organized around networks. For him, “networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power and culture” (1996:469). Furthermore, he examines the global changes that have occurred in reaction to the 1970s information technology revolution, which he asserts, resulted in the restructuring of society into a digital network. In this regard, he argues that every feature of the self, identity, relationships, and experience is now related to and informed by the network society (Flew 2008:61). However, for him, the influence of ICTs and the network society is neither specifically utopian nor explicitly dystopian, but can be both positive in relation to certain elements of contemporary culture, and negative in relation to others. That is, as highlighted by Siaper, Castells’s society of the network is no longer based on the “organic solidarity of modernity...in which people depend on each other on the basis of their functional differentiation.” Instead, the ties between people are “tenuous and temporary, often based on common views and beliefs, uniting people across borders, but equally fragmenting them within given places” (2012:15). This means that even though people can perhaps experience a greater feeling of connection online – through their expression of common goals and beliefs – the connections and relationships that are built and maintained in this way may be detrimental to real life connections, made between people in the same ‘real-world’ communities. On the one hand, the advent of the internet has led to the development of a new digital communication system, which “is both integrating globally the production and distribution of words, sounds and images of our culture, and customising them to the tastes of the identities and moods of...individuals” (Castells 2000:2). And these identities have become an intrinsic part of this system, because “in a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes the fundamental source of social meaning” (2000:3). Yet, on the other hand, Castells insists that

this meaning is no longer organized around what people *do* and the contributions that they make to society, but rather around who they *believe* themselves to be or pretend to be (2000:3). This idea can be linked to Turkle's notion that we "come to see ourselves differently as we catch sight of our image in the mirror of the machine" (1995:9), which is multi-faceted and which enables people to present a variety of identities online. However, gone is the great optimism which characterized Turkle's earlier assertions, and in its place one encounters far more ambivalence on the part of Castells concerning the socio-cultural effects of such interaction. Similarly, in relation to the works of Poster, the growth of individualism is another significant area of focus in Castells's examination of the network society. The term 'networked individualism' is an important concept in this regard, and it is used by Castells to describe a balance between individualism and interconnectedness. That is, he argues that "networked individualism is the synthesis between the affirmation of an individual-centred culture, and the needs and desire for sharing and co-experiencing" (2004:223). Again, on the one hand, this idea of networked individualism can be seen as a positive development in light of the augmented possibilities for individual choice, the increased abilities to manage sociality, and the emancipation from physical space, it entails. Yet, on the other hand, while he does not explicitly deny such possibilities, Castells also points out that the networks in question are also significantly influenced by structures of power that can easily marginalize certain individuals, and thereby enhance the inequalities experienced in contemporary culture. This idea can be seen in Castells's assertion that "networks converge towards a meta-network of capital that integrates capitalist interest at the global level and across sectors and realms of activity" (1996:506). Here he insists that such convergence around 'meta-networks' of capital has resulted in the atomization of social relationships, whereby a significant shift can be seen away from community-based societies, focused on shared values and mutual interest, toward 'me-focused' networks, where the maximization of personal gain becomes the ultimate goal. In short, where before, "communities were based on sharing of values and social organization," the new "networks are built by the choices and strategies of social actors" (2001:127). In this regard, notwithstanding its potentially positive impact on society, for Castells, networked individualism – "a new pattern of sociability based on individualism" – which focuses on people's use rather than worth, can also easily destabilize real world collective organizing or group togetherness (2001:130).

In the second volume of *The Information Age*, namely *The Power of Identity*, Castells develops upon the above mentioned caveat through a complex explanation of how groups and individuals are interconnected via various networked forms of communication. And he highlights the contradictions that emerge between the sense of self and the imperative to

search for meaning within society. In relation to this, Castells advances that the emergence of the 1970s technological paradigm led to the materialization of a new way of living, producing, and communicating. And in this regard, he asserts that “the rise of the network society and the growing power of identity are the intertwined social processes that jointly define globalization, geopolitics, and social transformation” (2010:xvii).

Related to the above, in the final volume of the *Information Age* trilogy, *End of Millennium*, Castells provides a descriptive analysis of the influence that the rise of the network society, information economy, and global capitalism have had on specific countries and people around the world. In short, following on from the first two volumes, which focused, respectively, on the “processes of structural change” – namely the rise of the network society and economy, and the significance of individual, community, and social identity within this paradigm – and on the “transformation of...macropolitical and macrosocial contexts that shape and condition social action and human experience around the world,” *End of Millennium* provides specific examples of this transformation (1998:2). Castells maintains that the third volume “explores some of these macro transformations, while attempting to explain them as a result of the interaction between processes characterising the Information Age” namely “informationalization, globalization, networking, identity-building, [and] the crisis of patriarchy, and of the nation-state” (1998:2). Castells opens with a discussion of the unexpectedly swift collapse of Soviet Communism, and he argues that the Soviet Union and statism’s inability, on the one hand, to adapt to the emerging Information Age, and on the other hand, to transition to the network society, was at the root of its ultimate collapse. This failure of Soviet Communism, together with the conversion of Chinese Communism into authoritarian capitalism, resulted in the intensification of both informationalism and the global spread of capitalism. In terms of this, Castells goes on to examine the trends of “uncontrolled...global capitalist networks,” highlighting the growing prevalence of social exclusion and increasing divides between information ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots.’ Referring to the “black holes of information capitalism” (1998:167), he addresses the connection between the rise of informationalism and the “rise of inequality and social exclusion throughout the world” (1998:69). And he focuses on the impact of capitalist restructuring, together with the technological and organizational conditions espoused by the evolution of the Information Age, providing numerous examples of how millions of people around the world are being excluded from the benefits of informationalism and the network society. The *End of Millennium* thus provides a detailed description of the impacts of networked individualism and global capitalism on society at large, and how developing and developed nations are attempting to adapt to the accompanying technological and organizational changes.



### 1.5.3. New media skepticism

Yet Castells's above circumspect ambivalence – for all its moderation – can still be distinguished from the perspectives of those for whom new media are more trouble than it is worth. In particular, the impact of new media technologies on the growth of a contemporary focus on the self has come under significant scrutiny (Vaidhyanathan 2006; Baldwin and Stroman 2007; Orlet 2007; Buffardi and Campbell 2008). That is, changes in both capitalism and identity formation have been linked to a growth in information networks and an increasingly computer mediated, commoditized and narcissistic society. Indeed, evaluated in relation to 'celebrity and consumer culture,' and 'new media,' narcissism has been identified as "the fastest developing social disease of the peoples of the West," with examples of vanity, self-aggrandizement, and self-promotion apparent in almost all aspects of cultural interaction (McLuhan and Powers 1992:100). "Seen to be at the root of everything from the ill-fated romance with violent revolution, to the enthralled mass consumption of state-of-the-art products," and infatuation with "the 'lifestyles of the rich and the famous'" (Tyler 2007:343), the most recent manifestation of the growth of narcissism has been attributed to society's use of, and increasing reliance upon, new media technologies (Baldwin and Stroman 2007; Orlet 2007; Buffardi and Campbell 2008). In particular, social media has been criticized for nurturing narcissism, by inspiring individualized fixations on the self, a corresponding inflated sense of self-concern and self-importance, and correlative exaggerated feelings of entitlement. In short, as prominent media theorist Manovich maintains, "most new media activates a 'narcissistic condition,'" whereby the promotion of the self becomes an intense and pervasive endeavor (2001:235).

In their article "Narcissism and Social Networking Web Sites," Lauren Buffardi and Keith Campbell offer a particularly incisive account of the role of new media technologies in perpetuating this growing sense of self importance. For them, social networking websites "offer individuals the abilities, among others, to (a) create an individual Web page, (b) post self-relevant information (e.g. self-descriptions, photos), (c) link to other members (e.g. friends lists), (d) and interact with other members" (2008:1303). Through these means, individuality is, respectively, identified, elaborated upon, socially sanctioned, and then rendered vital through interaction which, in turn, leads to its further reinforcement. Accordingly, despite the resounding popularity of related websites,<sup>36</sup> some researchers have

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<sup>36</sup> The popularity of social media are rated through its positioning in terms of 'most visited websites' on the internet. In 2014 Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia and Twitter, all ranked in the top ten 'most visited sites' worldwide (eBizMBA 2014).

begun to question the value of new media's promotion of extreme self-orientation (Baldwin and Stroman 2007; Orlet 2007; Buffardi and Campbell 2008). Buffardi and Campbell have raised concern that these "web sites offer a gateway for self-promotion via self-descriptions, vanity via photos, and large numbers of shallow friendships (friends are counted – sometimes reaching the thousands – and in some cases ranked)," and as such may present a potent platform for the growth of narcissism. In addition to this, they argue that, despite the fact that many people use social networking sites to preserve friendship and family ties, gain updates to events, and more recently, conduct business, such sites also provide narcissists with an unlimited platform to engender their preoccupation via social linking (2008:1303). In terms of the latter, after their examination of the activities and uploads of various Facebook users, Buffardi and Campbell insisted that social networking sites are "fertile grounds" for the development of narcissism, and they highlight two reasons for this. Firstly, they suggest that because "narcissists function well in shallow relationships," social networking sites are attractive because they are built on many superficial 'friendships,' with some people having thousands of 'friends' (2008:1304). Secondly, since social networking sites are "decidedly controlled environments" (Vazire and Gosling 2004), they suggest that the ability of users to orchestrate practically all aspects of self-presentation and expression – by writing self-promoting content and selecting attractive photos – appeals tremendously to narcissistic personality types. Consequently, they argue that social networks promotion of a growing culture of narcissism and the values of vanity, materialism, entitlement, and anti-social behavior, may not simply be possible, but also something highly probable.

In their 2009 book, *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*, Twenge and Campbell further examine the role of new media technologies in the growth and spread of self-involvement and narcissism. Particularly in the chapter entitled "Look at Me on MySpace: Web 2.0 and the Quest for Attention," the authors insist that the internet post-2004 – namely Web 2.0 – works in profound collaboration with cultural narcissism as a "'feedback loop'...with narcissistic people seeking out ways to promote themselves on the Web and those same websites encouraging narcissism" (2009:107). Accordingly, they maintain that "narcissists thrive in social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook," because the "structure of the site reward[s] the skills of the narcissist, such as self-promotion, selecting flattering photographs of oneself, and having the most friends" (2009:110). Highlighting the variety of 'me' focused new media platforms, Twenge and Campbell illustrate how

internet domain names beginning with *my* nearly tripled between 2005 and 2008, and trademark applications with *my* quintupled in the ten years between 1998 and 2008. MySpace is the most

prominent example, but there's also mycoke, My Subaru, My IBM, myAOL, My Yahoo, and My Times. (2009:108)

YouTube, with its slogan 'Broadcast Yourself,' and Facebook, with its focus on image, are further examples of this growing focus on the self (Twenge and Campbell 2009:107). And they consider this problematic because "social networking sites shape the ways teens and twentysomethings view their worlds, and mould the malleable personality of young people like clay" (2009:113), most noticeably around crass commercialism. For them, the latter is rampant on social networking sites, and "often overtakes friendships that were there to begin with" (2009:116). As they point out,

MySpace began as a place for bands to build a fan base, and many bands send out 'friend' comments about their latest album – actually just a form of advertising. As MySpace evolved, spam postings from businesses became very common. Virtually every MySpace page has been hit with postings advertising ringtones, porn sites, prescription drugs – anything that can make a buck. (2009:116).

Social networking sites are, of course, not the only promoters of narcissism. The narcissistic culture of the new internet, Twenge and Campbell insist, is also found in the "vapid exercises in self-expression and attention-seeking" found in blogs, and in the "attention and fame-seeking" videos uploaded to the likes of YouTube. Although blogging provides a convenient way for people to update others on their lives, Twenge and Campbell maintain that the comment and response system often results in one-sided arguments. And they assert that this form of communication is "not a true dialogue, as verbal communication would be, but one diatribe followed by the response to the diatribe." Moreover, "doing it all on screen also takes out the human element of empathy, nuance, and face-to-face interaction" (2009:117-120). Ultimately, for Twenge and Campbell, new media technology allows for the engendering and spread of narcissism in a variety of ways. On the one hand, the "internet allows the fantasy principle to trump the reality principle," insofar as "the Internet makes it very easy to be someone you're not, and that alternative persona is usually better, cooler, or more attractive" (2009:122). On the other hand, since most internet communications take place via images and self-descriptions, communication tends to be based on shallow aspects of personality and identity.

In 2011, *Life on the Screen* author, Sherry Turkle – whose initial optimism over new media was discussed earlier – published another book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Distancing herself from her earlier optimism

over the freedom that accompanies online identity formation, in *Alone Together*, Turkle adopts a more critical stance in her examination of the impact of new media technologies on contemporary life. In terms of this, unlike her earlier view of the internet as a virtual sphere of uninhibited expression, she criticizes the corporatization of the internet and the power that it has to keep people tied to their technology (Turkle 2011:296). And, examining peoples' relationships with technology— especially computers and robots – Turkle challenges the use of social media as a genuine communication tool, and instead draws direct correlations between people's growing online connections and their mounting feelings of offline loneliness, anxiety, and alienation. In this regard, she examines the psychological implications of new media, and how such technology and new forms of media are changing the ways in which people identify with themselves, and with those around them. In particular, she argues that people's reliance on new technologies such as *Facebook*, *Skype*, *Twitter*, robots, email, and so forth, has resulted in less emphasis being placed on direct human interactions and encounters. In addition, she asserts that just as people are replacing telephone conversations and face-to-face discussions with text messages and Tweets, so too, people are now more inclined to become 'friends' with strangers on *Facebook* than to make 'real' friends in the 'real' world. And such growing entanglement in a digital and technological world, and the increased feelings of loneliness, depression and alienation that such entanglement engenders, in turn problematize their purchase on reality even further. Consequently, while she concedes that digital "connectivity offers new possibilities for experimenting with identity," Turkle also argues that, "when part of your life is lived in virtual places...a vexed relationship develops between what is true and what is 'true here,' true in simulation" (2011:152-153). Strogatz reiterates Turkle's concern when he suggests that social media may actually make it increasingly difficult for people to differentiate between their important relationships in the real world, and the numerous casual relationships that are created or formed online. And as a result, "the distinction between genuine [or true] friends and acquaintances is becoming blurred" (cited in Jarvis 2012). The consequence of this, Turkle advances, is that in contemporary society people are networked together and yet feel "utterly alone" (2011:154). Loneliness, a fear of intimacy, and a need for overarching control over our connections and conversations, are all elements of what Turkle sees as a society increasingly experiencing feelings of being 'alone together' – deeply connected but thoroughly alienated at the same time. In addition to this, she argues that the contemporary incorporation of new media technologies into almost every aspect of people's lives not only changes what people do, but

also changes *who* they are. In a 2012 TED talk,<sup>37</sup> Turkle discusses this excessive reliance and overwhelming need to be connected to new media and the machines that they inhabit, and advances the following caveat:

I think we are setting ourselves up for trouble – trouble in how we relate to each other, but also trouble in how we relate to ourselves and our capacity for self-reflection. We are getting used to a new way of being alone together, people want to be with each other but also elsewhere, connected to all the different places they want to be. (2012)

In this regard, Turkle emphasizes the negative effects of this form of constant interconnectedness on ideas of the self when she asserts that growing expectations for twenty-four hour connectivity and instantaneous responses can create personalities that are “so fragile that they need constant support,” thereby creating a host of “symptoms born of isolation and abandonment” (Turkle 2011:177-178). In this way, the overwhelming need to be identified and communicated with online, results not only in a reliance on new media technologies for identity construction and interpersonal forms of communication, but also in a growing sense of anxiety and insecurity over the sustainability of such identity and communication.

## 1.6 Conclusion

Based on the above discussion, it is evident that social media have become a ubiquitous means of interaction among individuals and groups in contemporary society, and the impact of these media has been viewed in a positive, ambivalent, and negative light. On the one hand, the opportunities that have been made available by new media in terms of communication, interaction, participation, and identity formation, are striking. However, on the other hand, concerns related to accompanying pronounced individualism, narcissism, anxiety, and alienation, have similarly emerged.

Yet, notwithstanding concerns over the numerous, inconsequential casual relationships which dominate the online environment, what happens when online connections and communication are not based on vapid, consumerist conceptions of reality, but rather on ideas related to calls for democracy? To be sure, for a long time, such a situation has remained a rather utopian dream. This is because, although in principle possible, the realization of such a scenario is often undermined by the weight of capitalist imperatives within cyberspace, which

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<sup>37</sup> TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) is a global conference organization which allows free online access to a variety of conference topics.

inflect interaction through new media away from socio-political activism, and in the direction of individualistic consumerism. And because of this, Poster's and others' ideas that the internet offers opportunities for the creation of a new public sphere, and the concomitant progression of the democratic process, have received considerable criticism – especially in the wake of Poster's argument that “the age of the public sphere as face to face talk is clearly over,” and that questions “of democracy must henceforth take into account new forms of electronically mediated discourse” (1997:220). Yet, while perceived as somewhat naïve in the wake of Castells's more circumspect approach to networked society, recent developments in the political use of the internet indicate the possibility that such positive contentions may instead have simply been ahead of their time.<sup>38</sup> This is, of course, not to negate the concerns of Papacharissi and others, who insist that while the internet may offer a promise for reviving the public sphere, obstacles related to data storage and retrieval, inequalities in terms of access, political discourse fragmentation, and the influence of global capitalism, all stand to prevent democratic participation and the realization of a public sphere (2010:9). In this regard, even Castells, in his latest book, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age* (2012), has recognized the potential of internet networks to facilitate democratic change. Rather, it is simply to consider both the possibility that the narcissistic and alienating effects of new media decried above, although deeply problematic, are thankfully not hegemonic, and correlatively, that instances of online democratic practices, however rare, might not be impossible, either now or at some point in the future.

It is to consideration of this that we now turn, insofar as, in Chapter Two, the potential for new media technologies to be used in politically meaningful and critical ways will be examined. This will be done, on the one hand, in relation to increasingly popular uses of the internet and social media within the ambit of traditional mainstream liberal democracy, and on the other hand, in relation to the use of new media by groups, organizations, and movements focused on the spread of alternative ideas and radical forms of democracy.

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<sup>38</sup> In this regard, in his latest book, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social movements in the internet age* (2012) Castells has recognized the potential of internet networks to facilitate democratic change.

## **Chapter Two: Online Democratic Praxis**

### **2.1 Introduction**

As thematized in the previous chapter, the introduction of Web 2.0 has been construed by socio-political theorists in both a positive and a negative light. On the one hand, optimistic theorists advanced its capacity to increase interactive participation at a political level, and while a few were more cautious over its capacity in this regard, on the other hand, some expressed various degrees of pessimism concerning its emancipatory value, on account of the consumerist and narcissistic dynamics which they saw as being indissociable from it. Yet, in contrast to the problematic forms of communication and identity formation decried by Turkle, Strogatz, Baldwin, Campbell and Twenge, the formation of politically-engaged connections through social media has also recently become evident. Thus, despite the existence of numerous concerns related to the deleterious influence of the internet on society and democracy, the directness and interactivity that are the hallmark of new forms of social media technologies have once again been heralded as providing the latest instruments for the further democratization of political systems (Rheingold 1993; Poster 1995; Mossberger et al. 2008; Gurevitch et al. 2009). And such valorization stems less from optimistic speculation and more from recent examples of the adoption of new media for political purposes, ranging from the growing presence of political parties' and politicians' online profiles, blogs, and social networks, to the active engagement of citizens in these networks and related internet campaigns. However, the extent of these online interactions, and the potential of this media to offer a new form of electronically mediated public space, have yet to be confirmed, because the integration of a neoliberal democratic model of politics into the online environment continues to be accompanied by certain concerns. With a view to exploring the above, this chapter begins with a discussion of new media as an increasingly crucial factor in contemporary party politics, as evinced in particular by the 2008 US election campaign. However, because of correlative growing concern over the concomitant influence of neoliberal democratic policies on such online political interaction, subsequently, alternatives to the standard liberal democratic model of online politics will also be discussed, and their potential to usher in more radically democratic forms of online participation, will be elaborated upon.

That is, firstly, the political potential of social media will be discussed in relation to the growing use of this media in American politics in general, and by the current US president

Barack Obama in particular. In this regard, as indicated by Hendricks and Denton in *Communicator-In-Chief: How Barack Obama Used New Media Technology to Win the White House*, and Metzgar and Maruggi in “Social Media and the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election,” among others,<sup>39</sup> the use of social media by both politicians and citizens during the 2008 US presidential election points toward the immense role that social media can play in political party communications. Indeed, it has even been suggested that the social media tactics of Barack Obama and his campaigners helped to facilitate his subsequent growing popularity and, ultimately, his continued presidency of the United States.

Secondly, the role of liberal democratic politics in current online participation will be examined, in relation to the contemporary growth of liberal democracy as a dominant global discourse. That is, on the one hand, the concept of liberalism will be discussed in terms of its history and influence on current notions of democracy, and on the other hand, liberal democracy will be examined in relation to contemporary online and offline political practices. With regard to the latter, although some have argued for the greater realization of democracy through the internet, because it can allow citizens to participate in decision-making and to analyze and criticize power discourses (Rheingold 1993; Hauben and Hauben 1997; Kahn and Kellner 2004), others have begun to argue that the internet simply offers a platform for the perpetuation of dominant offline liberal-consumer models of democracy (Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Papacharissi 2009; Schiller 2000; Schlosberg et al. 2006). With this in mind, arguments *for* and *against* the potential of online politics and e-democracy will be investigated.

Thirdly, against the backdrop of concern over the promotion of individualized, consumer-orientated choices, alternative uses of new media technologies will be examined in relation to growing calls for new forms of political participation – namely those orientated around and informed by the concept of *radical democracy*. In this regard, radical democracy as a general political concept will briefly be discussed, before two of its three main versions – namely deliberative and autonomous democracy – will be elaborated upon, along with their respective online manifestations. This will be followed, in Chapter Three, by a detailed discussion of the third form of radical democracy, namely, agonistic democracy, and its

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<sup>39</sup> See also: MacNamara, J. 2010. *The 21st Century Media (R)Evolution*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers; Noor Al-Deen, H., and Hendricks, J. 2011. *Social Media: Usage and Impact*. Plymouth: Lexington Books; and Hendricks, J. 2011. *Techno Politics in Presidential Campaigning: New Voices, New Technologies, and New Voters*. London: Routledge.



online manifestations, which in terms of scope arguably dwarf those of deliberative and autonomous democracy.

## **2.2 New media and liberal democratic praxis**

The contemporary increase of citizen involvement in mainstream politics, via social media, points toward the possibility that new media technologies can be used in a way that is more politically meaningful than the private narcissistic use decried by the theorists discussed in the latter part of the previous chapter. In this regard, Siapera suggests that “the openness and directness of the internet and the new media as means of communication have given rise to hopes regarding the political system and its further democratization” (2012:83). This is because the interactive and familiar features of social media have opened up opportunities for a more cooperative form of communication between politicians and citizens. This communication, it has been argued, not only allows for the creation of a platform for the advancement of political conversations, but may also act to encourage the unification and mobilization of citizens around shared political goals (Mossberger et al. 2008). In short, their capacity to disseminate information and encourage active participation, in ways that make possible a new form of ‘public sphere,’ are some of the factors attributed to the rise in use of new media technologies in mainstream political activities and campaigning.<sup>40</sup>

Accordingly, it has been advanced that the increase in societal access to ever more interactive communication technologies that enable the generation of individual content and the creation of alternate networks of information distribution, has meant the waning of the gatekeeping monopoly of traditional media. For example, Gurevitch and his colleagues. argue this point when they assert that

from interactive news Web sites that receive tens of thousands of comments from the public each day to YouTube videos challenging government policy, it is apparent that media producers can no longer expect to operate within an exclusive, professionalized enclave. Media audiences are now able to intervene in political stories with a degree of effectiveness that would have been unthinkable ten or twenty years ago. (2009:168)

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<sup>40</sup> The term ‘public sphere’ refers to an area in social life where people can come together to analyze and deliberate over social problems, and through these deliberations, influence political action. According to Hauser, it is “a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment” (1998:86).

This is, of course, not to advance traditional media like television as an instrument of totalitarian domination; on the contrary, for a long time, television was construed as making possible a more “informed, inclusive and partisan democracy” (Gurevitch et al. 2009:164).<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, despite the important role that television has played – and still plays – in the communication of political ideas and campaigns, it has been suggested that the long relationship between television and politics is beginning to fade. This is because the popularization of new media technologies has resulted in a shift in the balance of power, from the media conglomerate to the citizen (Gurevitch et al. 2009; Trent et al. 2011). This shift arose as a result of the emergence of the internet and social media technologies, which have impacted significantly on the way that information is produced and communicated, and which, as Gronbeck indicates, has resulted in the transition from “candidate-centered” political campaigns to “citizen-centered campaigns” that encourage political participation (cited in Trent et al. 2011:366). Similarly, according to Baringhorst and his colleagues, “political campaigning has become a mode of articulation of the political that encompasses all political subject areas and types of political actors” (2009:9). Furthermore, they assert that political campaigns are now typically seen as political forms of strategic communication, which “position actors in processes of political competition, interest or value-orientated conflicts” (Baringhorst et al. 2009:12). Thus, despite the differences between various political campaigns, media interaction and involvement is becoming indispensable. Correlatively, in the contemporary political landscape, the integration of social media strategies into political campaigning, through which audiences are emerging as active participants in message communication, is increasingly becoming the norm.

As already mentioned, historically, the first instance of new media technologies being used in the mainstream political paradigm occurred in the 1970s, with the introduction of online bulletin boards, through which conversations took place based on standard topics or similar interests. And while by the end of the 1980s, email had become a standard method of communication, the introduction of the World Wide Web in 1991 resulted in the development of a variety of politically-motivated websites and ‘virtual’ campaigns. However, it was in America, during the Clinton presidential campaign of 1992, that the internet – email, discussion groups, and listserv – was first used in mainstream politics (Trent et al.

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<sup>41</sup> For Blumler, television not only “conveys impressions of the world of politics to individuals whose access to serious coverage of current affairs is otherwise quite limited,” but also “promote[s] the development of more effective patterns of citizenship” (1970:100). Indeed, the impression of intimacy, friendship, and privacy offered by the television has historically been perceived as endearing, and politicians have utilized this medium as a means to engage in ‘conversation’ with audiences.

2011:367).<sup>42</sup> Subsequently, the number of political groups using the internet as an informational tool increased dramatically by 1994, and by 2004 the US presidential elections bore testimony to the new influence and impact of the internet and social media on political praxis. According to Trent and his colleagues, in the related campaigns, approximately 100 million people used the internet to gain political information, 52% of voters said that this information influenced their vote, almost fifty million people had politics related discussions via email, and thirteen million people made online donations to political parties. Moreover, the introduction of blogs was of particular importance, insofar as online traffic to a number of blog sites surpassed the viewership of campaign related programming on major television news networks (2011:367). In terms of this, Wiese and Gronbeck maintain that six major developments related to new media technologies emerged during the 2004 elections. These included:

(1) the introduction of network software and theory to online campaign strategy; (2) the move to expand database functions to enhance e-mail and wireless functions; (3) the incorporation of coproduction features...to increase citizen participation in online campaigns; (4) the entrenchment of Web video and Web advertising for online campaign messages...(5) the evolution of candidate Web sites into a standard genre of Web text; and (6) the introduction of blogs to the political cyberspace. (2005:220)

Following on from the growth in social media use during the 2004 campaign, the 2008 US political campaign proved instrumental in the elevation of the status of social media as an important tool within contemporary political practice. As Hendricks and Denton assert, “the 2008 campaign was unique in that it became the first national campaign in which traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers were overshadowed by new media technologies and the internet” (2010:xi). In fact, Barack Obama’s use of social media, during the 2008 campaign, as a means to connect and communicate with his burgeoning supporters has been interpreted as *the* factor which secured his popularity and made possible his rise to the presidency of the United States (Aaker and Smith 2010:34). In this regard, specialists at Edelman Research argue that Obama won the election by “converting everyday people into engaged and empowered volunteers, donors, and advocates through social networks, email advocacy, text-messaging and online video” (Lutz 2009:2). And there exists significant evidence to support this. By the time he was elected, Obama had approximately five million ‘friends’ on over fifteen different social networking sites, nearly two thousand official videos

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<sup>42</sup> Listserv was an early electronic messaging system which allowed one email to be sent to a list of receivers.

on YouTube which were watched over eighty million times, thirteen million people on his email list, three million online donors who contributed six-and-a-half million times, and three million mobile connections signed up for his text-messaging program (Lutz 2009:5).

In addition to the Obama team's use of a variety of existing social media tools, MyBarackObama.com (MyBO) – an easy-to-use social networking site, similar to Facebook – emerged as a key component of the Obama strategy. In short, MyBO, which encouraged citizen participation and interaction with the Obama campaign, allowed people to connect directly with each other and with the party in a variety of ways. And it achieved this through encouraging Obama supporters to set up a personal profile, invite friends, join groups, connect and chat with other members, plan offline campaign related events, and raise funds. According to Aaker and Smith, “the mission, design and execution of the site echoed the single goal of the grassroots effort: to provide a variety of ways for people to connect and become deeply involved” with the Obama campaign (2010:34). That is, via MyBO, citizens were not only able to gain campaign related information and updates, but were also able to become actively involved in the campaigning process. Examples of this involvement can be seen in MyBO volunteers' use of seventy thousand online personal fundraising pages to successfully raise thirty million dollars for the Obama campaign (De Cock 2011:139), along with the actions of forty-five thousand online volunteer groups, who came together to organize approximately 200 000 offline awareness and fundraising events (Vargas 2009). In addition to this, Obama supporters uploaded 442 000 user-generated videos related to the campaign to YouTube, and 400 000 Obama related blog posts were written online (Lutz 2009:5). Against the backdrop of such evidence, Aaker and Chang suggest that “a major success factor for Obama's victory was how Obama's campaign used new media technologies” as an integral part not only of its strategy “to raise money,” but also, “more importantly, to develop a groundswell of empowered volunteers who felt they could make a difference” (2009). These connections and interactions resulted in people becoming deeply involved in the mainstream political campaigning process, in a way that allowed them to have a direct impact on the election results.

Admittedly, despite the success of this campaign and Obama's election as US president, it is important to remember that the use of social media in mainstream political campaigning and communication is not the *only* determinant of campaign success. In addition it is also determined by the campaign philosophy and candidate connectedness. In this regard, as Grove explains,

there's a tendency to think of new media as a secret sauce that suddenly unlocks this viral potential, and there's truth to that. But there's no such thing as some view count fairy dust that the Obama campaign had that somehow made their YouTube videos climb that chart. They had a very talented candidate who was a great communicator and they had a campaign philosophy that matched and mirrored very well the Internet – openness, inclusiveness, self-organizing, grassroots. If they didn't have that campaign philosophy, they wouldn't have gone anywhere. (cited in Aakar and Smith 2009:41)

Against the backdrop of both the successes of the 2008 US presidential election campaign, and the above caveat, social media are increasingly becoming a popular political tool around the world, with politicians from all levels of government using these media to promote their agendas and gain support. For example, in Latin America, traditional political campaigners are increasingly turning to the internet to muster support for their cause.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, as Clarke asserts, politicians and various organizations now routinely use social media as a means to “disseminate political messages, learn about the interests and needs of [their] constituents and the broader public, raise funds, and build networks of support” (2010). Clarke further explains that many politicians and parliamentarians in Canada have started using social media platforms – such as Facebook and Twitter – not only to communicate ideas related to policy and official work, but also to reveal aspects of their personal life in order to connect more personally with their supporters (2010).

Yet, notwithstanding its prevalence in contemporary democratic practice, it is important to consider carefully the above developments, and to avoid too readily advancing such public ‘political’ use of new media as some sort of panacea. To be sure, such political use of new media remains salutary, insofar as it is predicated upon and linked to actual events in the world, the politico-economic and socio-cultural consequences of which stand to be very significant. However, cognizance must also be taken of the extent to which such ‘political’ use of new media remains beholden to, and confined within, both the framework of liberal democracy, and the context of neoliberalism. This is because, as will be discussed next, for all

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<sup>43</sup> This is illustrated by a ComScore study which found that “when Hugo Chavez joined Twitter in April 2010, the Venezuelan audience for the site increased by 4.8% over the span of just a few months, not including the number of people that connected via their cell phones or via public computers like those used in Internet cafés. The Brazilian presidential campaign of 2010 was also a race on social networks during which Dilma Rousseff, elected president in 2010, engaged the services of the web agency who advised President Barack Obama during his 2008 campaign. The day she appeared on national television for a country-wide discourse, messages peaked at 90,000 messages” (cited in Igarza 2012:6).

its innovative dynamism, such political use of new media remains significantly ‘traditional’ in orientation, in terms of its propagation of dominant politico-economic discourses.

## 2.3 Neoliberalism and online democratic praxis

Historically, liberal democracy emerged in relation to the sixteenth-century Reformation in Europe and the subsequent destruction of Catholic hegemony.<sup>44</sup> In short, the Reformation resulted in the progressive dismantling of Roman Catholic political power, and the gradual emergence of a type of politics never before experienced in the Western world. Accordingly, prior to the Reformation, the ultimate task of the state had been viewed as the cultivation of “virtue and pious behaviour...[among] citizens” (Wolterstorff and Cuneo 2012:1). However, the Reformation led to critical reflection on the above ‘perfectionist view’ of the state,<sup>45</sup> and its replacement by a more *protectionist* interpretation of state functions. That is, the idea that the fundamental task of the state was the protection of citizens’ rights from violation by other citizens, foreigners, or the state itself, soon emerged (Wolterstorff and Cuneo 2012:2). And this was linked to the notion of “an impersonal and privileged legal or constitutional order with the capability of administering and controlling a certain territory” (Held 2006:58). Most keenly associated with the emergence of this tradition of political thought is Thomas Hobbes, who declared the limiting of religious authority to be imperative under the auspices of a social contract between subjects, which gave power to a chosen sovereignty, and which marked the transition from the terror and violence of the state of nature. Subsequently, John Locke’s ideas, which limited the overarching powers of Hobbes’s sovereign, through the separation of legislative and executive power, and through placing them at the service of the people whose rights they were obliged to protect, signaled the commencement of the liberal constitutionalist tradition (Ebenstein and Ebenstein 1991:397-406, 425-434): a tradition which involved the “attempt to uphold the values of freedom of choice, reason and toleration in the face of

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<sup>44</sup> The sixteenth-century Reformation resulted in a separation of Christians in western Europe into Protestants and Catholics, and this division both destroyed religious unity in Europe, and led to a growing focus on regional interests. According to Bergin and Speake, the Reformation played a role in the process of “nation-building by breaking the moral and economic power of the old Church” (2004:208). See D’Aubigne, J. 2003. *History of the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century 1846*. Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, for a detailed examination of the sixteenth-century Reformation and its political consequences.

<sup>45</sup> According to Wolterstorff and Cuneo, the perfectionist view of the state entails the idea that it is the task of the state “to ‘perfect’ its citizens” (2012:1); in other words, this view purports that the state, like the church, needs to play a role in the promotion of morally acceptable behaviors and an honorable realization of the ‘good life.’

tyranny, the absolutist system and religious intolerance” (Held 2006:59). In turn, following on from Locke’s ideas, liberalism was increasingly viewed as the means of maintaining and expanding individual liberty, while *simultaneously* upholding important elements of public order (McGowan 2007:11). One of the first couplings of liberalism with democracy – and the elaboration of issues pertaining to the conflict between freedom and equality – occurs in the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose concept of the ‘General Will,’ while it limits natural liberty, facilitates civil liberty, and ultimately makes possible moral liberty (1947:19).<sup>46</sup> Yet, after the elevation of democracy onto the political stage by the French Revolution, and its instantiation as the political *modus operandi* in America, the potential challenges to liberty and equality which accompanied it soon became apparent. As Alexis de Tocqueville, cautions in *Democracy in America*, not only does public opinion have the power to suppress idiosyncratic views (1840:261), but the rise of an aristocracy of manufacturers also threatens to become the harshest and most dehumanizing that has ever existed (1840:160). But while his concerns in this regard were echoed by John Stuart Mill (1840),<sup>47</sup> their collective fears were also negated by Herbert Spencer, who saw himself as a defender of liberalism in its classical sense, through his advancement of radical individualized and *laissez faire* economics.<sup>48</sup> In this regard, he not only coined the phrase, ‘survival of the fittest’ (later use by Charles Darwin) and criticized welfare systems for undermining the evolution of society.<sup>49</sup> In

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<sup>46</sup> For Rousseau, the general will refers to the will of all the people, and in a democratic society the state represents the general will of the people. As such, natural liberty, “which knows no bounds but the power of the individual” is reduced to civil liberty by the general will. Moreover, the general will allows moral liberty to emerge when man is rendered as the “master of himself,” via his freedom to obey a law which he has prescribed to himself (1947:19). See Rousseau, J. 1947. *The Social Contract*. New York: Hafner Publishing.

<sup>47</sup> In support of de Tocqueville, Mill argues that “the most serious danger to the future prospects of mankind is in the unbalanced influence of the commercial spirit” (1859:73). In his autobiography, Mill, a keen reviewer of *Democracy in America*, notes “how much he owes to Tocqueville from whom he learned the specific virtues and defects of democracy.” In response, de Tocqueville “wrote to Mill that of all reviewers of *Democracy in America* he was the one who best understood the meaning of the work.” According to Ebenstein and Ebenstein “the two met during Tocqueville’s second visit to England in 1835, and their friendly association lasted until Tocqueville’s death in 1859” (1991:627).

<sup>48</sup> Spencer promoted *laissez faire* as natural economic equality, and insisted that such equality arises due to the fact that in any economic transaction, each person is “free to offer; each is free to accept; each is free to refuse...but...no one may force another to part with his goods; no one may force another to take a specified price; for no one can do so without assuming more liberty of action than the man whom he thus treats” (1873:165).

<sup>49</sup> Connected to the idea of ‘natural selection,’ Spencer argued for an extreme form of *laissez faire* economics which rejected any form of state intervention. Spencer argued that intervention of government in social affairs

addition, he also argued that where liberalism had once sought to limit the power of monarchs, it must now strive to limit the power of parliaments, in order to protect the right of individuals to succeed according to their capacity.<sup>50</sup> Arguably, although the influence of Spencer in American political thought diminished after the nineteenth century, echoes and reflection of his single-minded support for individualized and *laissez faire* economics persist throughout the work of twentieth-century theorists, such as Milton Friedman, whose ideas have proved immensely powerful in shaping the contemporary political landscape (Gerrard 2006:30; Well 2002:62; Zafirovski 2007:30). In short, although liberalism is a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century idea, and democracy a nineteenth-century phenomenon, the connection between the two ideas is profound, and the combined notion of liberal democracy continues to be used to describe the ideological viewpoints of twentieth- and twenty-first-century western democratic political systems.<sup>51</sup> In this regard, Farnsworth defines liberal democracy as a political system which seeks to

defend and increase civil liberties against the encroachment of governments, institutions and powerful forces in society[:] restrict or regulate government intervention in political, economic and moral matters affecting the citizenry[:] increase the scope for religious, political and intellectual freedom of citizens[:] question the demands made by vested interest groups seeking special privileges[:] develop a society open to talent and which rewards citizens on merit, rather than on rank, privilege or status [, and to] frame rules that maximise the well-being of all or most citizens. (2013)

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distorts “the necessary adaptation of society to its environment” (Krehm 2010:125). Furthermore, he stated that government interference “encourages the multiplication of the reckless and incompetent by offering them an unfailing provision,” thus disrupting the “natural order of things [through which] society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members” (1851:323-324). Consequently, non-interference from the state, he argued, would result in the ‘withering away’ of the weak and unadaptable, and the correlative ‘survival of the fittest.’

<sup>50</sup> In this regard, Spencer argued that democratic reformers were the enemies of ‘true liberalism,’ and cautioned that as parliaments gained momentum, the potential for them to threaten the rights of private property would grow. As such, he insisted that the role of true liberalism was to put a “limit to the power of parliaments” (1969:183).

<sup>51</sup> Although the concept of democracy only became recognized as legitimate political praxis in modern society in the 1830s, it should of course be remembered that the notion of democracy was first conceived and introduced by Cleisthenes in classical Athens (508/7 B.C.). Democracy in Athens is the best known historical example of the classical version of direct democracy, in which citizens govern themselves, because all of them have the right to “participate in decision making” (Hansen 1999:1). As will be discussed shortly, direct democracy differs from modern forms of democracy which are indirect, on account of the way in which the only decision that citizens are directly involved in concerns the initial choice of decision-makers.



Vernon supports Farnsworth's definition of liberal democracy, and adds that, to be recognized as liberal democratic, "regimes must meet a certain standard of electoral accountability, and provide some level of constitutionally protected liberty to their citizens" (2001:1). Related to this, following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and 1991 respectively, Francis Fukuyama praised the expansion of liberal democratic regimes around the globe, which for him evinced "a remarkable consensus concerning the legitimacy of liberal democracy as a system of government," even to the point of marking "the endpoint of mankind's ideological evolution" (1992:xi). Yet, in spite of its standing in the world today, and Fukuyama's valorization of it, Vernon also emphasizes that liberal democracy has "never ceased to be in question" (2001:1), and Hollinger similarly insists that liberal democracy continues to receive considerable criticism (1996:xi). That is, seen to be too dependent on the economic individualism, capitalism, and elitism valorized by Spencer and Friedman, among others, leftist critics – echoing the concerns of de Tocqueville and Mill – argue that liberal democracy "does not generate anything beyond... 'thin' democracy." In other words, a form of democracy that is only focused on politics and the political activity of voting (Hollinger 1996:xi). Indeed, despite the numerous versions of liberalism and liberal democracy that have been developed over the years, contestations of its principles have grown, with critics arguing that it contains, among other things, "a false sociology, misrepresenting society as a collection of atomistic individuals, recognizing only voluntary ties, and neglecting the basic facts of unchosen human solidarity." It has also been accused of locating "the source of happiness in lonely [consumer] endeavours" (Vernon 2001:2), in a way that undermines the classical idea of democracy, through the breeding of "rampant economic individualism" and, correspondingly, "repressive social policies and restrictions in the moral, social, and cultural spheres" of life (Hollinger 1996:xi).

The reason for this, as already discussed in Chapter One, is that the liberal democratic model of politics has, since the 1980s, become increasingly entrenched in the economic ideals of neoliberalism, along with the consumer related ideology that it espouses. And according to McChesney, what this has resulted in is the emergence of a form of *(neo)liberal democracy*. In this regard, McChesney sees neoliberal democracy as the "largely vacuous political culture that exists in the formally democratic market-driven nations of the world," insofar as "neoliberalism operates not only as an economic system but as a political and cultural system as well" (1999:110). Vazquez-Arroyo corroborates this growing connection between liberal democracy and neoliberalism, when he highlights how "liberal democracy has provided a

depoliticized framework that nurtures neoliberalism, while providing it with a cloak of legitimacy” (2008:127).

Thus, although some theorists now construe the internet as a place that allows citizens to analyze and criticize social issues, and to play a role in democratic decision-making (Rheingold 1993; Hauben and Hauben 1997; Kahn and Kellner 2004, 2005), and although the use of new media in ‘traditional’ liberal democratic politics allows citizens to connect with and support their representatives, the ultimate connection of the internet and such social media use with neoliberalism cannot be overlooked.

That is, as alluded to in Chapter One, on the one hand, some scholars argue that web-based participation could be the answer to recent declines in interest in democratic citizenship. This is because, according to them, the “emergence of computerised ICTs have prompted less hierarchical discourses, characterised by the prospect of more intense democratic participation, visible-ness, public-ness and open-ness” (cited in Malina 1999:23). For example, in his book *The Virtual Community*, Rheingold promotes such a vision of digital democracy, and asserts that new media technologies, “if properly understood and defended by enough citizens...[have] democratising potential” (1993:279). However, on the other hand, it has also been suggested that the movement of mainstream offline politics into the online environment in the late 1990s, has simply resulted in a more widespread online adoption of a standardized liberal-consumer model of politics and contemporary e-democracy (Davis 1999; Resnick and Margolis 2000). In relation to this, Dahlberg and Siapera assert that “a liberal-consumer model of politics that valorizes the individual as a self-seeking utility maximizer choosing between an array of political options,” has been embraced around the world (2007:3). Accordingly, they suggest that,

in this consumer model the Internet is understood to be the most powerful communications medium yet for providing individuals with information on competing political positions and the means for registering their choices (e-voting, petitions, e-mail, polls). Concurrently competing political interests [have been]...given a relatively cheap and effective medium for organising their supporters and selling themselves. (2007:4)

Moreover, Dahlberg and Siapera go on to argue that the internet is often seen as “an information conduit for pre-constituted instrumental selves to transmit and transact through” (2007:4). In other words, instead of allowing for meaningful participation and the adequate contestation of power, the majority of internet politics simply provides a platform for citizens to participate in a relatively uncritical, individualized, consumer-orientated, political process. Schlosberg and his colleagues corroborate this idea when they suggest that many current

mainstream uses of social media are conducive to the engenderment of self-interest, isolation, and an aggregative rather than discursive form of democracy. This is because such media use tends to encourage largely unreflective participation, through which unfounded preferences are simply aggregated, such as in voting or polling (Schlosberg et al. 2006:217; Gutmann and Thompson 2004:13).<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, Schlosberg and his colleagues, assert that online forms of aggregative interactions and communications “do nothing to appeal to the shared public good,” and instead “actually encourage self-interested comment” (2006:224). And their argument is supported by the fact that many political websites simply require members to select the ‘join’ link to add their name to the party’s membership numbers, or to select an option in an opinion poll, or to select a sharing option for information dissemination. This means that, with the exception of relatively rare and transitory moments of attention given to the various policies or issues at stake – via the click of a mouse – further participation or action is neither expected nor allowed for.

Moreover, apart from the above criticisms surrounding the proliferation of such ‘uncritical’ democratic participation, the commercialization of the internet is another concern for researchers who study the prospective transactional capacity of this ‘virtual sphere.’ According to Papacharissi, “the internet has gradually transitioned into an online multi-shopping mall and less of a deliberative space, which influences the orientation of digital political discussion” (cited in Chadwick and Howard 2009:235). That is, since the internet emerged within a neoliberal capitalist context as a means of extending its economic dynamics, it is predisposed to the influences of a profit-focused market and, as such, cannot prioritize democratization and civic engagement (Schiller 2000). Following on from this idea, Dahlberg maintains that, despite the partial success of some online democracy projects, they remain for the most part habitually “marginalized by commercial sites...and liberal individualistic political practices” (2001:615). In addition to these concerns, Galloway, in his books *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (2004) and *The Exploit: Theory of Networks* (2007), questions the ability of the internet to be free and democratic. That is, in reaction to his examination of how network protocols create new forms of control, he argues against the possibilities for a democratic cyberspace.

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<sup>52</sup> Aggregative democracy is a form of democracy which seeks to find out citizens’ preferences, and aggregate or combine them together to determine which policies should be adopted. This aggregation is usually achieved through voting (Perote-Pena and Piggins 2011:1). According to Gutmann and Thompson, this concept of democracy only seeks to determine the preferences of society, and does not ask for a justification of these preferences (2004:13).

Yet, despite the dominance around the globe of neoliberal democracy, counter-discourses and alternative forms of democracy are steadily growing in popularity, and interest in more radical forms of political participation – involving liberty and equality pursued under the auspices of a return to the origins of the ‘democratic revolution’ – continue to gain momentum. These popular expressions of democracy take as their point of departure not the compromised complexity of neoliberal democracy, but rather older and simpler concepts of democratic praxis, in relation to which they seek to articulate their current positions and future trajectory.<sup>53</sup> These alternative conceptions of *radical democracy* point toward enduring concerns with both the conceptualization and realization of democracy, understood not just in the sense of the individual or private liberty upheld in neoliberal democracy, but also in relation to the original ideas of liberty *and* equality. And in terms of this, online new media technologies are increasingly being turned to in the interest of realizing these objectives. Yet, before such radical democratic use of social media can be explored, the different concepts of radical democracy need to be considered.

## 2.4 Radical democracy

According to Dahlberg, radical democracy concerns two interlinked and generally established root meanings or conditions of democracy, namely, “the free and equal participation of ‘the people’ (the *dêmos*) in power (*kratos*)” and “that democracy – including any of its criteria, institutions, and decisions – has no grounds, justifications, or guarantees outside of the people.” Accordingly, because democracy is “self-grounding, self-legitimising and self-constituting...it is in a constant state of anxiety and self-reflexive questioning,” underpinned by “a self-revolutionizing logic” (2013). And it is this self-grounding, Dahlberg further argues, which allows for the possibility of liberty and equality being approximated to ever

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<sup>53</sup> In addition to de Tocqueville and Mill’s ideas, mentioned earlier, Aristotle’s assertions in his *Politics* provides significant inspiration in this regard. Accordingly, “the basis of a democratic state is liberty...[and o]ne principle of liberty is for all to rule and be ruled in turn, and indeed democratic justice is the application of numerical not proportionate equality...Every citizen, it is said, must have equality...This then is one note of liberty which all democrats affirm to be the principle of their state. Another is that a man should live as he likes. This, they say, is the privilege of a freeman, since, on the other hand, not to live as a man likes is the mark of a slave. This is the second characteristic of democracy, whence has arisen the claim of men to be ruled by none, if possible, or, if this is impossible, to rule and be ruled in turns; and so it contributes to the freedom based on equality” (2005:97). To be sure, original (classical Greek) ideas of democracy were ultimately exclusionary, since only certain males were entitled to citizenship, but the underlying original concepts of freedom and equality are the focal point of more radical forms of democracy today.

greater degrees (2013). Yet, notwithstanding the global advancement of democratic societies, these two intertwining ideas have often been forgotten in contemporary liberal democracies. Consequently, the word ‘radical’ has been added to the notion of democracy to highlight a reconnection to these two ideas. That is,

radical democratic theorists have added ‘radical’ as a supplementary term to ‘democracy’ so as to draw out the two root conditions. Moreover, as a supplement, ‘radical’ does not just add to our current understandings and practices of democracy, but problematizes them, showing them to be not all encompassing: always incomplete and thus always revisable. (Dahlberg 2013)

As with most political ideologies, different understandings of the conceptions of equality, liberty and democratic community have led to the classification of radical democracy under various categories, and a corresponding emergence of an array of interpretations and conceptualizations of what ‘radical democracy’ entails. Although some of these conceptualizations relate to the *deliberative* democratic theories of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, others are derived from the *autonomous* democratic theories of Cornelius Castoriadis, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, while still others take as their point of departure post-Marxist theories, the most well-known of which is the *agonistic* democracy advanced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. And in what follows, each of the above forms will be considered in turn, with a view to examining the extent to which the dynamics of each are currently reflected in online political activity.

