How do the Internet and Social Media Affect Political Agency?

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Introduction

The internet and social media has been heralded by some commentators as a communication technology which can bring about a greater amount of citizen engagement with political processes, and therefore, a more deliberative democracy. Others have claimed that it has fostered the creation of communication habits which diminish political agency in that it may have caused a proliferation of opinion, a growth in the use of lies and gossip to garner support for certain causes, and even extremist behaviour. In my thesis, I will attempt to decipher what an enhancement or diminishment of political agency would look like and try to decide how the internet and social media may have facilitated this shift, if it has occurred. I will conclude by describing an optimistic view and pessimistic view of the internet and social media as a tool for political discussion and engagement and attempt to show that the potentialities that arise from the internet and social media could help to realise both depending upon how it is used but that they can also provide a "cure" for any of the negative possibilities that they might foster.

To do this, I will begin by claiming that communication is a bedrock of western liberal democracies and that the different forms of communication that are fostered by different technologies alter the quality and quantity of political agency that citizens can undertake. I will then attempt to show what an Ideal Communication Situation would look like and how the realisation of this could help to realise the Ideal Western Liberal Democracy. To formulate what constitutes an Ideal Communication Situation I will analyse *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere,* by Jurgen Habermas. From this I will decipher four conditions which are necessary for the realisation of this ideal. These conditions are: the access condition, the freedom condition, the exchange condition, and finally, the action condition. I will show that it is necessary that each of these conditions are met for the ideal to be achieved.

The next step of my argument will be to show how the internet and social media seem to create possibilities for the realisation of each of these conditions. The access condition seems to be met by the internet and social media as access to information and debate is more readily available now than ever before for any individual. There are circumstances which seem to bring about the realisation of the freedom condition as physical coercion towards a certain point of view seems to be mitigated by engaging in disembodied discussion. The exchange condition could be realised as

almost any citizen seems to be able to engage in debate. In fact, it has been argued by commentators such as Dan Tapscott that this freedom of idea exchange and opinion forming might bring about a heightening of intelligence and a burst in creativity amongst the population which may help to facilitate more productive discussion. The example of the Arab Spring seems to show that the action condition can be met by the internet and social media as it was through the use of social media that such a vast number of individuals could be mobilised to take action at the same time.

After cases for how the internet and social media could enhance political agency have been considered, I will then turn to focus on how they seem to diminish political agency. It is difficult to argue that the internet and social media do not offer unprecedented access to information and debate. However, the quality of this information and debate can be questioned. Arguments put forward by Dreyfus and Postman suggest that the freedom we have to express ourselves and create more information could create discussions where meaningless opinions are exchanged, and so, the actions taken as a result of these discussions may have little to no impact in shaping how society changes. Another possibility is that the internet and social media could allow for ideas to enter the public sphere which can inspire citizens to take actions which are not required but could still play a determining role in how society takes form.

To conclude, I will depict what the realisation of both the negative and positive possibilities of the internet and social media could mean for political agency. The optimistic view would be that the internet and social media can facilitate discussion which allows for a greater amount of input and, as a consequence, actions which are more representative of society. The pessimistic view is that the internet and social media facilitates fragmented and even aggressive discussion which is not productive and only facilitates a greater proliferation of opinion and a lack of trust amongst citizens for the other. I will point to the limits of the Ideal Communication Situation and show that the problems that might be experienced online have occurred throughout the history of human society, and so, any diminishment of political agency that could be attributed to the internet and social media may be unfair.

However, one very new possibility that has been cultivated by the internet and social media is that a large number of citizens can be mobilised to take action over a very short period of time. This is perhaps the greatest alteration to the forms of political agency created by the internet and

social media. Whether this new dynamic of poitical agency fostered by the internet and social media can be considered an enhancement or diminishment, again, depends upon how it is used. Whether it is utilised for positive changes might still depend upon the positive fulfillment of traditional political agency, which means that citizens need to engage in the ongoing debate and discussion required for the realisation and maintenance of democratic society.

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Chapter One – Ideal Communication Situations

According to Jurgen Habermas, the normative bedrock of modern liberal democracies is made up of three elements. The first is that citizens have their own autonomy to pursue their own lives. Secondly, citizens have democratic citizenship so that they are included in the political community. Finally, there is an independent public sphere which mediates between state and society. Discussions which occur freely and equally within the public sphere help to generate ideas about how policies are shaped. It is the discussion which occurs here which helps citizens to understand their interests and then at times of consent giving, citizens can indicate their preferences to officials by voting in a "yes or no" way. It is this consent giving stage which gives officials their political power and citizens are free to withdraw their consent at a given time because of the democratic rights that are secured for them. It could be said, then, that communication technologies facilitate the legitimisation of political power through a 'truth-tracking' process (Habermas, 2006, pp. 411-414). The truth-tracking process is an abstract term for tracking how citizens come to vote in one way or another. How citizens decide to vote is altered and shaped by discussion and debate. An outcome could be said to be more legitimate if voters are fully informed as to how their voting in one way or another will affect society. Given this situation, it would seem that communication technologies affect possibilities for, and quality of, political action because they facilitate the communications that occur between citizens and the state. My thesis, then, will be based on two claims which are derived from the work of Jurgen Habermas.

1.1 Two Claims

The two claims which form the basis of my thesis are:

1. Western Liberal Democracies are heavily dependent on communication technologies for proper functioning as it is these technologies which facilitate the discussion and deliberation by all of matters of common concern.
2. The concept of Western Liberal Democracy rests upon the ideas of the forms of political agency made possible by communication technologies. Communication technologies help to satisfy the conditions of liberty and equality.

I will be using these claims as a starting-point for my analysis of how the internet and social

media has affected how citizens communicate, and therefore, political agency.

1.2 Ideal Communication Situations

An Ideal Communication Situation would be a situation where all members of a society could discuss and debate in an unconstrained and free way all matters of common concern (Benhabib, 1996, p. 68). Debate and discussion in these situations would follow certain processes that would ensure that the outcomes of these debates and discussions would give liberal democracies their legitimacy. Legitimacy would be garnered as actions taken to shape society would reflect the conclusions of discussions. It seems to follow that the Ideal Western liberal Democracy can arise if the Ideal Communication Situation can be realised.

1.2.1 The Ideal Western Liberal Democracy and Ideal Political Agent

An Ideal Western Liberal Democracy would be achieved by allowing for the participation of all of its citizens as this seems to fulfil the ideals of liberty and equality. Equal participation in discussion and the freedom to express oneself would seem to protect citizens from oppression as they would have the opportunity to voice their concerns to the public. Participation, loosely speaking, can take the form of voting. Citizens would vote for individuals who would represent their views and ideals in government. These representatives would then affect policy change in a way that correlates with the expressed wishes of the electorate and also in a way that does not violate the democratic rights of citizens who have not voted a certain way. The Ideal Western Liberal Democracy, then, gives citizens power to affect change whilst maintaining and protecting the rights of citizens.

As voting for representatives who will carry out policy change based upon the expressed wishes of citizens is key to the creation of the Ideal Western Liberal Democracy, it would also be very important for the creation of this ideal that citizens, or political agents, have the tools to make decisions that help to maintain this Ideal form of democracy. These citizens might be called, "Ideal Political Agents." I will now briefly describe what this Ideal Political Agent would look like.

The Ideal Political Agent would be able to utilise rational, critical and empathetic capacities in the Ideal Western Liberal Democracy. Through the use of rationality citizens come to determine what matters to them most. Having a critical mindset is important as this allows citizens to evaluate how to deal with their concerns and to evaluate the representative candidates who claim to be able to do so. Empathy is an important factor in forming the Ideal Political Agent as this faculty helps citizens to understand the concerns of others and articulate their own concerns to others, as well as further define the importance and relevance of their own concerns. Further to this, it is important that participants aim at reaching a consensus. By aiming at reaching consensus, participants anticipate that they can achieve a result which has an underlying common ground even though initial opinions brought to debate by individuals may seem very different.

The Ideal Political Agent is key to creating the Ideal Western Liberal Democracy as it is voters who give officials their power. This power seems to be more legitimate if it is used in a way that represents the public or works for the pubic good. It is important, then, that political agents are fully informed about situations so that they cannot be manipulated into electing officials who do not represent their interests. Political agents must then engage in dialogue with each other to form a consensus on what action should be taken. Again, the importance of communication technologies can be seen for liberal democracies as dialogue between political agents is facilitated by these technologies.

1.2.2   The Ideal Communication Technology

The Ideal Western Liberal Democracy requires that its citizens are Ideal Political Agents. This requires that agents can discuss issues amongst each other and then somehow feed their concerns back to officials. The ideal communication technology, then, would facilitate communication from officials to citizens, from citizens to citizens, and from citizens to officials in the easiest and most efficient way possible (Wittkower, 2010, p. 233).

Through this technology, information and ideas could enter the marketplace of ideas. The market place of ideas, taken figuratively, is where ideas, theories and suggestions 'compete' (Williams, 2003, p. 111). Which ideas, theories and suggestions 'win' and enter into social reality will depend upon the rational-critical faculties of the participants in discussion. How individuals

rationalise, critique and form opinions will depend on the information they receive (Habermas, 2006, p. 413).

1.3 **The four conditions of Ideal Communication Situations**

The Ideal Communication Technology should help to create the Ideal Political Agent, which in turn will create the Ideal Western Liberal Democracy. It could be said, then, that the Ideal Western Liberal Democracy is dependent upon the creation of situations where political agents are able to communicate with each other in such a way that they can make the most informed and best decisions based upon the information which they are given. The realisation of all of these aspects; where the Ideal Communication Technology informs and fosters the Ideal Political Agents who rationalise and decide what representatives to elect in an Ideal Western Liberal Democracy takes place in what could be called "Ideal Communication Situations."

