Crisis, what crisis?
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For you know, dear, – I may, without vanity, hint –
Though an angel should write, still ‘tis devils must print.

[W]e live in a time when political passions run high, channels for free expression are dwindling, and organized lying exists on a scale never before known.

What should ye do then? Should ye suppress all this flowery crop of knowledge and new light sprung up and yet springing daily in this city? Should ye set an oligarchy of twenty engrossers over it, to bring a famine upon our minds again, when we shall know nothing but what is measured to us by their bushel? Believe it, Lords and Commons, they who counsel ye to such a suppressing do as good as bid ye suppress yourselves.

I am a big believer in technology and I’m a big believer in openness when it come to the flow of information … I think that the more freely information flows, the stronger the society comes, because then citizens of countries around the world can hold their own governments accountable … So I’m a big supporter of not restricting Internet use, Internet access, other technologies like Twitter.
President Barack Obama (O’Brien, 2009)
Our title draws on a well-known headline published in 1979\(^1\) in a tabloid newspaper, the London *Sun*, but it is used here to frame an internal debate. The danger of polemical writing – described in London’s *Evening Mail* in 1840 as ‘so many words and so few facts’ – are well known (*Evening Mail*, 1840, p. 4). Nevertheless, what we offer is a conversation based on opposing assessments of the intersection of communications technologies, history and the current political landscape. The need for such a debate was brought into sharp relief in the aftermath of the massacre in March 2019 of 51 citizens at two mosques in Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand. In some respects, the event and their deadly consequences were quickly subsumed into a discussion of the role of social media in providing a platform for a grotesque live feed of the atrocity preceded by the posting of an inchoate manifesto by the perpetrator. What has been largely absent from subsequent debate is consideration of a foundational question: does the broadcast of newsworthy events – no matter how heinous – by various forms of computer technology represent a *profound caesura* in the repertoire of ‘political’ communication over the long durée?

Put differently, do finely honed algorithms that harvest personal data represent an example of a new departure in political intervention? Does the promulgation of ‘fake news’ and conspiracy theories via social media exemplify the emergence of a rhizomatic media regime beyond the control of state actors? And, has the spread of the World Wide Web to nearly 60 per cent of the population on earth fundamentally changed the way we conduct our lives and ipso facto our politics? Or have we heard it all before?

In the discussion of broader implications of the Christchurch massacre, we have chosen to focus on text for our sources. Of course, we might have considered these issues through the lens of visual communication, from the semiotics of cave paintings lost in the mists of time to the grotesque images livestreamed on social media platforms as the tragedy in Christchurch unfolded in 2019 (Rahman, 2021; Coaston 2019). Similarly, we could have considered speech, from the first recordings of political speeches that allowed politicians to be in two places at one time and presidential fireside chats utilising radio, to endless chatter online. In the same vein, our unit of analysis might have been song, from ancient revolutionary anthems to the protest songs of the 1960s (Bowen and Pickering, 2017). Why then have

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\(^1\) It is also the title of a Supertramp album that had been released in 1975.
we opted for text? The answer is that, notwithstanding the kaleidoscope of content, the web is primarily a platform for the communication of text based on natural language utterances. Although the Christchurch gunman was anonymised by the fact that we could not see his face and by the fact that the New Zealand prime minister consciously decided not to speak his name, we know him by his words posted online before a shot was fired. Our chronology spans the proliferation of the radical press in Britain c. 1820–50 to the age of online terrorist manifestos (known as ‘sh*tposts’) such as that posted by the Christchurch gunman, when opportunities for citizens, media organisations and state actors to have their say seem to be limitless.2