#### **2.4.1 Deliberative democracy**

The deliberative democratic position is perhaps the most broadly recognized dimension of radical democratic theory today. Viewed as an alternative form of public decision-making, scholars of deliberative democracy highlight the importance of open discussion, citizen participation, and an active public sphere (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004; Cooke 2000; Leib 2004; Roberts 2008). Most commonly connected to the theories of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas, deliberative democracy proposes the general idea that “political problems...can be resolved through the force of the better argument: through people coming together and deliberating upon the best way to resolve particular disputes” (Dahlberg and Siaperä 2007:8). That is, viewed in relation to the transformation rather than the aggregation of preferences, deliberative democracy focuses on the “need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives” (Gutmann and Thompson 2004:3). In this regard, decisions need to be

reasonable enough to satisfy the demands of both rationality and democratic legitimacy. According to Bohman and Rehg, deliberative democracy can thus be seen as a “normative account of legitimacy...[that] evokes ideals of rational legislation, participatory politics and civic self-governance” (1997:ix). Although a variety of definitions for deliberative democracy can be found, all of them reflect cognizance of two main concepts. On the one hand, the idea of a collective method of decision-making, and on the other hand, the idea that decision-making is based on arguments made by (and presented to) participants who are devoted to the values and ideals of rationality and objectivity. In addition to these two ideas, Gutmann and Thompson maintain that deliberative democracy should, firstly, affirm “the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives;” that is, reasons need to be given for certain decisions. Secondly, it requires that “reasons given in this process should be accessible to all the citizens to whom they are addressed,” and, thirdly, they argue that deliberative democracy must seek “a decision that is binding for some period of time” (2004:3-5). Against the backdrop of such understanding, Nabitchi insists that deliberative democratic “processes offer a concrete way to bring together citizen views and insights in a way that is both inclusive and sensitive to value plurality” (2010:386). Similarly, Levinson argues that deliberative democracy

fosters cooperation and mutual understanding rather than winning and losing...[, as] it purports to give all citizens a “voice” rather than just the most powerful or the most numerous (as tends to occur in majoritarian democracy); and it encourages citizens to make decisions based on “public reasons” that can be supported through deliberation rather than on individual prejudices that thrive in the privacy of the voting booth. (Levinson 2002:262)

Some argue that the 1980s saw the formulation of the deliberative ideal of democracy, which opposed the hitherto dominant aggregative notions of voting and bargaining (Cohen 1989; Sunstein 1991; Knight and Johnson 1994). Unlike aggregative democracy, which is “vote centric,” deliberative democracy is advanced as “talk-centric,” insofar as discussion and deliberation are considered to be at the heart of democratic practices (Chambers 2003:308). That is, the aggregative model of democracy, which is found in most representative governments today, uses voting and bargaining to aggregate individuals’ preferences and, subsequently, to validate public policy decisions (Mansbridge 1980; Young 2000). Yet, it has been argued that this form of democracy promotes individualistic and strategic behavior based on economic incentives (Buchanan and Tullock 1962; Riker 1982; Mansbridge 1980; Barber 1984). In contrast to this model, deliberative democracy involves a movement away from the

individualistic competition of “the market,” toward a more collective rationality of “the forum” (Bohman 1998:400). In this regard, Chambers asserts that deliberative democracy

is a normative theory that suggests ways in which we can enhance democracy and criticize institutions that do not live up to the normative standard. In particular, it claims to be a more just and indeed democratic way of dealing with pluralism than aggregative or realist models of democracy...[It] begins by turning away from liberal individualist or economic understandings of democracy and toward a view anchored in concepts of accountability and discussion...[, and it] focuses on the communicative processes of opinion and will-formation that precede voting. Accountability replaces consent as the conceptual core of legitimacy. A legitimate political order is one that could be justified to all those living under its laws. Thus, accountability is primarily understood in terms of “giving an account” of something[;] that is, publicly articulating, explaining, and most importantly justifying public policy. (2003:308)

Similarly, Dahlberg and Siapera argue that the related “political community is therefore based upon communicative reason: the critical reflexive process of coming to the most reasonable solution (consensus) to a common problem, in contrast to the pre-deliberative, individual-strategic reasoning of liberalism” (2007:8). This echoes Bohman who asserts that “rather than simple compromise or bargaining equilibrium, the goal of deliberation is consensus[:] the agreement of all those affected by a decision” (1998:400). Thus, the focus on consensus, the idea that the government should represent the “will of the people,” the importance of argumentation, and the ideas of reason, are some of the major features of this form of democracy (Barber 1984; Habermas 1979). A form of democracy which Bohman defines as “the public deliberation of free and equal citizens as the core of legitimate decision making and self-government” (1998:401). And Cohen and Fung (2004) add to this definition when they assert that deliberative democracy points toward the infusion of “government decision making with reasoned discussion and the collective judgment of citizens,” in a way that connects “participation in public decision making to the practice of deliberation” (cited in Nabatchi 2010:384).

As mentioned above, the concept of deliberative democracy has been principally connected to and developed by two schools of thought, associated respectively with the work of John Rawls and that of Jürgen Habermas. In his article “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited” (1997), John Rawls sets out a theory of deliberation. Focusing on solving problems of legitimacy, he promotes the idea of public reason as central to deliberation, arguing that, as a result of plurality, “citizens realize that they cannot reach agreement or even approach mutual understanding on the basis of their irreconcilable comprehensive doctrines.” Public

reason therefore refers to the reasons that may reasonably be given when “fundamental political questions are at stake.” Accordingly, he proposes that, “in public reason[,] comprehensive doctrines of truth or right [are] replaced by an idea of the politically reasonable addressed to citizens as citizens.” Thus, for Rawls, “the definitive idea for deliberative democracy is the idea of deliberation itself,” and he asserts that “when citizens deliberate, they exchange views and debate their supporting reasons concerning public political questions”. Consequently, they must “suppose that their political opinions may be revised by discussion with other citizens; and therefore these opinions are not simply a fixed outcome of their existing private or non-political interests.” It is at this point, he argues, that “public reason is crucial, for it characterises such citizens’ reasoning concerning constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice.” Through this, he highlights three core elements of deliberative democracy, namely public reason, a constitutional framework, and the principle that citizens are willing to recognize the importance and realize the ideal of public reason (1999:132, 139, 570, 574, 579-580). While public reason is important because it helps to establish the common principle for deliberation, a constitutional framework helps to create essential supervisory institutions, that, in turn, facilitate citizens’ acceptance of the ideas of public reason, in a way that helps to build a foundation of commonality and harmony within pluralistic communities (Bantas 2010:2).

Initially Rawls’s ideas of public reason are often understood as being “characteristic of a democratic people” (1993:213). However, it soon becomes apparent that as a well-known proponent of liberal thought, Rawls “sees it as applying in particular to a more narrowly circumscribed set of issues and group of actors” (Saward 2002:2). That is, Rawls sees deliberative democracy as something that only *certain* people need to get involved in. As such, his idea of deliberative democracy indicates that the process of deliberation need only to be applied to problems of a constitutional nature or of political importance, thereby restricting the process to “citizens who are involved in constitutional or governmental matters” – such as judges, politicians, or government officials (Saward 2002:2, Bantas 2010:1). Consequently, citizenship, for the majority of people in Rawls’s deliberative democracy, is still a largely passive affair.<sup>54</sup> In this regard, Chambers goes on to argue that although Rawls joined the deliberative turn in 1999, and although his conception of public reason is often discussed in relation to deliberative democracy, his theory is not necessarily a theory of deliberative democracy in the strict sense of the term (2003). And Cooke elaborates on this idea when he

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<sup>54</sup>This issue has been expanded upon by various scholars, including Chambers (2003), Cooke (2000), Saward (2002) and Bohman (1998).



suggests that the deliberative features of Rawls's political theory are not always obvious, and do not tie up with the notion of deliberation "as the free exchange of arguments involving practical reasoning and always potentially leading to a transformation of preferences" (2000:958). Instead, Rawls's conception of deliberation can be viewed as fundamentally "monological," involving a "*private* process in which citizens work out for themselves whether the advocated political principles are reasonable[,] in the sense of capable of being reasonably accepted by all" (2000:985). In relation to this, Saward notes Rawls's argument that

reasonable and rational people, aware of pluralism[,] will find certain principles/ideals acceptable to them[,] therefore they will endorse a constitution which embodies these principles/ideals. If political power is exercised in accordance with this constitution then political power is exercised legitimately. (2002:3)

In many respects, this highlights Rawls's perception of public reason as a "solitary, inward looking, thoughtful matter...done by individuals thinking...[or] 'reasoning' alone, not together (2002:3). Thus, despite Rawls's presentation of public reason as a vital ingredient of deliberative democracy, the link between these two ideas is somewhat tenuous, because "public reason and deliberation are quite different things" (Saward 2002:1). Another theorist who has more closely (and successfully) been associated with the idea of deliberative democracy is Jürgen Habermas. Like Rawls, Habermas uses a liberal framework, constitutionalism, and the rule of law for his theory of deliberative democracy. However, unlike Rawls, his conceptions of constitutionalism and law are based on communicative reason – "which can be generally understood to consist of inclusive, equalitarian, reflexive, reasoned and reciprocal argument aimed at mutual understanding and agreement resulting in rational public opinion" – rather than public reason (cited in Dahlberg 2007b:129).<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, his theory is grounded on a more inclusive notion of deliberative democracy, where both the private and public sphere are involved in political processes, and where restrictions are not made in preference of the political elite. For Habermas, deliberative democracy "articulates [a] conception of popular sovereignty according to which the ultimate grounds of legitimacy are the collective deliberations of the public," even if such

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<sup>55</sup> According to Habermas, "there is no pure reason," rather, reason "is of its nature always an incarnate reason imbedded in complexities of communicative action and in structures of the lived in world" (1985:374). In terms of this, Habermas sees human beings as automatically connected via their use of language, and he consequently views reason in its communicative form, arguing that communication – via the structures of speech – connects people to each other and facilitates a practice of solidarity which contributes toward deliberative democracy.

“deliberations...are conceived in terms of a somewhat idealised set of procedures” (Fairfield 2008:35).

That is, in his book *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, Habermas considers a “two-track theory of democracy in which representative institutions exist alongside and contend with a vibrant and free public sphere and civil society of associations, social movements and citizens’ initiatives” (Benhabib 1997:725). Consequently, he argues that this two-track approach should replace the leftist critique of existing democracies, since it can be applied to all aspects and spheres of social life (Habermas 1996:306). In order to strengthen democracy through public participation, Habermas argues that politics needs to be seen as a form of public conversation that is governed by reason and legitimizing procedures. And in this regard, he suggests that “democratic will-formation draws its legitimating force...from the communicative presuppositions that allow better arguments to come into play in various forms of deliberation and from procedures that secure fair bargaining processes” (cited in Kapoor 2002:461-462). These ‘fair’ processes, Habermas explains, can be found within the ‘ideal speech situation’: a situation in which public conversation is inclusive (no one is excluded from participating), free of coercion (no participant in the conversation or dialogue is dominant over the other), and open (any participant can initiate or question the discussion on a relevant topic) (Habermas 1990:88-89). For Habermas, laws sanctioning these ‘fair’ processes can help to organize deliberative democratic practices and politics. According to Thomassen, Habermas’s idea of deliberative democracy thus “links the idea of public use of reason to a theory of law and democracy where...public deliberation, and hence the quality of the public sphere...gives the laws their legitimacy” (2010:111). In terms of such deliberation, Habermas sees the process as one of ‘ideal role-taking,’ in which participants are encouraged to contemplate what could count as a good reason for all others involved in, or affected by, the decisions under discussion (1996:147-148). Good reason, Habermas insists, “cannot be autonomous, insulated from society and imposing its will without accountability.” Instead, as Kapoor notes, “it must be a dialogical or ‘communicative’ rationality through which participants advance arguments and counterarguments” (2002:462). Subsequently, “consensual decisions are reached only by the (unforced) ‘force of the better argument,’ so that at the end of the deliberative processes, all concerned are convinced by the decisions reached and accept them as reasonable” (2002:462). In this way, Habermas sees public deliberations as having a cognitive dimension, insofar as they “are concerned with finding the best way of regulating matters of public concern, whereby the ‘best way’ is judged according to standards of rationality that have a certain objectivity” (1996:147, 151, cited in Cooke 2000:952). In order

for this deliberation to be considered rational, participation in democratic decision-making needs to be “orientated not egoistically or strategically but by impartial processes of collective ‘opinion formation’ and ‘will formation’ that are generalizable in nature” (cited in Fairfield 2008:36). To this end, Habermas maintains that consensus on political issues needs to be reached through un-coercive methods of participation and deliberation in the public sphere.<sup>56</sup>

However, although such deliberative democracy, as a conception of radical democracy, has gained significant support, criticisms of Habermas’s ideas have also emerged. In their book *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Gutmann and Thompson point out two major problems related to his deliberative democracy. Firstly, they assert that such “deliberative democracy does not provide a natural way to come to a definite conclusion short of consensus” (2004:18). Consequently, such deliberative politics cannot be adopted on their own and need to be accompanied by alternative decision-making measures. That is, since it is important for deliberation to end in a final decision, the inability of deliberative democracy to stipulate a single process for reaching a final decision, results in a reliance on additional non-deliberative procedures such as voting. Secondly, they assert that his “deliberative conception relies on explicitly moral principles rather than the seemingly neutral ones of aggregative conceptions.” Indeed, “reciprocity is an explicitly moral principle, and deliberation therefore invokes substantive moral claims that may be independent of the preferences citizens put forward” (Gutmann and Thompson 2004:18). Against this, though, Dahlberg asserts that Habermas’s notion of the public sphere and deliberative democracy remains radically democratic for two reasons. Firstly, its decision-making processes are connected to the public opinion and rational deliberations of everyone who is affected by these processes. Thus, instead of being confined to the economic, political, and administrative elite, democratic power is placed in the hands of the “communicative rationality of ordinary citizens” (2007b:129). Secondly, the ideas of public power, public opinion, and the public sphere, are extended to all situations in which people engage in deliberation.

In short, as a result of the ideas of Rawls and Habermas, the dimensions of deliberative democracy have emerged as one of the most extensively debated issues of democracy in the contemporary era. And although the concept of deliberative democracy forms part of the broader theoretical ambit of participatory democracy, it is generally agreed upon that it is unique in its aspiration toward

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<sup>56</sup> For Habermas, the public sphere can be seen as “a discursive space distinct and separate from the economy and state, in which citizens participate and act through dialogue and debate” (Kapoor 2002:461). See Habermas, J. 1989. *Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere*. Massachusetts: MIT Press; and Calhoun, C. 1992. *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. MIT Press.

a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives), justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future. (Gutmann and Thompson 2004:7)

In recent years, related concepts of deliberative democracy have begun to emerge in the realm of online politics and e-democracy. For example, Hands asserts that since deliberative democracy is predicated on the principle of reciprocity, it can be seen as “an attractive prospect in any theory of radical e-democracy, as it enshrines imperatives of justice, openness, recognition and autonomy as fundamental norms of all interaction” (2007:97). Viewed in relation to its possibilities for the extension of rational communication, scholars have begun to study the internet as a potential online deliberative public sphere. In particular, Fung and Kedl (2000), Gimmler (2001), and Janssen and Kies (2005), have examined the scope and value of rational online deliberation, especially in relation to “claims that the Internet’s two-way, relatively low cost, semi-decentralized and global communications, combined with evolving interactive software and moderation techniques, offer the ideal basis for rational deliberation” (Dahlberg 2007c:48). Accordingly, websites that promote a form of online deliberation are seen as constituting “a rational public sphere in which private individuals are transformed into publicly oriented democratic subjects interested in the ‘common good’” (Dahlberg 2011:860). Similarly, for Gimmler, the internet offers the opportunity for strengthening deliberative democracy, because “over the web, information can be utilized more effectively; it is easily obtained by users and can be made available at very low cost.” Thus, when it comes to deliberation, he argues that on

the local, regional and national level, moderated discourses, public forums, and a round-table style of discussion can be established [online], all of which give citizens the opportunity to be active participants in the process of decision-making. Decisions over planning, in particular, can be arrived at collectively by on-line conferences and discussion forums. (2001:32)

In addition to its importance within traditional politics, Gimmler also highlights the use of the internet by civil organizations and NGOs, when he examines the benefits that the internet offers as a relatively free ‘public platform’ (2001:33). His sentiments in this regard are also supported by Downey, who argues that the internet and new information and communication technologies comprise conduits for radical democracy through their promotion of a more transnational, participatory and deliberative form of politics (2007:109). A form of politics

that aims to produce critical public opinion which “can scrutinize and guide official decision making processes” (Dahlberg 2011:860). Indeed, despite their earlier concerns over the unreflective, uncritical and self-involved uses of such media, Schlosberg and his colleagues also argue that the internet can and should be used as a community platform which encourages discussion, reasoning, participation and engagement with social, political and environmental issues. This use, they insist, will allow participants to “make proposals, attempt to persuade others, listen to the responses of those others and determine the best outcomes and policies based on the arguments and reasons fleshed out in public discourse” (Schlosberg et al. 2006:216).<sup>57</sup>

Many examples of websites, blogs and social networks that support a deliberative democratic agenda can be found online, including, E-Democracy ([www.e-democracy.org](http://www.e-democracy.org)), the Deliberative Democracy Consortium ([www.deliberative-democracy.net](http://www.deliberative-democracy.net)), the Public Sphere Project ([www.publicsphereproject.org](http://www.publicsphereproject.org)), the Hansard Society ([www.hansardsociety.org.uk](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk)), the Electronic Commons ([www.ecommons.net](http://www.ecommons.net)), and Australia’s National Forum ([www.nationalforum.com.au](http://www.nationalforum.com.au)). These sites offer users the opportunity to participate in conversations relating to issues affecting their communities and societies, and actively encourage citizens to get involved in the democratic decision-making process. According to their website, e-democracy.org “builds [an] online public space in the heart of real democracy and community” (2013), and their mission is to “harness the power of online tools to support participation in public life, strengthen communities, and build democracy” (2013). Originating in Minnesota in 1994, e-democracy.org now has over fifteen thousand participants and is connected to over fifty local forums related to issues in the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand. This online platform offers the opportunity for the creation of community forums where local issues can be discussed and information can be shared. Accordingly, political dialogues and deliberations between ‘real’ people (users have to register and use their real names in order to participate) and facilitated

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<sup>57</sup> In terms of this, they pay particular attention to the concept of environmental citizenship and online rulemaking in the United States. Exploring the growing possibilities for citizen comment and deliberation on proposed government regulation through websites such as [regulations.gov](http://regulations.gov), Schlosberg and his colleagues examine the potential deliberative benefits of online rulemaking and electronic participation, and argue that “participation in Web-based decision making may make for more involved citizens” (2006:230). An example of this form of public online participation and deliberation can be seen in the US Department of Agriculture’s use of the internet to allow public comment on issues related to the National Organic Program. The openness and transparency achieved in this discursive practice allowed for deliberation on the organic rules to be implemented, and resulted in some of the most democratic rulemaking in the history of the agency (Schlosberg et al. 2006:218).

by local organizers, are also encouraged. In another example, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC) provides a platform for researchers and practitioners to come together and promote the institutionalization of deliberative democracy within governance in the United States in particular, and around the world in general. Their general philosophy is related to the view that “democratic deliberation is a powerful, transformational experience for everyone involved – citizens and leaders alike – which can result in attitudinal shifts toward the institutions and practice of democracy overall” (Torres 2013). The DDC runs the website [deliberative-democracy.net](http://deliberative-democracy.net), a blog, an eBulletin and a wiki to enable collaborative communications across its global network. And according to the Online Deliberative Democracy Consortium website, “much of the Consortium’s online activities are carried out through the Online Deliberative Democracy Workgroup (ODDC)” (2013). This network, which is made up of some of the leading voices on online deliberation, meet once a month to discuss recent developments in the field, and to “develop strategies to bolster online deliberation efforts in the U.S. and around the world” (Torres 2013). Similar to [e-democracy.org](http://e-democracy.org), the Hansard society – a UK-based independent political research and education charity – aims to reinforce the importance of parliamentary democracy and attempts to inspire a renewed interest among citizens in political deliberation. Of particular recent importance, the Public Sphere Project offers an arena for online deliberation and aims to “help create and support equitable and effective public spheres all over the world” (2013). Through their openDCN (deliberative community networks) software environment, the Public Sphere Project provides an online platform and various online tools, which assist in the formation of community and deliberation spaces, thereby supporting participation and online deliberation. A further example is that of the non-profit Electronic Commons project, which is based in Toronto, Canada, and which provides a support mechanism for the development of online communities, civic engagement, and democratic cultures of deliberation. This website and its connected blogs encourage citizen engagement and participation in decision-making, and offer various online workshops on expanding deliberative democracy. Finally, the National Forum is a non-profit website, or ‘virtual town square,’ which acts as a free and open space for citizen deliberation, and promotes the internet as a site for deliberative democracy in Australia. Already in their first year of operation, the [nationalforum.com.au](http://nationalforum.com.au) aimed at building an online community through their online opinion forum, ‘iparliment,’ and online domain, which offer a space for online conversations. Recognizing the importance of the participation and engagement of everyone in civil and political society, this group has enlisted various institutions, including “the Brisbane Institute, QUT, the Local Government Association of Queensland, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Australians for a Constitutional

Monarchy and Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, as well as prominent individuals and parliamentarians” (2013).

These examples, among many others, draw attention to the potential of the internet to offer a platform for the expansion of deliberative forms of radical democracy. That is, notwithstanding concerns surrounding the assimilation of such online sites into the mass of liberal-consumer-orientated websites, their ability to provide a place for real deliberation, between real people, with the intention of influencing regulatory change at local and national levels, arguably points toward the internet’s potential to function as a site for online deliberative radical democracy.

#### **2.4.2 Autonomous democracy**

Atkins explains that autonomous democracy is “generally understood as self-determination: the freedom to pursue one’s perception of the good life, just as long as it does not impinge upon another’s identical freedom” (2000:74).<sup>58</sup> Stemming from the tradition of Marxist critical theory, which seeks to realize the promises of the French Revolution – liberty, equality and unity – the autonomist conception of radical democracy is most notably connected to autonomous community formation and organization. In this regard, the autonomous strand of radical democracy focuses on the community as ‘pure power,’ and democracy is accordingly understood as a form of self-organization that is free from centralized systems of power. Responding to the crisis of the left, which emerged in reaction to the concomitant failure of socialism and rise of neoliberalism,<sup>59</sup> autonomists reject the

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<sup>58</sup> This echoes John Stuart Mill’s argument in “On Liberty,” where he examines the idea of autonomy as being one of the essential “elements of well-being” (1975:37).

<sup>59</sup> As already indicated, the 1980s expansion of neoliberalism was coterminous with two equally important historical events, namely the fall of the Soviet Union and China’s conversion to authoritarian capitalism. Indeed, while neoliberal policies were being implemented by Thatcher and Reagan in Britain and America, respectively, Baltic States on the periphery of the Soviet Union were beginning to rise up and demand autonomy from the socialist union (Gupta 2010:44). Following the 1980s uprisings in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and after growing political and economic instability, unrest in the Soviet Union ultimately resulted in its complete collapse in 1991 – an event which signaled the end of the Cold War (Gupta 2010:66). Although leaders of the Soviet Union initially refused to adopt all of the economic reforms suggested by the increasingly neoliberal West, China’s Deng Xiaoping recognized the importance of making economic reforms and initiated a movement away from socialist economics in 1978, which engendered a conversion to authoritarian capitalism. In terms of this, foreign investment, privatized industry and the decollectivisation of agriculture were introduced and encouraged (Naughton 1995:144).

power of capital and highlight the community – or ‘the multitude’ – as intricately plural and the agent of constituent power.<sup>60</sup> That is, driven by a new self-consciousness of civil society, autonomists argue that profound structural change is only possible through the mass participation in, and contribution toward, community by all concerned. In terms of this, autonomists actively encourage a continuous critique of capitalism and the institutions that support it, and they argue that autonomist change cannot be achieved through the mere extension or reform of liberal democracy. Rather, they seek the “formation of an entirely new democratic society – a ‘commons-based’ socio-economic arrangement as the foundation for democratic community” (Dahlberg 2011:863). According to Negri (2008:66–67), “the commons consists of the sum of everything produced independently of capital,” and it is the totality of autonomous production that will bring about radical democracy.

Yet, despite their rejection of liberal democratic capitalism, autonomists’ ideas of plurality and community power evince their continued support of the democratic principles of liberty and equality, and therefore situate them within the radical democratic framework. According to Flores, autonomous communities tend to focus on “interdependence[,]. . .intersubjectivity, expansiveness[,]. . .participatory democracy, and the notion of accompaniment as opposed to activist support” (cited in McLaren 2001).<sup>61</sup> That is,

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<sup>60</sup> According to Panitch and Leys, “the collapse of the post-war settlement in the late 1960s was a critical turning point in the history of the capitalist countries of the west. The response of the ‘new right’ was to call for the removal of restrictions on private capital accumulation and capitalist culture, and as far as possible to replace collective decision-making by the operation of markets” (2001:1). From these initial transformations, the growth of late/advanced or neoliberal capitalism in the 1980s – as discussed in Chapter One – became a largely uncontested element of contemporary politico-economic discourse. However, a rejection of related forms of acquiescent politics is the project of autonomous democracy.

<sup>61</sup> In relation to Flores’s characterization of autonomous communities, the ideas of interdependence, intersubjectivity, expansiveness, participatory democracy, and accompaniment, need to be clarified. With regard to the notion of autonomous communities being interdependent, Flores argues that members of autonomous communities struggle to survive collectively, because all the material, spiritual, cultural, and psychological elements of life are necessarily interconnected and interdependent. The notion of intersubjectivity emerges here in relation to the inclusiveness of autonomous groups, because all members are seen as equal, and as equally contributing to the collective group of their community. Flores asserts that autonomous communities thus tend to be asset based, meaning that they recognize the strengths of their communities, encourage collective awareness of these strengths, and build on them. The next characteristic Flores elaborates upon is that autonomous communities are expansive. For him, the autonomous “process consciously offers a micromodel, an archetype of a different type of national state system,” insofar as autonomous communities offer an alternative system to that of the current status quo. Next, Flores highlights the importance of equal participation in autonomous communities, noting the intercultural and pluriethnic elements of these communities, and highlighting their acknowledgement and welcoming of difference. Finally, in terms of the idea of accompaniment, Flores



defined as interdependent groups of individuals and community members, autonomist organizations seek to establish “the right amount and right type of independence and dependence” (Tojolabales cited in McLaren 2001). Thus, although the equality of all people is at the forefront of this political conception, the importance of individual difference is concomitantly recognized.

The idea of autonomous radical democracy has been most closely linked to the works of Cornelius Castoriadis and the collaborative efforts of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. In his book *Philosophy, Politics, Autonomy*, Castoriadis attempts to interpret the ideas of democracy and philosophy in terms of his central concept of autonomy. On the one hand, he views individual autonomy as the ability of individuals to make their own laws based on the recognition of their individual wants and desires. On the other hand, he sees social autonomy as society’s ability to advance its own laws, while at the same time recognizing itself as the foundation of its norms (Fotopoulos 1997). Widely known for his reflections on the consequences of a lack of autonomy in the contemporary world, Castoriadis is also often identified with his

call for Western thought to embrace the reality of creation in a radical sense, and...for his [defense] of an ethics and politics based on autonomy, or giving the law to oneself, which is never the autonomy of an isolated being but always involves beings who relate to others and [who] are aided by institutional supports. (Garner 2011)

That is, politics in contemporary society is largely based on parliamentary and representative democracy (Kornberg and Clarke 1992; Urbinati 2008). Yet, what Castoriadis highlights are the deficiencies of these democracies, particularly when he notes their lack of autonomy and their inability to accommodate the practicalities of radical democracy. And for Castoriadis, while a lack of autonomy means that the opportunity for equal participation in decision-making is negated, this lack of participation, in turn, ultimately results in a lack of freedom, and correlatively a lack of equality. Comparing contemporary politics to those of classical Greece, he highlights the autonomous role of citizens in early practices of direct democracy, and examines how societies, over time, began to delegate this role to selected groups, who would then be tasked with making decisions on their behalf.<sup>62</sup> On the basis of this, Castoriadis

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emphasizes autonomous communities’ recognition of the impacts and influence of globalization, and he maintains that these communities use the idea of globalization as a means to encourage the global community to work together *against* neoliberalism (Flores, cited in McLaren 2001).

<sup>62</sup> Direct democracy refers to a type of democracy that is said to be *by* and *for* the people. This means that, instead of leaving the decision-making process up to elected representatives, the people make their own

argues that, unlike in classical Greece, where the citizens were constantly able to deliberate on certain issues and to make collective decisions, contemporary society is only able to make autonomous decisions once every four years – through the process of voting in an election. In contrast, Castoriadis argues that classical Greek states were based on openness and autonomy, and the adoption of direct democracy allowed every autonomous citizen to partake in the democratic decision-making process continuously. This is because laws and rules were established in an open practice of creation, and citizens were encouraged to actively seek out the meaning and validity of these institutions.<sup>63</sup> Rendtorff elaborates on this idea when he explains that, for Castoriadis,

democratic society emerges as an auto-institutionalization of the norms of society. In a democratic society citizens [should] contribute collectively to make their own laws. They [should] engage in the process for the sake of justice and the common good and to bring order in the existing chaos. In the Greek city-state the people (demos) were considered as the absolute sovereign and this creates an autonomous political space, the public space that is the basis for the institutionalization of the laws in society. (2008)

Understandably, against this backdrop, Castoriadis sees current liberal-representative democracies as ‘liberal oligarchies,’ where only a few people are involved in the decision-making process, and where the rest remain acquiescent to capitalistic politico-economic

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decisions related to the laws and policies that govern them. Mautner explains the idea well when he argues that, in direct democracy, “decisions should be made by all members of the community, and only by members of the particular community that is affected” (1992:2).

<sup>63</sup> By 460 B.C., this classical notion of Greek ‘direct democracy,’ under the leadership of Pericles, was transformed into something akin to an aristocracy (Gill 2013). According to the ancient historian Thucydides, “Pericles...by his rank, ability, and known integrity, was enabled to exercise an independent control over the Demos – in short, to lead them[,] instead of being led by them” (Thuc. 2.65.8-9 cited in Blackwell 2003:6). His recognition as an elected general gave him the platform to address the Demos, and his ability as a speaker allowed him to convince the Demos to accept his ideas. Following the failed 415 B.C. invasion of Sicily, certain citizens began to question the effectiveness of the radical democracy of the people. According to Blackwell, citizens began to “work through constitutional channels, to establish a small body of Preliminary Councilors, who would limit the topics that could be addressed by the more democratic Council and Assembly” (Thuc. 8.1.3-4 cited in Blackwell 2003:6). Shortly thereafter, in 411 B.C., the Athenians brought an end to their democracy and instituted an oligarchy of commissioners, councilors and presidents (Blackwell 2003:6). Since the fall of Athenian classical democracy, new versions of democracy (representative, parliamentary, popular) have emerged, and are still in play in contemporary society. These versions of democracy are, however, a far cry from the citizen participation and political involvement of the autonomous radical politics of ancient Greece, which Castoriadis insists, should be restored (Raaflaub et al. 2006:11).

institutions (1991:221). Furthermore, he argues that “Western liberal democracies are...oligarchic [and] totalitarian-capitalist societies,” which “tend to collapse the public...into private, bureaucratic, capitalist companies,” thereby encouraging the engenderment of non-autonomous societies. In other words, societies “who do not know the law and therefore cannot question it or institute it for themselves” (cited in Garner 2011). Consequently, Castoriadis calls for a return to the ‘original’ meaning of democracy, and in this regard, he argues that

democracy does not mean human rights, does not mean lack of censorship, does not mean elections of any kind. All this is very nice, but it’s just second...or third-degree consequences of democracy. Democracy means the power (*kratos*) of the people (*demos*)...Democracy is or wants to be a regime aspiring to social and personal autonomy. (Castoriadis 1997:18-35)

For Castoriadis, this return would result in a society committed to autonomy, and one in which there would occur a “downgrade in the pursuit of wealth and power, so [as] to avoid the instrumentalization of its core values” (Rafael and Sternberg 2002:152); something which would amount to a movement away from a reliance on capitalism.

Yet, Castoriadis’s calls for a radical return to the original conception of democracy, and his corresponding theory of autonomist democracy, has received sizeable criticism. In this regard, two major critiques of Castoriadis’s work concerns its Eurocentrism, and its myopic eclecticism. Firstly, his theory of democracy and autonomy has been viewed by Wolfenstein, among others, as profoundly Eurocentric,<sup>64</sup> because it valorizes “ancient Greece and Modern Europe, celebrating their openness and autonomy, while casting all other societies into the dark night of closure and heteronomy” (Wolfenstein 1996:726 cited in Crews 2010:10). Secondly, his promotion of the return to a democracy based on that of classical Greece, has been criticized for its failure to recall the fact that only *certain* males were granted citizenship in ancient Greek societies, while slaves and women were not included in the political decision-making process (Crews 2010:20).

While debate over the value of such criticism continues, the case for autonomous democracy does not rest on the outcome, because Castoriadis is by no means the only voice expounding this form of radical democracy. In addition to his work, one of the most

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<sup>64</sup> Eurocentrism concerns the idea that “the West has some unique historical advantage, some special quality of race or culture or environment or mind or spirit, which gave this human community a permanent superiority over all other communities” (Blaut 1993:1). Seen as an ideology which views history from a primarily European point of view, many critics argue that Eurocentrism implicitly advances the superiority of Western culture in shaping world history, when it does not do so explicitly (Marks 2007:8).

influential perspectives on the autonomist position has emerged through Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's idea of 'Empire,' which, to a certain extent, addresses some of the above concerns. Written in reaction to the anti-globalization protests and demonstrations in Seattle, Quebec, Genoa and Prague,<sup>65</sup> Hardt and Negri's *Empire* (2000) – which some have called the 'Communist Manifesto of the twenty-first century' – provides a re-articulation of autonomist ideas of democracy. And because of its blending together of the notions of postmodernism, post-colonialism, autonomism, Marxism, anarchism and syndicalism, *Empire* has become a popular point of reference for much of contemporary radical thought.<sup>66</sup> Focusing on the topic of globalization, Hardt and Negri argue that "although nation-state-based systems of power are rapidly unravelling in the force-fields of world capitalism...[, f]ar from withering away, regulations today proliferate and interlock to form an acephelous supranational order," which they "choose to call 'Empire'" (Balakrishnan and Aronowitz 2003). According to Thompson, Empire is thus the "label given to the new global order and form of sovereignty over the global political economy that...succeeded imperialism and the nation state" (2005:73). Analyzing contemporary capitalism as a biased mode of economic development, Hardt and Negri argue that the ability of capital to operate "without reliance on a transcendent centre of power," has resulted in "power becoming administered through an infinite number of de-territorialised societies of control" (cited in Tonder and Thomassen 2005:210).<sup>67</sup> Balakrishnan

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<sup>65</sup> In the late 1990s and early 2000s, numerous 'anti-globalization' demonstrations and protests were held against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's global promotion of neoliberalism and corporate capitalist interests.

<sup>66</sup> Syndicalism, also referred to as 'anarcho-syndicalism' and 'revolutionary syndicalism,' is a political movement that advocates the replacement of capitalism with a confederation of labor unions. Calling for direct action by the working class, syndicalism argues for the overthrow of the capitalist order (including the state), and the creation of a social order of workers' unions. According to Kay, "Revolutionary Syndicalism has its roots in the anarchist movement, and can be traced back to the libertarian tendency in the First International Workingmen's Association, when prominent Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin argued that...future social organization must be made solely from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal" (Kay 2009).

<sup>67</sup> The idea of de-territorialized societies of control, is deeply indebted to Deleuze's ideas of 'deterritorialization' and 'control society.' The concept of deterritorialization, which refers to the process by which reasonably stabilized forces (spaces or bodies) are destabilized, or escape, from a given territory, was thematized by Deleuze in *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), which he wrote in collaboration with Felix Guattari. According to Engel, Deleuze and Guattari "provide an alternative to thinking of territories as bounded entities." Instead "a territory...is seen as a continuously changing configuration of various interrelated assemblages." These "assemblages form...a historically specific territory, which may then become the surface where deterritorializations" break up "an

and Aronowits corroborate this point when they assert that Empire “refers not to a system in which tribute flows from peripheries to great capital cities, but to a more Foucauldian figure – a diffuse, anonymous network of all-englobing power” (2003:xi). Similarly, Thompson argues that Empire’s “apparatus of rule is decentred and de-territorialised, yet capable of incorporating all activities within its domain, managing hybrid identities and flexible hierarchies through its own fluid networks of command” (2005:74).

Yet, despite the immense power of Empire and its relation to the consumer world order, Hardt and Negri argue that a form of counter-power – one which undermines the power of Empire and encourages a form of counter-globalization – is emerging (2000:56). This counter-power, they insist, can be found in ‘the multitude.’ Connected to Foucault’s analysis of ‘the resistance internal to power,’<sup>68</sup> and Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of rhizomatic

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established configuration...and build a new assemblage” (2009). Arguably, capital’s ability to operate and spread through processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization is at the heart of Hardt and Negri’s criticism of Empire. Furthermore, in relation to the above, and following on from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, Deleuze insists that the growth of neoliberal capitalism and information technology have resulted in disciplinary societies being transformed into ‘societies of control,’ where continuous digital surveillance shapes people into coded economic data or ‘dividuals’ (Deleuze 1995:182). The discussion of control societies, which can be found in Deleuze’s “Control and Becoming” and “Postscript on Control Societies,” examines the difference between disciplinary societies, which tend to be based on confinement and enclosure (i.e. institutions), and control societies, in which these confinements are being broken down or deterritorialized, to the extent that dividuals are now being controlled through the global flows of digital information. In this regard, Deleuze suggests that “we’re moving toward control societies that no longer operate by confining people[,] but through continuous control and instant communication” (1995:174). This account of societies of control in the age of neoliberal capitalism and the internet can be directly linked to the power of Empire, thematized by Hardt and Negri.

<sup>68</sup> In his book, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault advances the idea that power is all-embracing, and that everybody and everything is a source of power. In this regard, firstly, he suggests that power is not a ‘thing’ but is rather something that is constantly being exercised. Secondly, he argues that power is not merely applied externally to relationships of knowledge, sex, or economics, but is rather inside of these relationships. Thirdly, he insists that power is not always applied in a ‘top down’ method, but rather power relationships can emerge at any level of society. Fourthly, he states that, despite the existence of designs and strategies in power relations, there are no single subjects responsible for exercising this power. Finally, he argues that resistance is accordingly part of power relations – internal and not external to them – and that this resistance is not stable, but rather emerges in a variety of places at different times. This fifth idea of resistance as internal to power has been related to the ‘multitude’ spoken of by Hardt and Negri, insofar as the resistance of the multitude is dynamic, can emerge in every area of society, is not related to a specific leader, and is constantly being exercised (1978:94-96).

networks,<sup>69</sup> the multitude can best be explained as a “postmodern update of the proletariat” (Dyer-Witheford 2007:199). In terms of this, Hale and Slaughter maintain that

the multitude is not “*the* people,” but rather many peoples acting in networked concert. Because of its plurality, its “innumerable internal differences,” the multitude contains the genus of true democracy. At the same time, the multitude’s ability to communicate and collaborate – often through the very capitalist networks that oppress it – allows it to produce a common body of knowledge and ideas (“the common”) that can serve as a platform for democratic resistance to Empire. (2005)

In relation to this idea, Hardt and Negri insist that society needs to commit itself to a political revolution which overthrows the power of capitalist desire, and replaces it with the alternative desire of the multitude. Consequently, they assert that “the multitude, in its will to be against and its desire for liberation, must push through Empire to come out the other side” (Hardt and Negri 2000:218). Moving on from the ideas of earlier autonomist notions of ‘labor power,’ Hardt and Negri view the multitude in terms of ‘biopower.’<sup>70</sup> Defined as “a form of power that regulates social life from the interior,” Hardt and Negri see biopower as functioning to give power active control over every element of a person’s life (2000:23). And they argue that

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<sup>69</sup> In their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Deleuze and Guattari define their concept of the rhizome and rhizomatic networks. According to them, “a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (1987:7). This rhizome, they suggest, can be distinguished by six principles. The first two principles are “connection and heterogeneity.” These two principles suggest that any point of a rhizome can and must connect to any other point. That is, there is no hierarchical structure that needs to be followed because all points connect (1987:7). The third and fourth principles are “multiplicity” and “asignifying rupture.” In terms of multiplicity, they argue that “there are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines” that make connections (1987:8). The principle of asignifying rupture, in turn, points to the concept that a rhizome may be “shattered at a given spot, but will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (1987:9). The fifth and sixth principles of the rhizome are those of “cartography” and “decalcomania.” These principles suggest that the rhizome is not a “tracing mechanism, but...a map with multiple entry points.” To summarize these principles, Deleuze and Guattari assert that “the rhizome is an accented, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automation, defined solely by a circulation of states” (1987:21). This idea of the rhizome has been connected to the idea of Hardt and Negri’s multitude, in that the multitude also calls for non-hierarchical connections to be made between a multiplicity of struggles, in pursuit of a shared solution.

<sup>70</sup> Hardt and Negri borrow this concept of biopower from Michel Foucault, who coined the term in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, namely, *The Will to Knowledge*. According to Foucault, the idea of biopower refers to “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (1978:140).

“the paradox of this new power is that while it unifies every element of social life, it leads to resistance no longer being marginal as it becomes active in the very center of a society that opens up in networks” (cited in Munck 2001). Unlike Castoriadis, who has been accused of being Eurocentric, Hardt and Negri’s inventory of such resistance goes well beyond the parameters of Greek (and Roman) politics, and includes “Los Angeles 1992, [Tiananmen] Square 1989, Chiapas 1994, France 1995, [and] the Palestinian Intifada,” along with “the struggles of refugees and ‘nomadic’ immigrant labor to constitute a vision of contestation on a truly world-scale” (Dyer-Witheford 2007:199). Based on this premise, it is important to remember that the arguments advanced in *Empire* not only support the idea of anti-globalization, but also, more importantly, attempt to provide a manifesto for the formulation of a counter-globalization movement of the left – a movement that takes hold of opportunities made available by an interconnected, networked, globalized world.

Four years after the publication of *Empire*, Hardt and Negri, in their second book *Multitude*, further thematized their ideas in relation to capitalism and democracy. In particular, they call for the creation of a left that is “restructured and reformed...on the basis of new practices, new forms of organization, and new concepts” (2004:220). And they argue that “democracy can no longer be evaluated in the liberal manner as limits of equality[,] or in the socialist way as a limit of freedom,” but must rather “strive towards a radicalization of both freedom and equality” (2004:220). However, while these notions of equality and freedom point toward their affiliation with radical democracy, Hardt and Negri’s theories do not involve a radicalization of the current system of liberal democracy, but rather concern the formation of a radical system that is incompatible with the capitalist market. That is, they see the autonomous ability of post-industrial societies to self-organize as a threat to capitalist power, and, as such, they argue that capital is endangered by the “democracy of the multitude” (2004:328).

Written in relation to the rise of internet technologies and new media networks, Hardt and Negri see communication as vital to *Empire*.<sup>71</sup> Yet, although digital networks give capital

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<sup>71</sup> Again, a resonance exists between this perspective and Deleuze’s idea of the role of information and communication in what he calls control societies. For Hardt and Negri, communication is a deterritorialized mechanism of control, and they argue that “the contemporary systems of communication are not subordinated to sovereignty; on the contrary, sovereignty seems to be subordinated to communication – or actually, sovereignty is articulated through communications systems” (2000:346). Accordingly, they see communication as a deterritorialized function of power, and hence they view *Empire* as being “very much attuned to the individualizing initiatives of neoliberal ideologies where communication systems function as deterritorialized mechanisms of control” (Ruffolo 2008).

the opportunity to wield power, they argue that these same networks offer numerous opportunities for counter-power.<sup>72</sup> In this regard, they suggest that immaterial labor's connection to and use of ICTs may offer opportunities for the multitude's ultimate defeat of capitalism,<sup>73</sup> and they point to specific examples of these types of digitally enhanced counter-globalization movements. Paying particular attention to cyber-activism (as seen in the Zapatistas' use of the internet),<sup>74</sup> independent media centers (for example, Indymedia),<sup>75</sup> and the electronic civil disobediences of the late 1990s and early 2000s (among others, the Battle for Seattle),<sup>76</sup> they thematize the use of the internet as a key tool in counter-globalization

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<sup>72</sup> Again, in an adumbration of Hardt and Negri's assertions in *Multitude*, Deleuze earlier alluded to the possibility of establishing opposition to the information of control society, through forms of what he called "counter-information," which involves "act[s] of resistance" that are "effective" within this context (Deleuze 1998:18).

<sup>73</sup> In their examination of the possibilities for counter-globalization, Hardt and Negri advance the importance of 'immaterial labor.' Immaterial labor is connected to the period in which the processes of production are directly connected to the use of information and communications technologies (Lazzarato and Negri 1991:86, cited in Dyer-Witheford 2007:200), and for Hardt and Negri, this reliance on computers and digital networks is one of the major elements that biopower capital aims to commandeer today.

<sup>74</sup> The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) is an indigenous liberation movement situated in the Chiapas region of Mexico. The Zapatista uprising in 1994 against the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and its subsequent success in assembling an international support network over the internet, is one of the most popular case studies of networked or digital activism.

<sup>75</sup> Indymedia was established during the 1999 anti-globalization protests as a means to offer alternative, grassroots coverage of the protests against the World Trade Organization. Indymedia is a global network of collectively run, participatory media outlets, and encourages a 'radical' and 'accurate' reporting on social and political issues. Closely connected to the global justice movement (alter-globalization), Indymedia is critical of neoliberalism and the institutions that support it. According to their website, "Indymedia is a collective of independent media organizations and hundreds of journalists offering grassroots, non-corporate coverage. Indymedia is a democratic media outlet for the creation of radical, accurate, and passionate tellings of truth" (2014).

<sup>76</sup> On 30 November 1999, approximately seventy-five thousand people affiliated to anti-capitalist movements, environmentalists, opponents of the WTO, and NGOs, gathered outside the Washington State Convention and Trade Centre in a demonstration popularly named the 'Battle of Seattle.' This gathering constituted a response to the on-going World Trade Organizations Ministerial Conference, which aimed to launch a new round of global trade negotiations. Despite the largely peaceful protests, police responded to the demonstrations with tear gas and rubber bullets, arresting over six hundred protesters and charging them with civil disobedience. According to Engler, "the Seattle round of trade negotiations deadlocked when developing nations, bolstered by grassroots resistance, rejected US and European demands" (2007:152). This popular rejection of WTO policies and trade suggestions points toward the growing impact of the alter-globalization movement (or 'anti-globalization



mobilizations.<sup>77</sup> They add to this notion in the third book of their *Empire* trilogy, *Commonwealth*, which was published in 2009. In this book they call for the creation of an alternative world in which the multitude is involved in instituting a world of common wealth. They explain this idea of common wealth in the following way:

First of all, the common wealth of the material world – the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature’s bounty – which in classic European political texts is often claimed to be the inheritance of humanity as a whole, [is] to be shared together. We consider the common also and more significantly those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth. (2009:viii)

The internet, they insist, offers an opportunity for the realization of such common wealth. Indeed they assert that “by addressing their own needs...contemporary capitalist production...is opening up the possibility of and creating the bases for a social and economic order grounded in the common” (2009:x). In this regard, they insist that “innovation in Internet technologies, for example, depends directly on access to common code and information resources as well as the ability to connect and interact with others in unrestricted networks.” And since “all forms of production in decentralized networks...demand freedom and access to the common,” the online environment may provide a stepping stone toward a realization of common wealth.

Yet, notwithstanding their promotion of digital networks and communication as potential weapons in the fight *against* Empire and *for* counter-globalization, some critics argue that the contradictions surrounding these ideas have undermined the applicability of Hardt and Negri’s theoretical conceptions to the contemporary era. These contradictions emerge in the light of their inconsistent assertions that, while, on the one hand, communication is an essential part of counter-globalization, on the other hand, despite numerous global communication networks and new media technologies, the various struggles of the multitude “are exceedingly difficult to articulate.” In this regard, Hardt and Negri advance that “in our much celebrated age of communication, struggles have become all but

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movement’ as it was initially called), and highlights the potential political influence of the movement on a global scale.

<sup>77</sup> In their most recent collaboration, *Declaration*, which was released as a kindle e-book in 2012, Hardt and Negri respond to the mass mobilisations of the Occupy movement, and examine ways in which the internet and social media can be used as “vehicles of experimentation with democratic and multitudinary governance” (2012).

incommunicable[,...]blocked from travelling horizontally in the form of a cycle,” they “are forced instead to leap vertically and touch immediately on the global level” (2000:54-55). But for many, their idea of ‘incomunicado’ is contradicted by years of previous autonomous communication practices related to the ‘circulation of struggles,’ and is negated by numerous dynamic examples of communication within and between social movements.<sup>78</sup>

Criticism of this idea, and other elements of Hardt and Negri’s theory of Empire, have become quite prevalent, and consequently, despite the popularity of *Empire* – even among internet-activist groups – it has been criticized as “neither a robust guide to the realities and challenges of global governance, nor to the potential for social challenge and change” (Thompson 2005:92). Thompson further asserts that “neither the book’s analysis of regimes of global governance and the hidden abode of production, nor its articulation of a potential agency of resistance – the multitude – are convincing” (2005:72). In turn, Davis and others criticize Negri for his tendency toward “hyperbole, for...[his] frequent failures to take adequate account of working-class divisions and segmentations (particularly those related to gender),” and for his “emphasis on new struggles at the expense of old resistances” (Davis et al. 1997:199). In addition, further criticism of *Empire* has emerged in relation to the authors’ lack of economic analysis, and their pessimistic view that the politics of civil society is ‘dead.’ That is, despite the theory of *Empire* being grounded in Marxism, many feel that relatively little attention is given to global political economics, and even less to the notion of competition. Moreover, Hardt and Negri’s negative appraisal of civil society as being ‘absorbed within Empire,’ has been condemned by Rugman (2000), among others, who notes

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<sup>78</sup> Dyer-Witheford similarly maintains that Hardt and Negri’s conception of ‘incomunicado’ is “not just a neglect of concrete examples of inter and intra-movement communication, but also a major failure of theoretical conception” (2007:201). The concept of the ‘circulation of struggles’ comes from the autonomist tradition, and it was developed as a result of a class struggle reading of Karl Marx’s idea of a ‘circulation of capital,’ in his book *Capital*. Here Marx notes that capitalism, which is “a system for the accumulation of surplus value, operates on a circuit. Capital transubstantiates from commodity into money which commands the acquisitions of further resources to be transformed into more commodities” (Thorburn 2012). The circuit of capital is thus expressed as Money — Commodities...Production...Commodities — Money (M – C...P...C – M). But this circuit of capital, Cleaver and Bell argue, is also the circulation of struggle. “Shining lights on the fissures that appear at every node, at every moment in the circulation of capital[,] each space between a letter (the dash between M and C, the dots between C and P) indicate[s] that the ‘circulation process is interrupted’ and provide possible moments of breakdown” of the capitalist system. This ‘circulation of struggles,’ they explain, allows the “circuit of capital [to be] operationalized as resistance” (Cleaver and Bell 2002, cited in Thorburn 2012).

that civil society and NGOs have been instrumental in stimulating and re-shaping public policy.<sup>79</sup>

Nevertheless, although Castoriadis, along with Hardt and Negri, have received their fair share of censure, internet-led promotions of autonomist versions of democracy continue to emerge. In terms of related autonomist theorists' respective conceptions of democracy (Berardi 2009; Coté and Pybus 2007; Kidd 2003; Terranova 2004; and Dyer-Witheford 2002), digital communication networks are seen as "enabling a radically democratic politics in the sense of self-organized and inclusive participation in common productive activities that bypass centralized state and capitalist systems" (Dahlberg 2011:863). That is, since autonomist democratic decision-making is decentralized and collaborative, autonomists view digital media networks as allowing for the extension of the 'commons.' Consequently, democracy is understood as a form of self-organization that is autonomous from integrated systems of power. This is because online autonomous decision-making is "seen to take place organically (and rhizomically) through the collaborative, decentralized productivity of peer-to-peer networking" (Dahlberg 2011:863). And the subjects involved in this collective, networked decision-making process reflect Hardt and Negri's conception of the *multitude*, where the idea of a "community of singularities" highlights the intricate pluralities that exist within these networks (Negri 2008:67, 71). Within this context, instead of focusing on political resistance and protest, challenges to non-democratic regimes are undertaken through the development of alternative forms of progressive networking, evinced through the numerous examples of autonomous forms of online communication. Often seen in relation to "dematerialized" open source cultural production and distribution, this communication involves a range of software (for example, Linux), publishing (for example, wikis, Indymedia), and music (including 'piracy')" (Dahlberg 2011:863). To elaborate, Linux is a computer operating model that offers free, open source software to anyone, anywhere. Focusing on community, sharing, flexibility, and openness, Linux allows for the free use, distribution and modification of its software over the internet (Siever et al. 2003:1). In terms of publishing, wikis – which Glaser and his colleagues define as "web-based software that allow...all viewers of a page to change the content by editing the pages online in a browser" (2008:12) – allow for open access collaboration and cooperative work. Similarly, as mentioned earlier, Indymedia (Independent Media Centers) allow for collaborative and autonomous publishing over the internet. Kidd, in her examination of this autonomous

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<sup>79</sup> Further criticisms of Hardt and Negri and their writings can be found in Balakrishnan, G., and Aronowitz, S. 2003. *Debating Empire*. London: Verso; and Passavant, P., and Dean, J. 2004. *Empire's New Clothes*. London: Routledge.

alternative media center, highlights its use of the internet as an alternative platform for the anti-corporate globalization movement. Similarly, Indymedia is described by one of its co-founders, Jeff Perlstien, as an “‘experiment in media democracy,’ in which local crews operating autonomously and collaboratively enable...‘actual’ community newsrooms with ‘virtual online counterparts’ as spaces for organizing, participatory media-making and circulation” (cited in Kidd 2003). Indymedia, and analogous autonomous uses of the internet, have thus been construed as offering an opportunity for the expression of a “plurality of perspectives,” and for the formation of a radically democratic community whose ‘autonomous’ existence contests the needs for capitalist organization of society (Kidd 2003:2). Related to this, in his article “United Yet Autonomous: Indymedia and the Struggle to Sustain a Radical Democratic Network,” Pickard argues that Indymedia is a prime example of activists’ increasing reliance on the internet strategies defined by Castells (1996), the participatory practices referred to by Polletta (2002), and the social network structures put forward by Diani (2003) (2006:316).<sup>80</sup> Pickard goes on to explain that Indymedia is made up of “simultaneously interactive grassroots news websites, nodes within a rapidly expanding global network, and activist institutions deeply rooted in the social movements for global justice and media democracy.” Focused on empowering the marginalized and excluded, Indymedia thereby bypasses deliberative democracies’ calls for a “greater voice in policymaking” or “a seat at the table,” and instead “seeks active re-appropriation and redistribution of space, technology, and other resources to democratize society” (2006:19, 23). Indeed, using various websites, social networks and listserves to share information, mobilize communities and “co-ordinate collective action” (Melucci 1996; Tarrow 1998), Indymedia offers a non-hierarchical platform for autonomous, radically democratic communications, which focus on the values of diversity, inclusiveness, transparency, openness, co-operation, and collective decision-making.