In "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere," Habermas described the emergence of a public sphere where individuals came together to debate and discuss political issues. This public sphere later became such a force in political affairs that public authorities had to appeal to it to legitimise their policies. This public sphere emerged in the eighteenth century out of the representative publics of the middle-ages. Up to this point, no concept of private and public had existed. Rather than private individuals coming together to discuss issues which faced them, public persons, such as Kings, represented themselves to the people. The emergence of the eighteenth century public sphere occurred because of societal, philosophical and cultural possibilities which were brought about by the growth of early capitalism. For Habermas, the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere happened at an unprecedented time in human history and for him remains the closest to the Ideal Communication Situation that has ever existed.

The force that the eighteenth century public sphere managed to create can be summarised by Habermas himself;

"the bourgeois public's critical public debate took place in principle without regard to all pre-existing social and political rank and in accord with universal rules. These rules, because they remained strictly external to the individuals as such, secured space for the

development of these individuals' interiority by literary means. These rules, because universally valid, secured a space for the individuated person; because they they were objective, they secured a space for what was most subjective; because they were abstract, for what was most concrete. At the same time, the results that under these conditions issued from the public process of critical debate lay claim to being in accord with reason; intrinsic to the idea of a public opinion born of the power of the better argument was the claim to that morally pretentilus rationality that strove to discover what was at once just and right. Public opinion was supposed to do justice to 'the nature of the case.'"

(Habermas, 1991, pp. 54-55)

An interest in literature grew out of capitalism. Individuals began to read literary reviews and eventually journals which were critical of politics and other public interests. Interest in novels and literature helped to foster a critical psychology amongst private individuals as they became aware of their own subjectivity and that of others as well (Habermas, 1991, p. 48). The rise of merchant capitalism meant that individuals could locate their own interests within their own private lives. These concerns were usually bound up with the conjugal, patriarchal family. The critical faculties that exposure to literature were creating helped private individuals to contemplate their lives and their place within society. It also helped individuals to appreciate that other individuals were owners of their own inner subjectivity. The private, usually landowning, individuals would come together to debate and discuss issues of common concern and then try to formulate a consensus which would later become a check on public authority.

The eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere, described by Habermas, seems to be a description of a communication situation which comes close to the description of the ideal described above. From this, I have identified four conditions which, if met by a communication situation, could be described as meeting the ideal standard. These four conditions are:

1. The Access Condition;
2. The Freedom Condition;
3. The Exchange Condition;
4. The Action Condition.

I will now describe each condition in turn.

1.3.1 The Access Condition

Ideally, information would be freely available for all participants and it would be universally accessible for them. Also, participants would have access to the same information and could be present where and when debate occurs. For Habermas, "the public sphere of civil society stood or fell with the principle of universal access. A public sphere from which specific groups would be eo ipso excluded was less than merely incomplete; it was not a public sphere at all" (Habermas, 1991, p. 85).

In the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere access to political journals became more popular and readily available. Private individuals met in coffee houses and salons where they could freely discuss issues of individual and common concern. The coffee houses and salons were accessible to all private, landowning individuals. This was a form of accessibility never before experienced. As more individuals became able to access information and consequently added their voice to debate, the overall scope of opinion became wider and the final consensus more encompassing of the wider societal viewpoints. These discussions fostered public opinion which, "put the state in touch with the needs of society" (Habermas, 1991, pp. 30-31).

The fulfilment of the access condition would require input from all citizens, or input would represent all of the important issues facing citizens, at least (Williams, 2002, p. 113). Ideally, though, citizens would express their opinions in some way which would give actors of civil society an understanding of what demands arise from "the life worlds of various groups" (Habermas, 2006, p. 417). Access to information is important as this will ensure that participants in discussion can offer up opinions that are relevant. Universal access to debate is an important factor in ensuring that all voices are heard and none excluded when policy change is being implemented. By allowing universal access to information and debate, all individuals can be informed about issues and all ideas and views can then be articulated within an understandable context for others to consider during the consensus forming stage. Ideally, this would mean that the final outcome of debate should be the most accurate and representative portrayal of the collected ideas (Habermas, 1991, p. 37).

A further stipulation of the Access Condition would be that the information used is relevant, required and appropriate (Habermas, 2006, p. 418). For the Ideal Western Liberal Democracy to be achieved, political agents would ideally meet the conditions necessary to be Ideal Political Agents. It is more difficult for political Agents to meet the ideal if the information they have access to is not useful in constructing productive debate. This entails that information must, as far as is possible, lack bias towards a certain ideal or leave out, or manufacture, certain details that can affect how the information is perceived. Information must also be relevant to the debate taking place so that the context, relevance and coherence of information can be understood.

The Access Condition can be fulfilled if three subconditions are met. These are:

I) Universal access to information for all participants (A1)

II) Universal access to the location of debate for all participants (A2)

III) Only good quality information is utilised. This information would be; relevant, contextualised, coherent and non-biased (A3)

1.3.2   The Freedom Condition

In the Ideal Communication Situation, participants in discussion would be free from physical and psychological coercion when forming their own political opinions and ideals. Ideally, participants would access non-biased information, and, through their own rational-critical capacities, formulate their own ideas and opinions. Participants would also be free to express their ideas in front of others.

This condition was met during the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere as private, landowning individuals met in coffee houses and salons to discuss issues in a face to face manner. No individual was forced to give an opinion and debate took place in a free, almost anarchic fashion which allowed for a great deal of freedom of thought; "This space was the scene of a psychological emancipation that corresponded to the political-economic one... It seemed to be established voluntarily and by free individuals and to be maintained without coercion" (Habermas, 1991, p. 46).

The Freedom Condition is a necessary condition for the realisation of the Ideal

Communication Situations as the Ideal Western Liberal Democracy would require that citizens are free to form opinions and lead lives according to these values. If participants are coerced towards a certain viewpoint their liberty is being impinged upon and discussion is being shaped in a way that may deceive citizens. The freedom condition could be achieved by allowing participants to freely access information and express their opinions and views on the information without coercion from other parties. Participants could be limited when forging opinions or at an unfair disadvantage if they cannot receive the same information as others. To mitigate this possibility, access to information would, ideally, be free. This would also, again, entail that the information received is unbiased, relevant, contextualised and coherent. It is important that individuals are not censored as; "The elimination of the institution of censorship marked a new stage in the development of the public sphere. It made the influx of rational-critical arguments into the press possible and allowed the latter to evolve into an instrument with whose aid political decisions could be brought before the new forum of the public" (Habermas, 1991, p. 58).

There are three subconditions which, if fulfilled, would mean that a communication situation could achieve the freedom condition. These are:

I) Societal rank is not considered when opinions are being presented (F1)

II) Participants are free to form opinions and express their ideas, meaning that psychological and physical coercion are not present during this process(F2)

III) Ideas are not censored (F3)

1.3.3 The Exchange Condition

The Exchange Condition stipulates that participants can exchange opinions in a well organised debate. This is a necessary condition for the realisation of Ideal Communication Situations as this is where participants are heard and hear the views and opinions of others. This is the place where participants articulate their freely formed opinions and also is where empathy is fostered as individuals become fully aware of the subjectivity of others. We can see the role that empathy played in creating the forceful eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere; "From the beginning, the psychological interest increased in the dual relation to both one's self and the other: self-observation entered a union partly curious, partly sympathetic with the emotional stirrings of

the other I" (Habermas, 1991, p. 58). Empathy helps the individual to understand the other and, as a result, the overall accuracy of the consensus forming activity.

This fulfilment of this condition might require that there is some sort of organisation which allows for each participant to speak and be heard. However, as was noted earlier, it would seem that not every thought and utterance necessarily needs to be heard in a formal setting for discussion. Citizens seem to be able to discover the issues and ideals that matter to them most during implicit, informal, and tacit day-to-day casual discussions with others (Habermas, 1991, p. 420). So, as long as these discussions can occur, it would seem that this could meet the exchange condition. Once ideas have become more explicit in tacit discussion, then these explicit ideas which have a wider representative base can be brought forth to more explicitly political discussions for more detailed consideration.

There are three subconditions which, if met by a communication situation, could fulfil the exchange condition. These are:

I)   Participants must have the opportunity to voice their concerns and ideas (E1)

II) Participants must listen to the concerns and ideas of other participants (E2)

III) Participants must aim at forming a consensus on what the underlying general issues are and what action to take in order to express themselves as a public (E3)

1.3.4   The Action Condition

The final condition which could help to realise Ideal Communication Situations is the Action Condition. For the preceding debate to be effective, a public organisation with political power that allows for the consensus formulated by participants to be put into action must exist. This can take the form of voting in elections and referenda as well as organising individuals in mass movements which have political goals.

The eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere became a check on authority and would later develop such force that public authorities would appeal to the public opinion developed in the public sphere to legitimise itself. As Habermas states, "in this sense, the physiocrats declared that

opinion publique alone had insight into and made visible the *ordre nature1* so that, in the form of general norms, the enlightened monarch could then make the latter the basis of his action; in this way they hoped to bring rule into convergence with reason" (Habermas, 1991, p. 55). Policy change in the eighteenth seemed to reflect the rational consensus formed in the public sphere.

The Action Condition can be fulfilled, then, if the consensus formed during debate is expressed in some organised way that can affect policy change and the policy change must be representative of the consensus formed.