The historical context for a consideration of these issues is well known, but, for our purposes, is worthy of brief recapitulation. What has been called the ‘information–publication paradigm’ (Nurmikko-Fuller, forthcoming 2022) can be divided chronologically by two interconnected indices: technological innovation and the relationship between producer on the one hand and audience on the other. Broadly speaking, they are as follows. A period from roughly the fourth millennium BCE when pre-mechanical technologies emerged, which facilitated written communication between individuals and small coteries of elites. A second unfolded between c. 1450 and c. 1850 when successive innovations and improvements in mechanical technology, from Gutenberg’s printing press c. 1450 to the steam-driven printing press in c. 1850, incrementally enabled greater communication between the few and the many. The irascible Thomas Carlyle, one of the most influential social commentators of his day, pondered this transformation in his *Heroes and Hero Worship* in 1840, a time when the so-called ‘public sphere’ (to invoke Jürgen Habermas’s well-worn concept) was both fissiparous and febrile. From a pulpit, Carlyle noted, a preacher:

> With the tongue may, to best advantage, address his fellow-men … It is a right pious work, that of theirs; beautiful to behold! … But now with the art of Writing, with the art of Printing a total change has come over that business. The Writer

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2 As a consequence, the New Zealand Government introduced substantial amendments to the ‘Films, Videos, and Publications Classification (Urgent Interim Classification of Publications and Prevention of Online Harm) Amendment Bill’ in 2020 (see www.parliament.nz/en/pb/bills-and-laws/bills-proposed-laws/document/BILL_97940, 2020). At the time of writing, the Bill was at the committee stage of consideration by the New Zealand Parliament.
A third period was inaugurated by developments in electronic communication in the 1920s and 1930s, by which time there was a wireless radio in two out of every three households in Australia (Brett, 1992, p. 19), connecting a few to most. The final period consists of the years since 1995 when technological innovation, in the First World at least, connects not only the vast majority of all persons to all persons, but also automated machines to machines. The conception of the first mechanical general-purpose computers and computer programs occurred in the late 1830s and early 1840s. In less than a century, these hypothetical ideas were turned into general-purpose electronic computing machines, which could do much of the rudimentary intellectual work previously undertaken by women and men. In his groundbreaking 1950 publication, ‘Computing machinery and intelligence’, Alan Turing, one of the foremost pioneers of computing, began to anthropomorphise its key concepts, referring to ‘memory’, ‘thinking’, ‘learning’ and ‘decision’. He even made an overt call for a search to find a ‘programme to simulate the [human] mind’ (Turing, 1950). This was the seedbed for the invention, some three decades ago, of HTTP (the HyperText Transfer Protocol), and the birth of the World Wide Web. The web has profoundly changed the way information is stored, accessed, retrieved, disseminated, filtered, published, discussed, analysed and consumed.

Today we are all data producers as well as consumers; we are all publishers, including the nameless Christchurch gunman. Has the world been tilted on its axis? Surely we have crossed a Rubicon that irrevocably divides past and present and thus demands new ways of thinking about how we respond to it: harness it for social good, live with it. Or have we simply witnessed an advance in communication technology like many before it, which invariably provokes hysteria and kneejerk reactions and before long is normalised. Crisis? What crisis?

Areopagitica revisited

Although it remains in print almost 400 years after it was first published in 1644, Areopagitica, John Milton's ardent plea to the English Parliament to repeal the Licensing Order of 1643 – An Ordinance for the Regulating of
Printing – fell on deaf ears. The order was proclaimed at the height of the English Civil War, and designed to suppress pro-Royalist propaganda as well as a proliferation of books, tracts and pamphlets penned by various groups promoting what were considered to be dangerous, radical ideas of democracy and common ownership. In addition to requiring authors to obtain a licence from government censors in order to publish, the ordinance required all printed materials to be registered with the names of author, printer and publisher. It also provided for the search, seizure and destruction of material regarded as ‘offensive’ to the government and for the imprisonment of any offending writers, printers and publishers. In a climate of fear – perceived or confected or both – the state (according to its leaders at least) required protection from an unholy trinity of warmongering, socially constructed extremist ideas and communication technology. Sound familiar?