This type of collaboration and sharing can also be seen in illegal, yet increasingly popular, online piracy. The sharing of music, e-books, and films via file-sharing networks can constitute another example of ‘dematerialized’ autonomous communication, and an example of this form of ‘piracy’ is the Pirate Bay’s call for an online movement of copyright infringements. The Pirate Bay (TPB) is a file sharing website based in Sweden, which uses a

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<sup>80</sup> See: Castells, M. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell; Polletta, F. 2002. *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; and Diani, M. 2003. *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BitTorrent protocol to enable online peer-to-peer content sharing.<sup>81</sup> Drawing on autonomist thought, TBP launched a 'Piracy Manifesto,' which encourages the "freedom of infringing copyright...[and] the freedom of sharing information" (Manetas 2009).<sup>82</sup> Referring to this 'global piracy movement' as a new form of 'commons,' TPB calls for the 'pirates of the internet' (or the multitude) to unite and mobilize an online democratic revolution.

Based on these and other examples, the internet and the networks it provides are often recognized by supporters of autonomous democracy for their radical democratic communication possibilities, and their consequent ability to help usher into existence a new democratic society.

## 2.5 Conclusion

From the above discussion, it becomes increasingly apparent that despite the propensity for online politics to become absorbed within both the liberal-consumer model of e-democracy and its associated forms, alternatives to competitively individualistic and atomistic uses of new media technologies do exist. Indeed, deliberative democracy websites, blogs, and social networks, as well as radical democratic autonomous online movements, continue to grow in stature and gain momentum, in a way that contributes to the contestation of the currently dominant neoliberal democratic paradigm.

However, while deliberative democracy through its calls for greater participation within the neoliberal democratic framework, resides at one end of a continuum, autonomous democracy operates on the opposite end, insofar as it calls for a total rejection of capitalism and the institutions that support it. Yet, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, a third approach, namely agonism, attempts to situate radical democracy somewhere between these two poles. This agonistic approach to radical democracy – which supports and rejects various elements of deliberative and autonomous democratic ideas – focuses on the radicalization of the liberal democratic principles of liberty and equality, through emphasizing the importance of difference and conflict in sustaining democracy. And it is to this intriguing position and the democratic possibilities that it promotes, that we now turn.

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<sup>81</sup> As Bran Cohen explains, a BitTorrent "is a protocol for distributing files. It identifies content by URL and is designed to integrate seamlessly with the web. Its advantage over plain HTTP is that when multiple downloads of the same file happen concurrently, the downloaders upload to each other, making it possible for the file source to support very large numbers of downloaders with only a modest increase in its load" (2009).

<sup>82</sup> See: Manetas, M. 2009. "Pirates of the Internet Unite!" URL (consulted on 21 November 2014): <http://www.piracymanifesto.com/>.

## Chapter Three: The Theory of Agonistic Radical Democracy

### 3.1 Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, the internet has been used as a means of engendering variants of radical democracy by the proponents of both deliberative and autonomous democracy. However, concerns over the limited ‘real world’ successes of these online endeavors have resulted in continued cynicism on the part of various critics in relation to the political efficacy of this medium.<sup>83</sup> Yet, more recent use of the internet and online social media by, in particular, new social movements, as a means of sharing information, communicating, organizing, and subsequently mobilizing and coordinating protests and demonstrations offline (i.e. in the real world), have also provided greater evidence of the political potential of such media. But, although often associated with deliberative and autonomous approaches to democracy, these new social movements’ use of the internet – upon closer inspection – emerges as more closely connected to the theory of political agonism, and the accompanying conception of agonistic radical democracy, than with deliberative or autonomous ideas.

With a view to exploring the above, this chapter commences with a brief discussion of the overall conception of agonistic radical democracy, before an in-depth analysis of the related theorizations of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe – as reflected primarily in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* – is undertaken. That is, this chapter will commence with a brief discussion of the various ideas of agonistic democracy that have been advanced by, among others, William Connolly, James Tully, Bonnie Honig, and David Owen, who argue respectively for the ideas of difference, identity, contestation, and conflict within the agonistic political paradigm. After this, Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, as well as their individual conceptions of agonistic democracy, will be thematized and elaborated upon. In short, stressing the overarching presence of antagonisms and differences in contemporary politics, Laclau and Mouffe argue that democracy should not be about achieving consensus, but should rather be concerned with providing a platform for the confrontation of inevitable differences, and the

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<sup>83</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, such critics remain unconvinced of the democratic potential of the internet, and argue instead that online interactions either simply promote uncritical, individualized, and consumer-orientated political processes, or – apart from some minor critical successes – remain largely marginal and ineffective.

constant renegotiation of issues based on these conflicts. Moreover, related to the ideas of equivalence and plurality, they assert that previously unconnected or dissimilar groups should endeavor to recognize the similarities in their *progressive* struggles or ideas, and come together to support the radically democratic cause of extending liberty and equality to all. Understandably, because of its emphasis on plurality and multiplicity, such agonistic radical democracy stands to have a strong resonance with the dynamics of interaction made possible by online communications technologies, and the general and specific online reflections of agonism will be discussed subsequently, in Chapter Four.

### 3.2 Agonistic democracy

The idea of agonistic politics in modern society is often attributed to the philosopher Hannah Arendt, and her 1950s work *The Human Condition*, in which she thematized the politics that formed part of the ancient Greek tradition. Examining how the politics of ancient Greece were based on communication and direct participation, Arendt suggests that “to be political” in that time, was “to live in a polis...[where] everything was decided through words and persuasion and not through force or violence” (1958:24). Following on from Arendt, agonistic scholars, including William Connolly, James Tully, Bonnie Honig and David Owen, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, have tended to be deeply critical of the ideas of consensus which underpin deliberative democracy, and in contrast, argue that democratic contest or disagreement is an essential element in the regulation of political life. This is because social relations, they insist, are always radically unstable and predominantly antagonistic.

Accordingly, different people, all forming part of different communities and holding attachments to the identity, values, and ideologies of those communities, should not be forced to give up on those attachments. Instead, agonistic democratic theorists see social relations as ‘radically contingent,’ with different people occupying different socially organized subject positions, which are constantly in a process of kaleidoscopic transformation. As such, instead of being construed as unitary or purely rational agents, within the compass of agonistic theory communities are seen as plural and replete with antagonisms, and this state is understood as interminable. Thus agonistic politics explores the symbolic ordering of social relations, not in terms of the reasonable pluralism of values and worldviews, advanced by Rawls,<sup>84</sup> but rather

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<sup>84</sup> For Rawls, human beings are capable of mutual respect and tolerance, and these capabilities, he argues, help to ensure – despite a diversity of world views – reasonable pluralism in democratic society. In this regard, Wenar highlights Rawls’s hope that “the religious, moral, and philosophical doctrines that citizens accept will themselves endorse toleration and accept the essentials of a democratic regime” (2012).

in relation to a pluralism which “recognises the impossibility of ever adjudicating without contest and without residue among competing visions of the good, of justice, and of the political” (Benhabib 1996:8). Indeed, despite their slightly different areas of focus, for the most part agonistic scholars tend to agree that democracy within pluralistic societies needs to allow for the recognition of difference, that it should highlight the importance of conflict, and that it needs to take cognizance of the fact that there is no *one* truth, but only ever contingent *truths*.

To begin with, an important scholar in this regard is William Connolly, whose theory of agonistic democracy is inspired by the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and Foucault – in particular, Nietzsche’s advancement of the importance of rediscovering the *agon*, and Foucault’s emphasis of the role of agonism in facilitating freedom.<sup>85</sup> Accordingly, Connolly focuses on the way in which contingent identities and differences ultimately produce and strengthen each other, insofar as he argues that “to confess a particular identity is also to belong to difference,” and “to come to terms affirmatively with the complexity of that connection is to support an ethos of identity and difference suitable to a democratic culture of deep pluralism” (1991:xiv). For him, this ability to accept the pluralisms found within society comprises ‘agonistic respect,’ and it is this respect and subsequent recognition and acceptance of difference that is at the forefront of Connolly’s conception of agonistic democracy. A democracy which, on the one hand, is vital to “the recognition and inclusion of identity difference,” and on the other hand, functions as “a means by which identity can be colonised, formalised and politically legitimised” (Connolly 1991:x). Connolly thus argues for a new ideal of democracy, namely expressive agonism, which can “transform established terms of...debate and allow alternative ideas to surface,” and which is “based on the idea of ‘agonistic respect’ as a new way of negotiating the politics of identity and its problematic relationship to difference” (Allegritti 2006:1, 7).

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<sup>85</sup> In his book, *Homer’s Contest*, Nietzsche provides a classical definition of the *agon* as “an ongoing productive activity of contest, struggle, and resistance between opposing forces” (cited in Gogroff-Voorhees 2003). Here he highlights the superiority of the Greek notion of contest in its political, physical and rhetorical sense, and promotes the Greeks’ recognition of “the nature of the *agon* neither to render its participants mute nor to attain the conquering finality of *telos*” (Lungstrum and Sauer 1997:25). Furthermore, he sees this *agon* as being rediscovered or reoccurring in the future. Similarly, in his essay “The Subject and Power,” Foucault highlights the connection between agonism and freedom when he maintains that, “rather than speaking of an essential antagonism, it would be better to speak of an ‘agonism’ – of a relationship which is at the same time mutual incitement and struggle; less of a face-to-face confrontation that paralyses both sides than a permanent provocation” (1994:342).



Connected to such ideas of identity and difference, James Tully advances the concept of constitutional agonism, through which he recognizes that the “struggle over the fundamental values and structures of political life are essential to democratic practice.” However, at the same time he insists “that this struggle can and should take place within a framework which encourages mutual respect for and meaningful communication between different values and identities” (cited in Wingenbach 2011:54). Again, drawing on the ideas of Arendt, Tully explores the connections that can be found between participation, citizenship, and freedom, and he argues that citizen participation – which can be seen as the act of citizenship – characterizes the practice of freedom (1999:170). However, although without participation there can be no freedom, Tully argues that in contemporary society this participation is often restricted to those of the dominant group, and cultural minorities are often relegated to the realm of ‘subjects’ rather than citizens (2000:217). Against this, Tully promotes an idea of agonistic democracy that entails the implementation of a form of *mutual respect* in “an ongoing game of contestation...through participation in dialogues with others” (2000:228). For him, mutual respect relates to mutual recognition and the subsequent support of various groups’ cultural differences (2002:166). Admittedly, this mutual respect differs from Connolly’s conception of agonistic respect, which “builds links between disparate and contending individuals who do not necessarily seek institutional support for the accommodation of their differences” (Allegritti 2006:7). In contrast, Tully insists that agonism must be recognised through a framework of activity which facilitates contestation, in a way that realizes democratic freedom. Nevertheless, like Connolly, the realization of this freedom “does not rest on its approximation to some ideal consensus, but rather on the mutual relationship between the prevailing rules of law and the democratic and judicial practices of ongoing disagreement, negotiation, amendment, implementations and review” (Tully 2002:209).<sup>86</sup>

In certain respects, Bonnie Honig offers a similar conception of agonistic politics. Rejecting the idea of consensus in politics, Honig acknowledges the democratic potential of contestation and difference, and argues that to “take difference...seriously in democratic

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<sup>86</sup> In relation to this idea – and drawing on the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Foucault and Arendt – Tully describes freedom as “the ability to refuse to be governed in ways that deny one’s capacity for self-determination.” That is, he argues that “a subject is free when it can practice strategies that resist the rules guiding social interactions and contest the norms shaping social life.” As such, “freedom emerges as the struggle against sedimented practices expressed by the ‘rules of the game’ or any area of human activity” (Wingenbach 2011:55). Consequently, freedom, according to Tully, can always be seen as an agonistic practice in that it involves a continuous opposition to consensus.

theory is to affirm the inescapability of conflict and the ineradicability of resistance to the political and moral projects of ordering subjects, institutions, and value” (1996:258). Accordingly, drawing on the works of Arendt and Nietzsche, Honig develops an agonistic model of democracy that focuses on the difference between the notions of *virtue* and *virtù*. In terms of this, she explains virtue as “theories that displace conflict...[and] identify politics with administration and treat juridical settlement as the task of politics and political theory.” And she contrasts this to the conception of *virtù*, which she maintains “see[s] politics as a disruptive practice that resists the consolidations and closures of administrative and juridical settlement for the sake of perpetuity of political contest” (1993:2). In short, her agonistic theory focuses on the importance of political contestation together with the disruption of settled political practices. However, she differs somewhat from Connolly and Tully insofar as, while she highlights the importance of contestatory politics, she notes that agonism is not “inherently contestational,” but simply “anticipates resistance to all efforts to institute and maintain equality and justice” (Pearce and Honig 2013).

To some degree, David Owen expands on this idea of contestation, in relation to the realization of equality and self-government. Similarly influenced by Nietzsche and the associated valorization of the agonistic virtues of contestation and competition, Owen maintains that democratic politics should fundamentally be seen as “specifying the medium through which...[the] activity of working out the terms of our association and one’s relations to one’s fellow citizen is accomplished (2009:71). Furthermore, Owen suggests that agonistic democracy should use “the public sphere to allow citizens to generate and develop conceptions of the good and virtuous life” against the backdrop “of temporary, contestable public standards, the meaning of which is continuously at stake” (cited in Fossen 2008:392). In this regard, according to Schaap, Owen “defends an expressivist conception of political agonism.” This is because “he argues against distinguishing agonistic politics as different in kind from ordinary politics on the basis that the former involves contest *over rules*[,] whereas the latter is a contest within those rules, to which all parties already assent” (2009:4). Thus, Schaap highlights Owen’s idea that, “in a constitutional democracy, political agonism refers to the struggle to work out the terms of political association between free, equal and plural citizens,” via “a practical orientation to the abstract and critical norms of popular sovereignty and the rule of law” (2009:4).

Jacques Rancière’s theory of democracy is linked to the above mentioned agonistic theories on account of his ideas concerning difference and conflict, and his rejection of deliberative democracy. That is, Rancière views democracy not as a form of government, but rather as a “sporadic” break in the current order (1999:61), through disagreements that arise

via “the enactment of equality by a group of people who were not considered to be equal” (Ruitenberg 2010:43). He argues that politics is thus “primarily conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it” (Rancière 1999:26-27). Since he sees politics as being primarily about conflict, and since he sees the concept of consensus as “erasing the contestatory, conflictual nature of the very givens of common life,” he rejects the idea of deliberative democracy, insofar as it cannot recognize democracy’s constitutive nature of disagreement (Rancière 2004:7). According to Ruitenberg, Rancière sees disagreement not as “a detached exchange of rational arguments but rather [as] a dispute that has emotional force because a fundamental value is being violated” (2010:44). This fundamental value, Rancière argues, is equality, and when this equality is denied, political disagreements arise.<sup>87</sup>

The above theorists have contributed significantly to the formulation of agonistic political thought and related conceptions of radical democracy. However, arguably, the most succinct and cogent articulation of the role of difference and conflict within emancipatory *and* hegemonic projects of the left – and in relation to new social movement politics – occurs in the agonistic political theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

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<sup>87</sup> Lyotard’s conception of agonistics stands out as complimentary here, in that he views it not as a philosophical doctrine or social theory, but rather as a practice. In *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), he explores the concept of agonistics in relation to language games. In this regard, he notes that “to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing, and speech acts will fall within the domain of agonistics” (1984:10). Focusing on the issues of conflict, pleasure, and language, Lyotard examines the everyday implications of speech acts on social relations. Similarities between Lyotard, Rancière and Laclau and Mouffe (discussed below), can be seen in their support of conflict and agonistic difference. Indeed, Lyotard protests against “the reduction of the political into theories of democracy premised on the elimination of conflict as the goal of social justice” (Ziarek 2001:84), and instead calls for a rejection of deliberative versions of consensus and the embrace of dissensus. Browning notes Lyotard’s support of dissensus when he asserts that, “for Lyotard dissensus is to be valued because it harmonises with an incommensurability which is fundamental to the constitution of social practice. The mentality of agonistic practice he commends is designed to intensify differences, and so register the possibilities latent within the social bond” (Browning in Sawyer 2014:77). Since meaning in language is made through different forms of phrasing, Lyotard insists that different perspectives are disconnected and, as such, cannot be expressed in the same way. Thus, he argues that “the urge to accept or work for consensus is not only problematic but also politically unjust because it denies a voice to those whose standpoint is denied in phrasing” (Browning 2011:58). Consequently, he proposes “dissensus as the appropriate way of responding to a political world in which there are radical differences between perspectives” (Browning 2011:58).

### 3.3 Laclau and Mouffe's agonistic conception of radical democracy

Largely recognized for their interest in the workings of populisms during the twentieth century,<sup>88</sup> Laclau and Mouffe's position on radical democracy, needs to be understood by examining, firstly, their critical relationship with classical Marxism; secondly, their related disavowal of the deliberative democratic pursuit of consensus; thirdly, their problems with autonomous radical democracy; fourthly, their argument for a new political strategy of left-wing radical democracy; and fifthly, the various critiques of their theory.

To begin with, Laclau and Mouffe distance themselves from the centralization of power around ideas of consensus, and the related class logic of classical Marxism. Instead, drawing on Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony,<sup>89</sup> Laclau and Mouffe advance the idea of a radical and plural democracy, in terms of which the "multiplication of political spaces and the preventing of the concentration of power in one point are [seen as]...preconditions of every truly democratic transformation of society" (2001:178). For them, democracy is not about consensus – which can all too easily camouflage the oppressive hegemony identified by Gramsci – but is rather about allowing for the creation of an arena where differences can be challenged and conflict can be discussed. Accordingly, despite their roots being firmly based

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<sup>88</sup> Mudde and his colleagues define populism as "a thin-centred ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' and 'the corrupt elites,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (*general will*) of the people" (2004:543). Based on this definition it has been argued that populism includes three core concepts, namely, the elite, the people, and the general will, as well as two direct opposites: elitism and pluralism. While Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* investigates the political populisms of the twentieth century, more recently they have called for a form of left-wing populism against neoliberalism, which Mouffe explains in the following way: "If I speak of left-wing populism, it's not just one model. What is at stake here is the creation of a collective will from the articulations of different population sectors. A kind of popular project for different social factions, where different sectors of the population can identify themselves and create what I call 'a chain of equivalents of democratic demands and transformation,' of radicalization, of democratic institutions" (cited in Hackl 2014).

<sup>89</sup> Gramsci's idea of hegemony highlights the way in which certain social classes, within post-1870 industrial western European nations, *accepted* and *consented* to their domination and control by the ruling or dominant class. That is, instead of being violently coerced into accepting an inferior position, these classes were progressively inculcated with the requisite values, so that they came to view their subordination as 'natural,' the result of 'common sense,' and hence incontestable (Gramsci 1971). In this regard, Eagleton explains the Gramscian view of hegemony when he asserts that "to win hegemony is to establish moral, political and intellectual leadership in social life by diffusing one's own world view throughout the fabric of society as a whole, thus equating one's own interests with the interests of society at large" (1991:116).

in Marxism, problems with classical Marxism, including “the authoritarianism of Soviet-styled socialism [and] the failure of revolutionary movements in the West,” led to Laclau and Mouffe’s interest in post-Marxism. In this regard, notwithstanding the general recognition of Gramsci as a Marxist theoretician, he is also often specifically identified as having contributed to post-Marxism. And Laclau and Mouffe – who saw his work as veering away from economist perspectives toward political and cultural identity formation processes – have employed his idea of hegemony as the foundation of their democratic argument. To this end, they saw Gramsci’s concept of hegemony – involving “a political project that can assume leadership of society based on [a] carefully forged set of alliances among various groups” – as the future of leftist strategy. A strategy that focuses on creating a form of democracy that is less exclusionary and more expansive. Against this backdrop, Laclau and Mouffe also criticize the failure of the class logic of classical Marxism, and advance instead the idea that “capitalist societies show...increasingly complex and variegated social configurations” and identities (cited in Dyer-Witheford 2007:193). That is, although they agree that society is driven by conflict (antagonisms), they argue that the problem with traditional socialist thought is that it absorbs all conflict under the auspices of class struggle and does not allow for the understanding of conflicts not necessarily related to capitalism. Mouffe, in fact, insists that “there are forms of antagonism which cannot be understood purely as an effect of a capitalist system” (Mouffe, cited in Castle 1998). These relate to social identities (gender, class position, ethnicity) which, she and Laclau argue, are “far from being a mere reflex of economic position,” and are instead “symbolic constructions generated by [a] contested play of meaning” (Dyer-Witheford 2007:193). A good example of this is sexism, which “cannot be reduced to being simply a product of capitalism,” because “the origin of sexism is not in capitalism.” Consequently, one cannot “solve the question of sexism by transforming or even by ending the capitalist system. The same is true for racism” (Mouffe, cited in Castle 1998). For Laclau and Mouffe, then, “a person’s subject-position depends, like the meaning of a word, on how it is inserted in chains of signification.” That is, “what it means to be a ‘woman,’ a ‘worker,’ a ‘white,’ a ‘citizen,’ a ‘consumer’ or a ‘commoner,’ is constantly being redefined, and this definition in turn depends on every other identity” (Dyer-Witheford 2007:193). In relation to this, they advance that political movements or struggles do not necessarily depend on class logic, but rather on the creation of, on the one hand, antagonisms, in which certain identities oppose one another, and on the other hand, equivalences, whereby identities are articulated on a cooperative front. Thus, responding to the twentieth-century disillusionment with the Marxist project, Laclau and Mouffe do not privilege the class struggle, and argue instead against the traditional Marxist idea that there is one dynamic that

dominates social life (Laclau and Mouffe 2001:190). Indeed, in an interview with Castle, Laclau maintained that the history of socialism shows that “radical political movements have only emerged through an ‘alliance’ of many different struggles – nationalist, anti-imperialist, civil rights and religious alongside the workers’ struggle” (Laclau, cited in Castle 1998). Furthermore, in response to the rise of new social movements in the twentieth century, Laclau and Mouffe question the ability of Marxism to recognize or understand the differences in the oppression, resistance, and struggles of feminism, the anti-racist struggle, and for that matter, the environmental movement, along with struggles of other new social movements. Correlatively, they argue that, as a result of the plurality of social movement objectives and agendas, obstacles to consensus between such groups will almost always emerge,<sup>90</sup> and these cannot simply be wished away or obscured with a blanket of over-arching ideology. On the contrary, failure to take cognizance of these differences frequently results in the fragmentation of the leftist struggle, and these tensions prevent the formation of a strategy which can effectively challenge the current ubiquitous neoliberal concepts of democracy.<sup>91</sup>

Secondly, Laclau and Mouffe are similarly critical of the deliberative democratic idea of consensus, with Mouffe insisting that the possibility for the creation of an un-coercive deliberative sphere is ‘unfounded.’ This is because the formation of agreements between different communities, and between people with different discourses, is not the product of reason, but rather a result of ‘power play’ and ‘astute rhetoric.’ Mouffe elaborates on this when she asserts that “the domain of ‘the political’...is understood as primarily antagonistic, leading to ‘politics’...being characterised by dissent and division” (Mouffe 2000, cited in

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<sup>90</sup> Laclau and Mouffe’s recognition of the relationship between power and discourse is important here. In particular, Mouffe argues that a relation of inclusion/exclusion or inside/outside emerges as an inherent part of the logic of discourse (Mouffe 2000), the consequence of which, is that tensions or struggles for power, cultural domination, hegemony, etcetera, between those inside of, and those outside of, the dominant discourse will always develop. And this struggle leads to divisions between the dominant discourses – that achieve power or hegemony – and the marginalized discourses that are correlatively excluded. As a result, any attempt to achieve consensus always involves power relations and struggles for hegemony, involving the domination, or at least the co-optation, of one group by another. Thus, for Mouffe, “any consensus is always at least partially a result of hegemony” understood as “a stabilization of meaning aided by cultural domination and exclusion,” which cannot but emerge as a source of antagonism (Dahlberg 2007a:836).

<sup>91</sup> In relation to neoliberalism, Laclau and Mouffe also argue against the anti-democratic influence of neo-conservatism. Smith highlights their criticism of this form of politics when he states that, “although neo-conservatives equate the growth of the capitalist ‘free’ market with freedom, equality and democracy, the evidence suggests that capitalist formations depend on exploitation and coercion, foster inequality, and either neutralize democracy or tolerate fundamentally anti-democratic conditions” (1998:18). Laclau and Mouffe are accordingly equally critical of the anti-democratic influences of neoliberalism and neo-conservatism.

Dahlberg and Siapera 2007:9).<sup>92</sup> Because of this dissent and division, she maintains, agreements will always be contingent, and “achieving a fully inclusive rational consensus” – like that promoted by deliberative democracy – is impossible (2000:5). Of course Mouffe does indicate that “compromises are possible,” and indeed, “part of the process of politics” (1999b:755). However, she nevertheless insists that they should only offer momentary breaks in the process of confrontation (Mouffe 1999b:755). Consequently, Mouffe criticizes Habermas’s notion of deliberative democracy in two ways. Firstly, she questions Habermas’s Eurocentric and liberal understanding of rational consensus, arguing that such consensus is based on the liberal positions of individual human rights and the rule of law, which often tend to exclude ‘a priori’ groups and individuals who may not identify with such liberal principles. These groups, she asserts, are therefore repeatedly deemed ‘irrational’ or ‘premodern,’ and frequently react antagonistically toward obligations imposed on them by liberal consensus (2000:46). Related to this, as indicated above, she advances that any form of apparent public consensus is the product of clever rhetoric or power politics, rather than an accurate reflection of existing states of affairs. Secondly, Mouffe criticizes Habermas’s notion of the ‘ideal speech situation,’ which he sees as allowing public dialogue to be inclusive, open and uncoerced. Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, Mouffe highlights the ‘conceptual impossibility’ of Habermas’s notion of a ‘coercion-free’ deliberative sphere. And she argues that, “far from being merely empirical, or epistemological, the obstacles to [the realization of the ideal speech situation] are ontological” (2000:98). This is because “the free and unconstrained public deliberation of all on matters of common concern is a conceptual impossibility” (2000:98), on account of the way in which the symbolic field is made up of “free-floating signifiers, rendering the establishment of any discourse authoritarian”

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<sup>92</sup> Mouffe’s ideas on the political, at least to some extent, approximate those of Rancière, who argues that “the essence of the political is dissensus; but dissensus is not the opposition of interests and opinions. It is a gap in the sensible: the political persists as long as there is a dissensus about the givens of a particular situation, of what is seen and what might be said, on the question of who is qualified to see or say what is given” (Rancière and Panagia 2000:124). As such, Rancière’s focus on disagreement and dissensus as primary elements of the political, can be related to Mouffe’s focus on disagreement and conflict. That is, Mouffe’s idea of the political as “the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations” (2000:15) and “constitutive of human societies” (2005:9). Yet, despite this similarity, Rancière questions the notion, supported by Mouffe, that democratic change should be allowed to take place within the institutions and discourses of politics.

(2000:98). Thus “meaning can happen only by advancing a master signifier, at the expense and exclusion of other signifiers” (Kapoor 2002:464).<sup>93</sup>

Thirdly, Mouffe is equally skeptical of the feasibility of the autonomous radical democracy espoused by Hardt and Negri, and rejects their theory for four reasons. Firstly, she disagrees with their anti-institutional view, which argues that all forms of institutions are fascistic, and that the multitude should reject all forms of belonging. This disagreement emerges in relation to Mouffe’s idea that democratic change should be allowed to happen inside and via the discourses and institutions of contemporary politics. Secondly, she sees Hardt and Negri’s argument as being theoretically inadequate, since they do not take cognizance of the importance of what she calls ‘passions’ for collective political identities. In this regard, her conception of ‘passions’ can be linked to what Freud calls ‘libidinal investment,’ that is, an “attachment of strong, intense emotional energies to an issue, person or concept,” which is “mobilized in the creation of local, regional or national forms of identities” (Mouffe, cited in Miessen 2011:111). Accordingly, Mouffe argues that “the lesson to be drawn from Freud...is that, even in societies which have become very individualistic, the need for collective identification will never disappear since it is constitutive of the mode of existence of human beings” (2005:28). In relation to this, she highlights Jacques Lacan’s development of Freud’s theory through his concept of *jouissance* (enjoyment), and emphasizes its “importance for exploring the role of affect in politics” (2005:27). In particular, Mouffe thematizes Stavrakakis’s observation that the experience of Lacanian *jouissance* is in fact the reason behind socio-political forms of identification. He maintains that “the problematic of enjoyment helps us answer in a concrete way what is at stake in socio-political identification and identity formation,” and suggests “that support of social fantasies is partially routed in the *jouissance* of the body” (Stavrakakis 2007:196). Thus, “what is at stake in these fields, according to Lacanian theory, is not only symbolic coherence and discursive closure but also enjoyment, the *jouissance* animating human desire” (Stavrakakis 2007:196). In support of this, Mouffe also relates Slavoj Žižek’s articulation of this issue, when he draws a connection between Lacan’s theory of enjoyment and political nationalism. For Žižek, “the element which holds together a particular community cannot be reduced to the point of symbolic identification” because “the bond linking together its

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<sup>93</sup> Derrida highlights this idea when he points toward the violence inherent in any arbitrary binary opposition. He notes that such binary oppositions will always have a ‘violent hierarchy,’ in which one of the terms governs over or has power over the other – for example male/female, good/evil, and black/white. Thus, “in a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather...a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand” (1982:41).



members always implies a shared relation towards a Thing, toward Enjoyment incarnated” (1993:201). Thirdly, she argues that Hardt and Negri’s theory is largely a ‘reformulation’ of Second International Marxism. That is, for her, Hardt and Negri advance “the same type of determinism in which we basically don’t have to do anything, just wait for the moment in which the contradiction of Empire will bring about the reign of the multitude” (Mouffe, cited in Miessen 2011:112).<sup>94</sup> Finally, she insists that her main disagreement is with Hardt and Negri’s idea of an *absolute* democracy, one that is outside of any forms of institution. In relation to this, she criticizes their view that “it is possible to reach a perfect democracy in which there will no longer be any relation of power – no more conflict, no more antagonism” (Mouffe, cited in Miessen 2011:111) for the reasons indicated earlier.

Fourthly, and in contrast to all of the above, Laclau and Mouffe advance a new political strategy of hegemonic left-wing radical democracy. That is, for them, politics is not about the realization of the classical Marxist agenda, nor is it about Habermas’s idea of the creation of a rational consensus, nor is it akin to Hardt and Negri’s conception of the multitude. Rather, it concerns agonistic pluralism, and accordingly it is advanced that politics and democracy should provide an arena where conflicts and differences can be confronted. To be sure, subtle differences exist between Mouffe and Laclau’s respective approaches to this issue. In short, Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism identifies democracy as a product of conflict (Mouffe 2000:53), and she even argues that absolute democracy – where conflict no longer exists – will ultimately lead to the end of democracy (Mouffe, cited in Miessen 2007). This is, of course, related to the idea of the ‘democratic paradox,’ whereby the ultimate realization of democracy results in its concomitant elimination. More specifically though, for Mouffe, the heart of the democratic paradox can be found in the struggle between liberalism (liberty and the protection of rights) and democracy (collective sovereignty and equality). And she argues that since these two ideas can never be perfectly reconciled, perfect liberty and equality will never be possible. However, while Carl Schmitt viewed this inability to reconcile as leading to the failure of liberal democracy (1976),<sup>95</sup> Mouffe suggests, on the contrary, that it is exactly the conflict that exists between liberalism and democracy which allows political society to exist. In this regard, she asserts that “what we need to do is

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<sup>94</sup> This connection to Second International Marxism can be seen in relation to its claims that capitalism will inexorably result in its own demise (Bevir 2010:865).

<sup>95</sup> Schmitt insists that there is an irreconcilable opposition between “liberal individualism, with its moral discourse centered around the individual, and the democratic ideal, which is essentially political, and aims at creating identity based on homogeneity” (Mouffe 1999a:40), and because of this, for him, liberal democracy is not viable.

precisely what Schmitt does not do: once we have recognized that the unity of the people is the result of a political construction, we need to explore all the logical possibilities that a political articulation entails” (2000:55-6). That is, although Schmitt sees the *demos* as a given, already realized entity, Mouffe argues that there is never an absolute, fully formed *demos*, and that instead the *demos* is constantly struggling to create itself. This is because democratic politics does not consist in “the moment when a fully constituted people exercise its rule” (2000:55-56). Rather, she states that “the moment of rule is indissociable from the very struggle about the definition of the people, about the constitution of its identity” (2000:56). Liberal democracy, she maintains, is “precisely the recognition of this constitutive gap between the people and its various identifications” (2000:56). And because the *demos* can never be fully realized, it is imperative that a space for contestation and conflict should always be available for such struggles to occur.

Laclau and Mouffe’s move away from traditional socialist politics, and their concomitant connections to the post-structuralist thought of Derrida (and Lacan), is thus evident. This connection can be seen, in particular, in relation to their reinterpretation of Derrida’s conception of ‘democracy to come.’ In *Spectres of Marx* (1994), *Politics of Friendship* (1997b), and *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (2005), Derrida’s deconstructive politics are brought to the fore in his reference to the idea of democracy as always ‘to come.’ According to Rebentisch, “Derrida locates his notion of an impending democracy neither in the realm of the constitutive (as in Plato) nor in that of the regulative (as in Kant).” Instead he locates it “in the mode of what he calls *différance*; that is to say, democracy only exists in the mode of differing from itself and this alone can keep it open to the yet to come” (2005:928-929). Importantly, this idea of a ‘democracy to come’ does not relate either to an ‘idea’ or a ‘future possibility,’ but rather points toward the “transformative and disruptive potential at the heart of democracy, it points to a promise of change in the here and now” (Matthews 2013). In this regard, Derrida states: “when I speak of democracy to come...this does not mean that tomorrow democracy will be realized, and it does not refer to a future democracy.” Instead, he argues, “it means that there is an engagement with regard to democracy which consists...[of] recognizing the irreducibility of the promise..[that] ‘it can come’” (1996:83). Fritsch elaborates on this idea when he explains that “the ‘always’ here already indicates that we are no longer at the empirical level of promises made by identifiable subjects, but at an ‘ontological’ or, as Derrida prefers to call it, ‘hauntological’ or ‘quasi-transcendental’ level;”

that is, “we are talking about the being-promise of a promise” (Fritsch 2002:578).<sup>96</sup> Similarly, for Mouffe, radical democracy can be seen as a promise, something in the distance that should always be reached for, but something that ultimately can never fully be realized. Instead, because agonistic radical democracy involves constant disagreement and conflict, it offers the possibility of interminable democratic reinvention and renewal.

One of the key features of such reinvention and renewal thematized by Laclau and Mouffe is the formation of coalitions, and in this regard – even more than Mouffe – Laclau situates himself against autonomous democracy by offering one of the most scathing critiques of Hardt and Negri’s work. In short, he challenges the conviction expressed by Hardt and Negri in *Empire* that anti-capitalism is the only form of political coordination needed to bring about the counter-globalization of the multitude. For Laclau, their assertion fails to recognize the wide array of social factors that link people together, and hence he argues that their idea of *Empire* lacks a “theory of articulation, without which politics are unthinkable” (2004:26-30). In other words, for Laclau, Hardt and Negri cannot adequately explain the multitude’s politicization, and the subsequent circumstances that allow political action to take place. And he argues that, “if we have an internally divided society, the will of the community as a whole has to be *politically* constructed out of a primary – constitutive – diversity.” Consequently, “any ‘multitude’ is constructed through political action – which presupposes antagonism and hegemony” (2004:30). Instead, Hardt and Negri argue that groups in the multitude do not need to be linked on a horizontal level in order to challenge *Empire*, but rather should go vertically, straight to the power of *Empire* – thereby increasing the capacity of their subversion. This perspective stands in stark contrast to Laclau and Mouffe’s assertion that coalitions need to be created between differing groups, in order to construct a cooperative front against the status quo. Although Laclau is seemingly more critical of Hardt and Negri, he has also attacked the deliberative democratic ideal of consensus, in particular Habermas’s conception of rational consensus. Like Mouffe, he argues that exclusion and coercion are

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<sup>96</sup> This idea of ‘democracy to come’ can be closely related to the Messianic elements of Derrida’s deconstruction, and the emphasis it places on the future. That is, drawing on Judaic beliefs of the coming of the Messiah, Derrida (and for that matter, John Caputo) stress the importance of the ‘to come.’ Just as democracy would become lifeless if it was ever to be fully realized, they argue that if the Messiah “were ever to show up in the flesh [, w]ere his coming ever taken to be an occurrence in historical time, something that could be picked up on a video camera, that would be a disaster. The effect would be to shut down the very structure of time and history, to close off the structure of hope, desire, expectation, promise, in short the future” (Derrida 1997a:163). Therefore, just as the Messiah will always be a promise of something to come, so too democracy must always be something to come.

inherent to rational consensus, insofar as consensus can only be reached through the force of 'a better argument.' Thus, Laclau insists, unless "the 'grounds' on which what counts for a 'better argument' are themselves transcendently given, some alternatives must have been excluded on less than absolute or rational grounds" (Laclau 1991, cited in Hansen 2008:7). In relation to this, he argues that the "undecidability of any decision will never be complete and social coherence will only be achieved at the cost of repressing something that negates it." And because of this, "any consensus[,]. . .any objective and differential system of rule implies, as its most essential possibility, a dimension of coercion" (Laclau 1990:172).<sup>97</sup> Thus, although Laclau concedes that "Habermas addresses all of the important issues of contemporary theory and politics," he insists that Habermas "gives them answers, which are to a large extent...the antipodes of those which...[he is] searching for" (cited in Bowman 1999:22).

In relation to these critiques, Laclau and Mouffe argue that a new political strategy – a left-wing radicalization of democracy – which is based on an idea of equivalence rather than agreement, and which can effectively oppose the current near-hegemony of neoliberalism, needs to be established, and they call this *radical democracy*. In terms of equivalence, Laclau and Mouffe advance that "the strengthening of specific democratic struggles requires...the expansion of chains of equivalence which extend to other struggles" (2001:182). That is, the demands and successes of various groups and struggles need to be viewed as equal to, and dependent upon, each other, to the extent that the rights of one group cannot be realized at the expense of the rights of another. Yet, importantly, they do not suggest that one group should submit to the will of another, or that smaller groups should be adopted or incorporated into others. Instead, they suggest that all progressive struggles – no matter the size or vision – should be able to come together, while respecting and protecting their differences, so that the radical democracy thereby engendered continues to grow in terms of its plurality. Consequently, it is only when, for example, the rights and demands of the worker's struggle, are achieved in the "context of respect" for the right of women's or immigrants' groups, that "struggles against power become truly democratic" (Laclau and Mouffe 2001:184). In his

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<sup>97</sup>According to Stäheli, "Laclau develops a theory of decision based on [Derrida's notion of] undecidability" (2003:2). Undecidability, for Laclau, "is the pre-condition for any 'true' decision, otherwise the decision would be a result of the logic inherent in a previously constituted terrain" (Laclau 1996:53). That is, "in an undecidable situation one cannot determine the dividing line between two possibilities," and as such, one possibility is almost always left out (Stäheli 2003:4). Similarly, Mouffe maintains that, "without taking a rigorous account of undecidability, it is impossible to think the concepts of political decision and ethical responsibility." Thus, she argues that "undecidability is not a moment to be traversed or overcome" and that "conflicts of duty are interminable," because one can "never be completely satisfied that...[one has] made a good choice since a decision in favor of one alternative is always to the detriment of another" (1996:9).

book *On Populist Reason*, Laclau provides the following figure as a visual example of the concept of a chain of equivalence, and he explains his example of chains of equivalence in the following way: “The example I had in mind was that of an oppressive regime,” for example Tsarism (Ts), which is “separated by a political frontier from the demands of most sectors of society (D1, D2, D3,...etc.).” And while “each of these demands, in its particularity, is different from all the others...[a]ll of them...are equivalent to each other in their common opposition to the oppressive regime” (2005:131-132).

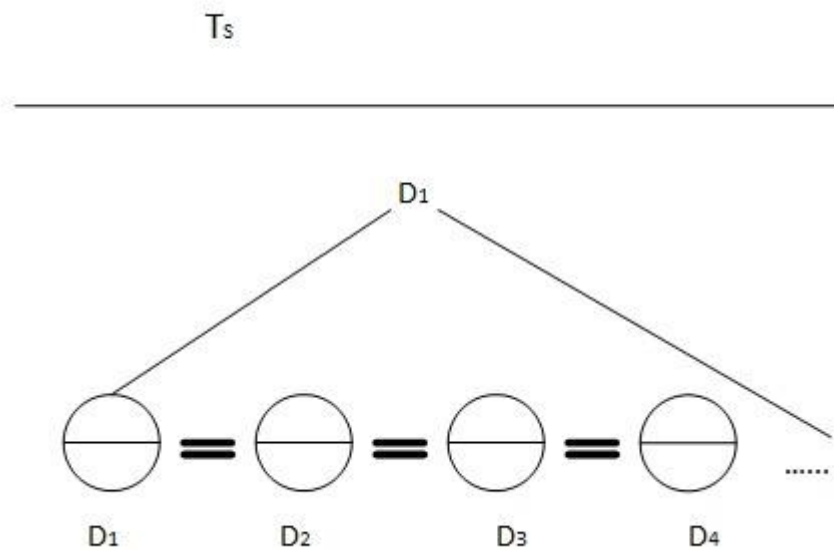


Figure 1: Chains of Equivalence (Laclau 2005:131-132)

Laclau and Mouffe see the ultimate consequence of this logic of equivalence as implying

the dissolution of the autonomy of the spaces in which each one of these struggles is constituted; not necessarily because any of them become subordinate to others, but because they have all become, strictly speaking, equivalent symbols of a unique and indivisible struggle. The antagonism would thus have achieved the conditions of total transparency, to the extent that all unevenness had been eliminated, and the differential specificity of the spaces in which each of the democratic struggles was constituted had been dissolved. (2001:182)

To oppose the threat of neoliberal hegemony, they promote this new strategy – or hegemonic project – as consisting of a combination of ‘radical,’ ‘plural’ and ‘hegemonic’ democratic ideals. The ‘radical’ component entails the above mentioned advancement of an ‘equivalence’ between different groups, which can facilitate not a *temporary* alliance between them, but rather the formation of *permanent* coalitions, within which the success of the agenda of each is understood as inextricably intertwined with the success of the agendas of all the others

(2001:186). In turn, this radical democracy is also ‘plural,’ in the sense that democratic rights and involvement are extended beyond citizenship and public political spaces, to include not only the private realm, but also both existing marginal subjectivities, and any new composite subjectivities which may emerge in the future.<sup>98</sup> This form of democracy is therefore ‘plural’ in the sense that it “broaden[s] the domain of the exercise of democratic rights beyond the limited traditional field of ‘citizenship’” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001:185). And through this it facilitates the “proliferation of radically new and different political spaces...[, together with] the emergence of a plurality of subjects” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001:181). However, the effective establishment of such radical and plural democracy, they argue, is indissociable from the progressive establishment of left-wing hegemony. Through this, hegemony – instead of operating as a tool of the neoliberal status quo that undermines the efficacy of social movements – would become a “fundamental tool” for political analysis and action on the part of the left (Laclau and Mouffe 2001:193). That is, instead of seeing hegemony as something that deprives the left of its political efficacy, Laclau and Mouffe insist that

it is only when the open, unsutured character of the social is fully accepted, [and] when the essentialism of the totality and of the elements is rejected, that...‘hegemony’ can come to constitute a fundamental tool for political analysis on the left. These conditions arise originally in the field of...‘democratic revolution,’ but they are only maximized in all their deconstructive effects in the project for a radical democracy, or, in other words, in a form of politics which is founded not upon dogmatic postulation of any ‘essence of the social,’ but, on the contrary, on affirmation of the contingency and ambiguity of every ‘essence,’ and on the constitutive character of social division and antagonism. (2001:192-193)

Thus, they argue that hegemony, although usually viewed in negative terms, can emerge and grow as a progressive force *of* the left, which includes everyone in a productive space of dissensus rather than consensus. And such a hegemonic project, they assert, could facilitate the creation of a radical and plural democracy. In relation to the idea of democratic revolution, Mouffe argues that “the objective of the left should be the extension of the democratic revolution initiated two hundred years ago” (1992:1). However, the democratic revolution, Laclau and Mouffe maintain, is much more than a series of events, and should rather be seen as “the very possibility of the radicalization of social resistance” (Smith 1998:6). Drawing on

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<sup>98</sup> This plurality is connected to the notion of ‘pluralism’ which refers to a discursive and open society, where multiple social identities and values exist together. This pluralism, Mouffe insists, can be seen as the “defining feature of modern democracy” and, as such, is imperative to the “symbolic ordering of social relations” (cited in Kapoor 2002:465).

the work of Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe support the idea that “wherever there is power, there is resistance.” Yet, they also recognize that “the forms of resistance may be extremely varied” (2001:152), and that “only in certain cases do these forms of resistance take on a political character and become struggles directed toward putting an end to the relations of subordination” (2001:152-153). In short, Laclau and Mouffe effectively call for the creation of a hegemonic politics, in which diverse struggles and demands are articulated into a movement of ‘radical democrats,’ capable of challenging current neoliberal discourses and systems that limit democracy (Dahlberg 2013). A movement whose adversarial power to do so derives from “hegemony,” or a coalition “between different struggles that are constructed as equivalent, which can then extend the meaning of equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations” (Dahlberg and Siaper 2007:9). It is through these hegemonic struggles or projects that the radical or agonistic democratic culture called for by Laclau and Mouffe, which involves the progressive extension of freedom and equality, and which is always open to confrontation, can come into being.

For many, such political development is crucial today, because in a culture of limited political participation, there is a need for the “formation of a politically active citizenry” brought “into being through successful democratic political activism,” a citizenry which recognizes their actions as contributing to their own self-constitution, as well as the self-constitution of society in general (Dahlberg 2013). And for Laclau and Mouffe, this political activism can only be effectively achieved through hegemonic projects and politics which *fight* (in a non-violent sense) for democracy. These hegemonic projects, they assert, help to politicize society by opening up spaces for a variety of divergent democratic struggles to come together, and to challenge existing ‘anti-democratic’ discourses. Accordingly, these struggles, which attempt to transform society rather than seize power, focus on the normative elements of democracy, through the process of which liberty, equality, and contestation – rather than an antagonistic politics of ‘destroying the other’ – are embraced. To this end, Laclau and Mouffe argue that such hegemonic struggles allow for the development of an agonistic democratic culture, which will help usher in the progressive institutionalization of radical democracy.

In this regard, democratic discourses and institutions which encourage political confrontation and conflict between different individual and group identities need to be established (Caperchi 2011). This is because the resultant ability to share “symbolic spaces” and democratic institutions, will allow people the room to exercise their democratic rights, thereby transforming antagonisms into agonistic confrontations – confrontations between adversaries not enemies (Caperchi 2011). Such adversaries, for Mouffe, constitute “a

legitimate enemy, an enemy with whom we have in common a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy,” an enemy who cannot be persuaded through deliberation, but who can be converted to accept the adversary through antagonisms (Mouffe 1999b:755). In relation to this idea of adversaries, Mouffe asserts that since these ‘friendly enemies’ have something in common and ‘share a symbolic space,’ a ‘conflictual consensus’ may exist between them. Importantly though, this is not the deliberative democratic conception of rational consensus, but rather a consensus whereby people “agree on the ethico-political principles that inform the political association, but they disagree on the interpretation of these principles.” For example, Mouffe suggests that “if we take these principles to be liberty and equality for all, it is clear that they can be understood in many different, conflicting ways, which will lead to conflicts that can never be rationally resolved” (Mouffe, cited in Miessen 2011:109). However, the aim of her radical politics is to

construct the “them” in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but [as] an “adversary,” i.e. somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question. This is the real meaning of liberal democratic tolerance, which does not entail condoning ideas that we oppose or being indifferent to standpoints that we disagree with, but treating those who defend them as legitimate opponents.<sup>99</sup> (Mouffe 2000:15)

Accordingly, despite an array of differences and disagreements which make up the field of the social, Laclau and Mouffe maintain that every group must recognize the importance of agonisms – “spirited clashes of democratic positions” – in the establishment of left-wing hegemony; clashes which will also by no means dissolve in the subsequent practice of radical

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<sup>99</sup> Mouffe developed her distinction between enemy and adversary in relation to Carl Schmitt’s thesis that political identities are made up of certain we/they or friend/enemy relations, which can emerge in diverse social situations. According to Mouffe, Schmitt’s friend/enemy conception “deals with the formation of a ‘we’ as opposed to a ‘they,’ and is always concerned with collective forms of identification; it has to do with conflict and antagonism and is therefore the realm of decision, not discussion” (2005:11). In his book *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt argues that the political “can be understood only in the context of the friend/enemy grouping, regardless of the aspects which this possibility implies for morality, aesthetics and economics” (1976:35). This distinction between friend and enemy means that any political consensus will always be based on an element of exclusion, and, as such, Schmitt rejects any notion of a fully inclusive rational consensus. Although Schmitt’s ideas were originally published in 1932, Mouffe argues that certain of his ideas are still relevant for the contemporary era, and she maintains that “Schmitt’s emphasis on the ever present possibility of the friend/enemy distinction and the conflictual nature of politics constitutes the necessary starting point for envisaging the aims of democratic politics” (2005:14).



democracy. Rather, what will progressively dissolve is the political atomism (and apathy) of neoliberalism, through the transformation of “the consciousness of individual groups in society so that they see that their interests are [increasingly] tied up with the interests of other groups” (Mouffe, cited in Castle 1998).