1.4 Non-Ideal Communication Situations

A better understanding of how Ideal Communication Situations would work might be formed and made more explicit by comparing it with public spheres from different epochs of human history. I will analyse the communication situations of Ancient Greece, the public sphere of eighteenth century France which existed just before the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere of the same century and the public sphere which developed out of the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which I will call the, "modern public sphere." Each of these situations are described in "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere," but how they measure up against the four conditions of Ideal Communication Situations is my ow analysis.

Below is a table describing how each of the communication situations, mentioned above, fair in terms of meeting each of the conditions of ideal communication situations. I will then describe each of these situations.

	Ancient Greece	**18th Century France**	**Modern Public Sphere**
Access Condition	Debate and discussion is accessible for free citizens of Greece.	Few printed journals.	Information is accessible through printed newspapers, journals, radio and television.

Freedom Condition	Free citizens could debate freely.	Information was censored.	Citizens are free to debate.
Exchange Condition	Free citizens could exchange ideas.	Information is exchanged orally as well as through the printed journals.	Citizens are free to exchange ideas.
Action Condition	Free citizens could affect change.	No public organisation existed to facilitate change.	Citizens can vote and are free to act in other ways.

1.4.1   The Communication Situation of Ancient Greece

The sphere of the polis in the Greek-city state was open to all free citizens. The polis was separate from the oikos, which was each individual in their own realm. Discussion about public life usually took place in the market place. The free citizens of Ancient Greece were able to take part in discussion with others in a way that allowed for a large amount of opportunities to affect public life as they could sit in the court of law and consult each other in common action (Habermas, 1991, p. 5).

This would help to fulfil certain standards of Ideal Communication Situations as it seemed to allow for greater accessibility into discussion for citizens. Free citizens were also able to freely exchange ideas and take part in public action. The free citizens of Greece were able to take part in public life to such an extent because of the freeing up of time they experienced. This freeing up of time was created because of a patrimonial slave economy (Habermas, 1991, p. 5). Thus, the communication situation of Ancient Greece seems to struggle to fulfil the access condition of Ideal Communication Situations. Citizens who were able to participate in debate only did so because of the exclusion of others. This would present a lack of scope of issues discussed as participants in discussion in Ancient Greece came from a very similar background, and so, the spectrum of issues discussed may have been limited. However, the free citizens of Greece would have come into contact with non-free citizens and could have represented their interests in discussion and debate.

The communication situation of Ancient Greece might struggle to meet the conditions necessary for the realisation of an Ideal Communication Situation because of how opinions and ideas were exchanged. Discussion which occurred in the polis occurred between equal citizens which created a type of competition. Becoming an exemplary speaker brought certain prestige in the Ancient Greek polis. As a result, participants learned to present themselves and speak in a way which would attain this prestige and appeal positively to others (Habermas, 1991, p. 6). In this sense, issues and ideas may not have been discussed and exchanged with the intent of forming a consensus. Rather, citizens may have presented ideas in a way that would further their own private interests. This would also damage the integrity of the information presented as it would be presented with the intention of persuasion.

The communication situation of Ancient Greece may not meet the necessary conditions of Ideal Communication Situations. It might not meet the Access Condition as only free citizens could access debate and therefore information. It also might fail to meet the Exchange Condition as citizens presented information in a way that served their private interests and not to foster a consensus that was a collaboration of all ideas and opinions. The inability to meet the access condition and exchange condition means that the freedom and action conditions are also not being met. Each condition needs to be met so that the others are also met.

1.4.2   The Communication Situation of Eighteenth Century France

The communication situation of eighteenth century France is another example of a non-ideal speech situation. This situation only just pre-dates the emergent bourgeois public sphere that Habermas holds up as the ideal. Before this emergent public sphere, access to information in France was greatly diminished. The official weekly journal at the time, the Mercure de France, had no more than 1600 subscribers even though it was the most widely read journal. A third of these subscribers lived in Paris and 900 went to the provinces, whilst the remaining journals went abroad (Habermas, 1991, p. 67).

As well as a lack of accessible information, there existed no public organisation with political power that citizens could appeal to for affecting change within their constituency; "But politically they could not affect the fate of the nation; they were not united, as in England, with the

nobility and the higher officialdom (noblesse de robez) into a homogeneous top stratum which, supported by a firm prestige, would also have been able to represent politically the interests of the capital-accumulating classes against the King"(Habermas, 1991, pp. 67-68).

The inability to meet the access condition and the action condition means that the freedom condition and exchange condition are also not met.

1.4.3   The Communication Situation of the Modern Public Sphere

The public sphere that emerged in the eighteenth century with the force to keep public authority in check lost this force to a great extent due the attempts to preserve these powers by institutionalising them; "That society was essentially a private sphere became questionable only when the powers of "society" themselves assumed functions of public authority" (Habermas, 1991, p. 142). The private lives of individuals became more tied up with public affairs as institutions did more to protect the private lives of its constituents. The interests of citizens were not drawn from their experiences within the conjugal family, which was the case in the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere. Instead citizens became interested in leisure consumption and their private interests were informed by their employment. Citizens were no longer as interested in discussing political matters as they were in consuming leisure and taking part in group activities centred around leisure. It was easier for politicians to appeal to groups of people as rational-critical debate and psychology was now not as strong a factor. This new way that politicians appealed to the public as a group resembled the representative publicity of the middle ages when a public person, such as a King, represented himself to a public, not for it; "The social psychology of the type of privacy that evolved during the eighteenth century out of the experiential context of the conjugal family's audience-oriented intimate sphere provides a key both to the development of a literary public sphere and to certain conditions of its collapse. The public sphere in the world of letters was replaced by the pseudo-public or shamprivate world of culture consumption" (Habermas, 1991, pp. 159-160).

The information produced in the period following the collapse of the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere was also turned into a consumable product. Debate was orchestrated and choreographed in a way that would make it most profitable and consumable. In the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere, individuals met to discuss issues which affected themselves and

the lives of others. From this rational-critical discussion, public opinion was formed and the "natural order" was deciphered. The modern public sphere could be manipulated by professional speakers as discussion about books, the arts and politic became something to consume as well. Furthermore, "the presentation of positions and counterpositions is bound to certain prearranged rules of the game; consensus about the subject matter is made largely superfluous by that concerning form" (Habermas, 1991, p. 164).

The post eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere (or modern public sphere) cannot be classified as an Ideal Communication Situation. It struggles to meet the access, freedom, exchange and action conditions. This is because the information that is accessed may not be of a good quality in that discussion and debate are presented in such a way that seems to pre-configure the direction which public opinion will move towards. This also impacts upon the freedom of individuals to form their own opinions as they are coerced by professional speakers to holding certain opinions. Individuals seem to be unconcerned with discussing political issues in tacit, casual discussions as well as meeting for more explicit political discussion. And, as a consequence of all of these factors, the actions taken by citizens may not be reflective of the issues they face and rational consensus which they have formed to deal with these issues.

1.5 On the Necessity of the Four Conditions of Ideal Communication Situations

The examples of non-ideal communication situations above show that each of the four conditions must be met for communication situations to meet the ideal. Each condition can be analysed by its own merits but if all four conditions are not met in some way then the communication situation cannot be said to be ideal.

If individuals cannot access information which is relevant and useful, then the overall outcome of discussion would not be very productive. Even if discussion does meet the ideal standard of free exchange, the opinions shared may be pointless as they are based on information which has no baring on how individuals can actually shape society. The freedom condition is a necessary condition as this allows any citizen to bring up a concern at some point during discussions. Without this freedom to express oneself, certain voices could be drowned out and then the final consensus would not be representative of all citizens. The exchange condition is a

necessary condition for similar reasons. It is important that ideas and opinions are considered and this can only occur in an exchange of ideas. The action condition is necessary as it is action which gives the discussion and free exchange of opinions its importance. It would seem that discussion without action would render discussion impotent.

The Ideal Communication Situation, then, would facilitate discussion and opinion exchange where the opinions and ideas which are exchanged are a well thought out collection of the general ideas which have occurred within society. The ideas and opinions formed would be based on information which paints a true reflection of the issues that face society and might suggest how and why these issues arose in the first instance. The information utilised would be of a good enough quality that it would be very difficult for political agents to deceive each other. Citizens would then form a rational consensus based on discussions which can then bring about actions which would affect policy change in a way that reflects preceding discussion and debate.

In what follows I will explore the effects of the internet and social media on our communication situation and ask whether they bring us closer to meeting the four conditions required for the Ideal Communication Situation.

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Chapter 2 – How the Internet and Social Media might fulfil the Four Conditions Necessary for the Realisation of Ideal Communication Situations

Some commentators have argued that the internet and social media could bring about the development of political agency unlike anything that has come before it:

"Inspired by those dramatic events, techno-optimists today advocate a powerful role for Web-based social networks in fostering more effective citizenship engagement. Many of these optimists have been inspired by Habermas's notions about "rational consensus" in public debate and how it can be achieved through online activism.

Since Web 2.0 networks diffuse power away from institutions and towards people, social networking sites are lauded as effective platforms for promoting a genuinely bottom-up expression of citizen sovereignty. If online social networks can challenge state power, perhaps citizens should harness the power of networks to govern themselves—replacing the coercion of intensive power with the persuasive effects of extensive power."(Wittkower, 2010, p. 226)

In this chapter I will attempt to show how the internet and social media seem to fulfil each of the four conditions detailed in the previous chapter that are necessary for the realisation of Ideal Communication Situations in the Ideal Western Liberal Democracy. I will also suggest how the communication possibilities presented by the internet and social media may be better than previous communication technologies.