Notwithstanding its brief efflorescence during the English Civil War, the Republica literaria in the capacious sense did not begin to flourish in the Anglophone world until the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Britain’s earliest newspapers had appeared at the beginning of the 1700s but they were principally confined to reportage of gossip and society news for an audience of aristocrats and their supplicants. In response to a growing interest in broader news, early in the eighteenth century successive governments sought to impose controls on political content, production and circulation of newsprints, principally by the imposition of a stamp tax. Nevertheless, over the next 100 years the annual circulation of legal newspapers in compliance with the tax grew steadily, reaching 3,000,000 in 1782 (Harris, 1978). By the third quarter of the eighteenth century then, the newspaper as we would recognise it today had come into being. The Times, for example, was first published in 1785. Here too, however, the coverage of politics was confined largely to elite machinations and foreign affairs. At this time, circulation of a genuinely oppositional, that is ‘unstamped’, press remained relatively low (Harris, 1978).

Much changed in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 when, for the first time, people outside the political nation (the vast majority of Britons) began to demand access to democratic rights. Concomitant with this burgeoning campaign was a sharp rise in the number of radical newspapers in circulation and the appearance of a flood of pamphlets, chapbooks and screeds as well as cheap editions of books considered by the government to be separately and simultaneously seditious, blasphemous
or incendiary. The number of newspapers in England and Wales rose from 76 in 1781 to 267 in 1821 (Asquith, 1978). The response of the beleaguered Tory government is significant for our purposes here. Before the end of the year, the parliament had passed what became known as the Six Acts, which included a provision to increase the speed of the administration of justice by reducing the opportunities for bail and allowing for swifter court processing, and a requirement that the permission of a magistrate be obtained before convening any public meeting of more than 50 people if the purpose of the meeting was to discuss matters of ‘church or state’. Notably, legislation included an extension of existing laws to provide for more punitive sentences – up to 14 years’ transportation – for the authors of seditious writings. Also passed was the *Newspaper and Stamp Duties Act* (60 Geo. III and 1 Geo. IV c. 9), which extended and increased taxes to include publications that had sought to evade duty by publishing opinion as opposed to news. Publishers also were required to post bonds to ensure good behaviour. The government’s particular target was those it deemed to be demagogues and scribblers who penned ‘irresponsible’ and ‘positively evil’ texts to incite rebellion among those Carlyle later described the ‘Dingy dumb millions, grimed with dust and sweat’ (Cookson, 1975; Carlyle, [1840b] 1971, p. 217).

A shudder of panic swept through Britain’s political elite when it became clear that their stranglehold on access to knowledge, which for generations had buttressed the status quo, was under threat; a new repertoire of political action could tip the balance between ignorance and understanding in favour of the latter. William Lovett and John Collins, prominent working-class activists, made this point from their prison cell in 1840:

> As long as one part of the community feel it to be in their interest … to prevent or retard the enlightenment of all but themselves, so long will despotism, inequality, and injustice, flourish among the few; and poverty, vice, and crime, be the lot of the many. (Lovett and Collins, 1840, p. 73)

For Carlyle, the political implications of the printing press were profound and portentous of an inexorable descent into violence and anarchy. As he put it in (also in 1840):

> Printing, which comes necessarily out of Writing, I say often, is equivalent to Democracy: invent Writing, Democracy is inevitable. Writing brings Printing; brings universal everyday extempore
Printing, as we see at present. Whoever can speak, speaking now to the whole nation, becomes a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making, in all acts of authority. (Carlyle, 1840a, p. 304)

Unsurprisingly, the masthead of the *Poor Man’s Guardian*, the most important unstamped radical newspaper of the early 1830s, included an engraving of a printing press with the inscription, ‘Knowledge is Power’. As an editorial in a radical newspaper put it 1839:

> The Press, in a moral sense, is the only instrument *we can NOW employ* to beat down the strongholds of oppression, and those formidable barriers to the happiness and liberty of the People – *ignorance and prejudice*. (Western Vindicator, 2005, original emphasis)