Importantly, since the ideals of liberty and equality are already found within the discourse of the modern capitalist system, Laclau and Mouffe do not call for a radical break from current social constructions, but rather for a radicalization of concepts and morals that are already present within, yet unsatisfied by, liberal democracy. Thus, although each project of radical democracy will have a socialist dimension (as a means of challenging capitalist relations of production), socialism is not the major component, but rather only one element of radical democratic strategy (2001:178). Consequently, unlike the arguments of Hardt and Negri, Laclau and Mouffe advance that “the task of the Left...cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and expand it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy” (2001:176). And in terms of this they argue that radical democrats should appropriate “insights from liberal democratic and socialist thought and combine them together to construct a new approach to democracy” (Smith 1998:18). Something which includes the creation of institutions that take on an agonistic form, thereby allowing conflict, when it emerges, to be expressed in a constructively adversarial, confrontation, rather than as a destructive antagonistic conflict between enemies (Dahlberg 2013).

However, fifthly, despite the immense influence that Laclau and Mouffe have had on contemporary radical democratic thought, together with the widespread recognition they have received as two of the most important post-Marxist theorists, their ideas and politics expressed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, and their related individual works, have by no means been exempt from criticism. Indeed, following the publication of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, post-Marxism as a combination of Marxism and post-structuralism came under significant scrutiny, and was viewed by some as “calculated ambiguity” (Boucher 2008:82), “politics as therapy” (Cloud 1994), an “opiate of the intellectuals” (McGee 1997:201), and an “intellectual sickness” (Geras 1988:40), and by others – ironically – as *too* Marxist.

That is, on the one hand, Laclau and Mouffe’s work was denounced by Marxists as being a repudiation of the class struggle, a promotion of “ex-Marxism without substance,” and as “symptomatic of an intellectual malaise” (Geras 1988:42). It was similarly criticized as being “‘beautifully pragmatic’ of the ‘retreat of class’ by a disillusioned section of the Western Left” (Wood 1998:40). In this regard, Wood also criticizes Laclau and Mouffe’s notion that “socialism is a moment internal to the democratic revolution” (1998:69), and he

argued that “the class struggles of capitalism are not...simply reflexes of liberal-democratic discourse and its ‘discursive construction’ of class relations as oppressive and illegitimate.” Rather, democratic discourse is something “constituted by class conflict” (Wood 1998:69). Moreover, Bertram accused Laclau and Mouffe of a “fetishisation of dislocation,” of contributing to the further dispersal of subjectivity in late capitalism (1995:110), and argued that their “new antagonisms are best suited for the postindustrial society in which there is not opposition to the dominant system (1995:85). Analogously, Osborne suggested that although Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of identity “looks sophisticated,” it only really “operates on one level,” negating the “tension between the irreducible dimension of extra-discursive determinacy in the object and the plurality of its possible discursive constructions” (1991:210-219). Although a supporter of Laclau and Mouffe in some respects, Žižek’s criticism of their ideas of hegemony and antagonism has also gained significant credence. He argues that the agonistic politics put forward by Laclau and Mouffe are unable to challenge the status quo, and as such, will simply result in a continuation of liberal democracy in its current state. Moreover, he takes issue with their idea of antagonisms within society, and questions the ability of Laclau and Mouffe’s ideas to bring about real, radical change. In fact, he goes so far as to assert that,

for all of their emphasis on the openness and contingency of signification, the way the underlying antagonism of society is never to be resolved, nothing is really contemplated happening in their work; no fundamental alteration can actually take place. There is a kind of “resignation” in advance at the possibility of truly effecting radical change, a Kantian imperative that we cannot go too far, cannot definitively fill the void of the master-signifier, cannot know the conditions of political possibility, without losing all freedom. (2000:316-317)

Yet, while Žižek criticizes Laclau and Mouffe for their ‘mere radicalization’ of the liberal democratic imaginary (2000:325), he does not himself provide an alternative to either the market economy, or the socialist political imaginary. Ironically, on the other hand, despite their movement toward post-Marxism, Laclau and Mouffe have also been accused by Barrett of being “too Marxist” (1991:76), insofar as they analyze “social situations...from a recognizably Marxist paradigm” (Boucher 2008:83).

In relation to the concept of agonistic democracy, Crowder (2006) and Erman (2009) have argued that Mouffe’s ideas lack insight into the structures and procedures needed in order to facilitate the realization of agonistic democracy. Moreover, Crowder (2006) and Dryzek (2005, 2009) have criticized agonistic democracy for its dependence on irrational decision-making. This criticism emerged in relation to Mouffe’s position that since passion

plays an important role in agonistic exchanges between citizens, some decisions are emotionally based and not the product of rational arguments. Olson (2009) adds to this criticism when he argues that “agonism’s encouragement of passionate exchanges among citizens would lead to greater societal conflict...particularly in divided societies in which extremism and zealotry are present” (Pinto 2012:16). Dryzek (2005) and Erman (2009) go on to argue that Laclau and Mouffe’s lack of support for consensus is unproductive, and that at least with consensus “decisions get made” (Dryzek 2009:221). In addition to this, Crowder questions *how radical* agonistic democracy really is. While it is clear that agonistic democracy “opposes the dominant liberal-democratic paradigm,” Crowder insists that although Mouffe criticizes “various aspects of liberalism and deliberative democracy[,]...at the same time she denies that liberalism is the enemy and claims to be working within a liberal-democratic framework” (2006:10). In this regard he argues that agonistic democracy “seems indistinguishable from liberal-democratic orthodoxy” (2006:10).

While there is some merit to certain aspects of these criticisms, it is important to note that although some scholars have argued that the concept of agonistic democracy lacks specificity, empirical investigations into specific approaches to instituting Laclau and Mouffe’s agonistic democratic practices are beginning to emerge (See: Pløger 2004; Goi 2005; Bäcklund and Mäntysalo 2010). In addition to this, while Dryzek may see passion as fruitless, uncivil, and chaotic, Mouffe’s position that passions play an important role in political decisions has also been supported by an increasing number of theorists, including Gilbert (1995, 1999, 2001), Thien (2007), Carozza (2007), and Ruitenberg (2009). Furthermore, although Laclau and Mouffe’s rejection of consensus has been criticized for not allowing final decisions to be made, such criticism overlooks Mouffe’s notion of “conflictual consensus” or compromise, which does in fact allow for decisions to be made, if only on a temporary basis (Mouffe, cited in Miessen 2007:6).

### **3.4 Conclusion**

Thus, despite the abovementioned instances of theoretical opposition to their ideas, Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of radical democracy, and their concepts related to agonism, hegemonic politics, and conflict, continue to glow intriguingly as a possible heuristic device through which a better understanding of recent popular online political developments can be approximated. In terms of this, recent political and social movement activism and protest, in which divergent groups with previously unarticulated demands have come together around

calls for justice and democracy, may point toward the possibility of the realization of the type of hegemonic politics suggested by Laclau and Mouffe. And because the internet and social media have had an increasingly important influence on the creation of such connections, the role of the internet and new media technologies in the facilitation of such a realization needs to be considered.

## Chapter Four: A Global Perspective on Online Agonism

### 4.1 Introduction

The discussions of the previous chapter drew attention to the ideas of Connelly, Tully, Honig, Owen, Laclau and Mouffe, and their related theoretical support of the agonistic approach to radical democracy. In particular, the significance of Laclau and Mouffe's conception of radical democracy for social movement politics and activism was considered, and the potential for their idea of left-wing hegemony to effectively challenge the contemporary dominant neoliberal discourse emerged as important. In relation to this, compelling arguments have been made for the role of the internet and new media technologies as contentious, yet innovative, spaces for the facilitation of such left-wing hegemony, through the instigation of agonistic radical democratic practices (Rahimi 2011:173). That is, construed as a site of discursive struggle, the internet and online media tend to be viewed by agonists as supportive of both dominant and marginalized voices. On the one hand, the internet has been recognized as being responsible for the reproduction of dominant discourses, especially via corporate and government promotion of neoliberal ideas and practices. Yet, on the other hand, research into the agonistic use of the internet to advance radicalized conceptions of democracy has also revealed how this medium is contributing to the effective development of counter-discourses, and to the correlative contestation of the discursive strictures of dominant discourse.

With a view to exploring the latter potential of the internet and new media technologies – to facilitate the development and implementation of agonistic democratic practices – this chapter commences with an examination of current *general* theorizations surrounding emergent online agonism. That is, firstly, in relation to the works of Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner (2005), Babak Rahimi (2011), Bart Cammaerts (2008), Joss Hands (2007), and Lincoln Dahlberg (2007a, 2007b, 2007c), among others, theorizations of the agonistic use of the internet in recent social movement politics will be discussed. Secondly, after such general theoretical discussion, *specific* examples of the agonistic use of online media by some proponents of recent social movements, namely, the Zapatista, the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan, the alter-globalization movement, and the Occupy movement, will be explored. In each case, both the extent to which the use of the internet and new media technologies has played a role in the development of their respective struggles, and the corresponding isomorphism that has emerged between such online communications and their ensuing offline political dynamics, will be thematized. Finally, the

importance of such consideration, which draws attention to the potential value of Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical perspectives as a hermeneutic key through which the popular political dynamics of the present era can begin to be understood, will be addressed.

Admittedly, the agonistic potential of this media use is not beyond contestation, because the specific political orientation of these social movements cannot be defined as *absolutely* agonistic. This is because both deliberative and autonomous elements are also – in different ways and to various degrees – reflected in their respective communicative dynamics. But, arguably, this is only to be expected, because these social movements comprise organic political processes which have grown out of an array of existing political discourses, some of which are orientated around non-agonistic concepts. Consequently, it is unreasonable to expect strict 'agonistic orthodoxy' among such social movements; they are, after all, messy practical affairs grounded in *realpolitik*, rather than pristine theoretical works composed in any ideal academic setting. Yet, a solid case can nevertheless be made for their strong progression toward a *primarily* agonistic orientation. A progression which is moreover indissociable from their use of the internet and new media technologies that stands to gradually adjust the respective movements' radical offline dynamics in accordance with their online agonistic approaches.

This idea can be related, to some extent, to Marshall McLuhan's "medium is the message" theorization. Central to his idea is that more than the message content, it is the medium of the message that is responsible for shaping and controlling "the scale and form of human consciousness and action" (1964:9). McLuhan saw the media as "extensions" or "amputations" of the human body or senses and argued that "all media, from the phonetic alphabet to the computer are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and his environment" (1964:54). In this regard, he saw the media as possessing the ability to either extend or limit human processes or senses (1964:7). Furthermore, he posited that "technology and media cause and determine the changes and directions of human activity, be it social, political or economic" (Siapera 2012:7).

While McLuhan's ideas were initially dismissed by anti-determinist arguments from figures such as Raymond Williams,<sup>100</sup> his argument that the medium is at least as important as the message it conveys, soon initiated an important strand of related theorizations. Indeed, in the opening lines of his book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (1999), Friedrich Kittler

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<sup>100</sup> In his book *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, Williams criticizes McLuhan's conception that the medium is the message, and argues that "the physical fact of instant transmission, as a technical possibility, has been uncritically raised to a social fact, without any pause to notice that virtually all such transmission is at once elected and controlled by existing social authorities" (1974:128).

reiterates McLuhan's "the medium is the message" when he insists that "the media determines our situation" (1999:xxxix). In this regard, he argues that "the dominant information technologies of the day control all understanding and illusions" (1999:xi). Adapting McLuhan's theory to the digital age, Kittler examines how the material structures of computers and networks create cultural and social change, and insists that in order to "understand our present condition, we must take into account the ways in which...information is processed and stored...in discourse networks" (Siapera 2012:9). Bernard Stiegler offers another angle on McLuhan's and Kittler's shared perspective concerning the relationship between media technologies and society. That is, while McLuhan and Kittler offer a determinist approach, (i.e. society is determined by its media), Stiegler "argues that technology and humanity are coeval or co-originary," insofar as, instead of technology occupying a primary position, "humans and technology are inextricably bound," belonging together and co-determined by each other (Siapera 2012:11).<sup>101</sup>

These theorizations suggest that "change in communication technology inevitably produces changes in both culture and social order" (Baran and Davis 2009:219). That is, changes in media technologies can ultimately result in the changing and reshaping of users' subjectivity in particular, and their society in general. Based on this logic, it is plausible to suggest that such changes or development in political communication mediums may, albeit unintentionally, lead to related developments or changes in users' politics. Thus, while certain social movements may initially have emerged as proponents of strictly deliberative or autonomous forms of radical democracy, their exposure to, and use of, new media technologies may inadvertently lead them toward alternative forms of political approaches that are more agonistic in orientation.

## 4.2 General theorizations of emergent online agonism

Much of the literature pertaining to the "interplay between the internet and social movements" has been influenced by the ideas of radical democracy and related dissident social movements (Vromen 2008:107). In this regard, in their article "Oppositional Politics and the Internet: A Critical/Reconstructive Approach," Kahn and Kellner examine how increasingly popular information and communication technologies have "facilitated oppositional cultural and political movements and provided possibilities for...progressive socio-political change and

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<sup>101</sup> For a detailed account of his theorizations, see: Stiegler, B. 1998. *Technics and Time: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

struggle” (2005:703). By exploring the rise of internet activism, the organizational role of the internet in various movements, and the use made of this medium by previously marginalized groups, they not only highlight how interactive new media technologies – such as blogs, wikis, and social networks – have become popular communication tools. In addition, they also show how such technologies have opened up “radical possibilities for a greater range of opinion, novel modes of virtual and actual political communities, and original forms of direct political action” (2005:717). Based on their findings, they argue that the internet offers a vital form of oppositional space, where a diversity of groups and individuals can come together to use these technologies as instruments of political struggle, and for the correlative creation of radical democratic political possibilities. Kellner, in particular, draws attention to the impact of the internet on radical politics when he states that “radical democratic politics can use new technologies to intervene within the global restructuring of capitalism to promote democratic...social movements,” to foster “globalization-from-below aiming at radical social transformation,” and to achieve “workers and human rights, environmental protection, the reconstruction of education, social justice and a diverse range of issues intending to help create a better world” (2004). Correlatively, in her article “Digitalising and Globalising Indigenous Voices,” Kowal draws attention to the “rise of the internet as a democratic communication technology” (2002:106). She moreover argues that the internet has not only allowed for the globalization of “otherwise local voices,” but has also created a “digitalized ‘counterpublic’ that serves as a collective voice of people from diverse regions, cultures, and classes connected electronically” (2002:106). Consequently, she asserts that the “potential of the internet as a forum for community organization and political activism, is magnified by the democratic nature of the technology with its ability to disseminate information to a global audience almost instantaneously” (2002:110). Similarly, Downey and Fenton advance that “the internet has been hailed as the saviour of alternative or radical...politics,” and is “perfectly matched for the widely-dispersed resistance...[of] culture jammers and radical political protesters” (2003:195). In terms of this, they argue that the internet allows groups to create ‘counter-public’ spheres which can contribute significantly to the activities and organization of their offline presence. Furthermore, they suggest that the internet offers an online area where previously marginalized groups can, on the one hand, “communicate with supporters,” and on the other hand, “reach out beyond the ‘radical ghetto’ both directly (disintermediation) and indirectly, through influencing the mass media” (2003:198). In this regard, they find support in Moghadam’s insistence that “the internet has become a prime vehicle for the transmission of information about [social] movement strategies, the



mobilization of resources, and the exchange of ideas across borders, boundaries and barriers” (2013:209).

Interestingly, upon closer consideration, an overwhelming number of examples of specifically *agonistic* online communications readily emerge. In his study of the use of social media in post-electoral Iran, Rahimi examines online social media as “agonistic arenas where information, ideas, values, and subjectivities are contested” (2011:158). And in this investigation, he highlights how “the key to understanding the Internet’s political propensity” lies with comprehending cyberspace’s provision of an agonistic arena where divergent groups can compete, as adversaries, in a variety of “confrontational games” (2011:164). Moreover, apart from such acknowledgment of the internet as a platform for the recognition of the conflict and confrontation so essential to agonistic democracy, increasing focus has also fallen on how these online confrontations can lead to the creation and articulation of related radically democratic groups and movements. In particular, Langman’s exploration of the emergence of internetworked social movements, and the vital role that new media technologies are playing in the organization and mobilization of diverse yet interconnected struggles, is important. In her article “From Virtual Public Spheres to Global Justice: A Critical Theory of Internetworked Social Movements,” she not only explores how “diffuse and unstructured” new social movements have “forged unlikely coalitions of labor, environmentalists, feminists, peace and global social justice activists,” who are “collectively critical of the adversities of neo-liberal globalization and its associated militarism” (2005:42). In addition, she also asserts that the internet and new media technologies have “enabled the emergence of tens of thousands of interconnected transnational NGOs, INGOs, advocacy networks, democratic grass root organizations and globally oriented social movements,” which, in turn, has “led to episodic mass mobilizations of resistance” (2005:55). Furthermore, she insists that cyber-activism has created a platform for the formation of coalitions between various progressive (and often marginalized) groups and organizations, insofar as it has allowed large numbers of “interconnected, progressive mobilizing structures, flowing across extremely complex networks of communications, to inform widely dispersed constituencies and coordinate activist endeavours” (2005:62).

In relation to the above, Vromen argues that “utilising ideas based on agonistic, radical democracy derived from the theory of Chantal Mouffe it is eas[y] to interpret the internet as a space for protest and disruption that challenges existing power relations” (2008:107). Cammaerts not only supports this idea when he insists that “Mouffe’s concept of agonistic public spaces as ‘places for the expression of dissensus, for bringing to the floor what forces attempt to keep concealed’” (cited in Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006:973-974), adequately

encompasses “the multiplicity of expressions and voices present online” (2008:339-340). In addition, he also argues that Mouffe’s conception of an agonistic public space, which is “inherently conflictual and where (productive) power is constitutive of the political,” offers a sensible theory through which to understand the online environment (2008:373). Furthermore, connections between the internet and Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of radical democracy are reflected in Joss Hands’s admission that one can “without much controversy...claim that...the Internet...lend[s] itself to expanding the ‘chains of equivalents’ between the different struggles against oppression,” suggested by Laclau and Mouffe (2007:91). This is because, as an environment replete with a heterogeneous array of texts, images, and practices, which “allow...for a semi-decentralised...means of organization and communication,” the internet provides a user friendly ‘arena’ for the construction of networks between previously disassociated social movements and activist groups. In this regard, Hands maintains that the advantages of an agonistic form of online politics – or the effect of Mouffe’s idea of agonistic pluralism on radical online democracy – can be seen in four main areas. Firstly, she argues that it offers “a way of understanding and guiding our thought in the struggle for a radical democratic practice on and through the NET – a hegemonic strategy.” This is because the structure of the internet, with its possibilities for the hyper-linking of websites and interlinking of networks, offers numerous opportunities for connections and associations to be made, and thereby lends itself to online hegemonic strategizations. Secondly, she maintains that agonistic pluralism recognizes “the value of the autonomy of online struggles and discourses while resisting domination and oppression” (2007:91). In short, since the internet is seen as an open, interactive, diverse, many-to-many, and relatively inexpensive tool for the realization of hegemonic strategies, its promotion of a ‘free’ environment – where the autonomy and equivalence of various struggles are respected (rather than absorbed by others) – points toward its connections to agonistic politics. Thirdly, for her, “the appeal to and inclusion of certain social movements into the nexus of radical politics previously disregarded by older discourses,” is now a regular occurrence, because of the capacity of the internet to extend the radical democratic process “to a whole new series of social relations” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001:159, cited in Hands 2007:91). Furthermore, new social movements are seen as particularly important to this conception of radical democracy, and the ability of the internet to bring these movements together – while simultaneously enhancing their autonomy – is construed as an integral element of online agonistic democracy. Fourthly, Hands argues that agonistic pluralism allows for “the possibility of including a substantive agenda of economic justice,” by allowing for the “generation of resistance to capital’s exploitation,” through “the opening up of technology for the construction of resistant identities” (2007:92). Such resistant

identities stand to give rise to “new kinds of community and the designation of the oppressive nature of cyberspace as a domain of colonisation by capital” (2007:92).

In particular, Lincoln Dahlberg’s examination and conceptualization of the re-radicalization of an agonistic public sphere (2007c), which takes much of the above agonistic theorizations into account, comprises an important framework through which to consider the capacity of the internet to support radical forms of democratic activism. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mouffe is highly critical of Habermas’s deliberative idea of rational consensus. However, one element of Habermas’s theory that she does endorse is the notion of the public sphere – or ‘public *space*’ as she prefers to call it – as an important concept when discussing radical democracy (Mouffe 2005).<sup>102</sup> Drawing heavily on the radical democratic ideas of Laclau and Mouffe, and their valorization of discursive contestation, Dahlberg similarly calls for a movement away from deliberative conceptions of the public sphere. Instead, he argues for a re-radicalization of public sphere theory along more agonistic lines, which, he insists, will enable a movement away from rationalist consensus readings of the idea (2007a:835). That is, he argues that instead of the public sphere being used to provide spaces for the realization of consensus, a form of discursive contestation – in which consensus and hegemony are constantly questioned – needs to be established. This discursive contestation, he insists, is a “normative requirement for advancing the [radical] public sphere” (2007a:836). As mentioned in the previous chapter, Laclau and Mouffe argue that political success is a product of linking disjointed struggles via ‘chains of equivalence,’ so that solidarity – based on a shared identification with various democratic ideas – can be established. This articulation of disparate identities, they argue, results in the creation of ‘counter-discourses’ and ‘counter-hegemonic fronts,’ which are necessary for effective opposition to dominant discourses.<sup>103</sup> That is, counter-discourses create safe spaces for the nurturing of marginalized voices, and help to build “alternative visions of life” that challenge the hegemony of dominant discourse (Dahlberg 2007a:837). In relation to this, Dahlberg’s notion of a re-radicalized agonistic public space, based on discursive contestation, “expands

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<sup>102</sup> As a result of its connection to the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe, Mouffe’s term ‘space’ will be used in place of the term ‘sphere’ for the remainder of this thesis.

<sup>103</sup> Dahlberg explains that the use of the word “counter” here does not refer to an “explicit contestation,” but can rather be understood as referring to discourses that are outside of, and in opposition to, dominant discourses (2007a:837). In addition to this, it is important to note that ‘dominant discourses’ are not necessarily deemed ‘bad,’ and ‘counter-discourses’ are not necessarily ‘good.’ Rather, the differentiation here is focused upon “the democratic role of the contestation that develops from out of discursively constituted exclusions from mainstream public spheres” (2007b:142).

the space for the effective participation in politics of different and marginal voices, while accounting for power and inter-subjectivity” (2007a:837).

Arguably, one of the key spaces that have allowed for this form of discursive contestation to take place is the internet. Based on this premise, Dahlberg draws attention to the extent to which the internet, as a form of agonistic public space, can be used to facilitate the development and expansion of, on the one hand, counter-discourses, and on the other hand, contestation between discourses. He maintains that, according to the agonistic argument, in order to advance democracy online public spaces should: (a) provide communicative spaces for “the development of counter-publics where marginalized or oppositional discourses can be reflexively fostered;” (b) allow for “the articulation of these counter-discourses to enable the formation of strong oppositional identities and meta-discourses;” and (c) allow for the “counter-public contestation of dominant discourses” (2007b:141). These three uses support the popular argument that the internet is allowing for the creation of alternative arenas, where different and dispersed people and groups can come together, recognize shared identities, and build and reinforce “counter-public networks and coalitions (or articulations) of radical discourses.” Radical discourses which are in opposition to, and which encourage the contestation of, mainstream dominant discourses (Dahlberg 2007c:56). Thus, on the one hand, agonistic use of the internet can be seen to involve “spheres of strife (protest) and hegemony (power), wherein claims to information, ideas, values, and identities are contested and ruptured.” Yet, on the other hand, cyberspace also comprises an arena where counter-hegemonic groups can come together and build alternative discourses. And through such means, new or social media allow for “perpetual confrontation between conflicting forces that bring instability to political order,” in a way that provides the context for radically “new ways of doing politics” in the future (Rahimi 2011:161).

However, it is not sufficient to leave matters at such a general level; rather, evidence of the role of agonism as the *modus operandi* of such social movements’ online practices must be examined.

### **4.3 Emergent online agonism**

With a view to exploring the *specific* dynamics of the agonistic democratic use of the internet and social media by recent prominent social movements, in what follows an examination of the online activity of the Zapatista, the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), the alter-globalization movement, and the Occupy movement, will be undertaken. In each case, following a brief historical contextualization of the movement in question, their

offline developments which rendered them open to agonism will be highlighted, before their online connections to agonistic democracy are elaborated upon and discussed. In the latter regard, the movements' respective approximations of the online agonistic public space framework detailed by Dahlberg, will be thematized. Such discussion, firstly, will concern the various movements' use the internet as a communicative space through which counter-publics can be formed and oppositional discourses can be nurtured. Secondly, it will focus on the degree of each movement's use of the internet to link up with politically diverse and disparate groups and networks, with a view to articulating their respective oppositional discourses in the development of strategically effective 'counter-discursive fronts.' And thirdly, consideration will be given to the scope of the various movements' use of the internet and social media to support the counter-public contestation of mainstream dominant discourses, along with the real-world effects of such agonistic use of the internet on the political orientation of the movements themselves.

#### **4.3.1 The Zapatista Army of National Liberation**

On the same day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into effect,<sup>104</sup> thousands of Mayan Indians connected to the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), an indigenous liberation movement situated in Chiapas (the most southern and poorest region of Mexico), launched a two-week campaign of armed clashes against the Mexican military (Hayden 2002:11). Occupying various government buildings in protest against a long history of exploitation and discrimination, the Zapatista denounced the neoliberal hegemony of the local and national elite, and called for the realization of eleven demands related to "work, land, housing, food, health care, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice and peace" (Harvey and Halverson 2000:151).<sup>105</sup> The implementation of further neoliberal policies, as well as NAFTA's cancellation of Article twenty-seven of

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<sup>104</sup> NAFTA – a trade agreement signed between America, Canada and Mexico on 1 January 1994 – aimed at eliminating the majority of trade and investment controls previously in place between the three nations. At the time of its implementation, it was widely understood that NAFTA would function to instill neoliberal ideals and principles into Mexican law. As such, the rights of corporations were to be placed above those of the indigenous Mexican people, citizens in general, and democracy *tout court* (MacArther 2000, Cameron and Tomlin 2002).

<sup>105</sup> Since the Zapatista reject all forms of neoliberalism and directly oppose the negative impact that capitalism has had on the already significant poverty of their people, their adoption of a strict anti-capitalist stance is evident. Drawing on various elements of Marxist, anarchist, and liberal socialist ideologies, the Zapatista view capital as "a corrupting influence," and in this sense their anti-capitalist *autonomous* agenda is evident (Greebon 2008:73).

Mexico's constitution – which protected communal Indian land from sale or privatization – appears to have been the final straw that resulted in the Zapatista's calls for action (Mize and Swords 2010:196 ). Yet, despite its initial violent start, under pressure from international civil society a ceasefire was soon called, and the Zapatista entered into dialogue with the Mexican government. This dialogue ended in 1996 with the signing of the San Andres Accords, which granted autonomy, self-determination, and rights to cultural pluralism, to the indigenous groups in Mexico (Hayden 2002:13). Following this agreement, the Zapatista extended their influence not only to the army (EZLN), but also to numerous indigenous supporters, “who non-violently retook land in 38 municipalities” (Hayden 2005), creating thousands of autonomous communities that grew to include more than 500 000 people (Flood 1999, cited in Greebon 2008:72). However, notwithstanding the government's acceptance of the San Andres Accords, their subsequent refusal to make the required institutional changes – together with the continued presence of thousands of government military troops in Chiapas – resulted in persistent tensions, and ultimately led to the Zapatista ‘opting out’ of the national system. After doing so, the Zapatista created their own local system, the corollary of which was the adoption of an autonomous policy of non-engagement with the Mexican state (Chandler 2004). By 2003, the EZLN announced that they would be implementing the San Andres Accords directly through newly created ‘Good Governance Councils,’ which were to be set up throughout the autonomous municipalities, and they soon began to put their “autonomy into practice by resisting government interventions, refusing government programs and services, and building their own infrastructure” (Greebon 2008:73). In relation to this, Flood highlights that through their creation of autonomous municipalities, the Zapatista have attempted to build “a system of direct democracy,” and create “a political space where everyone...[can] participate;” ultimately transforming the movement from “a marginal group of revolutionaries to a radical social movement” (Flood 1999, cited in Greebon 2008:72).

However, by 2005/2006, following years of global activism both online and offline, the Zapatista commenced the *La Otra Campana* (The Other Campaign), and their strictly autonomous orientation seemed to undergo a significant transformation.<sup>106</sup> That is, in the 6<sup>th</sup> Declaration of the Selva Lacandona, the Zapatista revealed a development in their program of struggle insofar as they insisted, on the one hand, that they are not necessarily against politics in general, and on the other hand, that they do not necessarily agree with the specifically autonomous idea that politics “serves no purpose” (Marcos 2005). Instead, they simply

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<sup>106</sup> The Zapatista's ‘Other Campaign’ was started in 2005 and was “designed to link nonpartisan anti-capitalist national liberation struggles around the country” (Mora 2007:64).

asserted that they are against the dynamics of current neoliberal politics. Arguably, this development in their political orientation emerged as a correlate of their widespread use of the internet and subsequent exposure to, and concomitant progressive openness toward, alternative democratic approaches. That is, while at a grassroots level within the Chiapas region, the orientation of the movement remains significantly influenced by the autonomous approach to radical democracy, such a development arguably points toward their growing receptiveness to the ideas of democratic agonism.<sup>107</sup> And this openness can specifically be seen within the online communications and activism of this social movement. In this regard, the Zapatista's success in spreading their message and gaining support has largely been attributed to their use of the internet. Indeed, Cleaver argues that no "catalyst for growth in electronic NGO networks has been more important than the 1994 indigenous Zapatista rebellion" (1998:622). In short, the internet has played a significant role in the communication and growth of this struggle, and has arguably been used to function as something akin to an online agonistic public space in three interrelated ways.

Firstly, various communicative spaces have been used by the Zapatista and their supporters to form counter-publics and to develop counter-discourses. In fact, by 2001, there were over forty-five thousand websites related to the Zapatista struggle in over twenty-six countries around the world (Hayden 2002:120). And from websites and email distribution lists, to blogs and social media sites, numerous online spaces have emerged in which the Zapatista and their supporters have been free to form counter-publics and develop discourses

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<sup>107</sup> In addition to autonomous democratic ideas, the Zapatista have also been connected to deliberative democracy especially through their implementation of Good Governance Councils or 'Juntas.' Via these Juntas, the Zapatista have implemented a form of participatory democracy which follows the mandate of "mando obedeciendo" (lead by obeying), where power is established at grassroots community level, and major political decisions are made by community assemblies (consultas), consisting of all community members over the age of twelve years. These assemblies follow a specific decision-making structure in which consensus is the ultimate goal. In a translation of a struggle archive from the Nicolas Ruiz community in Chiapas, Lopez highlights the Zapatista's adoption of the idea of consensus, when they advance that "in our community there is a decision-making structure in place, whose highest authority resides in the assembly, and...only by consensus of this assembly do we take action on any given issue" (2000). Even a cursory engagement with such arguments does seem to indicate that, since the concept of consensus functions so centrally within the organizational and decision-making structure of Zapatista politics, they are strongly informed by a deliberative democratic position. However, although the internal decision-making component of the movement has been connected to the deliberative idea of consensus, Higgins argues that because of the Zapatista's "recognition of the diversity of the Mexican populace," and their appreciation of the "multiplicity of socio-political identities" existing within the movement, they "do not look for complete political consensus" (2004:188). And it is through this that their connection to alternative conceptions of agonistic radical democracy becomes apparent.

and identities in opposition to neoliberalism. Kowal supports this assertion when he notes that through their use of “websites, email exchanges and other pluralistic discursive practices,” the Zapatista’s online presence has come to “constitute...[a] ‘distinct counter-public sphere.’” He also goes on to assert that the Zapatista have used the internet to “carve...out a space to question the motives of neoliberal policies...and even experiment with alternative political structures” (2002:199).

Secondly, the Zapatista’s online activity, reach, and communication, have arguably played vital roles, on the one hand, in allowing divergent people and groups to come together to articulate collective identities and discourses, and on the other hand, in maintaining and strengthening the resultant oppositional identities. In relation to this, through email and website communications, the Zapatista have been able to make connections with other progressive groups from around the world, to network and strengthen their counter-discourses. Moreover, they have been able to articulate their identities in line with an array of anti-neoliberal agendas, in a way that has both strengthened the movement’s discourse, and ignited the growth of anti-neoliberal sentiment around the world. In this regard, Ronfeldt and his colleagues maintain that “what began as a violent insurgency in an isolated region” soon transformed, with the help of the internet, “into a nonviolent though no less disruptive ‘social netwar’ that engaged activists from far and wide” (1998:xi). And the continuation of such online connections can be seen in websites and blogs of, for example, the ‘Zapatista Solidarity Group – Essex’ (<http://zapatistaessex.blogspot.com/>), the ‘London Mexico Solidarity Group’ (<http://londonmexicosolidarity.org/>), the ‘UK Zapatista Solidarity Network’ (<http://ukzapatistas.wordpress.com/>), and the ‘Edinburgh Chiapas Solidarity Group’ (<http://edinchiapas.org.uk/>) – all of which express support and solidarity with the Zapatista and the struggles in Chiapas.<sup>108</sup> As, Hands suggests, “this interlinking and global perspective”

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<sup>108</sup> The Essex group which stands in “solidarity with the Zapatista movement in Mexico and its peoples’ struggle for dignity, land, education, human rights and [an] end [to]...exploitation” (2014), claims that the Zapatista’s enemies are their enemies, and they use their active blog to connect with other solidarity groups, to raise awareness – both online and through the organization of offline events – and to fundraise for the communities in Chiapas. The London-based group claims to “facilitate...the exchange between...London and Mexico activist communities,” by building “relationships of mutual respect and support with groups resisting neo-liberalism,” in the interest of “building another world for all” (2014). This group provides up-to-date information on the current situation in Chiapas, and draws attention to upcoming events, meetings, and mobilizations, via its “What’s up” link. For example, in October 2013, the site uploaded information related to a “day of Protest, Exchanges and Celebration of Resistance,” to be held in London. This upload provided the date of the event, and presented a timeline of activities, including “12h00 -- 14h00 Vigil in Trafalgar Square, 15h00 -- 18h00 Workshops SOAS, 19h00 -- 23h00 Cultural Event SOAS” (2014). Similarly, the UK Zapatista Solidarity Network aims to “raise



offered by the internet allows “different groups to recognise” their commonalities, and thereby “construct a sense of shared humanity and identity – something of great significance in building movements” (2011:145). Another powerful example of such use of the internet to link disparate and diverse groups was seen during the ‘Worldwide Echo Campaign,’ which developed in reaction to renewed attacks on the Zapatista by the Mexican government. Responding to these attacks, activists from around the world, including the UK-based National Campaign against Fees & Cuts, Filipinas for Rights and Empowerment (FiRE), and GABRIELA USA in New York,<sup>109</sup> used the internet to connect with each other and to declare solidarity with, and support for, the Zapatista’s continued struggle. Much of this support was expressed online, with powerful written and video messages being added to the campaign.<sup>110</sup> This coming together of a variety of disparate and even antagonistic groups, including trade unions, indigenous movements, women’s rights activists, human rights activists, gay and lesbian activists, environmental activists, and so forth, around calls for democracy (Mora 2007:65-66), has arguably been facilitated by the Zapatista’s use of the internet, and highlights the opportunities that this media has to connect divergent struggles and articulate collective identities around criticisms of neoliberalism.

Thirdly, the Zapatista’s use the internet and new media technologies to contest dominant discourses both online and offline has emerged as increasingly significant, and has highlighted the capacity of such technology to provide a space for the practice of agonistic

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awareness about the Zapatista’s ‘other’ politics, from below and from the Left,” while at the same time maintaining partnerships with Zapatista communities, and disseminating information not only via their blog, but also through offline action. In turn, the Edinburgh Chiapas Solidarity Group aims to “raise awareness of the Zapatista struggle and to give practical help wherever possible.” They do this by “organising talks, film showings, benefit gigs, street stalls and direct actions as well as publishing articles” (2014). Their active blog also provides news on the latest attacks on the Zapatista and the people of Chiapas, and provides information on protests and how people can get involved.

<sup>109</sup> GABRIELA is a Filipino “grassroots-based national and international alliance of 250 organizations, institutions, desks, and programs” (2014). Campaigning against issues that adversely affect women, GABRIELA is named after Gabriela Silang, a Filipino woman who led a regional revolt against Spanish colonizers. Focusing on issues such as “landlessness, militarization, the foreign debt crisis and the IMF-WB impositions, GATT-WTO, anti-people development projects, the denial of women’s health rights, violence against women and children, prostitution, trafficking in women and migration,” and so forth, GABRIELA USA struggles for the liberation of oppressed Filipino women.

<sup>110</sup> Another poignant example of such virtual linkages and support was that of the South African social movement Abahlali baseMjondolo’s (the Shack Dwellers Movement) YouTube video message, in which two organizers stated that “the government wants to create fear in the community. You must be strong...Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere. Your struggle is our struggle” (Davies 2012).

conflict and counter-public contestation. Instances of such online contestation that are often referred to include the various ‘hacktivist’ techniques used by movement supporters to bring attention to the plight of the Mexican indigenous movement. For example, the ‘Electronic Disturbance Theatre’ used a number of electronic civil disobedience actions, including electronic trespass and blockade, to contest the activities of the Mexican government. Furthermore, it “engaged its FloodNet software and invited participation to an international set of artists, digerati, and political activists to make an [online] ‘symbolic gesture’ in support of Mexico’s Zapatista” (Wray 2003). These politically motivated online acts of disturbance illustrate the movement’s use of such media to contest the hegemonic discourses they deem undemocratic. Similarly, the movement has used the internet to provide information and to coordinate offline protests and activism. Indeed, during the recent Worldwide Echo Campaign, online resources, including the campaign’s blog (<http://sanmarcosavilesen.wordpress.com/>), provided multilingual (ten language) access to an organizing toolbox through which information, posters, fliers, multimedia resources, and so forth, were made available for use by supporters in their online and offline activism. A further example of the Zapatista’s online instigation of offline activism can also be seen in their use of the internet to assist the contestation of dominant discourses through the support of offline protests and actions, both inside Mexico and outside Mexican consulates and embassies around the world. While the international protests sparked by the 1997 Acteal massacre are a prime example of this (Richardson 2003:100),<sup>111</sup> further examples would be the 1994 physical and electronic “swarm” of civil society and social movement activists from “the United States, Canada, and elsewhere into Mexico City and Chiapas” (Ronfeldt et al. 1998:xi),<sup>112</sup> the London Mexico Solidarity group’s presentation of the Zapatista’s message to the Mexican Embassy in London on 27 February 2014, along with the 7 March 2013 handing of a letter to the Mexican Embassy in Madrid, Spain, demanding an end to violence and a guarantee of human rights in Chiapas, Mexico.<sup>113</sup> Apart from such online civil disobedience and the related online instigation of offline action, the internet has also been used as a site of online

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<sup>111</sup> On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December 1997, forty-five Tzotzil Indians, including twenty-one women, fifteen children, and nine men, were “brutally assassinated by paramilitary forces linked to the official party,” in the town of Acteal in the Chenalho district of Mexico (Castillo 2001:11, McLaren 2000:59).

<sup>112</sup> Once physically in Mexico, these activists met up with other supportive groups, voiced “solidarity with the EZLN’s demands,” and called for “non-violent change” (Ronfeldt et al. 1998:xi).

<sup>113</sup> For more examples of protests in support of the Zapatista, see: Worldwide Campaign. 2014.

“Worldwide Echo in Support of the Zapatistas.” URL (consulted on 21 November 2014): <http://sanmarcosavilesen.wordpress.com/worldwide-campaign/>.

discursive contestation of neoliberal hegemony and undemocratic practices. That is, the use of numerous websites (<http://www.ezln.org.mx/>), blogs (<https://floweroftheword.wordpress.com/>), social network sites (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/EZLN/>), forums (<http://www.revleft.com/vb/zapatista-forum>), and so forth, to debate and contest issues related to neoliberalism, democracy, social justice and globalization, has not only allowed the Zapatista to share their views with other activist groups and movements. In addition, it has also facilitated the progressive engendering of “anti-globalist consciousness and activism” around the world (Dahlberg 2007b:137).

Arguably such evidence of the Zapatista’s use of the internet and social media as a space for the creation of counter-publics, the strengthening of oppositional discourses, and the contestation of dominant neoliberal discourses, draws attention to the agonistic potential of online media, and their ability to function as an online agonistic public space in the facilitation of something akin to radical democracy. Moreover, the effect of the use of this online agonistic public space on Zapatista offline political orientation can also be discerned. Consequently, despite the continuing prevalence of an autonomous approach to democracy at the grassroots level of the Zapatista organization, their online approximation of the agonistic public space framework alluded to by Dahlberg, highlights their connection to the ideals of agonistic democracy – a connection which is becoming increasingly indissociable from the movement’s political *modus operandi*.

#### **4.3.2 Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)**

Established in 1977 as an independent social movement of Afghan women, the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) focuses on furthering human rights, social justice, and democracy in Afghanistan. Founded by a young student activist named Meena, RAWA was initially created as a movement striving for women’s rights and freedom. However, in 1978, one year after its formation, the Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan, which led to RAWA’s evolution into a movement fighting for women’s *and* national emancipation (Chavis 2003:70), and during the ensuing ten-year occupation, RAWA participated in various forms of non-violent protest against the Soviet regime. However, because RAWA’s resistance was seen as a threat to the authority of both the Soviet occupiers and Afghan religious fundamentalist groups, in 1987 Meena was assassinated, in a collaborative effort between the Soviet controlled Afghan secret police and the Islamist fundamentalist group Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Yet, despite the assassination of its leader, and RAWA’s subsequent movement underground, the organization did not dissolve but rather continued to grow. Indeed, in “late

1996, as the Taliban were taking hold of the majority of Afghanistan and instituting brutal reforms,” which included, among other things, “bans on technology and the removal of women from all aspects of public life[.]...RAWA entered cyberspace” with their website [www.rawa.org](http://www.rawa.org) (Fluri 2006:96).

Just as the Zapatista have been connected to autonomous democracy, so too, RAWA has been connected to the deliberative approach to radical democracy. In this regard, the Oslo Centre for Peace and Human Rights maintains that the principles of consensus-based decision-making – linked to the idea of deliberative democracy – have been in place for centuries in Afghanistan, where they have been practiced through the traditional political decision-making structure known as the Jirga (2012).<sup>114</sup> These Jirga have “operated as important mechanisms of conflict resolution and have contributed to the maintenance of social order in Afghan society” (Westendorp and Wolleswinkel 2005:87). Unfortunately, the maintenance of this social order has relegated women and other marginalized groups to the periphery of political, economic, social, and cultural life in the country, and it is as a result of this marginalization and exclusion that RAWA, as an independent women’s organization, emerged. Although the Jirga practice cannot be entirely connected to the idea of deliberative democracy – especially in the Habermasian sense of the term – according to which *all* people affected by the decision in question should be involved in the decision-making process – it can to some extent be connected to the Rawlsian notion of deliberative democracy. As discussed in Chapter Two, this entails the idea that only certain people need to be involved in the deliberation process. Yet, notwithstanding RAWA’s isolation, and their general exclusion from everyday Afghan life, they too seem to have adopted variants of the historically significant Jirga practices. That is, within their organizational activities, they use collective discussion and consensus-based decision-making in relation to issues such as movement activities, fundraising, conflict resolution, and so forth (Carrington and Griffin 2011:237). And it is in this sense, at least, that RAWA can be understood as being informed by deliberative democratic ideals. Yet, despite their internal organization around traditional deliberative ideas of consensus, further consideration reveals how certain developments in the movement’s approach to dealing with prejudice have precipitated increasing openness to the ideas of agonism, and this openness is arguably indissociable from their growing use of the internet. That is, the movement’s transition into the online arena in the mid-1990s effectively opened them up to alternative conceptions of radical democracy, and RAWA’s subsequent

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<sup>114</sup> The Jirga comprises of a selected “council of male elders, usually religious scholars or landowners chosen for their charismatic characters or their background of social influence” (Westendorp and Wolleswinkel 2005:87).

use of the internet and social media to function as something akin to the online agonistic public space proposed by Dahlberg, is indicative of their progression toward the democratic ideas of agonism. In this regard, RAWA can be connected to the agonistic public space framework in three interrelated ways.

Firstly, to a large extent, RAWA has used the internet as a communicative space through which counter-publics can be established and counter-discourses can be fostered. To be sure, this women's and human rights movement has largely been marginalized within Afghanistan. However, their website, Facebook page, Twitter account, and affiliated websites and blogs – among other online media – have nevertheless provided crucial communication spaces for debate and discussion, and the subsequent development of alternative identities and oppositional discourses through which to resist the oppressive hegemony of dominant Afghani discourses. Thus, although the movement's physical presence is limited by the police, religious authorities, and the government of Afghanistan, the internet has in many ways come to comprise a crucial virtual domain for the formation of counter-publics and oppositional discourses.

Secondly, the use of the internet by RAWA, on the one hand, to develop and strengthen oppositional discourses, and on the other hand, to support the articulation of diverse and dispersed groups into progressive democratic struggles, points toward their agonistic use of this medium (Dahlberg 2007b). In relation to this, despite their limited physical presence, their localized agenda, and their female-only membership,<sup>115</sup> RAWA have to some extent embraced the internet and social media's interactivity and reach as a means to make connections with other activist groups.<sup>116</sup> Not only has their internet presence and communication allowed for linkages to be made between RAWA and the "pro-democracy and progressive forces of Iran, Palestine, Kashmir, Kurdistan, Sudan and other fettered peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America" (RAWA 1998, in Kolhatkar 2006). In addition, various local, national and international groups have also self-identified with RAWA through their internet and social media presence (Skaine 2002:80). For example, movements such as

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<sup>115</sup> Since men are not permitted to be members of RAWA, the plurality of this movement is significantly limited.

<sup>116</sup> The RAWA website guestbook includes messages of support, and frequently asked questions about the movement, from people all over the world, including such diverse places as Colombia, Italy, Uruguay, Australia, Mexico, the United States, Belgium, and many others, all of which collectively indicate a coming together of different people and groups to support RAWA and their demands for freedom. The "recent post by others" link on RAWA's Facebook page also provides examples of different people coming together to instigate change (<https://www.facebook.com/RAWA.Afghanistan?fref=ts>), in a way that allows for an expansion and elaboration on issues of concern.

Friends of RAWA in Japan, RAWA Supporters in Santa Barbara, Italy, the United Kingdom, Australia, the United States, France, and Germany, along with both the Afghan Women's Mission and FemAid, have all helped to expand RAWA's counter-discourse to an increasingly wide range of social relations. Consequently, their use of the internet has not only opened RAWA up to international recognition and support, but it has also given strength to the marginalized and previously isolated voices associated with the movement.

Thirdly, RAWA's use of the internet, and more recently social media, as a key platform for the counter-public contestation of dominant discourses, together with the communication and mobilization of movement messages and activism – both online and offline – is a further indication of the movement's connection to the agonistic approach to radical democracy. In fact, RAWA's use of the internet has even been lauded by some as one of the “most exciting and significant examples of web activism,” and it has been acknowledged for making comprehensive use of the potential of new global media technologies (Karatzogianni 2009:65). In particular, Dartnell maintains that “RAWA's web activism [is] an important...venue for criticizing and resisting totalitarian ideology,” and he insists that RAWA “embodies the promise of electronic politics,” through its “articulation of a counter-discourse to a savage regime, an appeal to global civil society, the ability to witness and to resist...and cross-organizational...[and] cross-ideological appeal” (2006:71). An important tool in this regard is RAWA's active website. According to Shabana, a RAWA member, the movement's website “is being visited by hundreds of people daily who use it as a base reference: of critical information about women, reports, photos, movie clips etc.,” all “from fundamentalist-blighted Afghanistan.” She moreover explains that the website has been “nominated and [has] received several prizes for its valuable contents” (cited in Skaine 2002:80). The movement is also active on their Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/RAWA.Afghanistan>) – RAWA: The Voice of the Voiceless in Afghanistan, with over 7402 ‘likes’ (December 2014), and present on the micro-blogging site, Twitter (see <https://twitter.com/RAWA77>). Against the backdrop of the above, Fluri maintains that cyberspace has emerged as a key space “for RAWA to counter prevailing and/or dominant discourses and actions about Afghan women, geopolitics, and governance in the emerging Afghan state” (2006:101). This can be seen in RAWA's online use of emails, reports, images, documentation, and videos, to bring attention to the atrocities against women committed by the Afghan government, women's hardships within the country, and to the related illegitimacy of US hegemony. Examples of this form of contestation on RAWA's Facebook page are many, and include titles such as the following: “Afghanistan: Child Marriage, Domestic Violence Harm Progress,” “In Kabul, Trading Women Like Cattle,”

“Former Warlord a Contender in Afghanistan Elections,” and “NATO Air Strike Killed Nine Civilians in Afghanistan, including Women, Children.” In this way, RAWA’s use of the internet allows them to be actively involved in up-to-date online contestations of dominant discourses, the promotion of alternative voices and cultural identities, and the establishment of connections with other progressive struggles, all of which serves to encourage new knowledge development and advance women’s rights in Afghanistan, and indeed around the world. In relation to this, their use of the internet and social media has not only succeeded in relaying information and news stories about the injustices experienced in Afghan society to a wider global audience. It has also thematized their cause to such an extent that news stories related to the counter-discourse and plight of RAWA have appeared in mainstream newspapers, news websites, and radio discussions, including *The Guardian*, *The Daily News*, *The Commune*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Canberra Times*, [www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org), ABC radio, and Uprising radio, among many others.<sup>117</sup> In addition to such online discursive contestation, RAWA has also used the internet to mobilize and organize offline contestations in the form of ‘real-world’ protests, meetings, and marches. Examples of such online instigation of offline action can be seen on the ‘events’ link of the movement’s Facebook page, and on the Home page of the RAWA website.

Arguably, RAWA’s use of the internet and social media to function as something akin to an online agonistic public space is evident in the above examples. As such, notwithstanding their grassroots connection to the deliberative ideas of consensus, and despite the presence of some non-agonistic features within the movement, the movement’s progression toward a greater approximation of the ideas of agonism can be seen in their adoption of various online democratic practices. As alluded to earlier, such a progression may be connected, to some extent, to McLuhan’s idea that the ‘medium is the message.’ That is, the more RAWA’s use of online media opens them up to alternative ideas, the more the reshaping of their socio-political agenda in the direction of agonism seems to be taking place.

### **4.3.3 The alter-globalization movement**

Although consisting of a wide variety of groups, each with their own agenda and related demands, the alter-globalization movement stands together in its criticism of the economic policies of neoliberalism – or ‘corporate globalization’ – which have influenced international

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<sup>117</sup> For more examples of RAWA representations and articulations in the mass media, see RAWA. 2014. “RAWA in the World Media.” URL (consulted 21 November 2014): [www.rawa.org/media.htm](http://www.rawa.org/media.htm).

trade and development since the latter part of the twentieth century (Maeckelbergh 2009; Pleyers 2010). Arguing that the policies of neoliberal globalization have resulted in an intensification of poverty, inequality, and anti-democratic practices around the world, the alter-globalization movement has played a significant role in shifting the debate surrounding the operation of international institutions in trade and development (Smith 2002:207). It has also frequently been associated with the 1999 Seattle World Trade Organization (WTO) protests – popularly referred to as the ‘Battle of Seattle’ in the mainstream media. In this regard, on 30 November 1999, approximately seventy-five thousand people affiliated to anti-capitalist movements, environmental organizations and NGOs opposed to the WTO, gathered outside the Washington State Convention and Trade Centre in Seattle, in response to the ongoing World Trade Organization’s Ministerial Conference, which aimed to launch a new round of global trade negotiations. According to Engler, “the Seattle round of trade negotiations deadlocked when developing nations, bolstered by grassroots resistance, rejected U.S. and European demands” (2007:152). This subversion of WTO policies and trade suggestions pointed toward the power of the alter-globalization movement, and highlighted the growing influence of the movement on a global scale. And this influence became increasingly apparent during the demonstrations in 2000 held against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) promotion of neoliberalism, in Washington D.C. and in Prague, respectively. Since then, various meetings, social forums, mobilizations, and protests against the negative impact that neoliberal globalization has had on societies *around* the globe, have arisen.