1.2 The Access Condition

In chapter one, the access condition was identified as one of the conditions which, if met, would help to create an Ideal Speech Situation. Three subconditions were identified which would help to meet the access condition. These were:

IV) Universal access to information for all participants (A1)

V) Universal access to the location of debate (A2)

VI) Information is of good quality. That is; relevant, contextualised, coherent and non-biased (A3)

I will now show how the internet and social media seem to meet these subconditions and, therefore, provide possibilities for the realisation of the access condition.

Simply put, the internet and social media have created unprecedented access to information and debate. A study in 2013 showed that six billion people worldwide have a mobile phone out of the seven billion people on the planet,1so, as a result, more people have the means to access the internet and social media. Access to the internet can be achieved at little cost to the user as wifi hotspots have become increasingly available.2 The internet can also be accessed at public libraries or in internet café's. Social media provides a free platform that can be used for debate by anyone; "As of the third quarter of 2017, Facebook had 2.07 billion monthly active users."3

The internet and social media have improved access to information and debate in several ways. Firstly, individuals are not limited by their physical environment as to what information they can access. Individuals do not have to commute to a specific location to read information and take part in debate. This can be done almost anywhere at any time by anybody. Information is not only found in books and newspapers. It can be accessed online at any time. Secondly, access to information and debate is much cheaper than before. The open accessibility of information is enhanced as individuals do not have to pay as much for information or pay to commute to the location where debate is occurring; "certainly it makes social contact with distant persons, and communication generally, more convenient and efficient, and nearly cost-free. These are positive features that carry the potential for enhancing democracy. Many barriers to communication—from the practical to the psychological—seem simply to fall away in a transition to communication via Facebook" (Wittkower, 2010, p. 75).

Thirdly; time is not a limiting factor for individuals. Social media provides a platform for discussion which negates the necessity that individuals need to be present for discussion at an arranged or fixed time. Comments are recorded on social media so participants, if they are not

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[1]

  Worstall. T., *More People Have Mobile Phones than Toilets* (Forbes, 2013) accessed here:
  https://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2013/03/23/more-people-have-mobile-phones-than-toilets/#2894989f6569
[2] Wakefield. J., *One wifi hotspot for every 150 people, says study* (BBC, 3 November 2014) accessed here:
  http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-29726632
[3] https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/

available at the time when a certain debate occurs, can still access what has been said. This has also created a communication style where participants may need to be more specific and accurate with what they say as there is now a, "permanent searchable record," of what individuals have said (Tapscott, 2009, p. 258).

In the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere, information was only available in journals which could only be accessed by purchasing them. Debate occurred in coffee houses and salons, so individuals who were otherwise engaged could not participate in discussion. Today, political discussion can occur anywhere at any time. Political discussion has become so prevalent now that it might no longer be reserved for individuals who follow politics at a deep level, but has become part of popular culture. Discussing politics on social media forums and creating and consuming content designed to present political ideas has become part of the daily discourse (Jenkins, 2006, p. 208).

The accessibility of information and growing opportunities for participating in debate presented by the internet and social media, then, seems to be an improvement upon the communication situation which was possible during the time considered to be the best by Habermas. The internet and social media seems to meet the subconditions for universal and open access to information and debate (A1 and A2) which move the communication situation that the internet and social media provide towards the ideal standard of the access condition. Subcondition A3 might also be met as all of the debate that occurs online seems to be available for checking at a later date. Relevant, contextualised, coherent and non-biased information is available to everyone as this is accessible via the internet and social media as well.

1. The Freedom Condition

The freedom condition can be met by a communication situation if it meets the three subconditions identified in chapter one. These are:

IV) Societal rank is not considered when opinions are being presented (F1)

V) Participants are free to form opinions and express their ideas, meaning that psychological and physical coercion are not present during this process (F2)

VI) Ideas are not censored (F3)

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The universal and cheap access to information and debate that the internet and social media has fostered has brought with it the possibility that anyone can express themselves in such a way that anyone can hear them. Social media platforms act like a personal printing press. Any individual can add to debate from any place at any time and have their views heard by a broad audience without the cost that utilising a printing press would usually acquire. Opinions and ideas can be instantly broadcast without the physical restraint of actually having to print ideas on paper and then distribute them (Tapscott, 2009, p. 274). This improves upon the possibility for freely expressing ideas that has been possible through any other previous communication technology. Previous communication technologies could only be used by certain individuals. To have an article in a newspaper, one would have to be a paid journalist or have their letter to the paper chosen by an editor. Similar limitations are presented by communication technologies such as the television or radio. Those who could speak to a wider audience were chosen by editors of some kind. The internet and social media, then, seems to meet the stipulation that ideas are not censored. This is because the ideas which are presented by participants are not edited or changed by an editor. This, then, seems to present the possibility that all of the subconditions F1, F2 and F3 of the freedom condition can be met by the internet and social media.

Further to this point, the internet and social media have also made it possible that individuals are no longer limited to forming opinions based on the information available within their local community. It is now possible that individuals can form opinions based on a wider variety of information about a topic or situation. This would mean that the forming of opinions is exposed to a more rigorous process and may be more clearly thought out and as a result might carry more weight (Greenfield, 2008, p. 167). By forging a better understanding of the wider spectrum of ideas and opinions and being exposed to more information about the issues which face societies and communities citizens may be more likely to forge a more rational-critical psychology which would help to move us towards the realisation of Ideal Political Agents, defined in chapter one of this thesis (Wittkower, 2010, p. xxxvi).

Subcondition F2 might also be met by the way in which debate is carried out on the internet and social media. Debate online occurs without any physical interaction between individuals. This might mean that physical and psychological coercion are mitigated to a greater extent than has been possible in previous communication situations. In his book, "The Presentation of the Self in

Everyday Life," Erving Goffman shows how individuals adapt their behaviour according to the different social settings and contexts they find themselves interacting within. According to Goffman, we are performers who adapt to present the version of ourselves which we hope will bring about the best social utility for ourselves: "a performer tends to conceal or underplay those activities, facts, and motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of himself and his products" (Goffman, 1956, p. 30). This suggests that explicit physical or psychological coercion is not necessary for an individual to adapt their behaviour to an implicitly expected norm. As a result of this, consensus formed in physical face-to-face settings might never be a true representation of the ideas and concerns of the individuals present. Rather, the consensus formed will be based upon a version of the ideas and concerns which individuals feel are appropriate to share with a large audience in such a way that it will not cost them their perceived social standing.

The internet and social media may mitigate this implicit social pressure that is ever present in physical, face-to-face settings and make it more likely that individuals will fully express their authentic selves: "Internet activity is no more private than "real world" activities. Actually, online posting might even be our most public form of communication. We don't usually have much control over who will have access to the material we upload to the Internet, nor do we have the ability to fully remove something if we change our minds about going public... Despite how public and permanent online communication can be, people tend be less reserved online than they are offline... inhibition can prevent us from presenting a false image of who we are. In other words, inhibition can sometimes prevent us from 'fronting'" (Wittkower, 2010, p. 66).

The internet and social media also allows for a great deal of anonymity which gives individuals the opportunity to share ideas and opinions in relative safety. This, again, lessens the extent to which physical and psychological coercion can act upon debate and consensus forming, and helps to further realise subcondition F2. An example of this might be the use of private Facebook groups and Whatsapp by Muslim women to discuss issues such as religious and sexual identity in places where open discussion about these issues would be very difficult for them (Kesvani, 2018, pp. 26-28). A blogger from Saudi Arabia, who uses such forums for discussion said of the forums: "For the women in our group, everyone is equal to say what they want or think – there are no rules, other than no men... it's a space where you can be honest, which is difficult to find in Saudi Arabia" (Kesvani, 2018, pp. 27-28). This would also seem to fulfil subcondition F1 as

the societal rank of these Muslim women is not preventing them from participating in discussion.

The freedom which emerges because of the internet and social media seems to fulfil the subconditions of the freedom condition. This is because it gives every individual the freedom to express their ideas to a wide audience. These ideas are not censored by an editor and are formed based upon a wide spectrum of sources which are freely available to any individual at any location. The freedom to form opinions fostered by the internet and social media might also mean that these opinions are a more accurate reflection of an individual's authentic self as the physical and psychological coercion which might be present during social interaction is mitigated because of the lack of face-to-face contact and the safety that coincides with acting anonymously.

2.3 The Exchange Condition

If a communication situation can meet the three subconditions of the exchange condition, it might be said that it can bring about an Ideal Communication Situation. These three subconditions are:

IV) Participants must have the opportunity to voice their concerns and ideas (E1)

V) Participants must listen to the concerns and ideas of other participants (E2)

VI) Participants must aim at forming a consensus on what the underlying general issues are and what action to take in order to express themselves as a public (E3)

It is here, in the exchange condition, that the importance of developing a rational-critical psychology and empathy can be seen. The development of these faculties are important as this will help participants to form a collaborative consensus on how to proceed after discussion. In this section I will show how the internet and social media helps to achieve this condition and might also be an improvement on previous communication situations.

As with the access and freedom conditions, the internet and social media present a situation where everyone can voice their opinions and ideals and be heard by others, and so, seems to fulfil subcondition E1. Information from previous communication technologies was distributed via broadcasting, meaning that information only moved in one direction; from the information creator

to the audience. Consequently, broadcasters had more influence over how discussion and debate would occur as they could control what and when information was widely available for citizens as well as how it would be presented (Wittkower, 2010, p. 14). Internet and social media users are now able to challenge this paradigm as they do not have to wait for a broadcaster to voice an opinion on their behalf to the wider public. Users of social media can create material that is of a professional standard and they are also able to "manipulate and recirculate powerful images to make political statements," (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 220-221) meaning that any citizen can now have an influence over the shape of wider debate. This might help with the consensus forming process as opinions are constantly being expressed and are permanently available on record to be challenged. The internet and social media may have created circumstances where a wider spectrum of opinion is considered by all participants, and so, the the final conclusions articulated by the group are a much more representative public opinion than that which could have been formed through previous communication situations.