It is clear then that by 1820 widespread access to communication technology had transformed the conduct of demotic politics. Suddenly radical news and opinion seemed to be ubiquitous. As one commentator recalled in relation to the *Northern Star*, the preeminent radical newspaper of the 1840s, ‘it was not unusual for huge bundles of them to be loaded on carts and driven through the streets in order to lose no time in satisfying the many customers’ (Weerth in Kuczynski and Kuczynski, 1971, p. 144). Nor was reading a newspaper, tract, pamphlet or the latest cheap edition of a philosophical treatise a solitary activity conducted as an interior narrative. Single copies of newspapers passed through many hands, were read aloud on street corners, from platforms and in pubs, meeting rooms and homes. Writing in 1903, W. E. Adams, to take one example, recalled a childhood memory of Sunday mornings in his parents’ ‘humble kitchen’ when, ‘regular as clockwork’, a copy of the *Northern Star*, ‘damp from the press’, was read aloud to a gathering of family and friends (Adams, [1903] 1968, p. 164). Thus, as Dorothy Thompson has noted, the campaign for democracy was inextricably linked to a struggle for control of the technologies of cheap printing (Thompson, 1984). The government’s attempts to staunch the growing demands for political reform were focused on the technology, production, distribution and sale of printed material. They sought to regulate stringently both the spread and the use of technological innovation, rather than respond to the causes of the unrest. Indeed, the Six Acts touched off what later became known

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3 Adams went on to refer to it as an ‘almost sacred text’.
as the ‘War of the Unstamped Press’. A sharp rise in the prosecution of journalists, printers and shopmen saw more than 1,000 men and women imprisoned, sometimes multiple times (Wiener, 1969).

But the social order did not disintegrate. By the mid-1840s, the ‘War of the Unstamped’ was effectively over. The prosecutions ceased and the stamp tax itself was repealed in 1855. Of course, the struggles for reform and social justice continued but, notably, by the middle of the century, printed materials had become normative as a tool of campaigning, employed enthusiastically across the political spectrum. In 1843, for example, the Anti-Corn Law League – a middle-class reform organisation seeking free trade – distributed an estimated 9,000,000 items of literature (101 tonnes’ worth), and in 1910 the Tariff Reform League distributed 57 million leaflets and pamphlets in a single year (Pickering and Tyrrell, 2000, p. 22; Trentmann, 2008, p. 101). Speaking as chair of the British Printers’ Pension Corporation in 1864, Charles Dickens lionised the men with hands forever stained by ink:

The printer is the friend of intelligence, of thought; he is the friend of liberty, of freedom, of law; indeed, the printer is the friend of order; the friend of every man who can read. Of all inventions, of all the discoveries in science and art, of all the great results in the wonderful progress of mechanical energy and skill, the printer is the only product of civilization necessary to the existence of free men. (Dickens in Fielding, 1960, p. 325)

Few would have disagreed. If there are no lessons from history, there are at least parallels worth lingering over. There have been several occasions when commentators have declared that we have reached an apotheosis – a technological fulcrum – and the social fabric is confronted with a threat to life and liberty unlike any other. Surely the obverse it true: the internet is today’s printing press.

According to John Milton, the Licensing Order of 1643 was nothing short of a ‘reproach’ to the ‘common people’, a lamentable lack of trust in their discernment.

For if we be so jealous over them as that we dare not trust them with an English pamphlet, what do we but censure them for a giddy, vicious, and ungrounded people, in such a sick and weak estate of faith and discretion as to be able to take nothing down but through the pipe of a licenser? That this is care and love of them we cannot pretend. (Milton, [1644] 1980, p. 197)
Areopagitica was a seminal text in shaping modern ideas of freedom of expression. It is reflected, inter alia, in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution but it has little or no place in public discourse today. Does this matter? Does it matter that legislators in 2021 are just as quick to insult the ‘common people’ in whose discernment they have no faith as they were in 1643? Surely we’ve heard it all before.

Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose?

John Keane devotes the final 150 pages of his magisterial study of democracy to pondering the future of his subject (Keane, 2009; Pickering, 2009). His assessment is cautiously optimistic. The growth of what he calls ‘monitory democracy’, drawing upon ‘communicative abundance’, has the potential to reassert the role of the populace, perhaps even to instantiate the sovereignty of the people. If not a panacea, ‘monitory democracy’ – ‘viral politics’ – would subject the actions of the political class and state actors to greater scrutiny and transparency and foster a range of community associations and pressure groups. As early as the 1990s the idea that a democratised information landscape would lead to a technological utopia became almost hegemonic. Cyber-utopianists, as they were called, were convinced that communication technologies would be transformative, resistant to both corporate and political power (CrowdSociety, 2015). In 1996 a Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace, stated that ‘Netizens’ were building a ‘global social space’ independent of tyranny. In the same year, Magnet, a widely circulated journal of the cyber-utopianists, proclaimed that the internet would ‘enable average citizens to participate in national discourse, publish a newspaper, distribute an electronic pamphlet to the world … while simultaneously protecting their privacy’ (CrowdSociety, 2015).

In hindsight, the boundless optimism of the precocious ‘Netizens’ seems tragi-comic in a number of respects. Ostensibly, the information–publication paradigm has shifted from ‘one-to-many’ to ‘many-to-many’ (and ultimately ‘everyone-to-everyone’), but, at present, the agency of the ‘many’ remains a chimera. Today an estimated 4.8 billion, or 58 per cent of the world’s population, are connected to the web.4 As impressive as this number is, clearly not all citizens can access the means to become

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'netizens'. In fact, globally, there is a significant inequality in access to digital technology. According to the International Telecommunication Union’s 2019 Annual Report, 82 per cent of people in Europe were connected to the web compared to just 22 per cent in Africa (International Telecommunications Union, 2019, p. 2). Even within developed countries, access is affected by region and class. In Australia, for example, 88 per cent of households in major cities are connected to the internet compared to 77 per cent in regional areas (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018).

What is also clear is that data production, collection and dissemination continue to reflect the power and agency of a privileged few. Absolute monarchs of the ancien régime dictated edicts; today, media barons determine the content of the evening news. While the internet has enabled an increase in the number of data producers – everyone contributes content online – simultaneously, through convergence, the number of data collectors and owners has dramatically decreased. For example, Facebook owns Instagram and WhatsApp, which means that three different platforms are all harvesting data for one mega-corporation. A recent study shows that just five publishers account for 80 per cent of aggregated online and offline national newspaper coverage in the United Kingdom (Media Reform Coalition, 2019). In other words, a handful of powerful media conglomerates continue to control the distribution of information across all but a tiny percentage of media and platforms.

The promise of a cyber-utopia – a universalist monitory democracy – has proven too overly sanguine if not naive. To be sure, the scandalous, corrupt, excessive and criminal activities of the political establishment and its agents are regularly captured on iPhones, for example, and shared across of plethora of social media platforms, often before they are broadcast by conventional media outlets. But the promised techno-utopia has proven to have a dystopian underside. On the one hand, the internet provides opportunities for government surveillance far in excess of George Orwell’s worst fears outlined in Nineteen Eighty-Four (Orwell, [1949] 2008). As early as 1992, Neil Postman posed the obvious rhetorical question: ‘But to what extent has computer technology been an advantage to the masses of people?’ His answer was perspicuous: ‘There can be no disputing’, he wrote, ‘that the computer has increased the power of large-scale organizations like the armed forces, or airline companies or banks or tax-collecting agencies’.
Their private matters have been made more accessible to powerful institutions. They are more easily tracked and controlled; are subjected to more examinations; are increasingly mystified by the decisions made about them; are often reduced to mere numerical objects. They are inundated by junk mail. (Postman, 1992)