Inspired to some degree by both the online and offline activities of the Zapatista, the alter-globalization movement emerged as a global resistance movement connected to a broad array of causes, and has been connected in varying degrees to deliberative, autonomous, and agonistic conceptions of radical democracy. However, while the alter-globalization movement has been linked to deliberative democracy, insofar as it has been associated with a consensus-based decision-making process, Maeckelbergh insists that although the movement “makes decisions by consensus, at least in principle...complete agreement is rarely the aim” (2013:31). This is because the alter-globalization movement has not been created on the basis of “a harmonious coming together of different political actors,” but is rather founded on the understanding that conflict and disagreement are unavoidable (Maeckelbergh 2013:29). For her, the alter-globalization movement is instead committed to “creating conflictive spaces...in which consensus does not imply universal agreement among all participants.” And what this entails, she suggests, is the creation of “a decision-making process that actively and



continuously challenges hierarchies and power inequalities as they arise” (2013:31).<sup>118</sup> Thus, although at grassroots level the alter-globalization movement may appear to adopt consensus as a form of decision-making, it has been argued that this consensus is by no means the ‘rational’ consensus pursued through deliberative democracy. Rather, it amounts to something more akin to the idea of a “conflictual consensus,” in which, at best, a “common aim” is reached for (Mouffe, cited in Miessen 2007:6). An aim orientated around global social justice, democracy, and the acceptance of difference. Arguably, it is through such increasing adoption of a more agonistic form of ‘conflictual consensus’ that the movement has been rendered ever more open to the ideals and practices of agonistic democracy.<sup>119</sup> In addition to this, since the

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<sup>118</sup> In relation to this, in her study of the alter-globalization movement’s politics, Maeckelbergh found that by “acknowledging that liberty is linked to the ability to express difference,” the movement has come to “embrace conflict as an essential step in resisting the oppressive power of unity.” That is, according to her, viewing the idea of unity or complete consensus as a mask for repression and exclusion, the alter-globalization movement has adopted an alternative idea of consensus – explicitly linked to the idea of conflict. And in this regard, she argues that the fostering of conflict within the movement aims to achieve two objectives. Firstly, “to resist the exclusion created by a perceived need for homogeneity,” insofar as the alter-globalization movement actively ensures that “within the ‘open spaces’ they create, no requirement of ideological conformity develops.” Secondly, to “create conflictive spaces to ensure that they remain continuously open to new ideas, new places, new practices, as well as open to the development of new movement goals as part of a perpetual learning process” (2013:30). Consequently, under the ‘consensus’ of the alter-globalization movement, “differences in opinion are not resolved through deliberation to find the one best solution, nor is the aim to achieve universal agreement through lengthy discussion.” Instead, a non-deliberative approach to conflict has been adopted by the movement; that is, an “idea that conflict does not necessarily need to be resolved and that, at times, it is better to leave conflict unresolved” (Maeckelbergh 2013:32). Correlatively, Maeckelbergh asserts that, “for most movement actors conflict is not something to be avoided, but something to be desired for its constructive potential” (2009), because it is seen as a necessary prerequisite for the movement’s engendering of diversity and plurality.

<sup>119</sup> In addition to its connection to the ideas of deliberative democracy, the movement has also been associated with the autonomous democracy expounded by Hardt and Negri (Pleyers 2010; Sparke 2012). Yet, despite many of its affiliates’ criticism of neoliberalism, and their subsequent suspicion of institutions which propagate dominant neoliberal discourses, autonomy is by no means the only political dynamic at play. Rather, concerns related to ethnic subordination, minority rights, environmental degradation, and social justice, among other things (Miller 2013:516), continue to provide impetus for the emergence of an array of strategies, many of which are orientated around forming coalitions with progressive civic, political, and institutional entities. To be sure, while autonomy remains an important focus of many of the groups within the movement, Ponniah (2005) insists that “plenty of alter-globalization activists view alliances with progressive political leaders on strategic issues favourably” (cited in Pleyers 2010:248). Perhaps the best example of the alter-globalization movement’s openness to the positive role that institutions can play, can be seen in its participation in the World Social Forum,

emergence of the alter-globalization movement coincided, in many respects, with the public's growing access to the internet and the numerous communication opportunities that it offered, their widespread use of the medium as a site of discursive struggle in support of the marginalized further highlights the movement's connection to ideas of online democratic agonism. In particular, the internet's support of such agonistic democratic politics can be seen in three distinct ways.

Firstly, the internet has been used by the alter-globalization movement to provide communicative spaces through which counter-publics can be nurtured and formed. In this regard, websites, blogs, mailing lists, and so forth, have enabled the discussions and debates necessary for oppositional discourses to develop and for counter-publics to emerge. For example, the 'StopWTO' online distribution list, which supplied vast numbers of people with detailed information on the different problematic aspects of the WTO (George 2000:2), was a major rallying point for the movement. This list, as well as other alternative websites and mailing lists, have not only opened up opportunities for information transfer and the spread of movement news, but have also encouraged open participation through interactive features that facilitate the formation of counter-discourses and counter-public identities (Downey and Fenton 2003; Langman 2005; Dahlberg 2007b).<sup>120</sup> Another example of the use of cyberspace to establish and connect online cyber-publics, can be seen in alter-globalization movement groups' use of 'shared communication' tactics (*comunicação compartilhada*) during the first World Social Forum (WSF) in Brazil. That is, in order to allow participants of the WSF to freely share information and content with groups and people not physically present at the Forum, Brazilian and other Latin American activists created a publishing website called Ciranda ([www.ciranda.net](http://www.ciranda.net)). Ciranda not only allowed independent media centers to gain access to the event proceedings and information, but also allowed "activists from different parts of the world to come together, creating spaces of sociality that encouraged dialogue and a sense of common purpose" (Stephansen 2012). These shared communicative spaces, Stephansen maintains, allowed for the subsequent "development of permanent activist

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an annual meeting of civil society organizations aimed at strengthening the counter-hegemony of the alter-globalization struggle.

<sup>120</sup> For example, Indymedia – an online independent media center established just before the 1999 WTO protests in Seattle – offers activists an 'open' and 'participatory' online media platform which is distanced from corporate and mainstream media representations (Pickerill 2007:2669). Viewing media production as a 'many-to-many' process, indymedia.org emerged as "a critical resource for [alter-globalization] activists and audiences around the world, providing an extraordinary bounty of news reports and commentaries, first-person narratives, longer analyses, links to activist resources, and interactive discussion opportunities from around the world" (Kidd 2003:50).

networks and the idea of a politics and practice of shared communication” (2012). In short, this shared communication site – as well as others such as [www.wsftv.net](http://www.wsftv.net) (an online video platform) and [www.forosocialradios.org](http://www.forosocialradios.org) (an online radio platform) – on the one hand, facilitated online communication between movement groups and supporters. On the other hand, they also offered opportunities for “activists from different movement backgrounds to exchange knowledge and experience, and construct relations of solidarity,” and through such means form counter-public identities (Stephansen 2012).

Secondly, websites such as Ciranda have allowed previously unconnected groups to develop articulations of such collective identities in opposition to the current extension of globalization.<sup>121</sup> Van Laer and Van Aelst elaborate on this idea when they posit that, as a result of “the open network of the Internet, a diverse range of activists, groups and social movement organizations...[have] loosely knit[ted] together and coalesce[d] in coordinated actions against the WTO summit both offline, in the streets, as well as online, in cyberspace” (2010:1147). And Dahlgren argues similarly that the internet “has helped facilitate the growth of massive, coordinated digital networks of activists,” of which the alter-globalization movement is perhaps the most salient manifestation (2003:6). In this regard, websites and social media pages connected to campaigns such as the Alternative International and the People’s Assemblies network, among many others, have all provided opportunities for online communication and interaction, and the subsequent articulation of the respective discourses of previously unconnected human rights activists, environmentalists, anti-capitalists, social justice movements, animal rights activists, and many other progressive struggles (Downey and Fenton 2003; Langman 2005; Dahlberg 2007b). That is, on the one hand, Alternatives International (<http://www.alterinter.org/>) is made up of “social and political movements struggling against social injustices, neoliberalism, imperialism and war,” and aims to build “solidarity between social movements at the local, national and international level” (2013). On the other hand, the People’s Assemblies Network ([www.peoplesassemblies.org](http://www.peoplesassemblies.org)) provides an “informative and resource platform to support the ongoing democracy protests and open,

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<sup>121</sup> Despite the array of differences that exist between the alter-globalization movement groups, instances of agonism emerge when the rights, wants, and demands of, for example, an environmental group, are seen as equal and inextricably linked to, the rights, wants, and demands of every other group in the movement, be they workers’ groups, anti-capitalist groups, or feminist groups. Thus, although the various groups have a diverse list of objectives and agendas, they have largely been able to accept each other as ‘friendly’ adversaries in a broader fight *against* neoliberal globalization, and *for* social justice and democracy. According to Bennett, this diversity has largely been “facilitated and afforded by the use of new communication technologies that enable activists to exchange information and coordinate actions across geographical and ideological divides” (2003:24).

democratic assemblies in the UK, Europe and throughout the world” (2014). Campaigning for ‘real democracy,’ the People’s Assemblies Network thus offers opportunities for collaboration on issues related to: closures, evictions, and job losses; democracy and rights; climate change; opposing war and the secret state; struggles against racism and attacks on minority communities; building links with movements internationally; and creating a new democratic society through a transfer of economic and political power.<sup>122</sup>

Thirdly, apart from encouraging and facilitating the articulation of a variety of divergent democratic groups and the strengthening of oppositional discourses, the internet has also emerged as a space for the counter-public contestation of dominant discourses (Dahlberg 2007b:135). Indeed, the alter-globalization movement’s use of the internet to develop conflictual online spaces designed, on the one hand, to discursively contest the hegemony of neoliberal globalization, and on the other hand, to instigate offline challenges and protests in real time and space, provide further examples of the radically democratic dynamics of its online media use. To begin with, a good example of their online discursive contestation and activism is, of course, the ‘denial of service’ (DOS) action implemented by the Electrohippies Collective during the WTO ministerial conference in 1999. By hosting a ‘virtual sit in,’ this collective was able to jam the WTO internet network by flooding it with requests (Dyer-Witthford 2002:152). According to the Electrohippies, approximately 450 000 people participated in the action over five days, and together they succeeded in disrupting, slowing down, and even halting the WTO conference network (Electrohippies 2000; Jordan and Taylor 2004). In addition to this, Dyer-Witthford highlights how “other activists constructed a bogus WTO site – [www.gatt.org](http://www.gatt.org)...mimicking its logos and typeface, but announcing [that] ‘The WTO’s purpose is to broaden and enforce their will against democratic governments’” (2002:152). In a similar example of such online contestation, an anti-World Trade Organization group attempted to hijack traffic away from the original WTO website, [www.wtoseattle.org](http://www.wtoseattle.org), by creating a similar [www.seattlewto.org](http://www.seattlewto.org) site, which led to significant confusion among would-be delegates. And this confusion was compounded by a group known as the ‘Critical Arts Ensemble,’ which “introduce[d] electronic viruses, worms and [email] bombs into various data banks and programs in institutional networks” (Stewart et al. 2012:167). Additionally, protest websites, alternative media sites (such as Indymedia), and other petition sites, all provided online opportunities for contestation and activism, which sought – often through affective statements – to compound the above confusion, and thereby

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<sup>122</sup> More recent examples of such online articulations, and correlative formations of counter-hegemonic fronts, can be seen in the latest waves of alter-globalization affiliated protests (Nail 2013:21), including the Arab Spring uprisings and the 15M or Spanish Indignados movement.

derail the economistic logic upon which the conference rested. And such online civil disobedience has been deemed democratically legitimate by proponents of agonistic online thought, on account of its aim to contest the discursive hegemony of neoliberal globalization.

Apart from such online discursive contestation and politically motivated electronic civil disobedience, the internet and new media technologies have also been used by the alter-globalization movement to communicate, coordinate, and mobilize *offline* protests and actions. The powerful effects of such mobilizations were evinced, for example, in April 2001, when tens of thousands of people rallied in Quebec, Canada, against the creation of a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Similarly, in July 2001, some three hundred thousand protesters gathered for an anti-neoliberal demonstration outside of the G8 meetings in Genoa, Italy, while the same number met in Barcelona, in March 2002, at the European summit. Further examples include the one million activists who gathered in Florence to mark the closing of the first European Social Forum, and the approximately twelve million people in over five hundred cities across the world who protested on 15 February 2003, in reaction to the impending US invasion of Iraq (Pleyers 2010:8).<sup>123</sup> In this regard, in his article “Net-activism and the Emergence of Global Civic Cultures,” (2003) Dahlgren draws attention to ATTAC ([www.attac.org](http://www.attac.org)) and its role in the online instigation and facilitation of offline alter-globalization action. Active from the original protests in Seattle onward, ATTAC continuously draws attention to the alter-globalization movement’s message that ‘Another World is Possible,’ and focuses on creating worldwide activism against a variety of issues. These include international campaigns for a Europe-wide coordinated levy on wealth, campaigns related to the closing down of casino economies, campaigns for social and democratic rights in Europe, and campaigns for fiscal and economic unions. Using their main website [www.attac.org](http://www.attac.org), as well as the virtual domains of other regionally-and nationally-based chapters virtual domains (e.g. [www.attac.at](http://www.attac.at), [www.attac.es](http://www.attac.es)), ATTAC provides

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<sup>123</sup> The positive impact of the alter-globalization movement’s demonstrations outside of international financial institutions on the cohesion of disparate groups around a common cause, has received significant thematization. However, according to Engler, these are “only the most highly publicized manifestations of a much broader body of action taking place at the local and national levels” (2007:152). Some of these mobilizations include the mass organization of civil society in Argentina, following the country’s economic breakdown in 2001, the fight against development of hydroelectric dams in India in 1991, the strikes by unions in South Korea in 1996, Indonesian protests following the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the struggle against water privatization in Bolivia in 2000 and in South Africa in 2002, African struggles to gain access to low-cost generic AIDS drugs in 2003, demonstrations in Central America against the implementation of trade agreements with the United States in the early 1990s, and the actions of the landless farmers movement (MST) in Brazil between 1995 and 1999, among others (Engler 2007:152).

information related to their various campaigns, and explanations on how people can get involved, along with links to the thirty-eight ATTAC groups situated around the world. These sites also provide protest material, including flyers, posters, legal documents, and news related to the various protests (2014).

From the above examination it becomes evident that the alter-globalization movement's use of the internet and social media can largely be connected to the ideas of the agonistic public space framework highlighted by Dahlberg, and, as such, offers intriguing insight into the potential of such media to facilitate the practical implementation of Laclau and Mouffe's radical democratic theory. Admittedly, since the movement is largely conflictual and accepting of difference, it is inevitable that at a grassroots, 'real-world' level, it will entail a combination of deliberative, autonomous, and agonistic democratic approaches. However, since their use of the internet can largely be considered agonistic, due to its functioning as an online agonistic public space, and because – as McLuhan insists – new technologies can reshape and alter our cultural and socio-political lives, it is plausible that through recourse to such cyber-means the alter-globalization movement is progressively becoming more open to the ideas and dynamics of agonism.

#### **4.3.4 The Occupy movement**

In September 2011, inspired by an online call from Adbusters to 'Occupy Wall Street,' a few thousand people gathered unexpectedly in Zuccotti Park, New York, to protest against the unflagging social and economic inequality experienced around the world today.<sup>124</sup> Under the slogan 'We are the 99%,' the activists staged non-violent protests to highlight the unhealthy relationship between politics and Wall Street, along with the one-sided capitalist economic structure, whereby the concentration of the America's wealth can be found among the top 1% of society – leaving the remaining 99% at a disadvantage. Following the online call to action, an encampment was set up in the park with hundreds of people occupying the public space and demonstrating for democracy. Partly inspired by the various protests, demonstrations, and revolutions that had recently occurred in North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, Occupy

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<sup>124</sup> On 13 July 2011 Adbusters, a Canadian cultural journal, called for citizens to "Occupy Wall Street" in a peaceful protest against corporate influence on democracy. Their website stated that "on September 17, we want to see 20,000 people flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street for a few months. Once there, we shall incessantly repeat one simple demand in a plurality of voices...DEMOCRACY NOT CORPORATOCRACY" (Adbusters 2011). For the original Adbusters call to action, see: <https://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/occupywallstreet.html>.

Wall Street – which rapidly spread to over five hundred US cities – went viral through social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, and the Occupy movement was born. Consequently, by October 2011, Occupy had already become a global movement, reaching nearly every continent, and inspiring citizens in over 1500 cities to take to the streets to voice their discontent with the inequality produced by unregulated global neoliberal capitalism (Jackson 2012:xv).

As one of the most recent manifestations of mass political protests and social movement activism, the Occupy movement and its connected political practices have emerged as a topic of deep interest to scholars of deliberative, autonomous, and agonistic radical democracy. Accordingly, some theorists have linked the Occupy movement to a deliberative form of radical democracy (Lang and Levitsky 2012; Kegley and Skowronski 2013), on account of its relation to the issue of consensus. However, recent research has revealed that the large majority of the movement's members have advanced only a modified and partial form of consensus as a goal worth pursuing. This has resulted from the recognition that due to the plurality of the groups involved, and the significant differences between them, complete consensus is neither achievable nor even desirable (Castells 2012:181). In relation to this, Caperchi notes that consensus within the movement is more likened to a "temporary collective decision" (2011). And evidence of this agonistic form of decision-making can be seen in the movement's general assemblies (GA), and working groups – or groups of people working on projects related to different topics (for example food, sanitation, women's issues, etc.). Similar to the Zapatista and alter-globalization movements' internal organization, the Occupy movement established 'general assemblies' as decision-making bodies for on-site communication and contestation. In short, a general assembly is an open meeting usually held once a day, where issues related to the movement are discussed and debated. Everyone present at the GA can participate, make proposals, suggest actions, or confront certain issues. These assemblies can be "very confrontational," since "their participants hail from disparate political positions on the ideological spectrum, from the liberal to the anarchist" (Caperchi 2011). Consequently, the Occupy movement's decision-making process has been more closely linked to the agonistic conception of 'conflictual consensus,' in which the attainment of consensus forms part of the political process only insofar as it is "seen as [a] temporary respite in an ongoing confrontation" (Mouffe 1999b:755).<sup>125</sup> In this way, the movement "does not seek to absorb different political identities into a rational consensus" – as in deliberative

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<sup>125</sup> Caperchi also notes that the conflictual consensus, or compromise, that has often been reached in the GAs of the Occupy movement, is therefore "a contingent one: the product of temporary and negotiated discursive articulations and the child of an open, egalitarian and participatory democratic procedure" (2011).

democracy – but instead endeavors to “accommodate difference temporarily...through...confrontation” (Caperchi 2011). Importantly, possibly because the Occupy movement was essentially started on the internet, openness to agonistic ‘conflictual consensus’ is similarly seen in the online versions of such general assemblies. In particular, <http://www.nycga.net> – the official website of the New York City General Assembly (NYGA) – is a prime example of this.<sup>126</sup>

In addition, the Occupy movement has also been occasionally linked to the autonomous democratic approach, because as an anti-capitalist movement, it has been understood as adopting an autonomous anti-institutional and anti-political stance. However, although largely supportive of calls for a rejection of the neoliberal agendas which promote the status quo, the Occupy movement is made up of a variety of different people and groups, many of whom do not support thoroughly autonomous politics. According to Singhem, for example, the more liberal members of the movement are not totally against institutionalization, and instead see the Occupy movement as offering a possibility to achieve “progressive legislation, either by pressuring politicians to pass reforms or by electing Democrats or independent candidates to office” (2011).<sup>127</sup> Thus, although the movement has

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<sup>126</sup> According to the ‘About’ section of the NYGA website, the site is responsible for “organiz[ing] and set[ting] the vision for the #occupywallstreet movement” (2014a). Moreover, minutes of the general assembly meetings were posted online at [nycga.net](http://nycga.net) and meetings were also livestreamed, allowing participants from around the world to track the meetings in real time. Some meetings were also “archived online in audio and video formats” (Massey and Snyder 2012), while some “congregants also livetweeted the assemblies under Twitter handles such as @DiceyTroop and @LibertySqGA.” These accounts, Massey and Snyder maintain, “attracted thousands of followers, many of whom responded to live events, adding a layer of online conversation that augmented the face-to-face assemblies” (2012). Similarly, working group information can also be found online at NYCGA, because “nearly every working group had a page with a blog, activity wall, shared documents and event calendar, and discussion forum involving members who had never attended the face-to-face meetings” (Massey and Snyder 2012).

<sup>127</sup> Another example of this can be seen in the movement’s demand to revoke the Citizens United Supreme Court verdict (Schwartz 2011:4), which “gave corporations the right to provide political parties with campaign support without creating an obligation for either party to disclose this support” (Owsley 2012:20). Accordingly some authors maintain that “occupiers contested that this precedent created the potential for conflicts of interest among politicians receiving support from corporate interests, thus providing wealthy business interests with a potential mechanism through which to manipulate policy” (Owsley 2012:20). In relation to this demand, House Representative, Ted Deutch (2011) introduced the OCCUPIED amendment (Outlawing Corporate Cash Undermining the Public Interest in our Elections and Democracy), which states that “the rights protected by the Constitution of the United States are the rights of natural persons and do not extend to for-profit corporations, limited liability companies, or other private entities established for business purposes,” thereby cancelling the Citizens United ruling (Deutch 2011).



been connected to the autonomous ideas of anti-institutionalism, various scholars have also drawn attention to its increasing focus on the promotion of new forms of international institutions to “regulate international law, trade, environmental protection, and real development” (Jackson 2012:158). Correlatively, they have also highlighted the movement’s increasing non-adherence to autonomous democratic principles. Furthermore, Owsley’s assertion that “occupiers claim to be embodying the set of alternative institutions that they wish to see implanted in place of that system which they reject” (2012:16), indicates the dynamic democratic orientation of the movement. As such, although deliberative and autonomous elements will no doubt continue within the grassroots politics of the Occupy movement, growing evidence of its increasing openness to alternative, more agonistic ideas of democracy, continues to emerge. Such connection to, and increasing progression toward, agonistic democracy can most clearly be seen within the online communications of the movement. Indeed, the Occupy movement’s use of the internet to function as something akin to an online agonistic public space, is evinced by their approximation of Dahlberg’s threefold framework.

Firstly, through operating in various online domains, the Occupy movement has succeeded in creating multiple communicative spaces in which debate and discussion can occur, and through which counter-publics and oppositional discourses can be formed. In relation to this, Massey and Snyder maintain that the Occupy movement managed to establish “online presences unmatched in the history of social action, leveraging multiple online spaces to...generate distinctive counter-public[s] and alternative policy” (2012). In particular, various websites, social networking sites, video and photo sharing sites, online chat rooms, forums, and wiki-coding sites, all opened up opportunities for discussions and debates surrounding issues important to the movement. Indeed, websites such as Occupywallst.org, in addition to NYCGA.net discussed earlier, emerged as important communicative spaces for the movement. Occupywallst.org was created as one of the initial Occupy movement websites in July 2011. Calling for people to fight “back against the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process” (Occupy Wall Street 2014b), the website provides access to the latest news concerning Occupy actions and events, and encourages communication and discussion via its open forum and chat features. Similarly, Facebook – one of the largest and most popular public online spaces – emerged as a significant platform for the Occupy movement, and spread the movement’s ideas and discourse throughout user-generated social networks. In this regard, the Facebook profile <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyWallSt>, currently has over 667 372 ‘likes,’ while <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyTogether>, has over 263 167 ‘likes’ (December 2014), and

hence arguably provide a platform for counter-publics to emerge and counter-discourses to develop.<sup>128</sup>

Secondly, in addition to harnessing the internet's ability to provide multiple spaces for counter-public expansion and counter-discourse development, the Occupy movement has also embraced the internet and social media's ability to function as a platform for the networking and articulation of diverse, dispersed, and often conflictual, identities and discourses. "These virtual spaces, even more than city parks," became "points of encounter where previously unrelated individuals aggregated to form popular assemblies" (Massey and Snyder 2012). In particular, InterOccupy, an online platform dedicated to fostering "communication between individuals, Working Groups and local General Assemblies, across the movement" (InterOccupy 2014a), has helped to connect divergent activists from around the world, and engendered conversations between a variety of different yet connected movements, including anarchists, environmentalists, trade unions, LGBT groups, labor unions, and feminist movements, to name but a few.<sup>129</sup> Focused on "linking up working groups across the movement and coordinating direct actions," InterOccupy facilitates the development of numerous articulations between various groups, and in this way allows for the strengthening of often marginalized oppositional voices.<sup>130</sup> Indeed, according to their website, this network

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<sup>128</sup> Another online space which added to the communicative abilities of the movement was the microblogging site Twitter. According to Juris, Twitter emerged as a particularly important online public space, "especially during #Occupy's initial mobilisation phase" (2012:261). And in relation to the occupation of Wall Street's Liberty Plaza, Massey and Snyder insist that Twitter's "instantaneous syndication" played a valuable role in communicating "time-sensitive news," with its "140-character message limit...well suited to the mobile devices that predominated in Liberty Plaza" (2012).

<sup>129</sup> From anarchists to unionists, socialists to liberal leftists, and students to the unemployed (Janda et al. 2014:29), differences between the divergent groups in terms of ideologies, agendas, and objectives are understood as inherent and inescapable. These differences are, however, not seen to be restrictive or undermining, but have rather been embraced as an important part of the movement's democratic process. Maeckelbergh corroborates this idea when she advances that "diversity is not [seen as] a problem that needs to be resolved," but is instead "treated as a desirable characteristic for the polity, one that should be embraced and encouraged" (2012).

<sup>130</sup> These connections are achieved in three ways. Firstly, InterOccupy encourages the development of local working group 'committees of correspondence' and provides free and easy access to the contact details of all such committees (e.g. Austin, TX – [interocc@occupyaustin.org](mailto:interocc@occupyaustin.org) – (956) 655-8551). Secondly, their Occupy Directory provides an online digital map of the various Occupy movements around the world. By moving one's cursor/mouse over the town or country that one would like to connect with, and selecting the link, one is able to access contact details, addresses, and online resources. For example, by hovering over and thereby selecting the Occupy Colombo link on the map, the user is given access to the Occupation website, the email address, the Twitter account, and the Facebook account. Finally, InterOccupy provides access to various InterOccupy Hubs.

allows for the development of “coalitions,” and connects “occupiers on a wide range of social problems from anti-war, college debt, internet freedom, [and] the foreclosure crisis, to getting money out of politics, among many other issues” (2014a). In another example, Occupytogether.org focuses on the idea that ‘we find commonality within our diversity,’ and is made up of a collection of independent activist groups and movements, all of whom give advice on how to connect with other activists, get involved, mobilize, and spread the word of the Occupy movement. This site provides access to a variety of spaces and places on the internet where people are connecting, chatting, holding meetings, debating, and ultimately strengthening the discursive momentum of the movement. Similarly, other forums such as the Occupy Wall Street Open Forum (<http://occupywallst.org/forum/>), Occupy Café (<http://www.occupycafe.org/>), and the Hip Forum’s Occupy movement thread (<http://www.hipforums.com/newforums/forumdisplay.php?f=633>), also provide spaces for the articulation of a range of diverse people and groups, who come together to discuss movement objectives, actions and organization, and to participate in strengthening counter-discourses and oppositional identities. In this regard, discussions range from issues related to democracy and capitalism, to climate change concerns, and hundreds of people are active on the sites each day. The Occupy Wall Street Forum is particularly active, with some posts receiving over five hundred comments.<sup>131</sup> Online live streaming sites, such as occupystreams.org, have also allowed for connections to be made by live streaming video from offline occupations, camps, protests, and so forth. Occupystreams.org provided access to over two hundred live video streams, with some examples including: Global Revolution (<http://occupystreams.org/channels/globalrevolution/>) with 70.69 million total views, Live-Action-Spilno-TV (<http://occupystreams.org/channels/live-action-spilno-tv/>) with 2.01

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These hubs “allow anyone to use a set of organizing tools for coordinating large-scale projects easily for [the] greatest impact and reach” (2014b). These hubs are related to a number of topics including action (@occupytheconomy), issues (@OccupyHomes), regional (@Occupy Middle East), and projects (@Reclaim).

<sup>131</sup> This activity, it can be argued, is indicative of significant dialogue and contestation taking place on the site. Under the discussion titles ‘The Alternative to Capitalism,’ participants debate the impact of capitalism and contest various alternatives to the current economic order (<http://occupywallst.org/forum/the-alternative-to-capitalism/> 2014). In another example, 528 comments have been made on the discussion titled ‘Climate Change Is Happening Now – A Carbon Price Must Follow,’ in which issues related to carbon taxes, deforestation, alternative energy and the impact of all of the above on the consumer and the 99% are debated. Occupy Talk (<http://occupytalk.org>) is another example of an online voice chat room, which uses the open source Mumble application to allow people from around the world to connect, chat, and hold meetings related to the movement’s activities and organization.

million views, and Occupy Israel (<http://occupystreams.org/channels/occupyisrael/>) with over 32 600 views. This live streaming occurred in collaboration with live chat feeds connected to the videos, which enabled participants viewing the streams to communicate and interact ‘virtually’ with those on the ground.

Thirdly, since the Occupy movement grew as a movement representative of the 99% who are suffering under the neoliberal hegemony of the 1%, online communications and activity tended to criticize and call into question current dominant discourses related to corporate economic power, and its influence on politics. This use of the internet and social media to confront dominant discourses can be seen in the online activism of email discussions and lists (e.g. Occupy Boston mailing list), blogs (e.g. [occupytogether.org/blog](http://occupytogether.org/blog), <http://pmarcuse.wordpress.com> <http://wearethe99percent.tumblr.com/>), social networks (e.g. <https://www.facebook.com/OccupyWallSt>, <https://www.facebook.com/InterOccupy?fref=ts>, #occupy on Twitter), and alternative media (e.g. <http://citybeat.com>, [villagevoice.com](http://villagevoice.com), <http://americanindependent.com/>, [austinchronicle.com](http://austinchronicle.com)). For example, contestation of various dominant discourses can be found on the Occupy Wall Street’s Open Forum. Discussion titles such as “The Case Against Capitalism,” and “The Stealthy, Ugly Growth of Corporatized Medicine,” among many others, are indicative of a rejection of current neoliberal dynamics, and a call for alternative ways of life. Social networking sites such as Facebook have also been used to discuss and contest various ideas related to neoliberalism, including, for example, issues surrounding minimum wage, corporatization, debt, housing and land ownership, genetically modified foods, and environmental degradation. In addition to this online discursive contestation, the internet has also been used for the online instigation of offline action. Indeed, since the initial online call from Adbusters to Occupy Wall Street, the Occupy movement has continued to use the internet and new media technologies to initiate, organize, and coordinate offline contestations. This can be seen in the communications and mobilizations of various offline protests and marches in cities around the world, from Albany, Atlanta, and Bristol, to Cape Town, Cairo, and Lisbon, among thousands more. At the same time, the use of social media and the internet resulted in the generation of specific types of social and political interaction, which stimulated the “aggregation of large numbers of individuals in concrete physical places” (Juris 2012:266). And this resulted in the numerous sit-ins and encampments in Zucotti Park, Taksim Gezi Park, outside St Paul’s Cathedral in London, in Ngaba, Tibet, and in other cities around the world.<sup>132</sup> This online instigation of

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<sup>132</sup> Poignant examples of this online instigation of action are also evident in the variety of online organized offline protests that have emerged around the world, including Occupy Wall Street (667 372 Facebook

offline opposition remains a key characteristic of the Occupy movement, and their effective use of social media – in particular social networking – to gather vast amounts of people to protest in particular places, is indicative of the movement's use of the internet to strengthen and grow counter-public presences and reach. Moreover, the movement's widespread use of the internet and social media to spread their message resulted in months of mainstream media coverage of their related events, protests, ideas, and actions, which has drawn significant attention to, and engendered further support for, the movement.

Based on the above discussion it becomes apparent that the Occupy movement, although partially reflective of both deliberative and autonomous democratic ideas, is neither primarily deliberative nor autonomous in orientation. Rather, as a result of their online instigation of debate, counter-public articulation, discursive contestation and democratic participation, they have used the internet to function as something akin to an online agonistic public space. And through doing so, they have indicated the potential of their internet use to help realize a version of Laclau and Mouffe's conception of radical democracy.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

Agonistic radical democracy evidently resonates strongly with the politics underlying much of the above protests and activisms, and an agonistic approach is particularly evident in the various movements' use of the internet and social media as sites for communication, contestation, and mobilization. Indeed, as illustrated above, the internet has been used as something akin to an online agonistic public space, in which, firstly, counter-publics can be created and counter-discourses can be nurtured, secondly, politically diverse groups can come together to network and develop articulations of effective oppositional discourses, and thirdly, the contestation of dominant discourses and anti-democratic hegemonies can occur. And since these three dynamics resonate strongly with Laclau and Mouffe's radical democratic ideas, related arguments concerning the potential of such internet use to promote agonistic ideas of radical democracy and left-wing hegemony, are compelling. Admittedly, the influence of deliberative and autonomous forms of radical democracy within these social movements' grassroots political organization can often be detected. But, at the same time, evidence exists of their progression toward a primarily agonistic approach via their respective uses of the internet as a space for agonistic forms of communication, organization and contestation. In

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members), Occupy Germany (37 848 Facebook members), and Occupy Gezi (64 609 Facebook members) (December 2014).

this regard, the examples discussed above illustrate the promising effectiveness of cumulative connections, and point toward the immense potential of online agonistic public spaces to contribute toward the creation of what Laclau and Mouffe would call left-wing hegemony. This is all the more so because, while the primacy of agonism in online expressions of radical democracy has emerged, as discussed, there is also an increasing isomorphism between this online agonism and offline agonistic challenges to the status quo. However, it is important to note that although online spaces of discussion and debate have provided these movements with opportunities to connect to each other, organize protest, and confront dominant discourses, it has also become evident that the extension of online conversations into real-world public debate is imperative, in order to solidify and strengthen the hegemony of the leftist struggle.

Recent research into the agonistic use of the internet has, of course, not been oblivious to the role that this medium plays in “facilitating administrative power, flows of capital, liberal-consumer logics,” and the promotion and propagation of dominant discourses, which “shut down” and exclude alternative and oppositional counter-public voices (Dahlberg 2007b:143). Furthermore, issues related to power, inequality, and discursive hegemony in the online area have likewise materialized. Examples of this can be seen in concerns related to the replication of offline power inequalities online, which have led to questions over the value of the internet to support the development of radical democracy. In this regard, Murdock and Golding argue that irregularities connected to offline socio-cultural and economic elements result in the creation of disparity online (2004:253). And the problems with this inequality are not simply related to individual access and skills – as a result of the digital divide – but also, more importantly, relate to how such inequalities in access determine how discourses are nurtured online.<sup>133</sup> In a similar vein, questions surrounding the effectiveness of counter-discourse development and discursive contestation within online spaces that have been structured by corporations supportive of dominant discourses – for example, Facebook and Twitter – have also emerged. Thus, problems related to how marginalized discourses are

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<sup>133</sup> According to Dahlberg, since ideas related to overcoming the digital divide are “often part of the dominant discourse of capitalist consumer relations and liberal-individualist politics” (2007a:838), calls for the provision of universal internet access may ultimately act to support dominant discourses by encouraging individual need satisfaction, by “facilitating economic and political market transaction,” and by “attracting people into spaces of liberal capitalist practice while obscuring...[the] structuring of online space, the associated asymmetries of power and the lack of any significant institutional change” (2007a:838). As such, rather than simply focusing on a lack of access or skills as the reason for limited political activity or discursive contestation, issues related to the extent to which resource inequality impacts on online discourse development, also need to be considered.

being nurtured online, and whether or not these ‘counter-discourses’ are being ‘re-marginalized’ by dominant capitalist online discourses, have brought overly optimistic views of the radical democratic value of the internet into question. Consequently, although evidence that the internet can play a significant role in the development and support of counter-discourses and left-wing hegemonic strategies does exist, and although it is clear that dominant discourses are being challenged online (e.g. Downing 2001; Gallo 2003; McCaughey and Ayers 2003; Meikle 2002; Salazer 2003; Van de Donk et al. 2004), the effectiveness of these online contestations in the *destabilization* of the boundaries of dominant discourses, and the subsequent movement toward more radical forms of democracy – in real time and space – remains an issue of debate.

In this regard, despite an array of literature examining the global use of the internet and social media in political practice, and its implications for the extension of both online and offline deliberative, autonomous and agonistic radical democratic practices, little, if any, attention has been given to such use of the internet and social media in South African politics. In particular, the radical democratic use of the internet and social media by South African civil society and new social movements has remained largely undocumented. Some would argue that the low penetration of the internet in South Africa has resulted in limited general, and even more limited political, use of this medium. However, with growing access to telecommunications infrastructure and mobile web capabilities, the number of South African internet users is rising exponentially. Consequently, with a view to exploring this issue, the focus of the following chapter will fall on investigating the potential of the internet, and social media in particular, to function as an online agonistic public space, in support of, firstly, counter-public and counter-discourse development, secondly, the articulation of strategically effective counter-discursive fronts, and thirdly, the facilitation of discursive contestations of dominant discourses – and correlatively the promotion of a variant of Laclau and Mouffe’s agonistic version of radical democracy – in South Africa.

## **Chapter Five: Online Agonism in South Africa**

### **5.1 Introduction**

As illustrated in the previous chapter, there is significant evidence to suggest that some of the recent major new social movements' online politics and activism are primarily orientated around agonistic radical democratic ideas. That is, although elements of both deliberative and autonomous radical democracy can be found within the grassroots political orientation of movements such as the Zapatista, RAWA, the alter-globalization movement, and the Occupy movement, evidence of their growing progression toward a primarily agonistic approach can be seen in the orientation of their online politics. Within this digital world, the conception of the internet as an online agonistic public space has accordingly gained significant attention, with Dahlberg highlighting the growing translation of Laclau and Mouffe's agonistic strategies of discursive contestation into the online environment. Of course, questions concerning the effectiveness of such online participation in the instigation of real-world radical democratic change continue to be raised – particularly in relation to the use of such media by exponents of extremely marginalized discourses, the restrictions of the digital divide, and the overarching influence of dominant discourses online. And these questions are valuable insofar as they guard against the adoption of naïve wholesale optimism concerning the revolutionary potential of digital media. However, notwithstanding the related concerns, the evidence explored in the previous chapters strongly indicates that the internet has, in many cases, succeeded in providing communicative spaces for the formulation of counter-discourses, and for the development of the type of contestation associated with agonistic radical democratic practice. And against this backdrop, the question of the relevance of such evidence for South Africa – a country still in the throws of transition, with a plethora of new social movements and rapidly expanding digital connectivity – is important.

In the interest of examining this issue, this chapter will explore the extent to which some major South African new social movements have adopted online political practices that resonate with the primarily agonistic dynamics of the online political practices of those movements discussed in the previous chapter. This will be done with a view to determining the potential of the internet and social media to function as an online agonistic public space in the support of local counter-discourse development, in the facilitation of local contestation of dominant discourses, and in the consequent promotion of agonistic radical democracy in the country.



To begin with, a brief overview will be given of the recent South African political landscape, and important developments leading up to the 1994 transition to democracy, including the activism of the anti-apartheid social movement, along with the ensuing neoliberal turn which the country took after 1994. Hereafter, the emergence of a *new* set of social movements, which developed as a critical reaction to continuing inequality and poverty in the country, will be detailed. In this regard, three overlapping types of struggles, namely those connected to the ideas of (a) the right to *life*, (b) the right to a *better* life, and (c) the right to a better life for *all*, will be considered. And in each case, their use of the internet and social media as an online agonistic public space which can contribute to the facilitation of left-wing hegemony in the country, will be investigated. That is, following a brief discussion of the South African new media landscape, the above mentioned new social movements' online activity will be explored with a view to rendering conspicuous, firstly, the extent of their respective digital connectivity evinced by their use of the internet and social media; secondly, their respective proximity to the radically democratic ideals of agonistic democracy; and thirdly, both the current possibilities for – and the limitations to – their use of this media (i) to support counter-public formation, (ii) to allow diverse groups and people to network and articulate collective identities and discourses, and (iii) to facilitate contestations of dominant discourses. In short, drawing on popular agonistic arguments that the internet allows for the creation of alternative political arenas/spaces, where different and dispersed people and groups can come together, recognize shared identities, and build and reinforce “counter-public networks and coalitions (or articulations) of radical discourses” (Dahlberg 2007c:56), the focus of this chapter will fall on various South African new social movements' approximation of the online agonistic activity highlighted in Chapter Four. In terms of this framework,<sup>134</sup> the internet is viewed, firstly, as providing communicative spaces for groups “associated with marginalized discourses...to develop counter-publics.” Secondly, it is seen as assisting “politically diverse and geographically dispersed counter-publics [to] network and develop articulations of collective identities and discourses,” thereby allowing for “the formation of stronger and more effective oppositional strategies.” And thirdly, it is regarded as “supporting counter-public contestation...of dominant discourses” online (Dahlberg 2007b:134, 137, 139).<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> As indicated in the previous chapter, Dahlberg has drawn significantly on the discursive contestation theory of Laclau and Mouffe in the formulation of this framework.

<sup>135</sup> In relation to this, the internet is seen as assisting in online discursive contestation, in the spread of information, and in the organization and co-ordination of physical protests on local, national, and international levels. Furthermore, the internet and new media technologies are understood as allowing for alternative

Importantly, this study is undertaken with a view to identifying current local network deficits in the above three areas, with the ultimate aim of strategizing the formation of greater online agonistic constellations. Constellations which can increasingly facilitate the approximation of left-wing hegemony within South Africa.

## **5.2 The South African political context**

South Africa has a tempestuous political history. Following the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, the marginalization of indigenous people in South Africa – including Blacks, Coloreds and Indians intensified, and by the time the Union of South Africa was established in 1910, the ideas of white domination and white supremacy were already firmly entrenched in the politico-economic dynamics of the country. And following this, throughout the early 1900s, the power of the white minority was progressively strengthened through various policies and laws which sought to restrict the rights of ‘non-whites’ in the country.<sup>136</sup> In reaction to this growing repression, opposition to British authoritarianism began to rise, and in 1912 the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) was created as a resistance organization focused on protesting against racial discrimination and inequality (Zander 1999:121). Changing its name to the African National Congress (ANC) in 1923, the organization continued with its campaign of passive resistance against racial prejudice and minority rule in the country (Elphick and Davenport 1997:215).

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representations of counter-public protest to emerge alongside those dominant discursive representations propagated by the mass media.

<sup>136</sup> One of the most important pieces of legislation in this regard was the Native’s Land Act (1913), which “limited African land ownership rights to African reserves constituting...about 7% of the Union’s total land area” (Beck 2000:113). According to Hamilton and his colleagues, “the first and most severe consequence of this act was to evict hundreds and thousands of African dwellers on white-owned land, without any compensatory measures” (2001:35). Another example of segregationist legislation included the Native Administration Act of 1927 (later called the Bantu Administration Act), which, according to Christopher, “made the proclaimed Black areas subject to a separate political regime from the remainder of the country, ultimately subject only to rule by proclamation, not parliament” (2001:65). In relation to this, Rich asserts that “the central imperative behind the Act was to establish a strong enough system of national ‘native administration’ to contain the political pressures that were likely to result from the legislative measures necessary for the implementation of territorial segregation” (1996:33). Furthermore, opposition to the Act was made very difficult by the accompanying clause, which stated that “any person who utters any words or does any other act or thing...with intent to promote any feeling of hostility between Natives and Europeans, shall be guilty of an offence and liable on conviction to imprisonment not exceeding one year or to a fine of one hundred pounds or both” (Section 29 Act no.38 of 1927, cited in du Toit 2010:107).

However, following the National Party's (NP) election victory in 1948, and their subsequent implementation of harsh apartheid laws, passive resistance progressed into intensive civil disobedience, and mass defiance campaigns were undertaken by the ANC to end racial discrimination in South Africa, and to "repeal...the pass laws, the Group Areas Act...and the Separate representation of Voters Act" (Okoth 2006:175). Initiated in 1952, the defiance campaign, as Albert Luthuli explained, called on people "to disobey these laws...[and] suffer...arrests, assault and penalty if needed, without violence" (cited in Okoth 2006:176). Notwithstanding the initial limited impact of such defiance, similar peaceful protests against the repression and racism of the apartheid government grew during the latter part of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s.

Yet, the events of the 1960 Sharpeville Massacre,<sup>137</sup> and the subsequent banning of resistance movements – including the ANC – steered such resistance in a new direction; that is, away from peaceful non-violent resistance, and toward armed struggle.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, in reaction to Nelson Mandela's statement that "the state has given us no alternative to violence" (1996:88), the 1960s and 1970s saw unprecedented waves of black political mobilizations, with labor strikes, township protests, and acts of sabotage by the militant resistance wings, all of which intensified the mass struggle against apartheid. Ironically, as Falola and Oyebade assert, it was "the failure of peaceful protests to bring about change to the oppressive and racist South African system" that resulted in a "new generation of black leaders," who grew in prominence through adopting "a more militant anti-apartheid campaign" (2010:116). The armed struggle was further energized by the apartheid government's violent repression of protest marches in 1976, when thousands of Soweto school children non-violently protested against the use of Afrikaans as a primary medium of instruction for some secondary school subjects (Pieterse 2001:17). The government's brutal reaction "sparked days-long violent riots

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<sup>137</sup> During the Sharpeville Massacre, sixty-nine people were killed and 180 were injured, many of whom were shot in the back while fleeing, when police opened fire on a group of people protesting against Pass Laws in the Vaal Triangle (Dreyer 2006:186)

<sup>138</sup> Following the Sharpeville Massacre, and the banning of all resistance movements, the ANC and Pan African Congress (PAC) "declared that there was no longer any legal space for them to organize non-violent resistance to apartheid," and consequently, they established armed wings, respectively, *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (Spear of the Nation) – popularly known as MK – and *Poqo* (Pure) (Cherry 2011:14). Launching its armed struggle on 16 December 1961, with a series of sabotage attacks on symbolic apartheid infrastructure, Nelson Mandela described MK as "the fighting arm of the people against the government and its policies of race oppression" (1990:123). In turn, the PAC's *Poqo* became the first black political organization in South Africa to openly accept the taking of human life as part of its strategy," which derived from the fact that "the PAC was...manifestly more militant than the ANC" (Maharaj 2014).

in Soweto and neighbouring black townships, and trouble ensued for the remainder of the year throughout South Africa” (Mikaberidze 2013:608).<sup>139</sup> Accordingly, the “Soweto Uprising was an historic watershed in South African politics” because “many young people, politicised by the...uprising and school boycotts,” opted “for the armed struggle and...[fled] the country to join the ANC’s [military] training camps” (Pieterse 2001:17). Urban unrest and rioting also continued throughout the 1980s, largely under the organization of the United Democratic Front (UDF). The UDF comprised of a variety of organizations “that shared a total rejection of apartheid and a willingness to take to the streets in demonstration” (Kessel 2000:2). Indeed, between 1983 and 1989 the UDF emerged as one of the most prominent anti-apartheid movements (or coalitions) in South Africa, with more than six hundred affiliated organizations, including youth movements, civic associations, student movements, trade unions, church groups, and sports groups (Zukas 2007:118).<sup>140</sup> Operating as a movement in opposition to the hegemony of the apartheid government, the UDF can arguably be viewed as an example of the type of left-wing hegemonic project Laclau and Mouffe propose in order for radical democracy to emerge. That is, with an articulation of over six hundred divergent movements, the UDF succeeded in spreading something akin to the ‘chains of equivalence’ suggested by Laclau and Mouffe. And drawing on Laclau’s visual representation of such chains of equivalence – provided in the previous chapter – the following diagram is illustrative of the UDF’s role in the extension of such chains of equivalence:

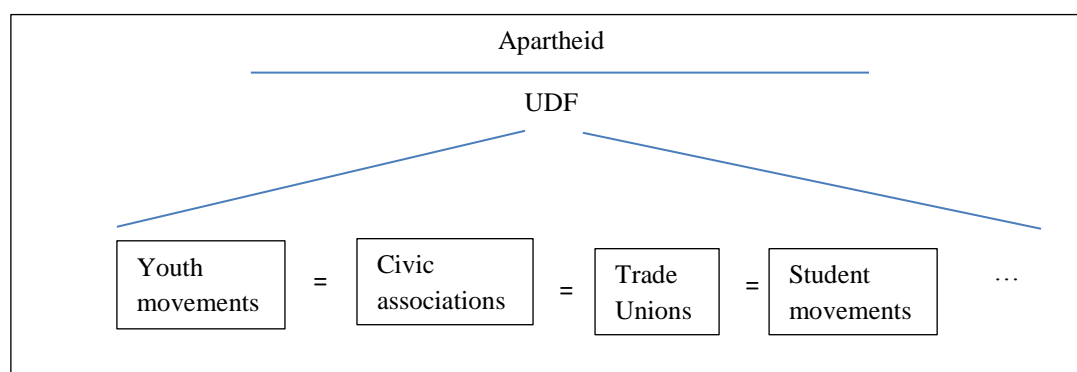


Figure 2: UDF chains of equivalence (adapted from Laclau 2005)

<sup>139</sup> For a detailed account of the Soweto Riots, see: Ndlovu, S. 2006. “The Soweto Uprising.” In The South African Education Trust. *The Road to Democracy in South Africa: 1970 – 1980*. (Vol. 2). Johannesburg: Unisa Press.

<sup>140</sup> The UDF adopted the Freedom Charter as part of its policy, and by linking itself directly to the banned ANC “played a vital role in bringing the...ANC back to centre stage of South African politics, thus paving the way for its unbanning and for the subsequent stage of negotiating and power sharing” (Kessel 2000:2). Once the ANC was unbanned, the UDF relinquished its political position and disbanded in 1991.

By the middle of 1984, public opposition to the government intensified and “the townships again erupt[ed]...in a wave of protest” (Wood 2000:4). Rioting, protests, marches, and sabotage continued to escalate, and by 1986 the apartheid government declared a nationwide “state of emergency,” and arrested thousands of activists connected to the enduring resistance movements (Griffiths 1994:192). In addition to ongoing domestic resistance, increasing international sanctions on South Africa, growing international anti-apartheid solidarity, as well as support for anti-apartheid resistance from recently independent neighboring countries, all put pressure on the National Party government to abandon its policy of apartheid, and to consider a transition to democracy. Finally, succumbing to this collective pressure, in 1990 the South African government under the NP leadership of F.W. de Klerk, agreed to release “all political prisoners, legalize all opposition parties, and begin genuine negotiations” for a peaceful transition to democracy (Jung and Shapiro 2003:99).

This entailed the NP entering into talks with the ANC and various other political parties, including the Pan African Congress (PAC), the South African Communist Party (SACP), the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), and the Conservative Party (CP), among others.<sup>141</sup> After years of difficult negotiations, deadlocks, and political and economic compromises, and following increasing pressure from civil society and international supporters, agreements were finally reached, and South Africa’s first democratic elections were held on 27 April 1994 – paving the way for the country’s transition to democratic rule, under the leadership of the ANC and the presidency of Nelson Mandela.

### **5.3 The role of civil society in South Africa’s democratic transition**

As mentioned above, during the transition period of 1990 to 1994, the popular UDF disbanded, and an array of non-union national associations – including the South African National Civics Organization (SANCO),<sup>142</sup> the Women’s National Coalition (WNC),<sup>143</sup> and

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<sup>141</sup> The ANC first met with the NP in May 1990, with the ultimate aim of ending white minority rule, and transforming the regime from a “totalitarian one to a democratic one” (Wa Muiu 2008:133). During this first meeting, the Groote Schuur Minute, which “linked the renunciation of the ANC’s armed struggle with the granting of political freedoms, the return of exiles, and the release of all political prisoners” by 30 April 1991, was signed by both parties (Buntman 2003:43; McGann 2010:109). Furthermore, the pact made “non-racial democracy in a united South Africa the official goal of negotiation” (McGann 2010:109).