For subconditions E2 and E3 to be met in the exchange condition, it would seem that the development of a rational-critical psychology and empathy is important. There is little point in expressing ideas if other participants do not listen to these ideas and try to form an understanding of them. It could be said that the internet and social media can give participants the opportunity to be heard, however, this possibility alone cannot guarantee that others will listen. And we might have to acknowledge our limitations here; it would be difficult to imagine a type of technology which could guarantee that each participant in debate gives each opinion and idea their full attention and consideration. However, some commentators have claimed that the open access to social media broadcasting tools and the freedom to express ideas that is possible online, coupled with the potential for collaboration with other individuals from all over the world may have brought about conditions which help to facilitate the growth of rational-critical psychology and empathy. The possibility for collaboration between individuals online has created a burst in intelligence and seems to improve academic performance (Tapscott, 2009, p. 137). This burst in intelligence could be attributed to the empathy fostered by the exposure to other viewpoints and cultures possible on the internet and social media (Tapscott, 2009, p. 138), and, perhaps, also because of the characteristics inherent within the medium of the internet and social media: "search engines have the potential to free up more of us for asking questions and ¨thinking¨ than we could have ever imagined" (Greenfield, 2008, pp. 189-190). That is; information is now widely accessible and easily located

because of search engines, and, as a result, individuals do not have to spend a lot of time or exert a lot of effort to locate the whereabouts of relevant information when trying to gain insight and knowledge about a subject. So, this time can be used for more consideration of ideas which are different from that which an individual already holds to be true.

This burst in intelligence and creativity, fostered by the internet and social media, might help participants to form a greater understanding of other participants points. Individuals can now be more creative in how they express their ideas because of the possibilities offered by social media platforms, which might make it more likely that individuals can express themselves in a way that can be understood by a wider audience. As individuals learn to express themselves better and also form a better understanding of topics that are up for discussion, it would seem that a more empathetic understanding of each other can be fostered. By cultivating conditions that may create more intelligence and empathy, it would seem more likely that participants in discussion can move towards forming a consensus.

2.4 The Action Condition

To meet the action condition a public organisation with political power that can affect policy change is required. For a communication situation to take effective action, it would be able to facilitate a process of communication between citizens and officials in such a way that officials would be able to make policy changes which reflect the consensus formed by citizens.

There is some evidence to suggest that more participation in political discourse creates a greater amount of interest in political processes (Habermas, 2006, p. 413-414). The open access to information and debate available because of the internet and social media, might then, realise this growth of interest on a wider scale. As a result, we might see a greater number of individuals voting in elections and referenda. A growth in interest in the political processes of a society might also bring about a situation where the actions taken by officials would be more representative of the electorate as the representatives themselves might be under a higher amount of scrutiny from a more engaged citizenry. This possible increase in the level of scrutiny which is possible because of the constant updating of, and access to, information that can occur on the internet and social media would mean that it is much more difficult for elected representatives to deceive the electorate. The

level of scrutiny may make officials more accountable to the electorate, and so, they must maintain integrity. They can maintain integrity by, initially, making promises that are realistic and not only made in order to win votes, and then, further to this, by trying to keep to their promises or keeping voters informed about progress they may, or may not, be making and give reasons as to why. The internet and social media may be able to create a more Ideal Political Agent as they are able to hold officials to their promises. The populace, then, could scrutinise the activities of their elected officials to a higher degree than has been possible before and can question them directly and in such a way that other participants can be aware of. This might create a more collaborative politics where individuals can have direct input into decision-making. The internet and social media could help facilitate the spreading of relevant information to the populace which can then be studied and scrutinised in a collaborative process so that the most representative action can be taken (Tapscott, 2009, p. 193).

When the actions taken by officials are not representative of the populace, the internet and social media offer other ways to take action besides voting. Protest and mass action can be organised and facilitated much quicker and more easily than before. A good example of this would be the Arab Spring which began in December 2010 when a Tunisian fruit vendor set himself on fire to protest police harassment. The Arab Spring is the name given to a range of protests which took place in several countries in the Middle-East. Protesters gathered with the aim of challenging the regimes in their countries. Around this time, many individuals used their social media accounts to spread political ideas and this spread of political ideas seemed to precede the outbreak of mass protest; "During the week before Egyptian president Hosni Mubaraks resignation, for example, the total rate of tweets from Egypt — and around the world — about political change in that country ballooned from 2,300 a day to 230,000 a day."[4] The speed at which mass action could be galvanised through the use of social media would not have been possible with previous communication technologies.

The access condition, then, seems to be met on the internet and social media as it allows for detailed scrutinisation of promises that election candidates make in order to get elected. Elected

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[4]   O῾Donnell. C., *New Study Quantifies use of Social Media in Arab Spring,* (University of Washington, September 12, 2011) accessed here: http://www.washington.edu/news/2011/09/12/new-study-quantifies-use-of-social-media-in-arab-spring/

officials can then be further scrutinised by the electorate, and so, it is more likely that they will keep to the promises that were made before elections took place. The internet and social media also allows individuals to orchestrate mass action in a much quicker way than was possible with other communication situations.

2.5 Conclusion

The possibilities presented above show how the internet and social media could fulfil the four conditions of Ideal Communication Situations. There are, of course, negative aspects of the internet and social media. In the next chapter I will analyse how the internet and social media face difficulties in regards to producing possibilities for meeting the four conditions and might actually diminish political agency.

Chapter 3 – How the internet and social media seem to fail to meet the criteria for Ideal Communication Situations

In the previous chapter I showed how the internet and social media seem to enhance the possibilities for accessible communication between informed citizens which can then affect policy change in a way that contributes to fulfilling the four necessary conditions of Ideal Communication Situations which were described in chapter one. As was shown in chapter two, the internet and social media present us with new possibilities for communication which could impact debate and political agency in a positive way.

Many commentators, however, have claimed that this is not the case and that, in fact, political discussion that occurs online has a negative impact on political agency:

"...the Internet shows signs of creating for the first time what Marshall McLuhan

prophesied as a consequence of television, a global village, something that has the disadvantages both of globalization and of a village. Certainly it does offer reliable sources of information for those who want it and know what they are looking for, but equally it supports that mainstay of all villages, gossip. It constructs proliferating meeting places for the free and unstructured exchange of messages which bear a variety of claims, fancies, and suspicions, entertaining, superstitious, scandalous, or malign. The chances that many of these messages will be true are low, and the probability that the system itself will help anyone to pick out the true ones is even lower. In this respect, postmodern technology may have returned us dialectically to a transmuted version of the pre-modern world, and the chances of acquiring true beliefs by these means, except for those who already have knowledge to guide them, will be much like those in the Middle Ages. At the same time, the global nature of these conversations makes the situation worse than in a village, where at least you might encounter and be forced to listen to some people who had different opinions and obsessions. As critics concerned for the future of democratic discussion have pointed out, the Internet makes it easy for large numbers of previously isolated extremists to find each other and talk only among themselves." (Williams, 2002, pp. 112-113)

In this chapter I will analyse how the internet and social media seem to impact negatively upon political agency.

1.3 The Access Condition

In chapter one it was shown that if certain subconditions could be achieved then this might also realise the access condition. These subconditions are:

VII)   Universal access to information for all participants (A1)

VIII)   Universal access to the location of debate (A2)

IX) Information is of good quality. That is; relevant, contextualised, coherent and non-biased (A3)

As was shown in chapter two, it is very difficult to deny that subconditions A1 and A2, are not realised by the internet and social media as access to information and debate may be better now

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than at any other time in human history. We have unprecedented access to more information than ever before and could have more exposure to a wider variety of personally held ideals than ever before. However, it could be claimed that, with input from every individual, we experience an over-saturation of information. The internet and social media have also given individuals new ways of presenting information that might make it impotent. It could be argued, then, that it is much more difficult for the internet and social media to fulfil subcondition A3.

As any individual can contribute to debate at any time from anywhere, there are so many different perspectives on an event that a context for understanding an idea or opinion might be difficult to locate. The sheer amount of information available because of this might rob information of its resonance. For information to resonate, it must be a "particular statement in a particular context" (Postman, 1987, p. 17). Instead of being exposed to information that might be of universal significance, or resonance, the internet and social media has created a space for a constant influx of information which, "pops into view, then vanishes again" (Postman, 1987, p. 78-79). This results in an over-saturation of information which may be irrelevant, incoherent and impotent in the everyday lives of individual citizens.

In his book, "Amusing Ourselves to Death," Neil Postman describes how overload of information and the methods used to present information can affect how individuals behave. Irrelevant, incoherent and impotent information can make individuals passive observers of information. This passive observation of events might have developed on the internet and social media to such an extent that the creation of irrelevant information has become profitable. This phenomena has been given a name; "the attention economy." The attention economy is the name given to the monetising of attention. Creators of information want to yield as high a following, or viewership, as possible so that they can yield the highest profits. Viewership can easily be monitored online by information creators. They can attain a higher yield by producing information that is more likely to garner attention or a following. This encourages the production of information or news that can attract as many views, likes, follows and shares as possible, and so, information is presented within a context which makes it possible for the whole world to understand it in some way (Postman, 1987, p. 70). Information, then, is presented with this goal in mind, rather than with the goal of presenting a view within a framework of debate so that consensus can be formed. In this way, the information presented resembles that which was presented in Ancient Greece, which was

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presented by individuals to attain fame rather than to generate productive and collaborative debate.