In 2011 Evgeny Morozov took up this point, famously railing against what he called the ‘Net Delusion’. Far from a tool to destroy authoritarianism, Morozov argued that the internet had become a weapon that authoritarian regimes were putting to good use. Since that time meteoric advances in computer technology have allowed governments to exponentially increase the vast amounts of data they harvest and simultaneously introduce comprehensive metadata retention systems. This is typically justified by the need to combat terrorism (Kininmonth et al., 2018), and much of this has been done with public support. Indeed, it is important to recognise that irrespective of the justification or the objective, as citizens we are agents in our own surveillance. As one of the present authors has argued, whether users are unconcerned or express – or feign – concern about unfettered violations of their privacy, the reality is that they are unwilling to change their online behaviour to protect it (Nurmikko-Fuller, forthcoming 2022). The most compelling element in this data exchange is convenience; as citizens we sacrifice our privacy on the altar of convenience with relentless enthusiasm. Every social media profile we create, every post we publish, every cookie we accept, every page we cache, as well as every bit and byte of information we insouciantly store in the browser, every automated log of geo-coordinates, provides spatio-temporal information to unseen eyes. Who wants to complete tedious bank account details every time we want to buy something online anyway? So, we let technology do it for us. As Morozov notes, the internet is a gateway to pleasure beyond that ever envisaged by Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* (Huxley, [1932] 2008). ‘The Internet has provided so many cheap and easily available entertainment fixes’, he writes, ‘it has become considerably harder to get people to care about politics at all’ (Morozov, 2011).

Clearly, the role of online technology in our politics has been transformative. The first candidate to successfully engage with social media as part of their campaign was Barrack Obama in 2008, his supporters leading the way in online political activism (Smith, 2009). But, it was the 2016 US Presidential Election that provided us with a case in point writ large. Allegations of unprecedented online Russian interference in
the political process, complicit with Donald Trump’s campaign, are well known, as is the appointment of former FBI Director Robert Mueller as a special counsel to investigate them. Mueller’s inquiry lasted nearly two years and involved over 2,800 subpoenas, approximately 500 search warrants and 500 witness statements (Rossman, 2019). Inter alia, the special counsel concluded that Russian-based trolls had systematically conducted cyberwarfare via mainstream social media with the intention of undermining the US electoral system. As Alex Ward has reported (2018), Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Tumblr, Pinterest, Medium, YouTube, Vine and Google+ were all used. In large part, Mueller’s findings were hardly revelatory. Neil Postman (1992) had already noted that users of the internet ‘are easy targets for advertising agencies and political organizations’. It doesn’t take much of a leap of the imagination to add foreign powers to Postman’s list.

The spotlight on the role of computer technology in politics created by the Mueller investigation highlighted that it was not only Russians at work. In March 2018 Facebook came under intensive scrutiny for the fact that the personal data of an estimated 87 million among its 2 billion users had been insidiously accessed by a third party for the purpose of targeting political advertisements. The organisation that had undertaken the hack was a British-based company, Cambridge Analytica.5 The furore over the raid on Facebook highlighted its vulnerability and undoubtedly damaged the brand, and Cambridge Analytica went bankrupt. Equally, in a politically charged climate, the attention given to the social media behemoth threw a spotlight on its unfettered right to take down content on the one hand and, conversely, its signal failure to control viral posts containing pernicious political material. The company’s response has been to implement improved security protocols to protect data sovereignty and the appointment of an external Advisory Board – or so-called ‘Supreme Court’ – with the power to review Facebook’s decisions to take down material, even those taken by the hitherto omnipotent CEO, Mark Zuckerberg (Granville, 2018; Leskin, 2020). Given that there are hundreds of millions of pieces of content taken down every year that can now be appealed, the judgements of a 20-person panel in dealing with the traffic, especially as any individual decisions are overturned, are not to be treated as precedents for similar posts (Leskin, 2020). Moreover, it

5 Allegations that the consultants had undertaken similar data harvesting for the Brexit campaign were later proven to be spurious (Kaminska, 2020).
quickly became clear that a modicum of confession meant that all sins were soon forgiven long before the ‘Supreme Court’ first met. Indeed, in January 2019, the BBC published data showing that not only had Facebook emerged financially unscathed, but also its profits had actually increased (Lee, 2019).