<sup>142</sup> Established in 1992, SANCO aimed to secure an independent voice for civil society during the negotiated transition period. Engaging in an “informal alliance with the ANC” (Zuern 2011:109), SANCO played both a

the National Youth Development Forum (NYDF),<sup>144</sup> were established in an attempt to ensure “the continuity of an autonomous and institutionalised voice of grassroots movements” (Papadakis 2006:18). These movements, it has been argued, played a significant role in the mobilizations of action in support of democratic changes, and “proved to be crucial not only in the peaceful transition to democracy but to transition *tout court*” (Papadakis 2006:20). In particular, many saw the involvement of such civic groups in the reconstruction and development process as pointing toward the new government’s openness toward participatory politics. This willingness to work with civil society was expressed, on the one hand, in the ANC’s Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP 1994) policy, in which it was stated that

without undermining the authority and responsibilities of elected representative bodies...the democratic order that we envisage must foster a wide range of institutions of participatory democracy in partnership with civil society on the basis of informed and empowered citizens...[to] facilitate direct democracy. (RDP 1994 para. 5.2.6, cited in Papadakis 2006:21)

On the other hand, various pieces of legislation, policies, and local programs, all similarly advanced the importance of a cooperative approach between government and civil society (e.g. Labour Relations Act, National Employment Skills Act, housing and public works services, etc.). According to Papadakis, “all the pieces of legislation, programmes and devices institutionalised an active role for civil society actors...in the design and implementation of

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passive and active role in South Africa’s transition to democracy. More specifically, SANCO was passively involved in rejections of “direct negotiations” which threatened the unity of the mass anti-apartheid movement, and actively involved in both their electoral alliance with the ANC, SACP, and COSATU, and in their subsequent involvement with drafting the Reconstruction and Development Programme policy (Papadakis 2006:18).

<sup>143</sup> Bringing together approximately seventy women’s organizations, and “bridging divisions of race, class, ethnicity, ideology, religion, party and rural-urban rifts” (Hawkesworth 2006:94), the WNC – which was developed by feminists in the ANC – launched an eighteen-month campaign to try and uncover what women expected from the new state. Following hundreds of focus groups and questionnaires, the WNC generated the ‘Women’s Charter,’ which focused on issues such as gender equality in the workplace and home, reproductive and sexual rights, childcare, and pension benefits, among other things (Hawkesworth 2006:94). In 1994 this charter was handed to the new president, Nelson Mandela, “with a view to [it] forming part of the overall documentation which determined the final constitution of South Africa” (Papadakis 2006:19).

<sup>144</sup> The NYDF was established in 1992 in an attempt to unify the youth of the country. However, following various problems related to a lack of “clear programmes” and “vague mandates,” the forum collapsed in 1995 (Papadakis 2006:19).

their respective objectives.” And Swilling and Russell (2001) similarly insist that they were seen collectively as an “integral element of the public space” (cited in Papadakis 2006:22). Consequently, such active involvement raised many hopes about the future role of civil society in the new democracy (Baccaro and Papadakis 2004).

However, after the 1994 elections, the extent of such cooperation soon diminished. That is, despite initial opportunities for participation, and healthy non-profit sector finances, many civil society organizations began to experience a ‘survival crisis’ of sorts. This crisis, it has been suggested, was largely due to three core issues. Firstly, although possibilities for financial assistance existed in the non-profit sector, many funders modified their funding initiatives, and tended to redirect focus toward development related concerns, thus rendering their funding incompatible with civil society objectives. Secondly, the large-scale migration of civil society leaders to state and business sectors left many organizations severely depleted and without effective leadership. And thirdly, civil society’s lack of technical skills often left them unable to participate in emerging developmental initiatives (Marais 2001; Cawthra et al. 2001).

In addition to these obstacles, changes in the socio-economic policy of the new government between 1994 and 1996, as well as the changing attitudes of the political elite, further weakened the influence of civil society in post-apartheid South Africa. Thus, despite the RDP’s promise of a ‘people-driven process,’ it was not long before the new government conceded to pressure from dominant market-driven agendas (Marais 2001, Mattes and Thiel 1998), and began to follow an increasingly neoliberal path – a path largely incompatible with civil society involvement.

## **5.4 The neoliberal turn of the ANC**

As already mentioned, prior to the 1994 elections, the ANC launched the RDP (which was developed in conjunction with the COSATU, SACP, and civil society) as its major policy platform.<sup>145</sup> As an essential political directive of the elected ANC, the RDP focused on meeting basic needs, limiting the country’s reliance on international finance, and attesting to the ANC’s mandate that “South Africa can afford to feed, house, educate and provide health care for all of its citizens” (ANC 1994:2.1.3, cited in Bond 2000:52). This policy of “growth through redistribution” (Terreblanche 2003:89) not only promised to meet the basic needs of

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<sup>145</sup> The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) joined with the ANC to form the tripartite alliance.

all people in South Africa. In addition, according to Marais, it also provided an ideological substrate that would ensure the continuity of the ideals of the Freedom Charter into the post-apartheid era (2001:239).<sup>146</sup>

Initially drafted in February 1994, the RDP drew on the Keynesian paradigm, insofar as it, firstly, “proposed growth and development through reconstruction and redistribution,” secondly, “sought a leading and enabling role for government in guiding the mixed economy through reconstruction and development,” and thirdly, “argued for a living wage as a pre-requisite for achieving the required level of economic growth” (Adelzadeh 1996:66). However, following various problems related to the practicalities surrounding the programme’s implementation, and accusations that the policy was a “wish list for too many people” (Heymans 1995:61-63; Meyer 2000:2; Terreblanche 2003:109), by the time the final economic framework was presented in the September 1994 RDP White Paper, profound changes had already been made (Taylor 2001:74). In short, as Hart points out, despite accommodating a wider group of constituents, it correlatively acted to redefine “key redistributive principles laid out in the Base Document, and replaced Keynesian thrust with neoliberal trickle down” (2002:18).<sup>147</sup> That is, abandoning Keynesian ideas in favor of a more neoliberal framework, the initial goals of redistribution were dropped, and the influence of the government was reduced to a managerial role. These changes led to mounting suspicion that “the RDP was viewed by the ANC leadership as just a mobilising tool for election purposes” (Padayachee 1998:440). In addition to the changes which the RDP underwent, further economic policy concessions were soon made in an attempt to “calm domestic capital and foreign currency markets” (Visser 2004:8). These concessions ultimately led to the adoption of more stringent policy changes, and to the introduction of a conservative macro-economic strategy, called the Growth Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) programme.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> According to the ANC website, the Freedom Charter “was the statement of core principles of the South African Congress Alliance, which consisted of the African National Congress and its allies the South African Indian Congress, the South African Congress of Democrats and the Coloured People’s Congress. It is characterized by its opening demand: The People Shall Govern!” (2014).

<sup>147</sup> The RDP White Paper aimed to provide a strategy for the new Government of National Unity to implement the RDP, and according to its preface, it included submissions from “different offices of government, parastatal agencies, multiparty forums, development institutions, organizations of civil society, business organizations, and individuals” (Hart 2002:18).

<sup>148</sup> According to Decoteau, GEAR “stipulates measures for liberalizing trade and enhancing export; it advocates fiscal austerity to service national debt, tax incentives for big business, the privatization of ‘non-essential’ state enterprises and state-run utilities, cuts in social spending, and the introduction of wage restraints and ‘regulated flexibility’ in the labour market” (2013:10).



Despite its “neoliberal character” (Marais 2001:163), GEAR was initially promoted as “a continuation of the RDP” (Taylor 2001:82). However, since the RDP is in fact only mentioned four times in the GEAR policy document, and since the policy explicitly acts to position redistribution as a “by-product” of growth, instead of the basis for growth (Taylor 2001:82), the two policies were from the outset clearly contradictory. According to Terreblanche,

perhaps the most important difference between the RDP and GEAR was that, while the former expected the state to conduct a people-orientated developmental policy, the latter saw South Africa’s economic “salvation” in a high economic growth rate that would result from a sharp increase in private capital accumulation in an unbridled capitalistic system. The government’s task in this was to refrain from economic intervention and to concentrate on the necessary adjustments that would create an optimal climate for private investment. (Terreblanche 1999:5)

This new version of development, Narsiah explains, “began a movement from social heterodoxy to neoliberal orthodoxy” (2002:5). And in this regard, the adoption of GEAR as the new national policy, together with its promotion of fiscal austerity, privatization, monetary discipline, and export-orientated development, illustrated the country’s full-scale shift toward a neoliberal, free-market economic framework.<sup>149</sup>

In relation to the above shift, Duncan points out that South Africa’s “path to neoliberalism did not involve brute force,” as was the case in Chile (discussed in Chapter One), nor was it “domesticated largely by consent,” as seen in the United States and the United Kingdom (Harvey, 2005: 39-63, in Duncan 2013).<sup>150</sup> Instead it has been argued that

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<sup>149</sup> Since GEAR was a combination of standard IMF and World Bank stabilization and structural adjustment policies, many have insisted that GEAR is simply a home-grown example of structural adjustment.

<sup>150</sup> While the implementation of neoliberalism in South Africa did not proceed from the military imperatives of an authoritarian dictatorship (as was the case in Pinochet’s Chile), since the early 2000s the ANC-led government has begun to reintroduce a process of militarisation in the country. According to Duncan, the first instance of this police militarisation process was the “reintroduction of a military ranking system that existed under apartheid” (2013). More recently, the facilitative approach toward protest policing is being increasingly replaced by “more militarised responses,” and paramilitary units have begun to be deployed to “protest ‘hotspots’” (Duncan 2013). In addition to this, the military has also become a supplementary to domestic policing, and Duncan asserts that “both the military and the police...[are] supported by intelligence agencies which began to characterise protestors as criminals and threats to national security and stability” (2013). A tragic example of this occurred during the 2012 Marikana Massacre, in which 34 striking mineworkers – who engaged in an unprotected strike against the multinational mining corporation Lonmin PLC – were killed by members of the South African Police Service. Such adoption of an increasingly militaristic stance in order to quieten voices

the country's neoliberal path was self-imposed, firstly through the ANC government's acceptance of the Apartheid regime's debt and their subsequent acceptance of an International Monetary Fund loan, and secondly through their implementation of GEAR (Duncan 2013; Satgar 2012:43).

However, the ANC's adoption of neoliberalism, evinced through its implementation of GEAR, did not go uncontested; on the contrary, it sparked "immediate resistance and drew considerable international attention" (Decoteau 2013:10). Indeed, GEAR was criticized for being "openly Thatcherite in content and tone" (Terreblanche 2003:115), and for violating "the promise of 'A Better Life for All'" (Van der Walt 2000:75).<sup>151</sup> Moreover, critics insisted that it was "geared to service the respective prerogatives of domestic and international capital and the aspirations of the black bourgeoisie," all "at the expense of the impoverished majority's hopes for a less iniquitous social and economic order" (Visser 2004:10). While GEAR promised to help stabilize the country's economy, the result was far from favorable. As Duncan notes, "unemployment levels increased, especially amongst youth, many of whom faced a lifetime of joblessness as part of a growing surplus population...and while poverty levels decreased, inequality increased" (2013). In particular, in 1996, Adelzadeh questioned GEAR's ability to "increase the growth rate of the economy...reverse unemployment...[and] yield sufficient progress towards an equitable distribution of income and wealth" (1996:92). And by 1999, the answer to many of these questions was clear. Bond (1999) and Adelzadeh (1999) found that between 1996 and 1998, most of GEAR's targets were missed; that is, annual GDP growth declined from 3.2% in 1996 to 0.1% in 1998, per capita income decreased by 2.6%, and formal sector unemployment increased, with job losses growing from Seventy-one thousand in 1996 to 186 000 in 1998. This was in stark contrast to the expected employment gains of 246 000 predicted by GEAR. In addition to this, although private sector investment was set to increase by 9.3%, investment fell from 6.1% to negative 0.7% in 1998 (Meyer 2000). Consequently, despite promises of economic growth and widespread poverty alleviation, the neoliberal orientation of GEAR not only undermined the initial objectives set out by the new government in the 1994 RDP policy.

In addition to this, "in an attempt to cut public spending, local governments were forced into financial self-sufficiency; yet, at the same time, they were being expected to

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opposing the neoliberal underpinnings of the country's economy, points toward an increasingly repressive shift in the type of neoliberalism being practiced in South Africa.

<sup>151</sup> GEAR's emergence as a neoliberal program was confirmed at the policy's launch when the then deputy President Thabo Mbeki confirmed his neoliberal intentions with his revealing statement: "Just call me a Thatcherite" (cited in Gumede 2007:107).

extend services like water, electricity and sanitation” (Duncan 2013). This continues to lead to massive service delivery problems. It has also resulted in the creation of class polarizations between the relatively few elite, who were prospering from the new policies, and the majority of the South African population, who were not. The consequence of this has been the emergence of an array of new social movements.

## **5.5 The emergence of post-apartheid new social movements**

Following the shift from RDP to GEAR in 1996, and the concomitant inauguration of South Africa into the largely neoliberal Southern African Development Community (SADC),<sup>152</sup> tensions surrounding the continuity of widespread poverty and inequality in the country began to surface. And as the ANC entered its second term in office, a variety of ‘new’ social movements began to emerge. These new social movements – which were ‘new’ in relation to their lack of connection to previous anti-apartheid social movements and civil society organizations – supported a range of struggles related to growing neoliberal economic policies, and the correlative problems associated with housing distribution, education and basic services (Ballard et al. 2006:2).<sup>153</sup>

According to Dawson and Setsemedi, “many of the post-apartheid social movements were born out of struggles against the commodification of basic services, [and] the inability to

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<sup>152</sup> South Africa joined SADC in the early 1990s and signed the SADC treaty, which laid the groundwork for the adoption of various objectives; among others, to “achieve development, peace and security, and economic growth, to alleviate poverty, enhance the standard and quality of life of the peoples of Southern Africa, and support the socially disadvantaged through regional integration, built on democratic principles and equitable and sustainable development” (SADC 2014). In order to achieve these objectives, a variety of neoliberal policies were accepted by the member countries and a Free Trade Agreement was signed. According to McKinley, free trade, “as a core plank of that neoliberal agenda...has taken centre stage with the main message being that if developing nations fail to ‘integrate’ into the global economy the result will be perpetual political, social and economic marginalisation and stagnation” (2011:2). Consequently, an FTA agreement was signed by the SADC community. However, despite this agreement, the majority of the member states remain in a severe state of under-development and poverty. Consequently, McKinley argues that, “given such a reality, the adoption of a FTA undergirded as it is by the completely contradictory foundations of a neoliberal development paradigm and assumptions of mutually equitable, beneficial and fair trade, simply deepens and expands already existing macro-economic deficiencies and disparities”(2011:2).

<sup>153</sup> This initial new generation of social movements included, among others, The Treatment Action Campaign (1998), the Concerned Citizens Forum (1999), the Anti-Eviction Campaign (2001), the Anti-Privatization Forum (2000), the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee (2000), the Landless People’s Movement, the Coalition of South Africans for the Basic Income Grant (2001), and the Education Rights Project (2002). In addition to these, numerous small-scale and transient struggles continue to emerge in the country.

access housing and/or healthcare” along with a “range of other injustices that were felt most acutely by the poor” (2014). In short, these new struggles responded “to particular manifestations of exclusion, poverty and marginality” (Ballard 2005:80), insofar as they emerged as direct, “local,” “pragmatic,” and “logical” reactions to everyday adversities and strife (Desai 2003; Egan and Wafer 2004). Although McKinley and Naidoo agree with Ballard that these new social movements were initially concerned with specific issues, such as electricity cut-offs, evictions, and privatization (2004:11), Flacks insists that such concerns over specific issues soon developed into a vehicle “for achieving broader ideological objectives” (cited in Egan and Wafer 2004). That is, for many of South Africa’s new social movements, ideological objectives soon paved the way for nascent counter-hegemonic projects opposed to the ANC and their neoliberal economic politics (Ballard 2005:79).<sup>154</sup> Gibson supports this, arguing that the post-1994 emergence of new social movements resulted in clear challenges to the growing hegemony of the ANC’s increasingly neoliberal state (2006), while Desai draws attention to the connection between these movements and their rejection of the hegemony of the state system:

The rise of these movements based in particular communities and evincing particular, mainly defensive demands, was not merely a natural result of poverty or marginality but a direct response to state policy. The state’s inability or unwillingness to be a provider of public services and the guarantor of the conditions of collective consumption has been a spark for a plethora of community movements [and] the general nature of the neo-liberal emergency concentrates and aims these demands towards the state. (2002:418)

Yet, importantly, many of the new struggles did not take on an explicitly anti-ANC or anti-neoliberal stance, nor did they reject out of hand state policy, or call for a socialist alternative to the current democracy. Instead, many of the new social movements focused squarely on local and issue-specific struggles (Ballard 2005:80), often operated “without any ideology” (Desai 2003), and sought to challenge state power via methods other than overthrowing the state, or “replacing one set of relations of domination with another” (Greenstein 2004:16, cited in Ballard 2005:93). That is, most aimed to achieve “direct relief for marginalized”

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<sup>154</sup> Notwithstanding some movements’ adoption of a counter-hegemonic stance, it is important to note that these new social movements do not “collectively share a counter-hegemonic political project with a focus on state capture” (Ballard et al. 2006:400). Instead, a diverse range of movements exists with diverse ideologies, some of which have taken on a largely counter-hegemonic position, while others remain focused largely on rights-based opposition.

groups, and refrained from focusing “primarily on opposing the state’s economic path” (Ballard 2005:80).

Although these movements experienced rapid growth in the latter part of the 1990s, from the middle-to-late 2000s, various fragmentations led to the effectiveness of the movements falling into question. In addition to political infighting – particularly within the Social Movements Indaba (SMI)<sup>155</sup> – and various discursive tensions, allegiances to the ANC led to the movements being divided into two opposing camps: those who opposed the ANC’s neoliberal politico-economic policies, and those who were critical of, yet loyal to, the ANC’s politics. ANC concessions also played a role in the weakening of opposing discourses; as Sinwell notes, “while at face value there have been important challenges to neoliberal orthodoxy, many movements die out at the faintest sign of a state concession” (2011:68). That is, he argues that once the demands of the movements have been met on a localized level, even extremely militant anti-government groups tend to become complacent and support the ANC. Thus, South African new social movement struggles have often been criticized for being fragmented, localized, and divided (Sinwell 2010),<sup>156</sup> and recent reliance on precarious international funding has left some of these movements on the brink of dissolution.<sup>157</sup> Yet, despite these challenges, new social movements continue to occupy an important space in the

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<sup>155</sup> The SMI was formed in 2002, in reaction to the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg that year. On 31 August 2002, under the banner of the Social Movement Indaba, the largest ever post-apartheid mass demonstration – outside of the Congress aligned alliance – was held. In terms of this, approximately twenty thousand people marched in opposition to the policies of the World Bank, from the streets of Alexandria through to the summit meeting in Sandton. In fact, this march overshadowed the ANC/COSATU-arranged march, which could only muster approximately five thousand supporters (Jones and Stokke 2005; Hlatshwayo 2006; Papadakis 2006). This protest action, under the leadership of the SMI, illustrated the growing influence of social movement resistance during that time. Yet, notwithstanding this initial success and cohesion, SMI members’ subsequent attempts to work together on political, theoretical, and practical levels, were undermined by political disagreements and resource constraints.

<sup>156</sup> More recently, the sustainability of local social movements and civil society organizations has been brought into question, especially in relation to the lack of donors funding South African civil society, as well as the related movements’ and organizations’ failure to offer practical alternatives to current social issues facing everyday South Africans. Indeed, O’ Riordan, in a recent article, notes that “South African civil society is losing funding because it is failing to compete and more importantly for the average South African fundamentally failing to develop or attract funding for an ambitious vision on how to deliver social justice” (2014). This lack of funding, together with the above mentioned divisions, has serious implications for South African new social movements, civil society, and democracy at large.

<sup>157</sup> In this regard, a recent decision by the Department of International Development to withdraw its funding from the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), has left the future of this new social movement in question.

South African political environment – especially in relation to access to demands for basic services, such as water, electricity, sanitation, refuse removal, and health services, which remain a daily struggle for millions of South Africans. In short, new social movements “demand that the state put its money where its mouth is” (Ballard 2005:88),<sup>158</sup> and the extent to which the internet and social media can be used to transform these fragmented demands into the collective roar of a left-wing hegemony, forms the focus of the next part of this chapter.

## **5.6 The South African new media landscape**

Although a range of new social movements have emerged in post-apartheid South Africa, and continue to operate twenty years into the country’s democracy, they do so in divergent, rather than increasingly cohesive and coherent, ways. To ensure the continuity of their agendas over the years, various forms of media have been used by the respective movements to communicate their campaigns, and to entice activists to support their specific causes. And since these movements often receive “limited access to formal media at a national level,” alternative media have often played a significant role in their struggles (Willems 2011:492). According to Willems, these new social movements often have “little access to the South Africa Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) and influential national newspapers such as *The Star*, *The Sunday Times*, *Mail and Guardian* and *Business Day*.” Also “mainstream broadcasting and print media often delegitimize...the new social movements and frame...their actions in terms of ‘conflict,’ ‘troublemakers,’ or the ‘ultra-left’” (2011:492). Consequently, ‘old’ media, including t-shirts, posters, pamphlets, protest marches, and songs, continue to occupy an important space in social movement communication. But in addition, ‘new’ media – including the internet, video, and cell phones – have emerged as “crucial in advancing the struggles of social movements in post-apartheid South Africa” (Willems 2011:492).

As one of the leading media players in Africa, the South African media industry stands out for its vibrancy and dynamism. Although severely hampered by government

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<sup>158</sup> In relation to this, a March 2012 South African Research Chair in Social Change report – on protests and police statistics – revealed that over eleven thousand “crowd management incidents” occurred over a one-year period (Alexander 2012:1). This amounts to approximately thirty protests per day. Based on the number of protests and the continuation of social discontent in the country, the current role, influence, and tactics of new social movements in the initiation and securing of radical democratic change in South Africa, have emerged as increasingly important considerations (Ballard et al. 2006; Polet 2007; Robins 2010).

censorship during the apartheid era, post-1994 saw the implementation of a new constitution which included a Bill of Rights that guaranteed the protection of freedom of expression, speech, and the press. Indeed, following the political transition in the country from white minority rule to democracy, the transformation of the South African media environment was lauded for its shift toward self-regulation, in the interests of guaranteeing freedom of expression and constitutional protection (Hyde-Clarke 2011:22). Along with the significant changes to broadcast and print media, the elected democratic government simultaneously recognized the growing role of the internet as an important area for access to information and communication, and subsequently implemented the 1996 Telecommunication Act, which highlighted the importance of affordable and universal telecommunications and ICT services in the country. Since then, South Africa's provision of internet access has been on the rise, with the government highlighting its commitment to a national ICT development plan, which focuses on broadband, digital migration, and e-skill development (Tredger 2013).

Yet, despite continuing developments in the growth and expansion of such media, South Africa's level of digital connectivity still remains relatively low. This is a consequence of, among other things, resource and skills inequalities, commonly known as the 'digital divide.' In a recent New Wave Report, de Lanerolle has drawn attention to the negative effects of the digital divide in South Africa, highlighting various problems related to capabilities, access, knowledge, network effects, and socio-economic factors – all of which derive from limited connectivity in the country. However, despite the ever-present problem of the digital divide in South Africa, the country has the most developed telecommunications network in Africa, and improvements in infrastructure and wireless capabilities have opened up access considerably. Indeed, recent statistics related to South African internet use indicate promising growth in accessibility, with the numbers of those who are digitally connected continuing to grow exponentially. In this regard, notwithstanding the above mentioned aspects of her report on the current status of the digital divide in South Africa, de Lanerolle's study is not entirely pessimistic. On the contrary, she also asserts that the use of the internet "has risen dramatically over the last four years," and that if this use continues at the same rate, "then more than half of adults in South Africa will be Internet users by 2014" (2012). Furthermore, her findings that "the majority of Internet users are now young, black and live on less than R1500 a month," point toward the broadening reach of this technology. What is more, a December 2013 World Internet Stats report highlights that the current number of people in South Africa who have daily access to the internet has reached 48.9% of the population (2014), while the South African Digital Media and Marketing Association

estimates the number of South African internet users at around fourteen million people (Nevil 2013).

Importantly, de Lanerolle also maintains that social media, including social networking, has emerged as one of the most popular uses of the internet in South Africa, with more people creating social network accounts than opening email addresses (2012). In relation to the use of social media, the contributors to the World Wide Worx South African Social Media Landscape 2014 Report, insist that social media use in South Africa is not only on the rise, but also increasingly crossing the urban/rural divide. In particular, their findings indicate that Facebook has emerged as the biggest social network in South Africa, growing exponentially from 6.8 million users in 2012, to 9.4 million active users in 2013. Twitter, they argue, has seen the highest percentage growth, increasing by 129%, from 2.4 million to 5.5 million users over twelve months. And the previous market leader in instant messaging and social media, Mxit, has “remained stable,” with just over 6 million users (World Wide Worx and Fuseware 2014). According to Arthur Goldstuck, the Managing Director of World Wide Worx, “the most significant finding, aside from the growth itself, was the extent to which social networks are being used on phones in South Africa,” with “no less than 87% of Facebook users and 85% of Twitter users...accessing these tools on their phones” (cited in World Wide Worx and Fuseware 2014).

According to the recent research by Deloitte, South Africa currently has 66.1 million active mobile phone connections (BusinessTech 2013), and Wasserman asserts that the rapid growth in access to mobile communications and the internet has not only allowed for greater consumer-orientated access. In addition, it has also opened up possibilities for new political actors, allowing increased opportunities for access to content, participation, and mobilizations, and providing correlative possibilities for ‘e-democracy’ (2007). Indeed, many have viewed these social media platforms as a “participatory tool” which allows the public to “engage politically with each other” (Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke 2012:92). This is not least because they offer audiences “the ability to form...online communit[ies]...and enable conversation,” making “it possible for people to gather online, share information, knowledge and opinions” (Jensen 1998; Safko and Brake 2009; cited in Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke 2012:92). Building on this idea, Hyde-Clarke advances that “social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook have become platforms for the mobilization of social and political forces, allowing the previously disenfranchised to voice their concerns and aspirations” (2012). And in support of this observation, Wasserman argues that such dynamics can be seen within the online and mobile practices of new social movements in South Africa (2007).



## 5.7 The ‘right to *life*,’ the ‘right to a *better* life,’ and the ‘right to a better life for *all*’ online

Many of South Africa’s new social movements have made “extensive and flexible use of the discourse of rights to add legitimacy to their activities” (Greenstein 2004, cited in Ballard 2005:80). That is, since the new South African political, economic, and social order has been underwritten by a constitution which protects both first and second generation human rights,<sup>159</sup> new social movements – even those that are vehemently anti-ANC or anti-neoliberal – have been quick to use the language of human rights in the defense and advancement of their campaigns (Ballard 2005:88). Accordingly, Greenstein notes that by couching their claims in terms of ‘rights,’ even illegal tactics such as electricity reconnections and occupation of property, can be imbued with a degree of legitimacy as a “fight to assert legal rights” (2004:113). Indeed, in many cases, it is only via claims to various human rights, and the right to a better life, that the “marginalized are able to challenge the state and thereby shift relations of power, particularly when combined with popular mobilisations” (Greenstein 2004:21, cited in Ballard 2005:88). However, despite their various connections to rights discourse, South African new social movements continue to be largely fragmented, and they tend to operate in divergent and divided, rather than cohesive and coherent, ways. In particular, instead of articulating themselves as ‘equivalent struggles for rights,’ they have arguably advanced themselves in such a way that they can be categorized into three distinctive groups: those who pursue the ‘right to *life*,’ those who pursue the ‘right to a *better* life,’ and those who pursue the ‘right to a better life for *all*.’<sup>160</sup>

In relation to this, and for the purpose of this project, the potential that growing access to new media technologies, and in particular social media, may have to effectively bring these three divergent groups together, in the interest of strengthening their largely fragmented oppositional strategies, emerges as an important point for consideration. But this potential needs to be explored in relation to, on the one hand, the extent to which new social

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<sup>159</sup> First generation human rights are related to civil and political rights, while second generation human rights refer to socio-economic rights (Viljoen 2012:80).

<sup>160</sup> While the first and second categories of new social movements have couching their strategies in terms of first and second generation rights, respectively, the latter group – concerned as they are with environmental issues – have couching their struggles more in terms of third, and even fourth, generation rights. While third generation rights involve the right to “economic and social development,” as well as “the right to a healthy environment” (Claude and Weston 2006:279), Evans asserts that fourth generation rights entail a “focus on environmental or ecological rights” (1999:19).

movements in South Africa are currently using this media, and, on the other hand, how such use can be augmented so that it approximates an online agonistic public space, through which articulations of collective identities can be established, and the radical democratic practice of left-wing hegemony can be promoted. As such, the analysis to follow will explore how such media are being used by new social movements in South Africa, firstly, to develop counter-publics and nurture counter-discourses; secondly, to bring divergent and dispersed people and groups together to network and articulate collective identities, thus strengthening oppositional discourses; and thirdly, to facilitate counter-public contestation of dominant discourses. Beyond this, in the following chapter, what online measures will be required to further realize the radical democratic potential of this media in future, will be considered.

### **5.7.1 The ‘right to *life*’ movements**

Social movements that fall under the ‘right to *life*’ category are primarily concerned with the South African Constitution’s declaration that “Everyone has the right to life” (South African Constitution 1996:6). Additionally, those social movements that fight for the right to adequate healthcare, as endorsed by Section 27 of the Bill of Rights – which states that “everyone has the right to have access to...health care services” (1996:11) – also fall under this category. Perhaps the best-known South African social movement in the above regard is the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), a movement that campaigns for the ‘right to life’ through access to *lifesaving* healthcare. The TAC was launched on 10 December 1998, and has since achieved considerable national, regional and international success. Noted as the most successful South African social movement, the TAC “campaigns for greater access to treatment for all South Africans, by raising public awareness and understanding about issues surrounding the availability, affordability and use of HIV treatment” (Senghor and Poku 2007:270). The movement’s demonstrations, protests, and online communications, have effectively “pressured international pharmaceutical firms into abandoning court action seeking to prevent the government from importing cheaper generic medicines” (TAC 2001, cited in Ballard et al. 2006:23). Moreover, after much pressure by the TAC, the South African government even agreed to freely distribute anti-retroviral medications to people living with HIV/AIDS (TAC News Service 2003, cited in Friedman and Mottiar 2006:23).

Starting their campaign within the ambit of the National Association of People With AIDS (NAPWA), the TAC brought attention to the need for “comprehensive and affordable”

treatment options, the need for the provision of “AZT to HIV positive pregnant women,”<sup>161</sup> and the problem of a lack of access to drugs as a result of extremely high prices (Geffen 2010:49). Initially, the TAC targeted those pharmaceutical companies that were locked in a court case aimed at preventing changes to the Medicines Act – changes that would drastically reduce the prices of HIV drugs.<sup>162</sup> After years of campaigning against corporations such as Pfizer, GlaxoSmithKline, Boehringer Ingelheim, and Bristol Myers Squibb, among others, the TAC’s efforts were partly responsible for the reduction of ARV treatment costs, from thousands of rands per month in 1997 to R93 per month in 2013 (Bendix 2013).

In addition to campaigns against various pharmaceutical companies, the TAC was concomitantly critical of the elected ANC government’s stance toward the HIV pandemic. Launched during the presidency of Nelson Mandela, the TAC did not start out as a movement challenging the government; however, the subsequent failure of the government to provide for the needs of poor people living with HIV and AIDS, together with growing AIDS denialism within the ranks of the ANC elite, led to the TAC adopting a conflictual relationship with the ruling party. This conflict was particularly evident during the TAC’s 2003 civil disobedience campaign, which responded to the government’s refusal to sign into effect an AIDS treatment plan.<sup>163</sup> Acting non-violently, and prepared to accept the consequences of defying prevailing laws (Jones and Stokke 2005:26), the TAC succeeded in influencing the cabinet to ‘roll out’ ARVs. Although this civil disobedience campaign illustrated the TAC’s willingness to challenge the government on certain issues, the relationship of the movement with the ANC is

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<sup>161</sup> By limiting access to AZT, a drug which is used to prevent mother to child transmission of HIV (Mbali 2013:125), pharmaceutical companies and the SA government were effectively seen as negating citizens’ constitutional right to life. According to Growen and his colleagues, the TAC argued that by restricting access to such drugs, the government was “violating the right to life, dignity and equality of HIV-positive pregnant women and their children” (2006:225).

<sup>162</sup> On 25 November 1997, president Nelson Mandela signed into law the Medicines and Related Substances Control Amendment Act, No. 90 of 1997 (Medicines Act), thereby ensuring affordable access to drugs for all citizens of South Africa. Subsequently, in February 1998, the Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Association (PMA) and forty supporting multinational drug companies, attempted to prevent the Act from coming into force by taking the South African government to court. However, with support from the TAC, the government defended the Act, and in 2001 the PMA withdrew its legal challenge (Heywood 2001:17).

<sup>163</sup> As alluded to earlier, new social movement strategies are often defined by their connection to in-system tactics or extra-institutional tactics. While the TAC can be most closely connected to in-system tactics, they have not been afraid to adopt extra-institutional tactics when the rights of citizens are seen to be grievously ignored. In relation to this, Ballard and his colleagues highlight that although “movements with an explicit rights based agenda would be at the in-system pole of the continuum,” they often resort to “practicing a mix of strategies where extra-institutional action is often used to supplement in-system strategies” (2005:407).

not entirely antagonistic. On the contrary, Friedman and Mottair insist that the TAC's approach to government involves "a more complicated relationship in which cooperation and conflict are enjoyed together" (cited in Jones and Stokke 2005:27). In other words, although the movement's core goal is not to help the government, but to ensure the treatment of people with HIV, they realize that in order to achieve this goal there needs to be alignment, as well as robust debate, with government. In this regard, they have committed to using "justiciable socio-economic rights to influence government policy" (Jones and Stokke 2005:31). For example, the TAC has used the constitutional right to health, to establish HIV/AIDS treatment as a human right to life. And according to Heywood, the movement has thereby not only "demonstrate[d] that human rights can be invoked to provide a moral legitimacy for advocacy," but has also shown "that strategic and political use of the Bill of Rights opens up space for contesting policies and practices of both government and the private sector" (cited in Jones and Stokke 2005:31). In addition to working in both collaborative and contestatory ways with the ruling ANC, the TAC has also sought numerous "alliances as a means of pursuing its strategic agenda" (Friedman and Mottiar 2005:555). These alliances have been formed with movements and groups which support HIV/AIDS projects, and include SECTION 27,<sup>164</sup> Doctors without Borders (MSF),<sup>165</sup> and Sonke Gender Justice,<sup>166</sup> along with many other divergent campaigns.

For Friedman, "a key feature of [the] TAC's campaign is the use of the internet." In this regard, he asserts that "the opportunities offered by advances in communications technology make co-ordinated cross-national campaigns for justice far more effective by creating new openings for pressure on power-holders" (cited in Oshry 2007:32). Gibson supports this assertion when he argues that the internet and its networks enable a fast and effective means of information and ideas transfer for potential lobbying (2006:17). In addition to this, in an exploration of the online activities of the TAC, Wasserman emphasized their use

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<sup>164</sup> Established in 2010, SECTION27 is "a public interest law center that seeks to influence, develop and use the law to protect, promote and advance human rights" (SECTION27 2014).

<sup>165</sup> Doctors without Borders/*Medecins Sans Frontieres* (MSF) South Africa, is a South African chapter of the international humanitarian organization. MSF provides "medical aid to people whose survival is threatened by conflict, epidemics, natural and man-made disasters," and speaks out "about the plight of the populations" they assist. According to their website, "MSF offers assistance to people based only on need and irrespective of race, religion, gender or political affiliation" (MSF 2014).

<sup>166</sup> Sonke Gender Justice "works across Africa to strengthen government, civil society and citizen capacity to promote gender equality, prevent domestic and sexual violence, and reduce the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS," thereby contributing to the increasing realization of a more "just and democratic" society (Sonke Gender Justice2014).

of the internet in the dissemination of alternative news, their creation of virtual public spheres, and their organization of collective political action, and he highlighted the role of such new media technologies in the “extension of existing methods of mobilisation” within the movement (2007:126). Loudon also builds on this research through her examination of the TAC’s use of the internet and ICTs, as an ‘opportunity structure.’ In this regard, she argues that the use of ICTs by the TAC serves two different but equally important functions. Firstly, it has strengthened “existing organizational channels of communication, mobilising structures and framing processes,” and secondly, it has extended “the reach of the organization so that it is able to connect to HIV infected and affected people for whom traditional membership is not feasible” (2010:1092). Moreover, she draws attention to the possibilities of mobile technologies offering new gateways to increasing participation with the movement in future.

In addition to the above mentioned general descriptions of how the TAC has used the internet as an integral part of its ‘right to *life*’ campaign, the extent to which its current use can be viewed specifically as functioning akin to an online agonistic public space – which offers opportunities for the promotion and development of a form of left-wing hegemony in South Africa – remains an interesting question. In the interest of exploring this issue, in what follows, the degree to which their online presence is used, firstly, to develop counter-publics and counter-discourses, secondly to offer a space for the coming together of diverse movements and groups to articulate collective identities and strengthen oppositional strategies, and thirdly, to promote the contestation of dominant discourses, will be considered.

Firstly, the TAC has been active in the online arena since the launch of its official website ([www.tac.org](http://www.tac.org)) in 1998, and to a significant extent it has used the internet and the communicative spaces that it offers to nurture and develop counter-publics. Comprising of a number of pages dedicated to ‘News,’ ‘Campaigns,’ ‘Publications,’ ‘Blogs,’ and ‘Resources,’ among other matters, the TAC website offers users a range of information and updates on the movement’s campaign, its organization, and its various activities. It also provides users with numerous opportunities to connect and communicate with the movement,<sup>167</sup> as well as gain access to additional information and details on how to support the movement.<sup>168</sup> Although

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<sup>167</sup> For example, the ‘Contact’ link provides a contact email and telephone number, as well as access to an ‘online enquiry form,’ which allows any visitor to the site to have direct contact with the movement.

<sup>168</sup> The “Donate” link is indicative of this and encourages users to support TAC and “save lives,” by donating financially to the movement. Moreover, various subscription options, which can be accessed directly from the TAC home page, including the online newsletter, magazine (Equal Treatment) and the National Strategic Plan Review, allow users to stay up to date with the campaign, its projects and accomplishments (Treatment Action Campaign 2014c).

anyone visiting the webpage address can access and view the website, in order to actively participate and interact with others visiting the site, users need to create an account via the ‘User Login’ link. However, in order for such an account to be created, the user’s ‘application’ needs to be approved by the website administrator. That is, instead of simply applying for a username, and receiving automatic login details via email, users have to wait for confirmation and approval from the movement, something which apparently can take several months and which is not guaranteed.<sup>169</sup> However, in principle, once an account is created, the user is able to log-in and interact directly by viewing comments made on news articles and updates, as well as by making their own relevant comments. Admittedly though, what this means is that despite their presence online, and the fact that possibilities for the creation of counter-discourses do exist, since users are either not guaranteed access to the interactive elements of the site, or must face lengthy delays before they are allowed to participate, in this respect, the TAC website is particularly limited in its potential to offer a communicative space for the formation of counter-publics. Yet, while only registered users are able to view and make comments on articles, any visitor to the website is able to share news articles and updates on other media platforms. That is, at the bottom of each article in the ‘News’ section of the site, a ‘Sharing is Caring’ link connects users to a variety of sharing methods. For example, the recent TAC news article entitled “Free State Health System in Collapse – Lives are Being Lost Urgent & Immediate Intervention from Minister of Health Needed” (Clayton 2014), can be effortlessly shared via a user’s Facebook profile, Twitter account, Google+ account, Pinterest board, email, and through many other online platforms, by simply clicking the link.<sup>170</sup> Arguably, this sharing option fosters opportunities for the dissemination and promotion of information related to marginalized and oppositional discourses. And this facilitation of the dissemination of counter-discursive ideas in a multiplicity of online communicative spaces goes some way toward ameliorating the above mentioned participatory deficits.<sup>171</sup> This is because, notwithstanding the structurally

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<sup>169</sup> While some of the international movement websites discussed in the previous chapter have a similar log-in procedure, this function tends to be automated and users are generally sent an immediate email with log-in details. As an interested person, I applied to create my own account on the TAC website; however, seven months later, I am still waiting for the TAC website administrator to approve my request.

<sup>170</sup> Other sharing options available on the TAC website include: Delicious, Reddit, Google Mail, Google Bookmarks, LinkedIn, Yahoo Bookmarks, Digg, StumbleUpon, Evernote, Bebo, and Tumblr.

<sup>171</sup> Some articles that highlight discourses in opposition to neoliberalism and the influence of corporate power include, for example, “Hands Off the Market Inquiry into Private Health Care!” “Hundreds March to Khayelitsha Hospital to Demand Urgently Improved Services” and “Leaked PharmaGate Emails Prove Big Pharma Involvement in Scandal” (Treatment Action Campaign 2014a).

restrictive website, the TAC's 'Sharing is Caring' option opens up an array of online spaces for discussion and debate, and in doing so, broadens prospects for the development of counter-publics, and the fostering of counter-discourses. Wasserman supports this idea when he notes that such media, along with the movement's "web links and e-mail addresses create the potential for the TAC to extend its influence across geographical and sociocultural boundaries," in a way that provides "the opportunity for interactivity and participation in a virtual public sphere in which alternative debates can develop outside of the parameters set by government and the corporate sector" (2007:120). In addition to their website, such capabilities have also been made available by the movement's social media presence on the social networking site, Facebook, and the micro-blogging site, Twitter.

Secondly, to a significant extent, the TAC's current use of the internet also supports the coming together of divergent people and groups to articulate collective identities and strengthen oppositional discourses. To begin with, coupled with providing information, news, sharing options, and so forth, the movement's website also highlights their connections to, and support of, other social movements and groups in South Africa, and indeed around the world. Importantly, the internet has played a central role in allowing these connections to emerge and develop. Digital connectivity has not only facilitated the quick and easy spread of ideas and information from one person or group to another, but also allowed solidarity and coalitions to be built – and sustained – with relatively modest resources (Friedman and Mottiar 2007:35). In this regard, although the TAC's website does not have a specific page dedicated to listing and linking up with all of their partners, their connections to other groups and movements, along with their recognition of the importance of other activist networks, can be found in the links at the bottom of each page, and are moreover alluded to in the 'News' section of the website.<sup>172</sup> Additional online articles and statements have highlighted the TAC's connections to movements and groups, such as the Coalitions Against Discrimination, LGEP,<sup>173</sup> the Rural Network, the Social Justice Coalition, the Unemployed People's

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<sup>172</sup> In particular, the TAC's connection to groups such as SECTION27, MSF, and Sonke Gender Justice, are illustrated through articles, such as one entitled "TAC, SECTION27 & Sonke Gender Justice Support the Striking Marikana Miners" (Matsolo 2014). In many ways, this article provides a succinct example of the articulation of collective identities between these divergent, yet interconnected, movements and groups. Another example of an articulation of collective identities can be seen in the article entitled "Over 70 Organisations Demand Minister Davies Finalises the IP Policy" (Matsolo 2014). This article highlights a very broad range of divergent movements' support of the TAC's calls for the South African Intellectual Property Policy to be finalized, which affects the availability of affordable life saving medication in the country.

<sup>173</sup> LGEP, or Lesbian and Gay Equality Project, is "a non-profit, non-governmental organization that works toward achieving full legal and social equality for lesbian, transgender, gay and bisexual (LGBT) people in

Movement, and the Anti-Eviction Campaign, among others. However, while such connections are readily expressed and thematized in their online communications, opportunities for these groups to come together online to discuss and contest pertinent issues, with a view to strengthening oppositional identities, are admittedly restricted by the approval-based user log-in function described earlier. Yet, this does not mean that no such opportunities exist. On the contrary, links to a variety of ‘supporter’ sites – found at the bottom of each page of the website – provide evidence of opportunities for communication and interaction between the movement, its members, supporters, and other activist groups. Some of the supporter sites which can be accessed directly from the TAC website include: ‘TB online,’<sup>174</sup> ‘Fix the Patent Laws,’<sup>175</sup> and ‘Quackdown.’<sup>176</sup> Although the TAC’s degree of connection to these movements vary – with some fostering strong associations, and others simply stating support in relation to certain common issues – their online communication and connectivity does provide evidence of the movement’s use of the internet to foster connections with other movements, groups and organizations.<sup>177</sup> And these examples resonate with Hands’s assertion that hyperlinking

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South Africa” (2010). The LGEP calls for “a just and democratic South Africa, free from all forms of social oppression, discrimination and exclusion; one in which there is full social liberation, full equality; in which all citizens claim their citizenship and rights in full; in which there is vibrant and self-sustaining popular and participatory democracy” (2010).

<sup>174</sup> TB Online ([www.tbonline.info](http://www.tbonline.info)) is an online forum for “activists, patients, health workers and researchers” which encourages people to “learn more about TB so that...[they] can work to alleviate and ultimately end the worldwide epidemic” (2014). This forum also provides visitors with connections to supporting organizations, including the Community Media Trust, South Africa Development Fund, Treatment Action Group, European AIDS Treatment Group, and HIV i-Base.

<sup>175</sup> The ‘Fix the Patent Laws’ link ([www.fixthepatentlaws.org](http://www.fixthepatentlaws.org)) connects users with the TAC campaign blog which aims to “highlight how amending South Africa’s Patents Act 57 of 1978 will reduce the cost of medicines, improving the health and saving the lives of millions of South Africans” (2014). This blog allows for user comment and sharing on social media.

<sup>176</sup> Quackdown ([www.quackdown.info](http://www.quackdown.info)) is a website started by the TAC and Community Media Trust, that identifies disreputable products or service providers, and aims to provide information which will enable people to make “informed choices about health care” (2014). Although this website offers opportunities for user input and interactivity, it has had no activity since May 2013.

<sup>177</sup> In this regard, Friedman and Mottair argue that for the TAC, “alliance politics is not simply a matter of gratefully accepting the support of those who happen to agree.” Instead, “it requires, firstly, rejection of a purism which insists on working only with natural allies,” and it “assumes that common ground can and should be found with those who differ as well as those who agree” (2006:33). Thus, although many of the TAC’s alliances and connections are with groups and movements that operate in different terrains, and which differ with the TAC on many issues, democratic compromises – as part of ongoing coalition formation – regularly occur and form an important element of their alliance politics. Arguably, this situates them very closely to the political dynamics of



capabilities may have the potential to facilitate the formation of counter-public oppositional strategies between divergent groups in a way that points toward their agonistic potential (2007:91). Additionally, links to social media platforms, including the movement's Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts, encourage users to connect with a wide variety of people and groups within the online arena – thereby offering further opportunities for the formation of online articulations between divergent groups and movements. For example, a March 2014 post on their Facebook page thematizes a protest action led by the TAC, Doctors Without Borders (MSF), SECTION27 and “activists from 13 [other] organizations” (Treatment Action Campaign 2014b). And in May 2014, further connections were highlighted when the TAC updated their Facebook profile with the statement that, “Yesterday 25 leaders from the Treatment Action Campaign, SECTION27, Sonke Gender Justice, and Awethu travelled to Marikana to stand in solidarity with the striking mineworkers” (2014b). These types of updates, as well as messages of support from other movements and groups, including the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), Delft Community Advisory Board, Practical Initiatives Network, and Reachers Philanthropy, indicate the significant possibilities that such social networking sites may have to facilitate connections between, and the articulation of, divergent democratic struggles. Moreover, because social network sites not only enable citizens to exchange ideas and opinions, but also provide an “expansion of the space within which expressions of...diversity and difference innate to vibrant political life can be communicated” (Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke 2012:92), the TAC's use of social media arguably provides a multiplicity of communicative spaces for the movement to network, develop an articulation of collective identities, and effectively strengthen counter-discourses and oppositional strategies. Indeed, in addition to Facebook, the TAC also has a presence on the microblogging site, Twitter. The TAC Twitter account has approximately 2 734 followers (December 2014), and is largely used for information transfer, updates on actions and protests, and as a means to express support for other movements connected to their cause. The TAC Twitter account is also used to ‘retweet’ activities and updates of other groups and movements, thereby spreading awareness of ‘right to *life*’ related discourses, and drawing attention to its ‘alliance’ politics. Yet, while such tweets and retweets, as well as Facebook posts stating support, provide evidence of connections between divergent groups and people, these online connections seem to be limited to sharing each other's posts. That is, very few

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agonistic democracy. In particular, their conception of alliance politics resonates deeply with Mouffe's idea of agonistic pluralism, in which ‘enemies’ are converted into ‘adversaries,’ and antagonisms are converted into agonisms, thereby allowing for a recognition of common ground between different and often competing groups.

examples of direct communication between the various movements can be seen in the commenting and posting functions of the sites.

Thirdly, the TAC has used the internet and social media as a means to contest dominant discourses, and highlight issues related to ‘right to *life*’ struggles in South Africa. Not only does their website news link provide an array of literature that draws attention to, and contests, government and corporate policies and actions concerning HIV treatment, TB, and a variety of health related issues. In addition, they have also used this media to highlight their offline activism, and to draw attention to events and protests that people and groups can support and get involved in. However, while examples of the TAC’s online contestation of dominant discourses can be seen in their discursive contestation of various issues related to their cause, the level of interactive communication that takes place through such channels is relatively low. In particular, the TAC, which has been active on the social networking site Facebook since 2011, has used this platform primarily as a means of information transfer – usually by sharing links from the TAC website – and secondarily as a space to draw attention both to the illegitimacy of certain dominant discourses, and to related upcoming debates and TAC events and activism. Yet, despite the high level of virtual infrastructural connectivity, the TAC Facebook page, by December 2014, had only 2 341 ‘likes.’ And although it does provide space for the development of counter-publics – as already discussed – and correlatively the contestation of dominant discourses,<sup>178</sup> the level of connectivity and interactivity on the site is quite limited in comparison to the Facebook pages of those international movements elaborated upon in the previous chapter.<sup>179</sup> As such, although the TAC’s Facebook page is regularly updated, interactivity between the movement, its members, and its supporters, remains relatively low, with few updates and posts receiving significant

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<sup>178</sup> An example of such counter-discourse development can be seen in the Facebook update in which the TAC declares support for, and shows solidarity with, Marikana miners who are striking against low wages offered by neoliberal mining conglomerates. Their statement that “this is a real front line for equality and dignity,” indicates their support of groups promoting oppositional and counter-discourses. In addition to this, an example of the movement’s online contestation of dominant discourses can be seen in the post contesting the continuation of intellectual property rights, which benefit multinational neoliberal ‘Big Pharma’ organizations, at the expense of the poor (Treatment Action Campaign 2014b).

<sup>179</sup> For example, on the Occupy Wall Street Facebook page, a post contesting the relationship between bankers and politicians received 1 416 ‘likes,’ over twenty-five comments, and 793 shares. Similarly, a post related to the harmful effects of fracking on the environment generated 1 013 ‘likes,’ 109 comments, and 526 shares. Additionally, a post comparing border control activities in the USA and Europe drew significant attention, with 155 315 ‘likes,’ 21 950 shares, and 3 509 comments debating and contesting the type of control currently dominating neoliberal societies.