Much information is created for the sake of attaining viewership rather than to encourage reflection and thought. Reading information in a newspaper used to involve processes which required that individuals 'slow down' their mind (Greenfield, 2008, p. 168) to construct an idea of what the writer was trying to communicate so that it could be fully understood. Information created on the internet and social media is created to make a point quickly to cater for "a world of immediate response rather than one of reflective initiative" (Greenfield, 2008, p. 180). By using the internet and social media as a means for accessing information to form opinions and ideals, individuals might be "having an experience rather than thinking" (Greenfield, 2008, p. 180). To form an understanding of something we must build up, "a personalized conceptual framework through which we can relate incoming information to what we "know" already. We can place an isolated fact in a context that gives our perceptions a "significance" - that is, we can see one thing in terms of something else, or more usually in terms of many things" (Greenfield, 2008, p. 165). The information created on the internet and social media may be stripped bare of informative details which shrivels context and makes it difficult for participants to garner an understanding of events (Greenfield, 2008, p. 181).

This suggests that the internet and social media may have "made the relationship between information and action both abstract and remote" (Postman, 1987, p. 69). The constant turnover of information and running commentary about events from anybody from any perspective in order to garner attention might reduce our understanding of events to a pseudo-contextual understanding (Postman, 1987, p. 78). As a result of this lack of contextualised and coherent information, citizens may be unable to resonate with it, and so, do not take action, even when action may seem to be a necessary step to take (Postman, 1987, pp. 66-69). Furthermore, it would seem that this lack of contextualised information might create circumstances where citizens are inspired to take action because of information which has no substantive bearing upon the reality of their situation. The overwhelming amount of information might make it difficult for citizens to distinguish whether a sensational statement is true or not.

The internet and social media seem to fulfil subconditions A1 and A2 of the access condition as it allows for almost universal access to information. However, the information that we have

access to may not be of a good enough quality for individuals to understand the significance of events. This means that individuals become passive observers of information rather than active users of it. It might also mean that citizens act upon information which is not factual. This, then, leaves the possibility that the internet and social media fulfils the subcondition A3, that information is of a good quality, up for dispute.

2. The Freedom Condition

The freedom condition can be met by a communication situation if it meets the three subconditions identified in chapter one. These are:

VII) Societal rank is not considered when opinions are being presented (F1)

VIII) Participants are free to form opinions and express their ideas, meaning that psychological and physical coercion are not present during this process (F2)

IX) Ideas are not censored (F3)

As with the access condition, it is very difficult to deny that the internet and social media offers a great deal of freedom for individuals when it comes to forming political opinions. Again, this is because individuals are exposed to a wider variety of opinions and ideals because they can access a wide variety of information. Individuals are not limited to using information which can only be located within their local vicinity and social rank is not something which seems to have a great impact on what opinions can be expressed by whom and to whom. In this sense, it would seem that all three subconditions; F1, F2 and F3, of the freedom condition could be met by the internet and social media. However, the level of freedom possible online might make it difficult to form a political identity or identify with a political cause. Exposure to so many different ideals and the ability to identify with any of these ideals might mean that individuals do not have to undertake risk and commit to any political goal. Risk and commitment are usually important aspects of political agency as it is usually risking exposure and undertaking commitment to pursuing an ideal which creates an awareness of the issue ad later change within society. In this sense, then, it may be the case that the internet and social media offers users so much freedom to form opinions and express ideas that the risk and commitment which may have traditionally given political ideals their intensity is missing. In this section I will analyse how this seems to affect this important aspect of political agency.

In his book, "On the Internet," Hubert Dreyfus suggests that the way that we interact with each other and with information online has created the possibility that individuals can linger within the aesthetic sphere. By lingering within the aesthetic sphere, individuals never fully develop an identity which helps them to locate their own ethical code, and therefore, political ideals. Dreyfus' argument is based on the claim that, on the internet and social media, individuals interact and communicate in a disembodied way. Embodiment – when we interact physically with our environment – is not possible on the internet and social media. Embodiment frames, "our sense of the reality of things and people and our ability to interact effectively with them," and this depends, "on the way our body works silently in the background. Its ability to get a grip on things provides our sense of the reality of what we are doing and are ready to do; this, in turn, gives us a sense both of our power and of our vulnerability to the risky reality of the physical world" (Dreyfus, 2001, p. 70).This means that our body works without our conscious awareness of it and provides optimal grip. That is; it helps to grasp the physical reality of our world by providing feedback between our actions and perceptual world. Our bodies make us aware of the constant vulnerabilities that we face in the physical world. We achieve meaning in our lives by being able to influence physical events and receiving perceptual feedback about those actions (Dreyfus, 2001, p. 53). Action requires risk and commitment and it is these risks and commitments that shape our identity and inform us of who we are by shaping our 'ethical sphere.' In the ethical sphere, "one has a stable identity and one engages in involved action. Information is not played with, but is sought and used for serious purposes"(Dreyfus, 2001, p. 83). Our physical spaces, or embodied states, inform us of our limitations and therefore provide a framework for understanding ourselves and what is important to us. This will in turn affect the causes we undertake in reality and further shapes who we are. The body provides us with a 'primordial belief' (Dreyfus, 2001, p. 55) of the reality of the world.

By trading embodiment for ubiquitous telepresence in cyberspace we are disposing of the entity which helps us to locate that which is important to us and therefore our true selves. The internet and social media makes it possible that individuals can remain living within the 'aesthetic sphere.' The aesthetic sphere leaves us, "without some way of telling the significant from the insignificant and the relevant from the irrelevant, everything becomes equally interesting and equally boring and one finds oneself back in the indifference of the present age"(Dreyfus, 2001, p. 82). Instead of locating a true self through risk and commitment in the physical world, the internet

and social media offers individuals the opportunity to sift casually between many identities. This is what Dreyfus calls the 'postmodern self.' The postmodern self is, "a self that has no defining content or continuity but is constantly taking on new roles" (Dreyfus, 2001, p. 81). This can lead to a situation when, "the multiplicity of causes and the ease of making and breaking commitments, which should have supported action, will eventually lead either to paralysis or an arbitrary choice as to which commitments to take seriously"(Dreyfus, 2001, p. 82).

The freedom to form political opinions, then, might have a damaging impact upon political agency. Yes, the internet and social media gives individuals more freedom from physical and psychological coercion than ever before, however, the disembodied way that this communication technology is used means that individuals may never have to identify with any cause as the reality of a cause never fully confronts them or affects their lives in a way that means they cannot ignore it. The freedom to form many identities removes the necessity for risk and commitment to political ideals.

1.3 The Exchange Condition

If a communication situation can meet the three subconditions of the exchange condition, it might be said that it could bring about an Ideal Communication Situation. These three subconditions are:

VII)   Participants must have the opportunity to voice their concerns and ideas (E1)

VIII)   Participants must listen to the concerns and ideas of other participants (E2)

IX) Participants must aim at forming a consensus on what the underlying general issues are and what action to take in order to express themselves as a public (E3)

Subcondition E1 could be met on the internet and social media because anyone can have a social media account, and therefore, add their opinions to debate. An important aspect of the exchange condition is that participants exchange their ideas and opinions in a way that others can understand. This might require a certain level of rational-critical psychology and empathy by both the speaker and listener. This is necessary for creating good, well-ordered debate so that participants can articulate their concerns clearly for others to understand and that consensus can then be formed. The internet and social media create the possibility for communication by anyone

to anyone and may boost intelligence and empathy as a result, meaning that subconditions E2 and E3 could be fulfilled on the internet and social media. However, questions can be raised about the organisation of this communication. It seems to be possible that individuals can actually shut themselves of from debate and, instead, seek out other individuals who only serve to reinforce their already held beliefs. Concerns also arise about how the ability to exchange opinions with anyone, anywhere at any time in a relatively anonymous way can impact the productivity of discussion and debate. There are also concerns that the possibility for constant, ongoing debate might lessen the impact of debate and the nature of the opinions shared. In what follows, I will attempt to show how this seems to affect political agency negatively.

The internet and social media presents individuals with the freedom to construct their own opinions through debate with many other individuals who hold beliefs which are very different from one's own. However, it is also very possible for individuals to withdraw and be alone with a screen (Greenfield, 2008, p. 178) and escape any confrontation whatsoever. Being exposed to differing opinions is important as "a system of free expression increases the likelihood that when groups and societies move in some direction, it is for good reasons" (Sunstein, 2003, p. 96). It is possible, with the internet and social media, that individuals can forego this important confrontational step of discussion and only ever come into contact with other individuals who hold similar beliefs to their own. These individuals, then, help each other to reaffirm each others beliefs. The result could be that the "internet will amplify whatever tendencies an individual might have" (Greenfield, 2008, p. 177). So, rather than forming political opinions that are based on a rigorous procedure where many views and ideas have been considered, individuals are only becoming more convinced of how correct they are. This phenomena might also be called an 'echo-chamber.' Echo-chambers make rational-critical debate unlikely as individuals can become so sure of the correctness of their ideal that the consensus forming aspect of discussion might never be realised. And so, the idea that the internet and social media can help cultivate the realisation of subcondition E2 could be disputed.