The 2016 presidential campaign also highlighted that alongside mainstream internet sites was a plethora of small-scale, localised, underground and sometimes ephemeral online outlets – ‘echo chambers of hate’ – hard at work generating, promoting and distributing ‘sh*tposts’. Joan Coaston (2019) has noted that the ‘manifesto’ has long been the platform of choice for spreading right-wing and white supremacist hate speech, but the internet has exponentially increased its capacity to do so. The fact that the heinous incoherent racist manifesto issued by the Christchurch gunman went viral is a case in point. Such sites are unambiguously reprehensible and there is self-evidently no case to be made that they should be protected by the right to free speech.

But elsewhere on the political spectrum the line is not so easily drawn. Keane’s hopes for a ‘monitory democracy’, like the legions of ‘netizens’ awaiting a techno-utopia, were based on the assumption that the capacity to monitor would inevitably enhance democracy on the side of the angels. The internet has undoubtedly enhanced democracy but the utopia they envisaged has not eventuated. Not all users are those they would regard as angels. Here, it is worth recalling the first of Melvin Kranzberg’s laws: ‘Technology is neither nor good nor bad; nor is it neutral’ (Kranzberg, 1986, p. 545).

In fact, the American public sphere over the past two decades in particular provides an obvious case to examine the intersection between contemporaneous communication technologies – Twitter in particular – and the reporting of political news and opinion. Why America? The list of the top 20 people in the world in terms of Twitter followers in January 2021 comprised mainly entertainers and sportspeople but there were two US politicians among the top five: Donald Trump (88.7 million followers);6 and, first on the entire list by a considerable margin, Barack Obama (127.9 million followers). Three US platforms providing news

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6 By this time Trump’s account had been suspended and thus he did not feature in this top 20 list. The last recorded figure – used here – would have placed him fourth on the list behind Obama, Justin Bieber and Katy Perry.
content were also among the top 20: YouTube, CNN Breaking News and Twitter itself. The numbers of people following Trump and Obama are vast by international comparison. If we look at the ratio of followers to the size of the overall voting population, the numbers for political leaders in other countries are derisory. While Obama’s ratio is 49.8 per cent, Boris Johnson’s ratio is 14 per cent and Narendra Modi’s is 7 per cent. Of course, the number of followers does not indicate support and nor are followers exclusively domestic, but the trend is there nonetheless.

Unlike Obama, Trump used Twitter as his principal outlet of choice for policy announcements and political commentary both before and throughout his presidency. His obdurate and often incendiary comments on the results of the 2020 election led, ultimately, to his Twitter account being suspended permanently on the grounds that he had incited violence (Collins and Zadrozny, 2021). In this respect, the abrupt end of Trump’s access to his principal social media platform was unsurprising but it also raises broader ethical issues in relation to the rights of those in a pluralist society – the land of the free – who use the awesome power of the internet to promulgate their opinions, irrespective of those opinions. Who decides what is ‘fake news’ or egregious error or a conspiracy theory or simply wacky? Is it Jack Dorsey, CEO of Twitter? Notwithstanding his arms-length ‘Supreme Court’, are we happy for Mark Zuckerberg to make decisions about who has access to the staggering power wielded by Facebook and Instagram? Who will decide if Fox News or Breitbart News are to be punished for endorsing Trump’s views? German Chancellor Angela Merkel, hardly an enthusiastic supporter of President Trump, is one notable political leader who described the permanent suspension of Trump’s Twitter account as ‘problematic’ (Browne, 2021; Merelli, 2021). Here, she was echoing President Obama’s unequivocal statement in support of unfettered access to the internet or how it is used. The minute Trump’s Twitter account was suspended we might easily imagine George Orwell reaching for his pen.