‘likes,’ ‘shares’ or ‘comments.’<sup>180</sup> Moreover, there appears to be little effort, on the part of the movement, to use this platform to spark and encourage debate and discussion surrounding campaign related issues. In fact, there was no evidence of debate or collaborative contestation on this social networking platform between January and July 2014.<sup>181</sup> And much the same can be said of their use of Twitter. The TAC is fairly active on their Twitter site, and uses it to provide news updates on their activism and information important to their current agendas. And their statuses and retweets are often retweeted, thereby drawing further attention to their cause.<sup>182</sup> However, although their activity on this platform matches that of some international movements, such as RAWA – and even exceeds them at times<sup>183</sup> – their activity is still relatively low in comparison to that of movements such as Occupy, whose Occupy Wall Street Twitter account’s last two posts have received 301 and 558 retweets respectively (December 2014).<sup>184</sup>

Arguably, in view of the above, it becomes apparent that the TAC, which falls under the ‘right to *life*’ category of new social movement activism in South Africa, is significantly digitally connected, both via their website and through various social media platforms. And, on the one hand, evidence does exist that their use of the internet, and social media in particular, has the potential to function as something akin to an online agonistic public space,

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<sup>180</sup> In 2014, a 1 December TAC post related to the movement’s World AIDS Day fundraising effort received forty-six ‘likes.’ This is the highest total of ‘likes’ for this year (December 2014). The largest amount of comments, namely twenty-six, can be found on a post relating to the death of Mduduzi Yende, a member and provincial organizer of the TAC. And the update with the most shares to date, namely forty-five, was related to their post responding to media reports that the movement was facing closure, and the sharing of the related article entitled, “Funding Crisis Places Future of the TAC in Balance - But Reassures Supporters ‘We Will Do All We Can to Keep TAC Alive’” (Treatment Action Campaign 2014b).

<sup>181</sup> Recent developments related to the TAC’s future sustainability have resulted in a significant increase in the number of people visiting and ‘liking’ their Facebook page, and subsequently, the possibility for increased participation has emerged. This increase in interactivity has, however, only emerged in response to fears that the movement may soon have to disband, and not necessarily in relation to their social movement campaign and agenda.

<sup>182</sup> For example, the tweet “@RediTlhabi have you seen @mailandguardian reports on appalling conditions in Free State #FSHealthCrisis? <http://bit.ly/1IEkVjF> #FireBenny,” which was posted on 4 July 2014, was retweeted seven times (July 2014).

<sup>183</sup> RAWA’s past five updates on Twitter have only received three retweets between them (December 2014).

<sup>184</sup> While their Twitter activity draws attention to the possibilities that this social media has for new social movement activism, the TAC’s use of the popular video sharing site YouTube leaves a lot to be desired. That is, although users of their website are also directed to view the TAC’s YouTube account, this video sharing site is largely inactive, with the last post having been made in 2010.

in which counter-publics can emerge, counter-discourses can be strengthened, and the contestation of dominant discourses can occur. Yet, on the other hand, because the extent of participation in contestation and reciprocal engagement through these online sites remains relatively low, it would appear that such agonistic potential has yet to be realized more fully.

### 5.7.2 The ‘right to a *better* life’ movements

Under the ‘right to a *better* life’ category fall new social movements that focus on securing basic services for the poor and marginalized. Framing their “campaigns in...counter-hegemonic terms,” it has been argued that these movements campaign for access to basic services, the provision of which they insist is being limited by privatization, cost recovery, and government neoliberal policies. In this regard, these movements not only protest for greater ‘service delivery,’ but also focus on opposing the state’s current neoliberal economic path (Ballard et al. 2006:399-400). Yet, notwithstanding their ideological position that collaboration with the state is largely pointless, they remain willing to use the legal argument of constitutional and human rights in an attempt to further their cause (Madlingozi 2014; Ballard et al. 2006). *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (AbM), which forms part of the Poor People’s Alliance, is a well-known examples of this type of movement.<sup>185</sup>

AbM, with over ten thousand members in over sixty shack settlements, is one of the largest and most strongly supported new social movements in post-apartheid South Africa (AbM 2011, cited in Harley 2014:6). Formed in Durban in 2005, in reaction to a lack of formal housing and land, AbM “campaign[s] against evictions, and for public housing,” and struggles for “a world in which human dignity comes before private profit[,] and land, cities, wealth and power are shared fairly” (Zikode 2013).<sup>186</sup> Since its launch, AbM has experienced

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<sup>185</sup> In 2006, AbM (based in both Durban and the Western Cape) and the Anti-Eviction Campaign (based in the Western Cape) joined forces to form the ‘Action Alliance.’ This alliance was soon expanded to “include the Landless Peoples Movement (Gauteng province) and the Rural Network (KwaZulu-Natal) and was renamed the Poor People’s Alliance” in 2008 (Dawson and Setsmedi 2014). Defining themselves as “a network of democratic and radical poor people’s movements that are committed to self organised social transformation from below and from the left” (cited in Dawson and Setsmedi 2014), the Poor People’s Alliance represents calls from impoverished and marginalized groups for a *better* life.

<sup>186</sup> With regard to the movement’s origins, it is important to note that, early in 2005, the Kennedy Road settlement in Durban was set to benefit from the recently initiated ‘Slums Clearance Project,’ which was developed in reaction to severe housing shortages in the KwaZulu-Natal area. Setting aside R200 million for the delivery of fourteen thousand houses (Grimmet 2004), the eThekweni Municipality’s project aimed at “providing quality living environments and integrating the poor into the fabric of urban life through spacial improvement”

severe threats and constraints from the state, including “disparagement, prohibition of protest marches, unlawful arrests, torture, and other physical attacks” (Madlingozi 2014:114). Despite this, however, this new social movement has succeeded in achieving some victories for shack dwellers, and has consequently been lauded as “the most successful local, ‘counter-hegemonic’ movement” in South Africa (Madlingozi 2014:115).<sup>187</sup> According to Vartak, although “the movement’s key demand is for ‘Land [and] Housing in the City,’” it has also been successful in politicizing and fighting for “an end to forced removals and for access to education and the provision of water, electricity, sanitation, health care and refuse removal, as well as bottom up popular democracy” (2006).<sup>188</sup>

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(United Nations Human Settlements Programme 2007). And the Kennedy Road community was promised access to vacant land, and formal housing on a plot of land next to their settlement. However, when the government reneged on this promise by renting this vacant land to a brick manufacturer, approximately 750 community members – under the leadership of the Kennedy Road Development Committee (a founding affiliate of AbM) – blockaded a major part of Elf Road, in protest against the government’s failure to honor its housing commitments (Zikode 2006). Not surprisingly, the protestors were met with hostility from the police and fourteen activists were arrested. Later that year, following further protests and violent clashes with police, the Kennedy Road Development Committee joined forces with several other shack dwellers movements, and officially formed *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (Harley 2014:6; Madlingozi 2014:116).

<sup>187</sup> For example, the AbM has successfully “developed a sustained voice for shack dwellers in subaltern and elite publics and occupied and marched on the offices of local councillors, police stations, municipal offices, newspaper offices and the City Hall in actions that have put thousands of people on the streets.” Furthermore, the movement has “organised a highly contentious but very successful boycott of the March 2006 local government elections under the slogan ‘No Land, No House, No Vote.’” In addition, AbM has so far “democratised the governance of many settlements, stopped evictions in a number of settlements, won access to schools, stopped the industrial development of the land promised to Kennedy Road, forced numerous government officials, offices and projects to ‘come down to the people’ and mounted vigorous challenges to the uncritical assumption of a right to lead the local struggles of the poor in the name of a privileged access to the ‘global’ (i.e. Northern donors, academics and NGOs) that remains typical of most of the NGO based left” (*Abahlali baseMjondolo* 2006).

<sup>188</sup> Although not initially framed in the discourse of human rights, AbM’s collective action soon moved from a ‘demands’ discourse to a ‘rights’ discourse. That is, following numerous prohibitions of AbM marches and protests, the movement recognized the need to draw attention to the rights of shack dwellers; in particular, their socio-economic rights, as well as their civil and political right to protest (Madlingozi 2014:116). Furthermore, after gaining support from various human rights organization (e.g. Freedom of Expression Institute) and numerous constitutional lawyers, the movement began to accept the role that legal action – even as a last resort – can play in securing land and housing for the poor. Yet, it is important to note that even though the movement is willing to adopt a ‘rights’ framework when necessary, it does so in an attempt to legitimize demands made from a counter-hegemonic standpoint. In order to illustrate their unwillingness to rely on rights-based arguments

In many respects, AbM, and other movements which similarly campaign for the ‘right to a *better* life,’ provide communities with an array of communicative spaces in which demands for rights – which they maintain are currently being ignored in terms of the government’s macro-economic policy – can be made. Indeed, it has been argued that these movements have “created [various] spaces of resistance for the average citizen to protect their livelihoods and demonstrates a form of bottom-up active citizenship” (Chiumba 2012:197). However, the role of the internet in providing such a communicative space remains a contentious issue. Resources among ‘right to *better* life’ movements are generally low, and the extent of digital connectivity of these movements varies. Apart from socio-economic and infrastructural constraints, socio-cultural factors – including illiteracy and language limitations – have also emerged as significant obstacles that impact negatively on their levels of connectivity (Wasserman and De Beer 2004). However, despite these restrictions, Wasserman insists that “in the context of political participation and social activism, fewer connections do not necessarily translate into limited political impact,” especially if the connections that are present “are used effectively and creatively” (2007:114).<sup>189</sup> That is, in spite of limited resources, and although ‘right to a *better* life’ movements may not have widespread, direct access to the internet and social media technologies, it does not necessarily follow that such media have not and cannot be used as a means of strengthening their movement’s activism. On the contrary, it has been argued that the internet, video, and cell phones have been “crucial in advancing struggles of social movements in post-apartheid South Africa,” including those of the AbM (Willems 2011:494). And although relatively few members of ‘right to a *better* life’ movements have direct and constant access to the internet, their presence online, via websites and social media, has succeeded in “increas[ing the]...national and international visibility” of their struggles (Willems 2011:494), in a comparable manner to the Zapatista’s use of such technology. In particular, their use of cell phones, and the mobile technologies that they offer, has emerged as pivotal in ensuring the success of their communication and organization. In South Africa, access to mobile internet

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alone, movement member Zodwa Nsibande has made it clear that “to support our legal action we go to the streets and demonstrate and show the establishment that the power is with the people” (cited in Vartak 2009).

<sup>189</sup> Evidence of the political influence of social media, regardless of limited access and connection, emerged during the 2010/2011 Arab Spring. Despite limited access in some of the countries, the internet was used by a “core number of activists who then mobilized wider networks through other platforms or through traditional real-life networks of strong ties.” For example, although Egypt had a relatively low digital penetration rate of 5.5% at the time of the uprisings, due to its large population this percentage “translates into around 6 million Facebook users, who in turn are connected to a much larger number of social contacts who can be influenced by information from those with Facebook accounts” (Dubai School of Government 2011:5).

technology far outweighs fixed line internet access (Cupido and Van Belle 2012:159), with mobile handsets offering connection possibilities to the majority of South Africans, especially the poor.<sup>190</sup> Indeed, a recent report by infoDev highlighted that “although half the 50 million people in South Africa live below the poverty line, more than 75% among those in low-income groups who are 15 years or older own a mobile phone” (cited in Peyper 2013). In this regard, they maintain that “mobile ownership...[in] households with an income of less than R432 per month per household member...is relatively high compared to other African countries” (cited in Peyper 2013). Although the use of data applications among this group of people is quite low, the drastic reduction of costs that came along with the introduction of social networking platforms such as Mxit and Facebook (Willems 2011:494), has increased access in this area – with other social media platforms such as Twitter also gaining in popularity (Peyper 2013). Thus, notwithstanding the relative lack of resources in terms of these social movements’ fixed landline communication abilities, the way in which mobile technologies are increasing internet access for the poor and marginalized cannot be dismissed. In relation to this, it is not surprising that mobile phones and their related web capabilities are increasingly being used by social movement activists to communicate with and “mobilise [their] constituencies effectively” (Willems 2011:494).<sup>191</sup> In what follows, the extent to which AbM uses the internet and social media, firstly, to open up communicative spaces in which counter-publics and counter-discourses can be developed, secondly, to provide a space for a range of divergent and dispersed movements to come together, network, and develop articulations of collective identities, and thirdly, to promote counter-public contestation of dominant discourses, will be considered.

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<sup>190</sup> According to Skuse and Cousins (2005, 2008), since “insecure housing tenure and lack of a postal address in many townships means that many people cannot apply for fixed landlines from the two fixed line providers – Telkom and Neotel,” interest in mobile phones has been “quite high with almost every household owning a mobile handset” (cited in Chiumba 2012:198).

<sup>191</sup> As Chiumbu confirms, “social justice movements in South Africa, often marginalized by mainstream communication systems, are increasingly using mobile phones to coordinate actions, mobilize and create networks despite the fact that most of these movements have their origins among deprived communities.” In her study of the use of mobile phones by the Western Cape Anti-Eviction Campaign, she noted that new media technologies have been used by the movement to facilitate three related processes, namely “organisation efficiency, accessing the...[internet] by movement members and strengthening collective identities among members” (2012:202-203). Consequently, despite the obvious implications of the digital divide in South Africa, strong evidence that the internet and social media are increasingly being used, not only for individual consumer purposes, but also within the political sphere, is beginning to emerge.

Firstly, AbM has developed quite a striking online presence, and it is not only the largest and most supported component of the PPA, but also the most digitally connected. That is, AbM has an active website which can be found at [www.abahlali.org](http://www.abahlali.org), and which has a multiplicity of links that allow users to explore and navigate the digital media and communicative spaces of, and connect to, this shack dwellers movement. Similar to the TAC's website, in order for users to actively participate in and comment on the site, they need to log-in, via the 'User login' link found on the home page. However, since there is no option for a general visitor to 'create an account,' it appears that only movement members are able to log-in to the site. This means that, while all visitors to the home page are able to view the movement's latest news, along with information related to new and ongoing activities and mobilizations, only logged-in users are granted full access to see the comments made, and to comment on the articles themselves. Thus, interactivity and participation on the site is largely limited to movement members, and accordingly, opportunities for the development of counter-publics in this online space remain somewhat restricted. In relation to this, while the 'Contact' link, which provides both an *online* email contact form, as well as other relevant contact details, provides users with direct access to the movement, the statement that "you can leave an email message using the contact form below, but the best way to reach Abahlali is via telephone, fax or snail mail," draws significant attention to the fact that the movement may not always have direct access to the internet. It also highlights further the limitations of their website to provide sufficient online space for debate and discussion through which counter-publics can emerge. Yet, despite these limitations, the link titled 'University of AbM,' arguably provides some agonistic possibilities, via its role in building, spreading, and strengthening the movement's counter-discursive ideas. In particular, it provides information on the movement's principles and orientation, along with an array of digital material in the form of articles, pamphlets, press statements, and so forth. Moreover, while their website might not be very conducive to the creation of counter-publics, their presence on the social media site Facebook does provide a platform for debate and discussions relating to the movement's discourse and campaigns.

Secondly, with regard to their use of the internet's interactivity and reach to allow diverse people and groups to network and form articulations of collective identities, thereby leading to stronger and more effective oppositional strategies, AbM's website 'Support' link draws attention to the movement's supporters and its donor policy. From the list of supporters, it becomes apparent that AbM has succeeded in facilitating an articulation of diverse groups and movements, despite their core focus on poor people's issues and



problems.<sup>192</sup> Moreover, not only are their connections to divergent and geographically dispersed groups listed on the ‘support’ page. In addition, hyper-links to each of these movements are also provided on the website. In this way, AbM has not only used the internet and social media as a means to spread both their own message and activism, along with information related to the campaigns of other PPA movements and affiliated movements. In terms of this, apart from the above mentioned links, a ‘Solidarity’ link indicates the movement’s connections to other South African poor people’s movements, namely the Unemployed People’s Movement, and the Rural Network. And it provides direct links to news articles and information related to these movements and their activities, despite differences in approach between them and AbM. The importance of this should not be overlooked.<sup>193</sup> As mentioned earlier, not all of the ‘right to a *better* life’ movements have access to the internet, with the consequence that the inclusion of these links on the AbM website highlights their commitment to supporting these other movements, and ensuring that they too have an online presence.<sup>194</sup> Also, the fact that AbM has not encroached upon the autonomy of any of these other poor people’s movements, further highlights their tentative connection to online agonistic ideas of democracy.

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<sup>192</sup> In particular, movements, organizations, and groups, including *Entraide et Fraternité*, The Church Land Programme, X-Y, The South Africa Development Fund, Anarchist Black Cross, War on Want, Amnesty International, Mute Magazine, People’s House, and the Onyx Foundation, Friends of Workers’ Education in South Africa, Gift of the Givers, St. Elizabeth’s Church (New Jersey, USA), Bishop Rubin Philip, the Ota Benga Alliance, The Freedom of Expression Institute, the Open Democracy Advice Centre and the Centre on Housing Rights & Evictions, the Legal Resources Centre, groundWork, the Centre for Applied Legal Studies, the Paulo Freire Institute, and the Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI), are highlighted as movements in support of AbM and their fight for the ‘right to a *better* life’ for shack dwellers and poor people in South Africa.

<sup>193</sup> For example, an article on the Unemployed People’s Movement, entitled “UPM: Election 2014: Our Position,” highlights the UPM’s stance in relation to the ‘No Vote’ policy of many of the ‘right to a better life’ movements, *despite* the UPM’s disagreement with AbM on this issue. It is important to note this, because even though the UPM disagreed with the AbM Durban branch’s decision to vote for the Democratic Alliance, the AbM did not refrain from including the UPM’s statement on their website. This draws further attention to the connection that the movement has with agonistic democracy, in that the right of the UPM to differ in its opinions and policy is respected and accepted by AbM.

<sup>194</sup> It could even be argued that AbM’s use of their online media to bring attention to the plight of other poor people’s movements, not only highlights their growing involvement with alliance politics, but also draws attention to their realization that, in today’s globalized and digitally-mediated world, having a presence online can mean the difference between widespread recognition and success, and disempowering obscurity.

In relation to social media, as already indicated, AbM is connected to both the social networking site Facebook and the microblogging site Twitter, and the movement has a direct link to their Facebook page on the home page of their website. That is, under the ‘Find us on Facebook’ heading, users are encouraged to ‘like’ the AbM page, or go directly to the Facebook account. Their Facebook page, which focuses on sharing information, news, and updates on movement events and activism, has over 2 497 ‘likes’ (December 2014).<sup>195</sup> AbM have also used their Facebook page to ‘like,’ and thereby tentatively show support for, other groups and movements, including the Mandela Park Backyarders, Coalition of Immokalee Workers, Take Back Vacant Land – Philadelphia, Right to the City Alliance, Zapatista, Socio-economic Right Initiative of South Africa, Institute for Women, Religion and Globalization, among many others.<sup>196</sup> This virtual show of support for a range of divergent movements and groups, not only highlights AbM’s tentative use of this media to connect and articulate a range of movements and groups, but also indicates their use of this media to provide opportunities for the strengthening of marginal voices who are often rendered vulnerable through isolation.<sup>197</sup> Updated almost daily, the movement is very active on this platform and thereby offers its users a communicative space in which a variety of divergent groups can come together to discuss, debate, and contest the movement’s issues and objectives, thereby opening up opportunities for the articulation of counter-discourses, and the strengthening of oppositional strategies. Lax (2000) and Lister (2003) support this idea, when they insist that social media such as Facebook can “act as the foundation through which discussion and opinion flows, in ways that can achieve and sustain common and collective [counter]-discourse and action” (cited in Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke 2012:92). Yet, while updates are regularly made on the AbM Facebook page, little evidence exists of interaction between the

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<sup>195</sup> Some examples of striking updates and information include press statements entitled “The Local ANC Disrupted an Abahlali Meeting in Madlala Village Yesterday,” “Abahlali Launches a Branch in Silver City (Umlazi),” and images with the headline “Aftermath of the Attack on the Marikana Land Occupation, Cato Crest, By the eThekweni Municipality, 22 June 2014” (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2014c).

<sup>196</sup> Since this movement is largely anti-state and anti-capitalist, they tend to assume a largely autonomous democratic position. However, their willingness to work within institutions (law courts), even as a last resort, as well as their willingness to work with a variety of movements, even those not committed to anti-capitalism, highlight their possible – if somewhat nascent – connection to the ideas of agonistic democracy.

<sup>197</sup> In addition to these connections, online statements such as “an injury to one is an injury to all,” which was made by AbM to express solidarity with dismissed Commercial, Stevedoring, Agricultural and Allied Workers Union (CSAAWU) farmworkers, indicates their connection to agonistic pluralism, and the notion that the rights and activism of one group are of equal importance to, and dependent on, the realization of the rights and activism of all connected causes.

movement and its followers, supporters, and other groups or movements. Thus, although opportunities for communication, debate, and networking exist, they are not being utilized, and instead, their social networking site effectively functions as a platform for information transfer. In addition to their presence on Facebook, AbM can also be found on Twitter under the name @abahlali\_abm. Yet, although the movement joined this microblogging site in May 2012, there is still no reference or link to its Twitter account on the movement's official website. Also, a simple search online for 'Abahlali baseMjondolo on Twitter' does not provide a direct link to the site, but rather only provides links to other people's tweets about the movement.<sup>198</sup> Moreover, with only 587 followers as of December 2014, their connectivity on this platform is significantly smaller than on their Facebook page. And while their Twitter account has evidence of AbM updates and links to news related to the movement, there is little indication of connection with, or support of, other groups via this platform. Furthermore, with only six of the first twenty posts receiving a retweet from another user, the current reach and impact of this platform, to develop and strengthen the discourse and agenda of this 'right to a *better* life' movement, remains very limited. Consequently, while their tentative connections to divergent and dispersed movements are expressed online, the extent to which the AbM movement is actually using this media to interact and network with such movements, seems negligible.

Thirdly, despite their somewhat intermittent online connectivity and interactivity, AbM has used their online presence to contest dominant discourses, as well as to instigate offline contestation and action. In this regard, recent 2014 Facebook posts have been largely focused on the movement's occupations of land, and re-occupation of land following evictions, along with illegal evictions, and the demolition of shacks carried out by government. All of these posts serve to highlight the plight of the shack dwellers in South Africa, and at the same time, to contest the dominant discourses surrounding the government's macro-economic and housing policies. In relation to this, users are able to comment on, 'like,' and share all posts, as well as make their own posts to the AbM page. And in addition to such online discursive contestation, the events page of the movement's Facebook page has also been used as a space for the online instigation of offline action.<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> For example, after an online search, the first Twitter link is that of the 'Right to Know' campaign and their tweet "Abahlali baseMjondolo's Bandile Mdalose is being held by police for 'Public violence.' Police violence and... <http://fb.me/1xK3FVNeB>."

<sup>199</sup> For example, an April 2014 post to its Facebook 'Events' page stated that "Abahlali will be hosting its annual Unfreedom Day Rally. All welcome to attend" (2014d). This call for attendance emerges as an example of the

Arguably, such use of this media resonates with Vromen's assertion that new media and the internet can be used as a space for social movements to challenge existing relations of power (2008:107). However, again, despite such opportunities, little advantage has been taken of this communicative space, and interactivity on the platform remains relatively low. In this regard, although most posts are 'liked' by a number of users, very few comments have been made, and little to no debate or contestation is evident in relation to the highlighted issues. And while active participation is lacking on the 'wall' of the page, the 'Posts to Page' link, which provides further opportunities for users to access posts made from a diverse group of people and organizations, both in support of and against AbM's actions and politics, is also under-utilized. From questions surrounding their decision to break their 'No Land! No House! No Vote!' policy,<sup>200</sup> to statements of encouragement, and calls for support from other movements,<sup>201</sup> the 'Posts to Page' link offers significant opportunities for debate, discussion, and contestation to develop. Yet, notwithstanding these opportunities, examination of the posts reveals that only two of the latest ten posts made to the page have received comments (December 2014). Furthermore, of these comments, none of the posts received a comment from the movement itself. Consequently, despite the opportunities for participation offered by such social networking platforms, interactivity and engagement are lacking on this Facebook page.<sup>202</sup> Thus, despite AbM's structural connectivity via this social media platform, the extent

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online instigation of offline contestation needed in order for social media to function as an online agonistic public space.

<sup>200</sup> The already mentioned, 'No Land! No House! No Vote!' campaign was initiated in 2004 by the Landless People's Movement, and was adopted by the Poor People's Alliance in 2008. This campaign focuses on encouraging a boycott of national elections and an overall rejection of party politics, thereby highlighting these 'right to a *better* life' movements connections to autonomous democracy. In the run-up to the 2014 general elections, AbM's Durban branch decided to forgo this policy/campaign and encouraged its members to vote for the Democratic Alliance (DA) – the official opposition to the ANC (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2014b). This decision was met with various negative comments and criticisms, with much of the left lambasting them for compromising their efforts toward progressive social change. Yet, while criticized by some, this development in the movement's politics highlights their increasing openness to working within political institutions, and as such, could indicate their tentative inclination toward a more agonistic approach.

<sup>201</sup> Examples of such communication are: "Excellent initiative, indeed, the people should rule, the dog wag the tail and not the tail wag the dog" (2013), and "Please join us in our struggle ag[ai]nst the criminalization of homeless people in Hungary!" (Abahlali BaseMjondolo 2014a).

<sup>202</sup> This lack of participation and engagement on the part of AbM may be related to the fact that movement leaders themselves may not be running the movement's social media. That is, movement supporters or volunteers may be updating the site on behalf of the movement. If this is the case, those in charge of running the

of interactive communication is fairly low when compared to the Facebook page of, for example, the Zapatista (EZLN), whose most recent post received 198 ‘likes’ and thirty-nine shares.

As already indicated, a lack of resources and issues relating to the digital divide, have resulted in the majority of poor people’s movements in South Africa having limited access to, and presence on, the internet. Admittedly, *Abahlali baseMjondolo* does seem to be the exception in this regard, especially in relation to their high level of digital connectivity in comparison to other ‘right to a *better* life’ movements, and their active presence online via their website and social media pages. However, despite their structural presence in a variety of online spaces, and the concomitant opportunities for this media to be used to facilitate the promotion of radical democratic practices, the current use being made of this media lacks the level of interactivity, discussion, and debate required for it to function as something akin to an online agonistic public space – as advanced by Dahlberg, and as called for by Mouffe.

### **5.7.3 The ‘right to a better life for *all*’ movements**

Thus far, new social movements that campaign for rights to health, land, housing, and affordable basic services in South Africa, have been discussed. But in addition to these, a range of other movements have also begun to highlight the need for environmental *and* social justice in the country. According to Hallows and Butler, environmental justice exists when “relations between people, within and between groups of people, and between people and their environments are fair and equal,” so that *all* are able “to define and achieve their aspirations without imposing unfair, excessive or irreparable burdens or externalities on others or their environments, now and in the future” (2004:15). During the apartheid era, environmental concerns tended toward the conservation of endangered plants, animals and wildlife areas. And this led to environmental needs, including “urban, health, labour and development issues” (Cock 1991), being neglected (Beinart and Coates 1995; Kahn 1990; Mittelman 1998). However, the ideas of environmental justice that have been thematized in the post-apartheid era, indicate a movement away from the above mentioned conservation approach, toward an ever greater emphasis on ‘social justice,’ as “an all-encompassing notion that affirms the...value of...all forms of life, against the interests of wealth, power and technology” (Castells 1997:132). It is in relation to this conception of environmental justice

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social media may not have the authority, or even the knowledge, to comment on behalf of the movement, thus impeding chances for vibrant discussion and participation at a national or even international level.

that “a new phase of struggle for a better life for *all*” has emerged in the country [my italics] (Hallowes and Butler 2004:71). In short, ‘right to a better life for *all*’ movements are concerned with environmental and social justice, and “empower[ing] people in relations of solidarity and equity with each other and in non-degrading and positive relationships with their environments” (Hallowes and Butler 2004:15). And in this regard, the Environmental Justice Movement affiliate, groundWork, is perhaps one of the best-known examples of a ‘right to a better life for *all*’ movement in South Africa.

GroundWork, a non-profit environmental justice and development organization, founded in 1999, aims to “improve the quality of life of vulnerable people in South Africa,” and “places particular emphasis on assisting vulnerable and previously disadvantaged people who are most affected by environmental injustices” (groundWork 2014c).<sup>203</sup> And through representing Friends of the Earth South Africa, a national branch of Friends of the Earth International (FoEI), groundWork challenges “the current model of economic and corporate globalization,” and promotes “solutions that will help to create environmentally sustainable and socially just societies” (Friends of the Earth International 2014). By providing support to a number of community-based organizations, groundWork has succeeded in redirecting “the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism’s strategy for pollution control;”<sup>204</sup> gaining

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<sup>203</sup> In addition to groundWork, other key nodes in the Environmental Justice Movement include the Environmental Justice Networking Forum (EJNF) – a movement “which seeks to advance the interrelatedness of social, economic, environmental and political issues to reverse and prevent environmental injustices affecting the poor and working class” (Madihlapa 2003, cited in Cock 2006:207). Although the EJNF has played a role in reconfiguring environmentalist discourse in South Africa, the significant lull in its activities since the mid-2000s has brought its continued effectiveness into question (McDonald 2002:103). Earthlife Africa (ELA) has been recognized as another important node in the Environmental Justice Movement. According to Cock, ELA “is a loose, nationwide alliance of volunteer activists, grouped into local branches” (2006:208), all dedicated to five core areas including toxics, nuclear, zero waste, animal action and climate change. ELA is one of the most prominent environmental justice movements in South Africa. In addition to these two important groups, other significant organizations have also been linked to the movement, including the Environmental Monitoring Group (EMG), and the Group for Environmental Monitoring (GEM).

<sup>204</sup> According to Roemer-Mahler, prior to 2005, “the legislative framework governing air quality management in South Africa was the Atmospheric Air Pollution and Prevention Act (APPA) of 1965.” This legislation, he asserts “was based on a top-down regulatory approach in which emission permits were granted without the requirement of ambient air quality assessments considering local meteorological and topographical conditions.” This meant that “local authorities did not have any jurisdiction over air quality management.” However, in 2005, the Air Quality Act was passed by the South African government. This Act places “strong emphasis on the subsidiarity principle and encourages public participation in policy making through consultative processes” (Roemer-Mahler 2013:1). groundWork played an important role in promoting the approval of this Act.

“publicity for community issues;” providing “community access to decision makers, and combining “science and policy work with action” (Cock 2006:208). In addition to this, they have been involved in mobilizing “support through public events, the media and a network of national and international [civil society] partner” organizations, and in “lobbying the government, engaging directly with industry, and monitoring” injustice on the ground (Roemer-Mahler 2013:1). In the latter regard, through the organizational vehicle of “Groundwork...activists have been able to mobilize various resources to sustain local mobilizations and put pressure on national government and multinational corporations” (Barnett and Scott 2007:12). Additionally, groundWork assists in “making connections between sites and actors and helping to establish at least temporary political identities between them” (McAdam et al. 2001, 142-3, cited in Barnett and Scott 2007:12).

Section 24 of the South African Constitution’s Bill of Rights, states that “Everyone has the right to (a) an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being; (b) to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that – (i) prevent pollution and ecological degradation; (ii) promote conservation; and (iii) secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development” (South African Human Rights Commission 2010:323). Guided by this, ‘right to a better life for *all*’ movements focus on securing and realizing these rights. That is, since the Bill of Rights “speak[s] to the experience of environmental injustice and...formally protects people’s rights to organise and mobilise in defence of...[those] rights,” ‘right to a better life for *all*’ movements, such as groundWork, “have recognised the important role that rights discourse can play in environmental movement campaigns” (Hallowes and Butler 2004:74). Cock concurs with this, stating that at “the core of the notion of environmental justice as a powerful mobilising force lies...the notion of rights – rights to access to natural resources and to decision making” (2006:206). Correlatively, since the language of rights is often used to legitimize movement demands and activism (Madlingozi 2014:113), Cock points toward the counter-hegemonic potential of the environmental justice movement – in particular, groups such as groundWork – in “the challenge to power relations that this notion of rights implies” (2006:206).<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> As mentioned earlier, environmental justice movements are often tasked with attempting to find alternatives to the current hegemony of neoliberal capitalism. In this regard, these movements often suggest that people’s rights will not be fully realized until an alternative to “contemporary industrial capitalism and the neoliberal state” are found (Hallowes and Butler 2004:67). Admittedly, this argument can be closely connected to the ideas of autonomous democracy. However, since these movements are not militant in their calls for alternatives to the

As thematized in the previous discussions, the internet and new media technologies have succeeded in facilitating the expansion of both online and offline new social movement networking. In terms of this, the internet offers opportunities for a diversity of groups and movements to come together and organize collective action at a relatively low cost, while at the same time allowing movements and groups to bypass traditional and often restrictive mainstream media. In relation to ‘right to a better life for *all*’ movements, Castells insists that “the internet has become a major organising and mobilising tool for environmentalists around the world,” both for “raising people’s consciousness about alternative ways of living, and [for] building the political force to make it happen” (2001:280). Kutner similarly argues that “the use of internet-based technologies by environmental justice activists has already been...demonstrated to be effective for access, use, dissemination and creation of information resources” (2000:7). Accordingly, environmental justice movements in South Africa are making significant use of the internet to “coordinate their activity and give visibility to their issues” (Cock 2006:216-217). But whether or not such use entails this media functioning as a form of online agonistic public space, in the promotion of something akin to radical democracy, is a matter of debate. In the interest of contributing to this debate, in what follows, groundWork’s online presence, and the degree to which this presence contributes toward the creation of counter-publics, the development of counter-discourses, and the promotion of discussion, debate and contestation of dominant discourses, will be considered.

Firstly, groundWork’s use of the internet and new media technologies to provide communicative spaces for the establishment of counter-publics and the development of counter-discourses, is encouraging. To begin with, groundWork has a well-established online presence, especially via their website, [www.groundwork.org.za](http://www.groundwork.org.za), the home page of which consists of a number of links that direct users to various communicative spaces. In addition to the links – and a number of latest news headlines – the home page also provides direct links to the organization’s social media pages on Facebook and Twitter, as well as that of their parent organization, Friends of the Earth International.<sup>206</sup> Unlike the websites of ‘right to *life*’ and

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current neoliberal system, and since they are actively involved in promoting institutional reforms, their politics can also be connected closely to the agonistic radical democracy advanced by Laclau and Mouffe. That is, while they support the importance of working within the realm of institutions (courts of law) – in an attempt to reform government and capitalist environmental policies, they also concomitantly advance a discourse which challenges the legitimacy of neoliberal hegemony in the country.

<sup>206</sup> According to their website, Friends of the Earth International “campaign[s] on today’s most urgent environmental and social issues,” insofar as they “challenge the current model of economic and corporate globalization, and promote solutions that will help to create environmentally sustainable and socially just societies” (Friends of the Earth International 2014).



‘right to a *better* life’ movements explored earlier, groundWork’s website does not require users to log-in via a user log-in link. Consequently, any visitor to the site is able to access all of the information available on the site. Yet, this lack of a log-in facility means that no opportunity is given to anyone to interact or engage with the movement through commenting on news articles or website updates. And this means that there is no opportunity for debate and discussion, and consequently, limited possibilities for this media to nurture and foster counter-publics and oppositional discourses. However, this does not mean that no such participatory function exists. On the contrary, users are provided with opportunities to participate and interact with the organization via the commenting function on its Facebook page, and via its blog, ‘Smokestack,’ which focuses on climate justice, energy, waste, and environmental health. Yet, while Smokestack provides a communicative space through which counter-publics could be established, there has been no activity on the blog since March 2013 (December 2014). As such, although online communicative spaces currently do exist, indications are that at present they are not all conducive to the development of counter-publics and the nurturing of ‘right to a better life for *all*’ counter-discourses.

Secondly, the extent to which groundWork has used the internet and social media as interactive spaces through which diverse people and groups can connect, network and articulate collective identities and oppositional strategies, emerges as important. In addition to providing updates on the movement, the news section of the groundWork website also highlights their association and affiliation with other movements connected to the pursuit of environmental justice in South Africa. For example, in the article entitled “Eskom’s Application for Increased Air Pollution from Its Kriel Power Station Refused” (GroundWork 2014c), groundWork’s affiliation with Earthlife Africa,<sup>207</sup> along with the Centre for Environmental Rights,<sup>208</sup> is brought to the fore. At the same time, the ‘Links’ and ‘Partners’ links also provide evidence of groundWork’s connections to other movements, pointing to its possible connection to online agonistic practices. Indeed, the ‘Links’ page provides users with

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<sup>207</sup> According to Earthlife Africa’s website, they “seek...a better life for all people without exploiting other people or degrading their environment,” and their “aim is to encourage and support individuals, businesses and industries to reduce pollution, minimise waste and protect...natural resources” (2014).

<sup>208</sup> The Centre for Environmental Rights (CER) “was established in October 2009 by eight civil society organizations (CSOs) in South Africa’s environmental and environmental justice sector[,] to provide legal and related support to environmental CSOs and communities.” The Centre’s mission is to “advance the realization of environmental rights as guaranteed in the South African Constitution by providing support and legal representation to civil society organisations and communities who wish to protect their environmental rights, and by engaging in legal research, advocacy and litigation to achieve strategic change” (Centre for Environmental Rights 2014).

a considerable list of links to movements and organizations that groundWork have formed connections and articulations with.<sup>209</sup> This not only highlights groundWork's connection to other 'right to a better life for *all*' groups, but also draws attention to their support of movements and organizations that do not necessarily advance the groundWork agenda of environmental justice. For example, groundWork has indicated its 'support' of *Abahlali baseMjondolo*, which is connected to the 'right to a *better* life' movements, discussed earlier.<sup>210</sup> Arguably, their inclusion of direct links to these movements on their website opens up opportunities for the articulation of progressive democratic struggles and concomitant strengthening of oppositional discourses and strategies.<sup>211</sup> Furthermore, their 'Partners' page provides direct links to their partner movements and organizations, and even groups which have stated solidarity or formed some type of coalition with groundWork. According to their website, "these organizations are diverse in a variety of ways and provide critical support to groundWork's work." And they insist that, "together with the support of these organizations [they]...have built significant connections and a stronger environmental justice movement in South Africa, regionally and globally" (GroundWork 2014e).<sup>212</sup> Thus, since groundWork

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<sup>209</sup> In this regard, links to the South African government (Department of Energy, South African Parliament), South African organizations (*Abahlali baseMjondolo*, Greenpeace Africa, Earthlife Africa, Treasure the Karoo Action Group), international NGOs (350.org, Corpwatch, Healthcare Without Harm, Women in Informal Employment), international treaties, conventions and bodies (United Nations Environment Programme and the United States Environmental Protection Agency), are all provided.

<sup>210</sup> Moreover, evidence from groundWork's online communications highlights their openness to working with, and facilitating collaboration between, varieties of divergent movements. In particular, their promotion of *Abahlali baseMjondolo* on their website indicates their existing affiliations with 'right to a *better* life' movements. In addition to online evidence of such connection and support, collaboration between groundWork and AbM can also be seen in the offline environment. For example, in 2008, AbM joined a groundWork-supported march for waste pickers' rights in Durban. That is, both groundWork and AbM are supportive of the plight of waste pickers – who also tend to be shack dwellers – and marched in solidarity with these impoverished people (Hans 2008).

<sup>211</sup> While evidence of agonistic use of the internet can be seen in 'right to a better life for *all*' movements' online activity, the political orientation of these organizations is particularly dynamic. That is, on the one hand, they are often involved in consensual deliberations (i.e. via participation in Environmental Impact Assessment deliberations), and, on the other hand, they tend to adopt something akin to an agonistic stance via their adversarial activism (i.e. legal challenges and protest) and formulation of oppositional strategies (Barnnet and Scott 2007). At the same time, 'right to better life for *all*' movements also adopt a counter-hegemonic agenda which stands in direct opposition to the neoliberal macro-economic policy currently being implemented in South Africa (Hallows and Butler 2004).

<sup>212</sup> These movements, organizations, and groups include the Centre for Environmental Rights, Earthlife Africa, Friends of the Earth International, Health Care Without Harm, the Global Anti-Incinerator Alliance, Oilwatch

provides links to each of these partner organization websites, thereby opening up opportunities for multiple connections to be made between a plurality of organizations and movements, in a variety of online communicative spaces, their use of this media arguably does increase opportunities for the development and strengthening of counter-discursive strategies. Furthermore, their connection to and/or support of other movements and organizations is illustrated via the ‘likes’ link on their Facebook page. This link highlights the variety of movements and organizations that groundWork has ‘liked’ on this social networking platform, which includes the World Wildlife Fund South Africa, Earthlife Africa, the Right to Know Campaign, the Coalition for a Living Wage and Good Working Conditions for Farmworkers, Greenpeace Africa, and the eWaste Association of South Africa, among many others. Arguably, these ‘likes’ provide evidence of attempts to make connections with, and to support (or at least recognize) these groups, and points toward groundWork’s tentative use of this media as a means to create connections between divergent and dispersed people and groups. Another opportunity for groups and movements to connect and network with groundWork is the ability of users to make direct posts to the movement’s Facebook page. Yet, despite the use of this function by a number of individuals and groups, groundWork is yet to actively engage with – or even acknowledge – these posts, and this lack of online engagement acts to stifle opportunity for discussion or debate. Consequently, possibilities for connections and articulations to be developed in this online space are simultaneously constrained. However, at the very least, since the organization exhibits online support for a multiplicity of politically, economically, and geographically diverse organizations, its use of this social media can be seen to contribute, albeit incrementally, toward the instigation of a development of articulations of divergent progressive struggles, as promoted by both Hands (2007) and Dahlberg (2007b).

Thirdly, the movement’s use of the interactivity of the internet and social media to support counter-public contestation of dominant discourses, is quite significant. In this regard, groundWork has frequently used their online presence to contest issues related to their four core campaign areas, namely climate and energy justice, coal, waste, and environmental health. In relation to this contestation, some of the news articles on the movement’s website support a form of online discursive contestation, by encouraging users to “make some noise”

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International, the South African Waste Pickers’ Association (SAWPA), the Southern Cape Land Committee, the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance, the Vaal Environmental Justice Alliance, Women in Informal Employments: Globalising and Organising, and the Zero Mercury Working Group.

and share the issues or topic being discussed via social media.<sup>213</sup> In addition to this, a variety of new articles on the site encourage users to sign online petitions related to various environmental causes. As mentioned earlier, in addition to their website, groundWork is also present on the social media sites Facebook and Twitter. With 575 ‘likes’ as of December 2014, their Facebook page is largely used to bring attention to, and to contest, issues related to environmental justice in South Africa, and around the world. In particular, recent posts have engaged with issues related to fracking, coal pollution, corporate greed, and recycling.<sup>214</sup> Although the information in groundWork posts relates to their own agenda, the movement also regularly reposts links from partner and affiliated movements or groups. For example, in July 2014, they shared Greenpeace Africa’s link on Eskom (16 July), the Centre for Environmental Rights link related to coal mining (15 July), and 350.org’s post on climate change (21 June).<sup>215</sup> In addition to such online discursive contestation, groundWork’s online media have also been used to bring attention to offline activism and contestation. For example, their ‘Events’ link on their Facebook page has been used to encourage users of the site to join offline sit-ins and activism related to environmental justice.<sup>216</sup> Apart from Facebook, groundWork joined Twitter in February 2012, and currently has 456 followers (December 2014). The organization’s Twitter feed is also fairly active, with tweets and re-tweets that relate to pollution, electricity, the impacts of coal mining on people’s health, and

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<sup>213</sup> For example, in relation to the article on the groundWork-backed report “Honest Accounts? The True Story of Africa’s Billion Dollar Losses,” users are asked to “make some noise” and ‘tweet’ a variety of statements to Twitter. Some of these statements include, “Africa loses almost 6.5x the amount of money it receives in aid each year. We demand #honestaccounts of our finances,” and “There is a story politicians like to tell about aid to Africa. It’s not the right one. Give us #honestaccounts,” among others (GroundWork 2014d).

<sup>214</sup> Many of their posts attempt to introduce counter-discursive ideas. For example, the Facebook post entitled “We cannot commodify nature!” emphasizes groundWork’s rejection of the widespread privatization promoted by neoliberal-capitalism (2014f). Examples of the movement’s online contestation of dominant discourses can also be seen in their sharing of posts, such as one from Occupy Wall Street, which denounces capitalism. Indeed, on 23 July 2014, groundWork shared a post uploaded by Occupy Wall Street, which quotes John Maynard Keynes’s statement that “capitalism is the extraordinary belief that the nastiest of men for the nastiest of motives will somehow work for the benefit of all” (2014f).

<sup>215</sup> According to their website, 350.org is an organization committed to “building a global climate movement.” Founded in 2008, their “online campaigns, grassroots organizing, and mass public actions are coordinated by a global network active in over 188 countries” (350.org 2014).

<sup>216</sup> An example of such online instigation of offline action can be seen in their call for people to join in at the ‘People’s Climate Camp’ in Durban, which included “exhibits showing people’s ideas of an alternative, clean energy future” (GroundWork 2013).

“rights to a clean environment” (GroundWork 2014a), among other things.<sup>217</sup> However, although this contestation reflects Cammaert’s argument that the internet offers spaces for the expression of disensus on issues often hidden by the current status quo (2008), groundWork’s inability to attract significant online followers, as well as the relatively low number of debates and discussions evident on their social media sites, admittedly detracts from the extent to which this online space currently facilitates effective contestations and the promotion of related agonistic democratic practices.

Based on the above discussion it becomes apparent that, although groundWork – as the leading ‘right to a better life for *all*’ movement – is present and accessible online, their level of interactivity is low. And since they have largely used their online presence to share information on issues related to their environmental justice agenda, rather than to actively encourage and initiate online conversations, debates, and contestations, the potential of their current use of social media to act as an online agonistic public space, that promotes radical democratic change, remains limited.<sup>218</sup>

## 5.8 Conclusion

From the above analysis it is evident that although ‘right to *life*,’ ‘right to a *better* life,’ and ‘right to a better life for *all*’ movements differ in their degree of connection to the internet, similarities can be found in their tentative linkages to the online agonistic public space framework advanced by Dahlberg. Yet, at the same time obstacles to their respective use of this media as an agonistic public space that can facilitate the emergence of the left-wing hegemony and radical democracy advanced by Laclau and Mouffe, were also identified. That is, despite their use of the internet, and in particular social media, to provide communicative spaces for the creation of counter-publics and counter-discourses, the coming together of

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<sup>217</sup> Videos and images related to environmental justice are also uploaded or re-tweeted by the organization, and connections between groundWork and their affiliates and partners are expressed via the re-tweeting of links and tweets. Although uncommon, some of groundWork’s tweets have been retweeted by other Twitter users – thereby disseminating their updates to an even wider range of users.

<sup>218</sup> Yet, the potential for such use can be seen in the online activity of ‘right to a better life for *all*’ group, Greenpeace Africa, which currently has 79 522 ‘likes’ on Facebook and 39 700 followers on Twitter (December 2014). To be sure, Greenpeace is a well-recognized organization in the field of environmentalism and environmental justice, and, as such, has gained more widespread recognition and support than smaller grassroots, local organizations. However, their use of this media offers promising insight into the potential that it may have for other environmental justice movements in South Africa in the future.

divergent groups and movements in the articulation of collective identities, and the counter-public contestation of dominant discourses, only a limited resonance exists between their resultant levels of interactivity and those of the social movements discussed in the previous chapter. Thus, although the potential for the radical democratic use of social media by new social movements in South Africa does exist, it has yet to be realized, because their current use of this media lacks the engagement, participation, and contestation needed in order for it to facilitate the advancement of left-wing hegemony, or radical democracy, in the country. In this regard, despite the participatory potential and extensive reach of social media, it appears that new social movements in South Africa tend to view it in much the same way as South African mainstream political parties do – simply as a tool for information dissemination. In this regard, in their article “The Use of Facebook for Political Commentary in South Africa,” Steenkamp and Hyde-Clark examine the online activity of the South African governing party, the ANC, and the official opposition party, the DA. Although these parties both have highly active Facebook pages (MyANC has over 215 000 ‘likes’ and the Democratic Alliance has over 144 000 ‘likes’), Steenkamp and Hyde-Clarke assert that, to a large extent, the parties do “not participate in political discussion online,” and do “not engage in a conversation with the public” (2012:96). And this despite widespread and vibrant conversations between the Facebook group users themselves, which indicates an interest in entering into dialogue of over key issues.<sup>219</sup>

Yet, in spite of these current limitations, evidence of ‘right to *life*,’ ‘right to a *better* life,’ and ‘right to a better life for *all*’ movements’ connections to the ideas of agonism – especially in relation to their online activities and communication – are nevertheless apparent. And despite being very tentative in some instances, these highlight the promising opportunities for such media to be used to “shift social relations and political constructions, and thus contest and challenge [current]...hegemonic formations in the country” (Macgilchrist and Bohmig 2012:87).

Based on this premise, questions concerning *how* new social movements in South Africa should try to take further advantage of such social media, and *what* they need to do in order to transform their current online presence – from ‘information conduits’ into active facilitators of democratic discussion, debate, and contestation – emerge. Furthermore, questions concerning *what* these movements stand to gain from an online agonistic public

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<sup>219</sup> Although the parties are usually not involved in the online discussions, vibrant contestation is evident between users of the pages. This strongly indicates that the South African public is interested in participating in political discussions and debates online. Consequently, it is plausible to suggest that new social movements need to make greater efforts to encourage the public to get involved in their conversations as well.

space, and *how* they will benefit from the formation of left-wing hegemony in the country, similarly require answers. These, and other questions, will be addressed in the conclusion of this thesis.

# Conclusion

## 6.1 Thesis overview

Despite the emergence of an array of new social movements in South Africa following the country's transition to democracy in 1994, the ability of these movements to effectively challenge the marginalizing power of the ANC-led neoliberal trajectory, has fallen into question. This is because, despite their attempts to challenge the injustices exacerbated by the current politico-economic orientation of the country, the tendency among these new social movements to become too issue-specific and localized, has often resulted in deep divisions between, and the corresponding fragmentation of, South African civil society organizations. However, the potential for their growing use of social media and mobile technologies to form online agonistic public spaces, in which a multiplicity of struggles can come together to contest and problematize the neoliberal order of the country exists. And this stands to offer intriguing opportunities for a progression toward new social movement cohesion and coalition, and correlatively, the incremental advancement of radical forms of democracy in South Africa. In the interest of exploring such radical democratic potential of social media use by new social movements in South Africa, this research followed the following path.

In Chapter One, an examination of the connections between neoliberalism and the internet was undertaken, via an exploration of the rise of the internet from Cold War military 'packet-switching' technologies, through 'big business' funding of internet network development, to its domination of the private sector. That is, following an examination of the progression of the internet from the military and government networks of the 1960s, through Web 2.0 in 2003/2004, to the various interactive social media platforms available today, the neoliberal and consumerist underpinnings of contemporary online activities were considered, particularly in relation to Dan Schiller's notion of digital capitalism (2000), and the corresponding corporate colonization of cyberspace. After a brief examination of Schiller's work, the impact of the internet and new media technologies on human communication, identity formation, and interaction, was then discussed in relation to various conflicting scholarly perspectives. To begin with, positive theorizations of this media's potential to build communities, increase participation in public life, and expand freedom in society – as advanced by Rheingold (1993), Turkle (1995), Poster (1995), and Jenkins (2006) – were highlighted. After this, the more circumspect and ambivalent theorizations of Castells, who both promotes certain aspects of online networks, and denounces others, was explored.



Finally, negative theorizations of new media technologies for their promotion of individualism, narcissism, and alienation from society, were elaborated upon in relation to the arguments of Buffardi (2008), Campbell (2008), Twenge (2009), and Turkle's most recent work (2011). This was done in order to thematize the current debate surrounding the influence of the internet and new media technologies on identity and society, and to provide insight into both the opportunities and challenges that they respectively afford and pose to digitally-connected people in the contemporary era.