Another problem with the exchanging of opinions and ideas on the internet and social media is that the very nature of the way these ideas and opinions are expressed might become meaningless. With the constant and ongoing debate that is possible online, views and ideas may be expressed in order to 'score points,' as was the case, on an oral level, in Ancient Greece when free citizens debated in front of an audience. Ideas can be expressed quickly and it requires much less

effort to have your views heard. In this sense, it is much easier to voice ideals just to be heard. The same problem mentioned in the access condition occurs during the exchange of ideas. Individuals may be expressing ideas in order to achieve approval or generate traffic and likes and shares. Communication on the internet and social media can be very reactionary as a result of the liking and sharing capabilities. Individuals can show approval in a very cheap way for ideals that have been expressed with the sole purpose of generating attention. In this way, "human nature... could be obliterated in favour of a passive state reacting to a flood of incoming sensations – a 'yuk-and-wow' mentality characterised by a premium on the raw senses and momentary experience as the landscape of the brain shifts into one where personalized brain connectivity is either not functional or absent altogether" (Greenfield, 2008, p. 203). In the coffee houses and salons of the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere, considered and well thought out opinions were exchanged as the amount of time available for debating was limited. No such limits are present on the internet and social media. This might make the importance of arriving at a consensus less prevalent as it would seem that there is no obligation to reach a conclusion. As a result, individuals may undertake discussion for the sake of undertaking discussion. The intention to arrive at consensus, in this case, is not present. Therefore, the ideas presented lack importance and subcondition E3 is difficult to achieve.

The anonymity which was praised for creating a safe environment for individuals to express themselves free of harm also has drawbacks. As a result of disembodied anonymity, individuals lose the vulnerability and risk that is usually inherent in expressing an idea. As we have seen before, this can be a very positive possibility for those who are unable to safely express their ideas within oppressive communities. However, freedom and safety through anonymity is also possible for individuals who wish to be disruptive and even harmful. It is also possible that individual users of social media can be susceptible to a great amount of online abuse and bullying. This impacts political agency as individuals might not express certain ideas because they fear being attacked in this way. It also threatens agency in that it, again, can add to the incoherence of debate by infiltrating productive debate and steering it away from this. Or as Dreyfus puts it: "In news groups, anyone, anywhere, any time, can have an opinion on anything. All are only too eager to respond to the equally deracinated opinions of other anonymous amateurs who post their views from nowhere. Such commentators do not take a stand on the issues they speak about. Indeed, the very ubiquity of the Net tends to make any such local stand seem irrelevant" (Dreyfus, 2001, p. 78). Anonymity,

when used in this way, does not facilitate the development of rational-critical debate or empathy.

The internet and social media present new obstacles as far as the exchanging of ideas is concerned. It would seem that it is very possible that individuals, rather than challenging their opinions and ideas, can locate an environment where there ideas are reaffirmed. This would be problematic for debate as it might create an environment where individuals are unlikely to hear or listen to opposing views to their own. The possibility that debate can remain constant and ongoing without ever moving towards a consensus is very likely on the internet and social media. This seems to weaken the strength of debate and cheapens the ideas expressed. Trolling, which is possible because of disembodied anonymity is a new phenomena fostered by the internet and social media which can also impact debate in a negative way.

1.3. The Action Condition

The possibility that any individual might initiate political action has been heightened by the internet and social media. It also may be easier to mobilise individuals to act en masse by protesting or signing petitions in a much quicker way than before. However, it can be questioned whether activity undertaken online can actually be understood as political action. As has been suggested already in this chapter, it seems that political action requires physical action. Activity undertaken on the internet and social media might be called symbolic gesturing. It is unclear how much this can affect the political reality of a society. In this section I will analyse how far the internet and social media actually facilitates action.

The internet and social media has created a faster type of communication. It is now possible for an individual to garner mass support for their cause in a quicker period of time and perhaps affect policy change. This is because networking and the movement of information can happen much quicker and much more efficiently. The internet and social media has given every individual the opportunity to have a much bigger sphere of influence (Tapscott, 2009, p. 193). The level of commitment needed from individuals to achieve a large number of supporters has also diminished because of this. It is much easier to create a petition and find support from a large number of people with the internet and social media because the process of supporting a petition only involves the act of clicking on a few links. Petitions can be passed from social sphere to social sphere so quickly and

easily that the act seems to lack the commitment which would give it a legitimising force. It would seem that for an action to have force it must take on some sort of physicality.

If we return again to the mass uprising of the Arab Spring; it can be seen that the action which actually counted as political action was the gathering of masses in a physical space. Yes, this was facilitated by the internet and social media, however, it was the physical act which gave the action its meaning and power to affect change. Petitioning online does not generate the same impetus or intensity as people exercising their political agency in a physical way. This seems to strengthen Dreyfus' claim that meaningful action requires embodiment. The disembodied, ubiquitous telepresence offered by the internet and social media might struggle to match the impact of physical action. The action that can be taken on the internet and social media is essentially meaningless without a consequent commitment to action in the physical world if this is the case. In this sense, "wall-to-wall must result in a face-to-face. Profiles must become people"(Wittkower, 2010, p. 239).

For discussion and debate to count, it might be the case that a physical act must always follow. By occupying spaces and exposing themselves, political agents are taking a risk which demonstrates how important their goal is to them. It might be this which resonates with others and gives consensus force. Voting is also a physical act. The internet and social media may give individuals the opportunity to debate and form opinions but, in the end, it still seems that it is physical acts which count as political. This suggests that the internet and social media have not improved or enhanced this fundamental aspect of western liberal democracies.

1.4 Conclusion

It has now been shown that the internet and social media has several drawbacks in regards to political communication. It would therefore be difficult to suggest that it can be understood as a communication technology which can facilitate Ideal Communication Situations.

In the next chapter I will attempt to analyse how close the internet and social media can come to realising the Ideal Communication Situation by readdressing some of the points in this chapter. This will involve investigating whether the definition of a political agent as an individual

who undertakes committed, physical action which involves risk over a period of time is still relevant today. I will also attempt to understand if the internet and social media has enhanced the possibilities for productive political agency in comparison to previous communication situations.

Chapter four – Conclusion: How do the Internet and Social Media affect political Agency?

The internet and social media seems to provide platforms which could facilitate the realisation of an Ideal Communication Situation. As was shown in chapter two, the internet and social media have created conditions where all participants can have access to information and can form opinions in a way where coercive power is diminished. Ideas and opinions can then be exchanged by anyone to anyone, and so, all individuals seem to have the opportunity to add input into discourse. This adding of input can occur through tacit, everyday conversation, as well as, more explicit "campaigning."

However, communicative problems arise because of the nature of the internet and social media. Interaction between participants which occurs in a disembodied way might create conversation which lacks intensity, and political ideals may be formed without an ethical sphere as their bedrock. Commitment and risk, which have traditionally been considered key characteristics of political agency, seem to be less prevalent on the internet and social media as participants can constantly change identities, as well as offer and withdraw support for a cause at any time. This might make attempts at political action which occur online seem trivial.

In this concluding chapter I will describe two different views of what these positives and negatives might suggest about the internet and social media as a communicative tool and the agency it may or may not facilitate. I will call these views the "pessimistic view" and the "optimistic view." I will then attempt to reconcile these views by considering the limitations of the Ideal Communication Situation, before finally offering a conclusion as to whether the internet and social media enhances or diminishes political agency.

1.4 **The Pessimistic View**

The pessimistic view of the internet and social media would be that it is allowing poor information to enter the public sphere which creates unrealistic views of what can be achieved through the current democratic framework and creates frustration within society that can lead to harmful action. Or, that the internet and social media allow for poor information to enter the public sphere which creates a negative, or suspicious, opinion of the democratic framework itself. And

finally, the internet and social media allows for poor information to enter the public sphere allowing for the manipulation of voters. This view of the internet and social media suggests that it is a technology which has created a communication situation which cultivates forms of political agency which are harmful to democracy.

The ability for anyone, anywhere to add information at anytime may seem like a positive as this will ensure that all voices and opinions can affect policy change in some way. This seems to be a key aspect of Western Liberal Democracies in that this allows every citizen the free and equal opportunity to voice an opinion and affect change. However, the ease at which information can be added might bring about an overload of information which might affect the overall standard of opinions in a negative way. There is so much information available now that it could be difficult to recognise which information is useful and which is irrelevant. Useful and irrelevant information can, then, have the same influencing power on the consensus forming stage of debate and perhaps cultivate harmful behaviour.

This might be described as the "pessimistic view" of the type of political agency that is cultivated on the internet and social media. This view suggests that the internet and social media harms communication and might facilitate acts which harm democratic processes and rights. These negative acts could have been facilitated by the internet and social media because they seem to have upset the commonly understood "rules of the game" of information exchange in a public sphere. These rules used to mean that power to intervene in the process of opinion forming used to be held, mainly, by agents, such as journalists or experts. Journalists and experts served as a linking point, or gatekeeper, between civil society and the political center, where officials can use administrative power (Habermas, 2006, p. 415), by feeding "relevant issues, facts, and arguments," into the public sphere which could be mobilised to form public opinion and affect policy change (Habermas, 2006, p.419-420).

Now, however, through use of the internet and social media, anyone can have access to tools which grants them influencing power. Any agent can intervene during the process of opinion forming, and therefore, help to influence public opinion. The agents, or institutional bodies, which used to hold the most power to strategically intervene in the process of public opinion forming seemed to do so with a certain amount of care and responsibility. Agents who wished to attain such

power to intervene had to gain a certain amount of expertise and knowledge about how to collect data that could be presented as facts and how to present information in a way that was constructive for discussion. There seemed to be a certain amount of responsibility to not generate a certain point of view. Whereas, with the use of the internet and social media for inputting information into the public sphere, individuals are not accountable to the same level of responsibility. As a result, individuals can affect and shape public opinion as much as their sphere of influence will allow. Indeed, they can grow their sphere of influence much easier than previou communication situations would have allowed. Now, it is much easier for any participant to shape, frame and nudge debate in a certain direction.