So, to return to the questions that underpin our polemic. We agree that the potential of immanent technologies has almost invariably provoked grave fears among the political elites who have, invariably, attempted to regulate access to them or suppress them (or both). These efforts have typically been futile. But, political elites are never so easily marginalised.

7 Dorsey has stated that he does not ‘celebrate or feel pride’ about his decision (Phillips et al., 2021).
On the one hand, it is clear that the internet has massively increased the power of a few to collect, store and manipulate data. The use of insidious algorithms, such as those brought to light by the Cambridge Analytica scandal, demonstrate that the internet has aided and abetted those who seek to undermine democracy.

Further, we agree that even among those who understand the scale of digital oppression, many do not care. Agency has not been violently stolen, nor passively allowed to slip away. For perhaps the first time in history we face a situation where we actively choose, even insist on, repeatedly, relentlessly, acquiring each new means of self-oppression. Access to a keyboard has been the agent of inclusion and liberation but this is for good or ill. The promise of a techno-utopia has proven to be a flawed project by the multiplicity of voices admitted to the forum, some wacky, some evil. Here we suggest, with due humility, a revision of the wording of Kranzberg’s first law in relation to the data ecology: technology is never neutral; it is simultaneously good and bad.

One of us advocates the view that the advent of the internet has transformed the relationship between the leaders and the led. While previous advances in communication technology have invariably occurred in lock step with an expansion of the political nation, access to the internet is transformative in a way unlike any before it. The advent of the internet has provided citizens with the tools to communicate with each to an extent beyond John Milton’s and William Lovett’s wildest dreams. The printing press was a profound caesura in the way that the few communicated with the many, but the internet is more impactful: it is a permanent rupture with the past. Many of those who have been given a voice are now beyond the control of political elites and state actors. One of us disagrees.

Indeed, the argument is that for millennia powerful individuals have had the means to present their views irrespective of any semblance of objective truth, however defined. Think of the untrammeled power of media moguls who became household names in the twentieth century. Are Jack Dorsey and Mark Zuckerberg more powerful than Rupert Murdoch, Ted Turner, David Thompson, Frank Packer and Robert Maxwell, or Conrad Black, Lord Beaverbrook and William Randolph Hearst? No. One of us disagrees.
Moreover, one of us argues that the tools used by the purveyors of
information will be overtaken by the next technological revolution just
as they have been for millennia. Mark Zuckerberg will be a twenty-first
century analogue of Ozymandias, the ancient overlord imagined in 1818
by Percy Bysshe Shelley: ‘My name is Zuckerberg, king of kings: Look on
my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’ But, in time all that will remain of an
ancient statue of Zuckerberg in the sand will be ‘two vast and trunkless
legs of stone’, a ‘colossal wreck, boundless and bare’. Computers will be
found next to his ruined statue. Today’s political manifesto circulated via
a text is no different from a scrap of printed paper with a seditious message
being circulated insidiously in 1820. One of us disagrees.

So, does the splintering news market and the ultimately unfettered
politics expressed in hypertext herald the rise of a promised utopia of
‘monitory democracy’ and a crisis quintessentially different from those
that have come before? I believe it does; I don’t. Huxley’s _Brave New World_
of self-oppression by pleasure seems more pervasive than he could have
possibly imagined. I don’t care; I do. Orwell’s _Nineteen Eighty-Four_ came
and went in 1984. In 2084, will citizens wonder what all the fuss was
about? I think they will; I don’t.

References


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9. CRISIS, WHAT CRISIS?


This text is taken from Rethinking Social Media and Extremism, edited by Shirley Leitch and Paul Pickering, published 2022, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/RSME.2022.09