Next, against this cautionary backdrop, in Chapter Two, evidence of the potential that the internet and social media may hold to encourage and enhance mainstream political participation in contemporary society, was explored. In this regard, the social media campaign of the 2008 US presidential elections, which highlighted the increasing role that social media are playing in traditional or mainstream party politics, was considered. However, following a discussion of the proliferation of liberal democracy around the world, and its promotion of neoliberal discourses and dynamics both online and offline, arguments by Davis (1999), Resnick and Margolis (2000), Schlosberg (2006), and Gutmann and Thompson (2004), among others, were engaged with. These authors suggest that the use of the internet and social media in mainstream politics has simply resulted in the adoption of a standardized neoliberal-consumer model of politics, which promotes uncritical and consumer-orientated political practice. Yet, despite such concerns, evidence of the growing use of the internet and social media in the online practice of *alternative* democratic politics was also identified, and this was investigated in the latter part of the chapter. In this regard, the concept of radical democracy was elaborated upon, before, firstly, the deliberative approach to radical democracy – which has largely been attributed to the ideas of John Rawls (1993) and Jürgen Habermas (1996) – was discussed. As indicated, the exponents of deliberative democracy propose that “political problems...can be resolved through the force of the better argument,” and that reasonable discussions and objective and rational consensus-based decision-making are precursors to any democratic transformations of society. And this was followed by an exploration of the potential of the internet to promote this form of radical democracy, via a range of deliberative online platforms. Secondly, the autonomous approach to radical democracy, which highlights the role of community, self-determination, and freedom from centralized systems of power in democratic practice, was examined. In particular, the works of Cornelius Castoriadis (1991, 1997), who calls for a system of self-government and emphasizes the need for a return to a society committed to autonomy and the ‘original’ meaning of democracy, were engaged with, along with how his arguments have been supported by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's (2000, 2004) works. That is, their similar

denunciation of the current liberal democratic system as a neoliberal 'Empire,' and their call for both a political revolution against the power of neoliberal capital, and the creation of autonomous communities and organization, were discussed. And the subsequent consideration of the internet and new media networks as a means to challenge neoliberal discourses and power, revealed the autonomous democratic potential of this media to bypass centralized forms of control and capitalist systems, and to allow for an online formation and extension of a 'commons' (Dahlberg 2011:863). In short, while this chapter drew attention to the role of the internet in the co-optation of mainstream politics by neoliberalism, it also highlighted the opportunities that such media have to resist such co-optation, and to facilitate alternative – in particular, deliberative and autonomous – forms of democratic participation.

In turn, Chapter Three drew attention to a third category of radical democracy, namely agonistic democracy, which has been lauded for its deep resonance with online political dynamics. Offering an alternative to deliberative and autonomous radical democratic approaches, the theory of agonistic democracy was initially discussed in relation to the ideas of Connelly (1991), Tully (2002), Honig (1996), and Owen (2002), who advance the importance of conflict, difference, identity, and contestation in democratic transformations. After this, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's popular conception of radical democracy – as expressed through their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), and their individual theoretical works – was critically engaged with. That is, stressing the overarching presence of antagonisms and differences in contemporary politics, Laclau and Mouffe's argument that democracy should not be about achieving consensus, but rather about providing a platform for the confrontation of inevitable differences and the constant renegotiation of issues based on these conflicts, was discussed. Moreover, related to the ideas of equivalence and plurality, their assertion that previously unconnected or dissimilar groups should be able to recognize the similarities in their *progressive* struggles or ideas, and come together to support the radically democratic extension of liberty and equality to *all*, was highlighted. In particular, their rejection of deliberative ideas of consensus, and their criticism of autonomous notions of 'the multitude,' were elaborated upon, before their promotion of a new political strategy of the left was examined. That is, a left-wing hegemonic project involving the embrace of difference and conflict, the transformation of antagonisms into agonisms, and the subsequent challenging of un-progressive hegemonies. In terms of this, specific emphasis fell on their promotion of co-operation between civil society and social movements as essential to the development of such a 'left-wing hegemonic' project, and as imperative to the formation of radical democracy.

Against the backdrop of the above theory, in Chapter Four existing general theorizations of online agonism were considered, before specific investigations of salient radical democratic use of the internet by major social movements was undertaken. That is, firstly, various general theorizations of the agonistic use of the internet in recent social movement politics were considered, namely the works of, among others, Kahn and Kellner (2006), Kowal (2002), Downey and Fenton (2003), Moghadam (2013), Rahimi (2011), Langman (2005), Cammaerts (2008), Hands (2007), and Dahlberg (2007a, 2007b, 2007c). Secondly, specific examples of the radical democratic use of the internet by recent major international social movements – namely the Zapatista, RAWA, the alter-globalization movement, and the Occupy movement – were investigated. And through such investigation, it emerged that the online politics and practices of these movements resonate primarily with the political dynamics of agonistic radical democracy. That is, the above mentioned movements' connections to the agonistic public space framework, detailed by Dahlberg, were thematized, and their use of the internet and social media to function, firstly, as communicative spaces or arenas for the development of counter-publics, secondly, as a means to assist politically diverse and dispersed groups to network and articulate their collective identities and discourses, and to strengthen the effectiveness of oppositional strategies, and thirdly, as a means of supporting counter-public contestation of mainstream dominant discourses, was considered. Based on this analysis, it was argued that, notwithstanding various degrees of continued connection to deliberative and autonomous conceptions of democracy at a grassroots level, the movements under investigation evinced a clear progression toward the dynamics of agonism in their online activism.

Finally, in Chapter Five, with a view to discovering whether or not such global agonistic developments have local counterparts, the radical democratic use of the internet and social media by new social movements in South Africa was explored. In this regard, following a brief discussion of the South African political landscape and its history, the ANC's neoliberal turn after 1994, and the subsequent emergence of new social movements in the country, a brief overview of the current South African new media landscape was provided. After this, the online activities of three new social movement categories – 'right to *life*,' right to a *better* life' and 'right to a better life for *all*' movements – were analyzed and discussed, in relation to the online presence and activism of the leading examples of each, namely the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (AbM), and groundWork. In short, it was determined that, although these South African new social movements' use of the internet and social media does resonate partially with that of the previously discussed global movements, for the most part their current use of this media lacks the requisite level of

engagement, participation, and contestation needed for it to function *effectively* as an online agonistic public space. That is, a space which can, firstly, provide a platform for the development of counter-publics through which agonistic pluralism can be practiced, secondly, assist politically diverse and dispersed groups to network and articulate their identities and discourses as ‘chains of equivalence,’ to strengthen the effectiveness of oppositional strategies, and thirdly, support counter-public contestation of mainstream dominant discourses. Instead, due to the predominant use of such media by the selected South African new social movements as ‘technological tools’ for information dissemination, rather than as ‘cultural technologies’ for precipitating dialogue and change, it was determined that the potential of their social and mobile media platforms to function as online agonistic public spaces of debate and contestation – which open up possibilities for radically democratic transformations of society (Laclau and Mouffe 1985:178) – is yet to be realized. And in addition to such current formal limitations, what also emerged is that thematic obstacles to the creation of such online agonistic public spaces exist. Indeed, despite evidence of growing multiple connections and solidarity between an array of divergent new social movements, fragmenting differences over the adoption of in-system and extra-institutional strategies continue to impede widespread coalition formation on the basis of what Laclau and Mouffe call the articulation of ‘chains of equivalence.’

In this regard, ‘right to *life*’ movements like the TAC can be connected to the ideas of agonistic democracy. Not only are they evidently willing to work with, and form coalitions with, a range of struggles, including those whose ideas conflict with their own, but they also aim to bring about ameliorative change, by deepening and extending features of the current liberal democratic system.<sup>220</sup> However, they have also expressed reservations about working in collaboration with, or forming coalitions with, militant anti-state/anti-neoliberal movements (Friedman and Mottair 2006) – the majority of whom fall under the ‘right to a *better life*’ category of movements. Their hesitance to work with or alongside some other South African new social movements, they assert, is a result of their belief that these groups’ “militancy...tactics and approach will not yield change” (Friedman and Mottair 2007:34). Thus, although ‘right to *life*’ movements have denounced government repression of, and violence against, the ‘right to a *better life*’ movements, they have not actually expressed solidarity with them. And in some cases, they have even publicly rejected their activities and

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<sup>220</sup> This idea that ‘right to *life*’ movements aim to bring about change within the current ideological framework, namely liberal democracy, is resonant with Laclau and Mouffe’s argument that “the task for the Left...cannot be to renounce liberal-democratic ideology, but on the contrary, to deepen and extend it in the direction of a radical and plural democracy” (1985:176).

tactics.<sup>221</sup> This rejection has placed strain on the relationship between ‘right to *life*’ and ‘right to a *better life*’ movements, and has resulted in deepening antagonisms and divisions between them, which have limited opportunities for the development of the left-wing hegemonic project that the online environment might otherwise facilitate.

Next, while the leading ‘right to a *better life*’ movement, namely, *Abahlali baseMjondolo* (AbM), has shown some online inclination toward the ideas of agonistic radical democratic practices, at the grassroots level they remain largely autonomous in orientation.<sup>222</sup> That is, they, firstly, are willing to work within institutions in order to facilitate the realization of their rights, secondly, demand to be included in political conversations,<sup>223</sup> and thirdly, have displayed an online form of kinship with the ideas of agonistic pluralism and democratic conflict. But they are still ultimately committed to the political dynamics of autonomous democracy, and in particular, achieving an ‘anti-capitalist’ political vision. For instance, in a recent statement released by *Abahlali baseMjondolo* in relation to the Durban branch’s 2014 decision to abandon their ‘No Land! No House! No Vote!’ policy, in favor of participation in the political elections, they asserted that: although

we have to act to protect our ability to organise and to sustain our living politics right now...[, but t]his does not mean that we have given up on our vision of a world where land, cities, wealth and power are shared fairly. We call this a living communism and we remain committed to it. But we also remain committed to the human beings that we are now and to our families, neighbours and comrades. We will make what deals we have to make to protect our politics and

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<sup>221</sup> In October 2010, the TAC – in conjunction with COSATU Khayelitsha, Equal Education and the Social Justice Forum – denounced ‘right to a *better life*’ movement *Abahlali baseMjondolo*’s (AbM’s) calls for violence and chaos during a proposed “general strike of informal settlements.” AbM’s alleged encouragement of “residents to burn tyres, block roads and throw stones and rubbish” was criticized by the above movements as being “immature” and “ignorant,” and showing “contempt for...communities” (2010). In the statement, the TAC and its supporters clarified their agreement that the “need for mass organisation to overcome social inequality has never been greater.” However, they insisted that “the poor and working-class people of Khayelitsha cannot advance their struggle in this way.” Instead, they argued that, “to build their own power they need patient organisation and unity with people from Cape Town to Mitchell’s Plain, Gugulethu to Manenberg” (Treatment Action Campaign 2010).

<sup>222</sup> While “Abahlali has shared ideas and worked closely with other movements, including some non-authoritarian NGOs and a few supportive academics, decisions have always been taken by the movement without regard to outsiders’ wishes and/or agendas” (Sacks 2014).

<sup>223</sup> In a 2007 press statement, AbM insisted that “the ‘experts’ and the rich and the politicians speak about us and for us. They see no reason to speak to us” (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2007). In relation to this, poor people’s movements including AbM have demanded that their movements be spoken ‘with,’ instead of being spoken ‘about’ or for.

improve our members' lives right now[,] but we will not give up on our political vision.  
(Abahlali baseMjondolo 2014)

Accordingly, this movement's connections to the promotion of a 'living communism,' and to a correlative total rejection of the current system, comprise major issues. On the one hand, these aims tend to isolate them from other South Africa new social movements, especially those connected to the 'right to *life*' struggles which, although largely critical of neoliberalism, nevertheless work toward change within the current system. On the other hand, their politics indicates a significant diversion from the radically democratic ideas of Laclau and Mouffe, who argue that the role of the left is to bring about change by deepening and extending liberal democracy, in the direction of radical and plural democracy.<sup>224</sup> That is, while the radical democracy advanced by Laclau and Mouffe has a definite anti-neoliberal/socialist element to it, and although Mouffe asserts that one of "the most important task[s] for the left today is to find alternatives to neoliberalism," socialism is not promoted as their core objective (cited in Castle 1998). In addition to this, since 'right to a *better* life' movements tend to be suspicious of groups and movements that are affiliated to the ANC and certain NGOs, any opportunities for the online creation of something akin to chains of equivalence may be stopped short before being realized. For example, although AbM has expressed support for the 'right to *life*' movement, the TAC, they have also criticized their internal hierarchy and their connections to the ANC.<sup>225</sup> Moreover, while there is evidence that they are willing to work with groups and movements not directly connected to housing, eviction, and other basic needs struggles,<sup>226</sup> their core focus remains the achievement of rights and basic services for the poor, as well as building "as much unity as possible between

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<sup>224</sup> For Laclau and Mouffe, "liberal democracy is not the enemy to be destroyed in order to create a completely new society. [T]he problem with 'actually existing' liberal democracies is not with their constitutive values crystalized in the principles of liberty and equality, but with the system of power which redefines and limits the operation of these values." As such, they insist that their idea of a "radical and plural democracy was conceived as a new stage in the deepening of the 'democratic revolution'" and "as the extension of the democratic struggle for equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations" (2001:xv).

<sup>225</sup> In a 2010 statement, AbM asserted that "we respect the important victories that TAC has won for health care over the years and we respect the work that they have done in solidarity with migrants and LGBT people. We are clear that our enemies are those who put the interest of the elites, be they in business or politics, before the interests of the poor and we are clear that we wish to build as much unity as possible between organisations of the working class...However we are very disappointed that TAC chooses to attack our campaign in public without first meeting with us as a fraternal organisation to discuss any concerns that they may have had" (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2010).

<sup>226</sup> For example, AbM's website highlights their connection to the environmental justice movement groundWork.

organizations of the working class” (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2010).<sup>227</sup> Consequently, although opportunities for the extension of chains of equivalence between the divergent democratic struggles of the above groups do exist, this ‘right to a *better* life’ movement’s suspicion of donor-funded NGOs, and their related refusal to work with organizations such as the Centre for Civil Society, stand to limit possibilities for the widespread articulations needed in order for radical democracy to emerge. Correlatively, the counter-hegemonic and militant nature of many ‘right to a *better* life’ movements has distanced them from other new social movements and organizations, whose members see such militancy as undermining the efficacy of social activism, because they feel that such tactics and counter-hegemonic approaches will not yield significant change (Friedman and Mottair 2007:34).

While the above relationship between ‘right to *life*’ and ‘right to a *better* life’ movements presents significant obstacles to any online formation of left-wing hegemony in the country, ‘right to a better life for *all*’ movements appear to be more open to creating connections with a wide range of progressive movements.<sup>228</sup> Indeed, groundWork, the leading ‘right to a better life for *all*’ movement, has recognized the need to create connections with both ‘right to *life*’ and ‘right to a *better* life’ movements, as well as many other progressive elements within civil society, in order to extend the democratic project to a whole new range of social relations. In this regard, in a 2004 groundWork report, Hallows and Butler suggest that “an inclusive understanding of environmental justice [may]...contribute to building a common and broad movement that...aims to secure the material conditions for realising people’s rights to a better world” (2004:88). Although a broad national movement is not necessary for chains of equivalence to be made, their recognition of the need for such equivalence is important. Additionally, their willingness to work with, and within, the ambit of current democratic institutions, in order to fight for environmental and social justice, highlights their potential not only to facilitate change, but also to institutionalize that change as well. Thus, it can be argued that ‘right to a better life for *all*’ movements may be engaged in the process of what Mouffe calls ‘agonistics.’ That is, “instead of implementing a strategy of withdrawal” from the state (as seen in ‘right to a *better* life’ movements), they have tentatively accepted the need to become part of a “progressive ‘collective will,’” aimed at

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<sup>227</sup> In addition to their various connections to the ideas of autonomous and agonistic democracy, this call for unity also highlights their tentative connection to the ideas of deliberative democracy.

<sup>228</sup> ‘Right to a better life for *all*’ movements have shared ‘right to a *better* life’ movements’ concern over the danger of NGOs and certain elements of civil society reproducing the status quo, and thereby “becoming a transmission belt for the current political and economic order” (Lumsden and Loftus 2003:9). However, they have also recognized that NGOs and civil society can play a significant role in the transformation of society.

adopting a “war of position” focused on “radicalis[ing] democratic institutions and establish[ing] a new hegemony” (Mouffe 2013:127). And it is toward this conception of ‘agonistics’ that ‘right to *life*’ and ‘right to a *better* life’ movements may need to turn, before the potential of the internet and social media to facilitate radical democratic practices in the country can begin to be realized.

In sum, although such media have the potential to facilitate the formation of something akin to left-wing hegemony in South Africa, which in turn could help to usher in radical democracy in the country, obstacles to the achievement of an online agonistic public space through which such a formation could occur, exist at both formal and thematic levels. Nevertheless, these obstacles are arguably coterminous with the beginning of such political use of online platforms. And as discussed in Chapter Four, evidence exists that such use by recent major global social movements has had the effect of incrementally shifting the political orientation of the groups concerned in the direction of agonism. Consequently, despite the current formal and thematic limitations of such media use in South Africa, the fact of the increasing employment of the internet, social media, and mobile technologies by local new social movements, may yet lead to the realization of something akin to Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of left-wing hegemony – albeit only through a slow and incremental deepening and expanding of democracy in the country.

But it is not sufficient to simply wait for this to occur, as though the internet comprises some sort of political panacea that only requires time to work its magic. On the contrary, the neoliberal underpinnings of the internet – as discussed in Chapter One – remain an ever present issue of concern, because of their capacity to undermine such democratic development. Possibly, the best defense against this would be a pro-active stance concerning ways in which to address the above mentioned formal and thematic obstacles to the formation, by South African new social movements, of left-wing hegemony, and in what follows a few tentative recommendations will be offered in this regard.

## **6.2 Recommendations**

Despite the continuing divisions between new social movements in South Africa, some tentative solutions have already been suggested. In relation to the problem of most new social movement struggles being localized, issue specific, and accordingly fragmented, Madlingozi has argued that “fundamental change can only come about when community organizations engage in sustained collective actions that focus the struggle on wider social change” instead of the “single issues impacting on their communities.” Consequently, he asserts that South



African new social movements need to focus on “building strategic alliances with others, and forming a ‘united front’ which will ensure that particularistic struggles of different communities get coordinated at a national level” (2007:92-93). Zeilig and Dwyer develop on this idea of a united movement, insisting that “the way forward must be a unity between the organized working class, the township unemployed and...social movements” In short, they maintain that nothing less than a “unified struggle against neoliberalism in South Africa” is needed (2012:125). Yet, one negative implication of unity achieved through a nationally-orientated movement, namely the potential loss of diversity through progressive conformity, remains a concern.

In opposition to these two perspectives, Greenstein suggests that in order for new social movements in South Africa to present an effective contestatory force against the neoliberal policies of the ANC government – while at the same time preserving their own autonomy – they need to move away from the idea of creating unity between movements and rather move toward ‘transformative politics.’ That is, politics which “focuses on shaping the practical and discursive routines of social life,” in a way that allows “the untidy nature of the new social movements to flourish and spread to hitherto unaffected aspects of society.” And he argues further that this type of politics “works towards ‘empowered democracy’ precisely by adopting a piecemeal and cumulative approach,” and correlatively, through “eschewing grandiose revolutionary rhetoric that sounds radical but ends up achieving very little because it is removed from people’s daily concerns” (Greenstein 2004:17, cited in Madlingozi 2007:94).

In support of Greenstein, this thesis indicates that Laclau and Mouffe’s conception of radical democracy offers a valuable heuristic device through which the future of the expansion and deepening of democracy in South Africa may be pursued. A democracy based not on increasing unity, but rather on agonistic conflict and the proliferation of difference, within a sphere of political activity understood in increasingly broad terms. In this regard, it is important neither to devalue the role of civil society – and in particular new social movements – in the instigation of such agonistic radical democratic practices in South Africa, nor to underestimate the internet and social media as ‘cultural technologies of change’ in their hands.<sup>229</sup>

As mentioned earlier, this thesis divides new social movements in South into three main categories, namely ‘right to *life*,’ ‘right to a *better* life,’ and ‘right to a better life for *all*’

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<sup>229</sup> Aaker and Smith have lent support to this perspective, by suggesting that such new technologies allow people to “connect” and “mobilize” in a manner that brings about change. They further argue that “the power of social technology, when fully engaged, can be nothing short of revolutionary” (Aaker and Smith 2010:xiv).

movements. And all three of these categories differ in relation to their strategic approaches to attaining the rights which each privilege, with the consequence that antagonisms surrounding choices of strategy have developed. That is, on the one hand, the first category which is seen to adopt a 'rights-based' strategy, focus largely on the implementation of in-system tactics, and so are often accused of pandering to, or being co-opted by, the ANC and its neoliberal politico-economic agenda. On the other hand, the second category, which adopts counter-hegemonic strategies focused principally on extra-institutional tactics, is often denounced by exponents of the above 'rights-based' strategy for their militant and unorganized approach. Yet, as discussed in the previous chapter, despite the avowedly different strategic alignments of the movements within each category, they are arguably less diametrically opposed and more situated on opposing poles of a continuum, along which moments of slippage and consequent interface have occurred. After all, evidence exists that all such movements have at one stage or another implemented in-system *and* extra-institutional tactics. For example, 'right to *life*' movements, which operate chiefly within the current political system, have been known to adopt counter-hegemonic tactics of civil disobedience, particularly when in-system tactics fail to bring about an adequate or timely realization of their calls for rights to health, HIV/AIDS treatment, and life. Similarly, notwithstanding their largely counter-hegemonic and extra-institutional stance, 'right to a *better* life' movements have at times adopted in-system tactics, in order to augment the legitimacy of their claims to land, housing, and other basic service rights. Moreover, movements within the third 'right to a better life for *all*' category, seem to have embraced both the implementation of counter-hegemonic campaigns for social and environmental justice and rights, and supported these with in-system challenging of the state and capital. Consequently, since the new social movements of each of the above three categories all entail interest in realizing a certain set of constitutional and human rights, and are willing to use both in-system and extra-institutional methods to achieve these rights, the concept of rights can conceivably function as a 'common symbolic space.'<sup>230</sup> That is, a symbolic space within which new social movements and activist groups in South Africa can proceed to articulate "themselves as equivalent subjects of rights" (Joseph 2002:xxviii), in a way that transforms existing antagonisms into agonisms.

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<sup>230</sup> In this regard, Henderson and Waterstone highlight Laclau and Mouffe's argument that "the expansionary logic of rights-discourse must be extended to ever wider social relations" (2009:205). This is because deployment of rights language can facilitate the construction of 'chains of equivalence,' thus contributing to the development of connections between new social movements, and concomitantly, the opening up of opportunities for the establishment of something akin to a left-wing hegemony in South Africa.

Accordingly, this would entail the different movements' adopting a 'friendly enemy' position, in terms of which they are "friends because they share a 'common symbolic space' but also enemies because they want to organise this space in a different way" – either through a focus on in-system or extra-institutional strategies (Mouffe 2005:20). For Mouffe, this means that, although their struggles are not exactly the same, they are going to be linked in such a way that, for example, the rights of 'right to *life*' movements will not be pursued (or achieved) at the expense of those rights prioritized by 'right to a *better* life' movements (2006:73). Furthermore, although such adversaries may argue with each other in terms of their differing positions, "they do not put into question the legitimacy of their respective positions" (Mouffe 1999a:4). Rather, by extending chains of equivalence, these movements – instead of trying to unite all of their demands into a single national homogenous movement – would insist on the open and plural character of the social, within which conflict and difference will always occur. And within this context, these new social movements would instead recognize themselves as 'equivalent struggles of rights,' which can begin to effectively challenge aspects of the neoliberal hegemony.<sup>231</sup>

But how do such chains of equivalence come into being? While there is an abundance of literature related to the theory of political agonism, and the importance of the creation of chains of equivalence, there is significantly less material on the application of this theory at a practical political level. Indeed, even Mouffe herself admits that "there are no recipes on how to establish a chain of equivalence" between divergent democratic struggles. Instead, the application of such theoretical conceptions must remain open to interpretation and be determined by local circumstances (Mouffe, cited in Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006:971). Arguably, the potential of the internet, and in particular social media, to offer opportunities for the expansion of such chains of equivalence, should not be underestimated – especially when tentative linkages can already be seen in new social movement and civil society online communications. Admittedly, as alluded to above and in the previous chapter, South African new social movements' current use of the internet and social media, although varied, remains relatively limited in comparison to that of some of the recent major global movements, discussed in Chapter Four, and hence, such media yet to function as something akin to an online agonistic public space within the context of South Africa. However, this does not mean

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<sup>231</sup> In this regard, the respective struggles of 'right to *life*,' 'right to a *better* life,' and 'right to a better life for *all*' movements' struggles for first, second, third, and even fourth generation rights, can be viewed as both equal to, and correlatively supportive of a common symbolic space of 'human rights,' within which the different movements can position themselves in collaborative relations with one another.

that the potential of this media to, on the one hand, provide a space for pluralism and, on the other hand, facilitate the contestation of dominant discourses, does not exist. On the contrary, from the analysis in Chapter Five it emerged quite clearly that while such media are yet to be used to their full agonistic potential, their nascent agonistic use is evident. Hence, it becomes important to determine how improvement and augmentation of such nascent use could contribute toward the ever greater realization of an online agonistic public space, through which chains of equivalence between ‘equivalent struggles for rights’ can be made.

Arguably, four possible new media approaches emerge from the discussions of the previous chapters: firstly, the augmentation of existing dialogic functions at a cyber-structural level; secondly, the active and enthusiastic engendering of *virtual* discursive momentum; thirdly, the provision of a critical buffer against online neoliberal influences as the digital divide is progressively overcome in South Africa; and fourthly, the exploration and progressive utilization of alternative software that constitutes a more democratic and safer means of social networking than current commercial sites and applications.

That is, firstly, in order for the internet and social media to function as a pluralistic online agonistic public space, within which the different views of various South African new social movements can be expressed, and dynamic dialogues and contestations can take place, greater opportunities for more open interaction need to replace the current rather exclusionary dynamics. This is because, while *some* opportunities for interaction are provided on the respective movements’ websites, commenting facilities – when they do exist – tend to be largely restrictive in nature, and only allow select visitors to the website (such as members of the movement and logged-in users) to participate in discussions. This exclusion limits opportunities for dynamic dialogic contestation to occur, and thereby prevents the emergence of agonistic democratic spaces. Thus, instead of restricted commenting options, movement websites need to move toward the adoption of more open dialogic structures, which allow any visitor to sign up, comment, debate, contest, or support the issues at hand. In addition to this, none of the websites examined included an online public (or even private) forum facility. By including an ‘open forum’ link – similar to that of the Occupy Wall Street website, discussed in Chapter Four – new social movements in South Africa would not only open up the additional communicative spaces needed in order for counter-publics to develop, for the articulation of identities to occur, and for the contestation of dominant discourses to take place. In addition, they would also provide a far more adequate platform for a multiplicity of expressions and ideas to arise in relation to their respective agendas. Something which would open up opportunities for chains of equivalence to be formed, through allowing for dissensus and the contestation of dominant discourses – what Mouffe calls “bringing to the floor what

[hegemonic] forces attempt to keep concealed” (Mouffe, cited in Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006:973-934).

Secondly, although interactivity is seen as a central feature of new media technologies, active participation is not a guaranteed outcome of the presence of interactive online capabilities, but rather something that needs to be discursively engendered. The lack of continuity between interactive capabilities and popular participation and engagement is clearly evident in much of the South African new social movements social media use. That is, despite the variety of interactive opportunities that are offered on the Facebook, and to a lesser extent Twitter, pages of certain of the movements – such as structurally embedded commenting and sharing functions – limited active participation and engagement remain the general rule. And this stands as a warning to avoid the naïve adoption of a technologically deterministic view, which rushes to celebrate new technologies as being directly responsible for transforming democracy, instead of focusing on the need for such technology to be “actively contextualised and domesticated by [South] African users” (Wasserman 2011:150). One possible way of engendering such development would be for South African new social movements to follow in the online footsteps of international movements – such as Occupy Wall Street – not only by instigating discussions and encouraging participation in counter-discursive conversations, but also through contesting dominant discourses and debating alternative solutions. Moreover, the emphasis on the part of new social movements in South Africa should fall not simply on the local contextualization of such types of interactions, but also on the enthusiastically encouraging agonistic discursive momentum concerning such content. That is, such interaction needs to steer clear of promoting unreflective participation which is simply aggregated, such as polling or voting (Schlosberg et al. 2006:217; Gutmann and Thompson 2004:13), and aim instead for reflexive debate. For example, many groups and pages on Facebook that attempt to bring attention to ‘right to *life*,’ ‘right to a *better* life,’ and ‘right to a better life for *all*’ issues, simply require supporters to select the ‘join’ or ‘like’ link, and add their name to the group’s membership or number of followers. This often means that, besides fleeting moments of attention given to various causes or events via a click of the mouse, no further discursive participation or action is either expected or encouraged. According to Schlosberg and his colleagues, these types of aggregative interactions and communications “do nothing to appeal to the shared public good,” and can even “encourage self-interested comment” (2006:224). To avoid this pitfall, South African new social movements need to engage more actively with the recipients of their social media updates and information dissemination, by encouraging discussion and contestations via the commenting functions of their sites, and by engaging with those comments that are posted on their

Facebook pages or those tweets relating to their movement or activities. And beyond this, they also need to encourage debate surrounding the issues and ideas of other 'equivalential' movements and struggles. To be sure, the new social movements discussed have created tentative links with other democratic struggles via their social media, but these remain, for the most part, static listings of support. Accordingly, the lack of discussion and participation reduces possibilities for the emergence of agonism, and correlatively limits the growth and visibility of the webpages in question. In this regard, Shelly and Frydenberg argue that new and social media technologies "rely upon the fact that many people visit them and provide content to keep them fresh." This means that "more content leads to more users," and "an increase in the number of users increases the likelihood that many of them will participate by providing their own new content" (2010:2), which in turn facilitates the growth and dissemination of constantly changing content. Since many of the South African new social movements' social media platforms have a small number of followers, possibilities for continuous content development, and thus continuous contestation, are limited at present. However, if these movements were to encourage new content development by engaging more actively and enthusiastically with their supporters, and by encouraging more participation and sharing, more users will conceivably be attracted to their pages, increasing opportunities for greater contestation and content development, and concomitantly increasing opportunities for this media to function as an online agonistic public space. Again, the Occupy Wall Street Facebook page emerges as a good example. With over 654 000 'likes' or followers, issues raised and uploaded by the movement are immediately commented on and discussed, thus developing more content and attracting more people and groups to participate in the conversations and contestations.

Admittedly, notwithstanding the radical democratic potential of social media when harnessed in a more interactive and participatory way, it would be naïve to laud such media as 'omnipresent tools,' through which new social movements in South Africa can begin to approximate something akin to Laclau and Mouffe's conceptions of left-wing hegemony. This is especially because of the continuing technological and digital gap in the country between those who have access to such media, and those who do not. As discussed in the previous chapter, the disparity between those who are digitally connected, and those who remain on the digital margins of society, remains high. And this disparity is a result not only of a lack of access to new media technologies, but also of expensive broadband costs, slow and interrupted connectivity, as well as socio-cultural factors related to literacy, particularly English language proficiency. Indeed, according to de Lanerolle, in South Africa, "the greatest barrier to Internet use is literacy," which she ranks as "more important than income,

age, home language or occupation.” But she also asserts that, “in countries with very fast and cheap Internet access, the Internet is becoming as much about photos, video and audio as text,” thus reducing the obstacle of illiteracy. However, “until most South Africans have access to cheap fast broadband[,] literacy is a significant barrier for millions of South Africans” (de Lanerolle 2012:10). Related to this, the majority of local new social movements discussed in this thesis – especially the ‘right to a *better* life’ movements – are found predominantly on the margins of South African society, and it is therefore not surprising that they have yet to succeed in transforming their use of social media into a functioning agonistic public space. Nevertheless, the fact that they have been able to break into the online environment, despite their limited resources, is both highly commendable and a very promising sign, which not only indicates increasing literacy rates, but also the possibility for such literacy to be channeled into agonistic political engagement.

The increasing availability and accessibility of mobile technologies is also playing a crucial role in helping people and groups from the marginalized and disadvantaged strata of society to gradually become more involved in political communication and conversation. As Cullum notes,

the turn of the twenty-first century has seen the rise of mobile phones as powerful devices that have transformed how people create and share information...[A]ctivists are harnessing the power of mobile technologies to improve and expand campaigns, better coordinate activities and demonstrations, and increase awareness about social issues...[because a]ctivists armed with either low-cost, basic mobile handsets or more complex smartphones, are capable of instantly connecting with their network of colleagues and supporters. (2010:47)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, South Africa had over sixty million mobile phone connections in 2013, and as costs reduce and networks improve, the influence that mobile phones and ICT technologies stand to have on development and democracy in Africa is increasingly being explored (Hahn and Kibora 2008:88). And while the “extent to which mobile phones can create alternative politics and facilitate social change” is still unclear (Wasserman 2011:147), what is clear is that mobile phones are “almost always the cheapest and quickest way to communicate” (Etzo and Collender 2010:659). In particular, the range of functions available on these devices makes them “an extremely versatile technology” (Ekine 2010:xi).

Admittedly, while South African mobile phone subscriber rates have been lauded as impressive at 128% – with 66.1 million mobile connections (active SIM cards) in a population of 51.8 million people (Deloitte in BusinessTech 2013) – the implications of this

penetration for mobile internet connectivity in the country are not as optimistic. This is because smartphone (full internet browser capabilities) devices – which are often exorbitantly expensive – are currently only reaching a minority of the population.<sup>232</sup> Yet, although smartphones that offer enhanced capabilities for accessing the internet and a variety of social media have a relatively low penetration (approximately eleven million phones have been registered in the country), they are not the only mobile devices that offer interactive and socially networked virtual environments. For example, WAP (Wireless Application Protocol) enabled feature phones, which provide users with cheaper internet and applications options, have begun to occupy a significant percentage of the South African mobile market. According to Miller, “feature phones, which...boast basic forms of GPS, camera, MP3 player and some kind of internet access, as well as the ability to run simple apps,” are “increasingly popular in the developing world.” He further asserts that they now “occupy the middle ground between basic phones that simply make, and receive calls and text messages, and smartphones” (Miller 2013). An example of the online capabilities offered by such devices is Facebook Zero – a simplified text-based version of the popular social networking site. This text-only version of Facebook has been offered by approximately fifty mobile service providers across Africa, and it allows users to participate in the basic textual features of the site, free of charge. That is, unlike the normal Facebook page, which includes images, photos, videos, graphics, and so forth, Facebook Zero is purely text-based. And this enables users to view friend requests, comment on posts, write on walls, and interact with updates, among other things. Consequently, users do not need to have a fully-fledged smartphone, nor do they need to have airtime credit or data available, to be able to participate online.<sup>233</sup> Mxit is another example of a more ‘data-light,’ cost-effective mobile and social network available on feature phones. In addition to their general Mxit mobile social network and chat functions, Mxit Reach allows individuals, groups or organizations to use the Mxit “platform to make free mobile education,

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<sup>232</sup> Although access to statistics allows people to gauge current technological environments, these statistics do not necessarily reflect the influence and use of such technologies on democratic participation. As referred to earlier, limited internet penetration does not necessarily mean that this technology has a limited impact (as seen in Egypt during the Arab Spring), and correlatively, widespread access does not necessarily mean that people will automatically participate in politics. As Wasserman points out, “too often discourses around mobile phones make a[n] interpretive leap from access figures to speculation about the impact of mobile phones on democracy and development. This leap from access to effect, bypassing the unpredictable and highly contextualised usage of phones in everyday life, then lead to either over optimistic conjecture about the potential impact of mobile phones, or moral panics about their detrimental influence” (2011:149-150).

<sup>233</sup> Although Facebook Zero’s text-based service is free of charge, users are encouraged to migrate to the full view option for which they will be charged.



healthcare and community apps available to millions of users” (Milanian 2014). These apps must be “committed to enabling broad-based education and community upliftment,” and are available on over eight thousand different types of handsets around the country. Examples of such apps include ‘Red,’ which provides information and online counselling and chat services related to HIV/AIDS,<sup>234</sup> and a Childline app, which utilizes the popularity of the internet and meets “young South Africans where they are – online” (Mxit Reach 2014a). Of particular importance to the issue of subsequent political use of social media are FunDza, an app that focuses on literacy and allows “readers and writers...[to] read and comment on each other’s work, allowing for instant feedback to writers and creative collaboration” (Mxit Reach 2014b). Anyone can apply to create a free portal, which provides cost-effective online opportunities for connection and communication. In addition to these functions, feature phones also allow for the use of a number of mobile software applications (apps), and although many of these apps are consumer-orientated, a number of ‘apps for social change’ have also emerged. From apps for transparency, accountability, and reporting, to apps disseminating knowledge and information, to apps for philanthropy and activism. These apps provide opportunities for people to learn and to get involved in online practices not primarily linked to consumer culture, and through such means to contribute – if only incrementally – to social improvement and change. A good example of such an app is the ‘Dialogue App,’ which can be used by national and local government, healthcare organizations, regulatory bodies and trusts, charities, utility companies, non-profits, NGOs, and new social movements, as a means to initiate dialogue with their communities or supporters. According to the Dialogue App website, this app allows users to “discuss an issue online with the people it affects... and produce ideas you can act on” (2014).

The above examples of ‘data-lite’ social media platforms, mobile social networks, and mobile app possibilities, thus constitute interesting opportunities for participation within the South African online environment, where 80.2% of users access the internet through their mobile phones (Effective Measure 2014:3). And the potential for such mobile media to be used by new social movements in a way that is conducive to discussion, debate, and contestation, cannot be overlooked. After all, these mobile functions, because they are largely

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<sup>234</sup> According to the Mxit Reach website, “Red aims to give South Africans, particularly youth, easy access to HIV and AIDS related information to improve their levels of knowledge around how to prevent HIV, and how to live with it. RedChatZone makes HIV counselling available via Mxit,” which “makes it cheap and very private. The level of anonymity offered by the service is [also] attractive to users. Red and RedChatZone work through Mxit, which is largely regarded as an affordable medium by South African youth. RedChatZone is staffed by qualified HIV counsellors from the National AIDS Helpline” (2014c).

low cost, can potentially be used by new social movements in South Africa not only as a communication device, but also as a means of ushering in something akin to online agonistic public spaces. This is especially since these technologies have the potential to be adopted and used by marginalized and disempowered people to “transgress boundaries imposed by the state[,]. . . culture, the economy and . . . the technology[-]capitalism complex itself” (Wasserman 2011:150). Thus, because the mobile means currently exist, and are becoming more available every day, it remains only for the exponents of the new social movements to explore and embrace such means actively and enthusiastically, because the digital divide in the country is fast becoming an anachronistic excuse for failing to do so.

Thirdly, it is arguably imperative for such exponents to act fast because, despite these mobile possibilities, and the related potential of social media to contribute toward the development of chains of equivalence in South Africa, the influence of the above mentioned ‘technology-capitalism complex’ cannot be ignored. As indicated from the outset of this thesis, the internet and related social media technologies have by no means succeeded in escaping the hegemony of the neoliberal politico-economic system. In fact, notwithstanding initial utopian ideas of its democratizing influence, since the internet was transformed from a military device into a commercial product it has, for the most part, served as a means for profit. McChesney provides a succinct explanation of this, when he advises us to

pause [and] . . . consider how far the digital revolution has travelled from the halcyon days of the 1980s and early 1990s to where it is today. People thought that the Internet would provide instant free global access to all human knowledge. It would be a noncommercial zone, a genuine public sphere, leading to far greater public awareness, stronger communities, and greater political participation. It would sound the death knell for widespread inequality and political tyranny, as well as corporate monopolies. Work would become more efficient, engaging, cooperative, and humane. To the contrary, at what seems like every possible turn, the Internet has been commercialized, copyrighted, patented, privatized, data-inspected, and monopolized. (2013:218)

Similarly, elsewhere McChesney insists that the internet of the 1970s and 1980s was not only “non-commercial” but “anticommercial” (2013:101); that is, viewed as a “harbinger of egalitarianism and cooperation, not competition and profit,” because computers were “envisioned as a benefit to humanity – a tool that would lead to social justice” (Wozniak, cited in McChesney 2013:101). And since advertising and commercialism already encompassed the entirety of traditional media, they were deemed to have no space on the

internet (or ARPANET at the time).<sup>235</sup> Yet, by the 1990s the internet had transitioned from a public service to a private capitalist sector.<sup>236</sup> In this regard, Schiller's concept of 'digital capitalism' set out in his book of the same name, which was discussed in Chapter One, highlights the deeply neoliberal nature of the internet, and he disregards the possibility that this media could be used for the 'common good.' Moreover, in his 2007 book *How to Think About Information*, Schiller expands on the ideas of the neoliberal incorporation and commodification of the internet, insisting that the "accelerated commodification [of the internet] reorients institutional infrastructure," thereby distorting social power relations in favor of the "increasingly omnipresent" logic of capital (2007:112). In short, he maintains that the commodification of the internet has resulted in the online promotion and propagation of dominant neoliberal discourses, and the subsequent trivialization of alternative democratic ideals. Thus, rather than providing a platform for the extension of democracy, for Schiller, the commodified internet ultimately threatens it, something with which even Mouffe partially concurs, when she criticizes new media for operating "under the power of corporations which are dictated to and promote capitalist interests" (cited in Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006:967).

In relation to this, it has further been suggested that the global capitalist networks that have emerged as a result of information and communications technologies not only lead to greater exclusion from democratic politics, as a result of the digital divide. In addition, they also act to foster a form of 'networked individualism' among the digitally connected, in terms of which an individual's wants and needs become the focus of all their social relations, in a way that negates real democratic participation. In light of this, an array of research has begun to focus on the problematic dynamics of such individualism, and on the impact that the internet and social media technologies have on the exacerbation of an individualized, narcissistic, neoliberal consumer identity. Indeed, as elaborated on in Chapter One, authors such as Baldwin and Stroman (2007), Orlet (2007), Buffardi and Campbell (2008), and Twenge and Campbell (2009), have all highlighted the role of the internet – and in particular social media – in the widespread promotion, adoption, and acceptance of superficial, self-involved, and materialistic online communications. And they have accordingly placed in question optimistic views that the internet can contribute to the expansion of democracy. In

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<sup>235</sup> ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), discussed in Chapter One, was the first operational packet switching communications network from which the global internet of today was developed.

<sup>236</sup> As McChesney notes, "the Internet was formally privatized in 1994–95 when the NSFNet turned the backbone of the Internet over to the private sector. Thereafter market forces were to determine its course" and future trajectory (2013:104).

addition to this, the alienating and isolating impact of such new media use has similarly been explored by authors such as Turkle, who criticizes the internet for operating as a ‘corporate trap’ that leads people away from offline ‘real’ relationships, interactions, and connections, toward an online world of weak and unfulfilling interactions. Such growing societal reliance on the internet and social and mobile media technologies, she argues, has resulted in diminished real-world relationships, which has led to an intensification of feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and alienation. In many ways, her notion that the internet leads to society being ‘alone together’ has received support even from those who still advance the political potential of social media. For example, Schlosberg and his colleagues highlight analogous concerns when they suggest that “virtual...citizenship may be isolating rather than community-building citizenship” (2006:209). In terms of this, they refer to Sunstein’s (2001) thesis that, without some major guidance, “the Internet’s use with regard to...the public realm will be isolating, and will not build any sort of public sphere or community life” (2006:229). Rather, the extreme individualism and consumerism that dominate the current virtual realm will more likely result in the internet and social networking encouraging a withdrawal from, and the fragmentation of, communities, thereby perpetuating a “loss of democratic authenticity” (Schlosberg et al. 2006:229) – even in the presence of token democratic gestures. However, the American context of such research is very different to the post-apartheid context of South Africa, in which the memory of major political transition – and of the importance and power of political activism – are still fresh. And within this context, if exponents of South African new social movements were to take seriously both the threat of looming neoliberal hegemony, and the way in which the closing of the digital divide stands to be coterminous with its increasing approximation, they could act to drive a wedge between neoliberal influences and South African citizens, by engendering a digital political culture *as* the digital divide is overcome. In other words, they could create a cultural buffer of digital activism, within the context of South Africa, and keep it alive through contributing to its discursive momentum, so that the closing of the digital divide is not synonymous with the opening of a neoliberal consumer culture monologue.

Fourthly, this buffer could conceivably dovetail with what McChesney identifies as the recent “tremendous burst of nonprofit and noncommercial Internet sites and free or open software and applications...that have become [a] central part of the digital realm” (2012:108). Millan concurs with McChesney on this issue, when she states that “in recent decades activist groups have increasingly challenged...[neoliberal] corporations on their own terrains,” by creating “alternatives to existing communication infrastructure [and software and]...by setting up alternative websites for self-produced information” (2013:1). In fact, Halleck even refers

to alternative non-commercial platforms as “infrastructures of resistance” (2002:191) that can be used by progressive movements to facilitate democratic participation, in the pursuit of justice, and equality. In this thesis, a significant amount of attention has been paid to the impact of social movement and activist groups’ use of commercial internet and social media (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.). And such use remains important because although these commercial services have come to dominate the contemporary online experience, as Hirsh points out, they also provide opportunities for “spontaneous information sharing and collective action” (2011:131), such that their potential to function – albeit to a limited extent – as an online agonistic public space, has emerged. Admittedly, though, those “technologies and services designed for explicitly commercial purposes are often not ideally suited for activist” or social movement use. This is because they often require a range of personal information from their users, which opens up questions surrounding the surveillance of activists, especially when this media are used in particularly volatile or sensitive political climates.<sup>237</sup> Moreover, commercial online products and services “often impose conditions on the ownership and dissemination of data that are at odds with activists’ needs to repurpose and rebroadcast content across a variety of media and contexts” (Hirsh 2011:131-136).

This, however, does not mean that the internet, social media, and mobile media technologies cannot facilitate social movement communications and activism. On the contrary, inspired by the above challenges of the presently restrictive commercial context, activists around the world have begun to develop and use similar, yet non-commercial, social and mobile media technologies. These non-commercial software offer real alternatives to the software of dominant neoliberal media corporations (e.g. Facebook and Twitter), and provide platforms that are more conducive to social movement communications. A good example of this type of non-commercial, alternative online media, is Crabgrass. As a free software web application, Crabgrass was designed to allow for social networking, network organization, and group collaboration. According to the RiseUp network, Crabgrass offers users the “ability to get to know one another through their online contributions and presence,” to “share files, track tasks and projects, make decisions and build repositories of shared knowledge,” and to

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<sup>237</sup> Since the early 2000s, new social movement marches – especially those connected to calls for the ‘right to a *better* life’ – have allegedly been violently suppressed by the South African police, and members of the movements have reportedly been harassed, arrested and murdered (McKinley and Veriava 2005). Consequently, some have expressed concern over the implications of government surveillance of movements’ use of commercial social and mobile media, in terms of the continuation and strengthening of government repression and criminalization of social movements, along with the subsequent intensification of movement marginalization.

organize “multiple groups to work together on projects in a democratic manner” (2014). This software was developed in reaction to the current need to be able to form adequate online connections and dialogues between social movements and activist groups. And it encourages social change by allowing groups, movements, and organizations to “get things done, get the word out, collaborate and network” (RiseUp 2014).<sup>238</sup> In short, Crabgrass offers opportunities for communication and collaboration within and between groups and subgroups. Focusing on network collectives rather than individual use, this software allows for the creation of numerous relationship configurations. For example, relationships and connections between individuals and groups, groups and committees, committees and councils, and many more, are supported by this software. The features of the site allow these groups and subgroups to send personal messages, engage in discussions and contestation – on both public and private forums – share files, and participate in non-aggregative decision-making,<sup>239</sup> among many other things. In addition, since each group and subgroup has control over their membership and privacy settings, this networking software helps to ensure the online safety of participating groups and movements, and protects them against online surveillance.

In closing, for South African new social movements, the obstacles of the digital divide and the growing hegemony of neoliberalism, both online and offline, will remain challenges that require persistent engagement. Although opportunities for the creation of online agonistic public spaces exist within the realm of commercial social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, new social movement use of these commercial platforms may be restricted in terms of their reach and impact. Moreover, in this regard, since commercial search engines are seen as the gatekeepers of the online ‘public sphere’ (Milan 2013:3), alternative discourses

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<sup>238</sup> Crabgrass “provides tools like task list management, meeting scheduling, asset management, wiki, and decision making,” and it “allows groups to create a customized home page where a group can list their event calendar, blog postings, and other public content.” Users can also “rate content, add keywords to content, comment on content, annotate content, alert others to content you need their feedback on, and track participation and revisions.” While groups can “create networks with other independent groups. These networks provide a place to work together on shared content and make decisions. Alternately, you can share a single document if that is the extent of the cooperation (in development)” (RiseUp 2014).

<sup>239</sup> In this regard, the Crabgrass voting system is much more dynamic than the general aggregative systems or tools found on most commercial social networks. Instead of simply providing options which support ‘majority rules’ voting, the software provides tools for movements to “create straw polls that allow users to individually rate various options under consideration.” Additionally, the platform also supports instant runoff elections that allow participants to rank options rather than simply choosing a single preference” (Hirsh 2011:141-142). Supporters of this platform insist that this type of voting helps to protect and include minority views in the decision-making process.

created and contested on these networks are not only open to exclusion and re-marginalization by dominant online discourses (Dahlberg 2007b:143). In addition, they are also open to surveillance, and ultimately, neoliberal government/corporate control. Consequently, in order to reduce the risk of such control and exclusion, new social movements in South Africa will need to seek out alternative online spaces through which to expand their movements and connect with other democratic struggles. And since such opportunities are already available through software platforms such as Crabgrass, it is moreover conceivable that online agonistic public spaces are far more likely to emerge and endure within the non-commercial networking environment. In terms of this, notwithstanding her initial reservations, even Mouffe has noted the existence of some media diversity, and has asserted that “ideally, the role of the media should precisely be to contribute to the creation of agonistic public spaces in which possibilities for dissensus to be expressed or alternatives to be put forward are provided” (Mouffe, cited in Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006:974). Arguably, within the South African context, good opportunities exist for links and ‘chains of equivalence’ to be made via a platform such as Crabgrass – between ‘right to *life*,’ ‘right to a *better* life,’ and ‘right to a better life for *all*’ movements.

However, despite their radical democratic potential, these types of new media platforms cannot be expected to be directly transformative. That is, new social movements’ use of the internet and social media cannot be expected to facilitate and instigate radical democratic transformation on their own.<sup>240</sup> Yet, while the celebration of such media as tools with direct transformative effects for the radicalization of democracy in South Africa is unwarranted, critical views that they are totally irrelevant and ineffective when it comes to agonistic political practices, are similarly unfounded. That is, on the one hand, it has often been argued that media can only be considered political if “they have a major impact on political decision-making and the public sphere” (Macgilchrist and Bohmig 2012:84). But, on the other hand, the above types of online activities can be considered deeply political, especially when they are viewed through Marchart’s conception of “minimal politics” (2010), in terms of which even seemingly mundane activities – such as those found on social networking sites or online blogs and forums – can lead to the creation of gaps or fissures in contemporary hegemonies. Consequently, while the internet and social media technologies are certainly not a political panacea for South Africa, the findings of this thesis call for their consideration as indispensable cultural technologies of change. Admittedly, the conversations

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<sup>240</sup> That is, these media cannot be used in isolation, but instead, need to be used in collaboration with an array of offline media, protests, marches, rallies, and meetings, in order to ensure the transition of connections and chains of equivalence from online agonistic public spaces, into real-world agonistic spaces.

and contestations that stand to take place in the resultant online agonistic public spaces may only account for a small percentage of the conversations that will be needed in order to achieve left-wing hegemony in South Africa. But as Lefort insists, even though such activities may comprise only a tiny rip, “the traces of the rip will remain even after the veil has been woven over” (2008:43). In other words, even if such spaces do not have a direct effect on transforming democratic politics in the country, they will still play a significant role as contributing factors to the development of counter-publics and counter-discourses, the articulation of collective identities as chains of equivalence, and the facilitation of the contestation of dominant discourses. Through such means they will help to ensure that the imperfect and unending democratic practices of conflict and disagreement can play out unhindered, as a deepening and expanding agonistic version of radical democracy takes shape in our country.



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