This may cause some issues in terms of political agency which can be made more explicit by returning to the definition of the Ideal Political Agent. The Ideal Political Agent is rational, critical and empathetic. They want to engage in debate with other participants and gain as full an understanding of the others viewpoint as possible. Finally, our Ideal Political Agent will come to form an idea, in collaboration with others, as to what the underlying common concern is and form a consensus with the others as to what action to take in order to address this concern. For this process to occur as perfectly as possible, it requires that accurate and relevant information is utilised. On the internet and social media there is so much information about events that it might be difficult for the Ideal Political Agent to form a basis from which the consensus forming process can initiate from, and so, actions taken are not a true representation of the concerns that may arise within a populace.

Another issue that may arise because of this declining authority of traditional media powers is that a wider proliferation of opinions can arise and help to foster a larger extent of extremist views within a society. Indeed, this seems to be the case (Williams, 2002, p. 113). As everyone can add information to debate and the accuracy of this information is harder to locate it seems much more difficult to discount one "fact" over another. The epistemological basis for judging the accuracy of information seems to be eroding and therefore trust is also in decline. This diminishment of trust is detrimental to democracy as democracy demands that individuals can compromise with each other going forward even if their beliefs are completely different. This lack of trust causes a friction between citizens which may be difficult to overcome with legislation.

3. **The Optimistic View**

The optimistic view suggests that the tensions that arise because of over-saturation of information and disembodied communication are just obstacles which must, and can be, overcome on the way towards a more representative consensus.

The pessimistic view of the internet and social media seems to hold up previous methods of communication as the gold standard. The written word and talking in a face-to-face way are regarded with such high esteem that it might discount other means of communication. It does seem very possible to concede that; yes, the internet and social media have limits in that the meaning of ideas may be difficult to construe due to the disembodied way by which they are presented, however, the printed word and face-to-face communication also presents limits which the internet and social media can alleviate.

Sceptics of the disembodied communication of the internet and social media, such as Dreyfus and, presumably, Postman, may be guilty of judging this type of communication by the standards of a previous time. They champion discussion which takes place in a physical, face-to-face environment as this means that individuals are taking risks by presenting their ideas to an audience. As a result of this, individuals are more likely to have subjected their ideas to a more strenuous process of thought and consideration. By being in front of an audience, individuals would want to present carefully constructed arguments and would have to listen attentively to the arguments of others so that they could respond in kind. Writing articles for printed journals seems to require more care as well, as only certain ideas could be printed. The assumption here is that only the best written work would be printed.

The internet and social media may have lowered the quality of opinions shared. However, it has created possibilities which might achieve more than carefully constructed arguments traded in a physical, face-to-face way could. Imagine that every communication between individuals had to involve some sort of physical meeting. This would greatly limit the amount of confrontations or discussions which could occur. The internet and social media can facilitate discussion between all. It is difficult to imagine a communication technology that facilitates global and universal communication that does not involve some amount of disembodiment. The dismissal of online interaction as not useful because it lacks embodiment seems to be an all or nothing claim. Just

because an interaction does not involve all of the traditional aspects of communication does not mean that it has been unproductive. The difference between intensity in face-to-face discussion and disembodied discussion may be vast but this does not mean that disembodied discussion should be dismissed because of this. The optimistic view, then, suggests that, even though the potential for affecting change from each action online may be diminished, the amount of actions which occur can eventually lead to a greater overall result.

The optimistic view acknowledges the problems – that there is a lot of differing information, that communication in a disembodied state might lack intensity or resonance – but looks at them as steps towards a larger, more coherent outcome. That is; consensus forming might take longer, but this is because participants are being exposed to a much broader picture of all of the possible outcomes and viewpoints. So, the proliferation of opinion coud be explained as part of the process. As debate and discussion continues, over time, differing opinions will be brought closer and closer together until the underlying issue is resolved.

1.4 Conclusion

Both the pessimistic and optimistic view of the internet and social media seem to be possibilities that could occur. However both seem to suggest that the communication technology of the internet and social media has created these phenomena. Under the pessimistic view, it would seem that the internet and social media has created a tension between individuals which causes each individual to view the other as a threat. The optimistic view, on the other hand, suggests that the internet and social media can cultivate a mutual understanding between individuals and facilitate discussion from a "moral ground zero" (Benhabib, 1997, p. 78). By beginning at "moral ground zero," participants would be approaching debate without any grievances or ideals. They would be neutral as far as ideology is concerned and would engage in discussion only to achieve rational consensus. A more neutral view, however, suggests that the internet and social media has not created new phenomena. Rather, the internet and social media is just another medium for communication ad that any results are dependent solely on how individuals utilise that technology. The point is that it is the users of technology who create the outcomes. It is not the technology which alters behaviour.

By analysing phenomena that seem to emerge from the internet and social media from this neutral point of view, the limits of the ideal communication situation become much more apparent. It acts more as a regulatory ideal, rather than an empirical or practical one in that it seems to be an ideal that is worth striving toward, but is in all likelihood unattainable (Mouffe, 1997, p. 28). The end that the Ideal Communication Situation would hope to move discussion towards is one where citizens, through deliberation, come to discover a common thread which they can utilise when trying to form consensus on principles that can constitute a basis for rules that would govern a society. Deliberation, in theory, is supposed to create an "enlarged mentality" where citizens can think about the wider picture of society and calculate a consensus that would suit all participants (Benhabib, 1996, p. 72). If this were to be achieved, it would seem that the optimistic view, detailed above, could be realised. Whether any communication technology could encourage such objective scrutiny where indivduals suspend consideration of their own interests for the greater good would be a difficult coclusion to make. On the other side of this it is also difficult to conclude that a communication technology can encourage individuals to only care for their own ideals. Or, in other terms, create the pessimistic view.

This acknowledgement of the difficulty of realising the ideal shows us that there is a tension within democratic processes. This tension is sometimes considered to be the paradox of liberal democracies. There seems to exist a paradox between what the ideal of liberal democracy is and how liberal democracies actually function. The tension, or paradox, arises because it is difficult to capture exactly what is meant by "the people." Decisions made within democratic constituencies are said to have been derived from the expressed wishes and demands of "the people." However, it would seem that the consensus formed in deliberation cannot always represent the plurality of opinion that may be present in complex societies, and so, the democratic process seems to continue whilst simultaneously "disowning" the voices of dissenters (Mouffe, 1997, p. 25). The ideal form of communication could be achieved if plurality were removed, so that every citizen would enter discussion from a very similar frame of reference. In this way, the consensus reached, then, might have a much better chance of representing all of the differing opinions. However, this narrowing of the scope of opinion would involve too much exclusion and, therefore, would be anti-democratic (Mouffe, 1997, p. 28).

The internet and social media seems to highight this paradox more than other

communication technologies could have done because these disowned voices are able to use the relatively cheap and accessible medium of the internet and social media to project their ideals and opinions into the public sphere for consideration. With previous communication situations, political agency required some form of physical organisation. For a cause to receive attention and gather force, physical mass protest or action was required. Citizens had to be seen and heard because the type of communication itself was physical. For a political cause to attain traction or velocity, a certain amount of time was required to "spread the news." With the internet and social media, because of the speed at which communication can occur due to the lack of physical constraints, an ideal can attain much more force over a much shorter period of time. In this sense, the geographical landscape is no longer a limiting factor as to what views can attain force within the public sphere. So, with the internet and social media, it is much easier for voices which may have been disowned to group together in such a way that a collective voice can affect debate. The amount of time required to create this force of opinion has also been dramatically shortened.

This new dynamic for political agency seems to be the most prescient change from previous forms of political agency which were possible during other communication situations. It can have both positive and negative affects depending upon the ideal which inspires action. What ideals can be considered positive or negative might be a topic for another time. Here, I would like to focus on the affect that constant demands for change could have on the institutional framework itself.

According to Habermas, democratic institutions embody "the idealized content of a form of practical reason" (Benhabib, 1996, p. 68). That is, democratic institutions seem to maintain ideals over time which help to maintain the functioning of a society. Democratic institutions seek to embody the consensus formed during debate and encapsulate the general will. The extent to which this can be achieved was mentioned earlier. Not all demands can be fully encapsulated by these institutions but some form of commonality is thought to be which helps to maintain the functioning of society even where plurality exists. The internet and social media has made it possible for individuals who feel that these institutions do not work for them to mobilise and demand change. Many different vocies can attempt to pull the institutions in their direction which can have a destabilising affect on the institutions themselves.

It might be prudent here to return to the limits of the ideal pointed out earlier. The idea that

an overall consensus that can encapsulate all citizens within a definition of "the people" seems to be much too big a task for any communication situation to complete. To conclude that this could be the case seems much too utopian. Plurality of opinion will probably always exist. In this sense, institutions cannot embody the scope of all opinion. The internet and social media might have helped previously disowned voices to attain force to some degree, however, to claim that they created these voices in the first instance seems like quite a stretch. The internet and social media has given individuals who have previously felt disowned the opportunity to have a stronger voice. As we have seen this can have positive and negative outcomes depending on the ideals presented. One of the strengths of liberal democracy is that it allows for plurality to exist. It acknowledges that difference is a good thing and that maintaining freedom is something worth striving for. Maintaining plurality whilst encapsulating "the people" is a difficult task and requires much communication, compromise and discussion. Acknowledging these limitations and corrective measures seems to be a fundamental aspect of liberal democracy. The maintenance of these ideals might require that a "commonality"(Mouffe, 1997, p. 32) is forged. The internet and social media seems to provide the perfect platform for the realisation of this, especially in a world which is becoming much more open and global.

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