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“Will Nobody Do Anything to Help?”

Networked Journalism and Politics

3.1 Introduction

It used to be thought – and I include myself in this – that help was on the horizon. New forms of communication would provide new outlets to by-pass the increasingly shrill tenor of traditional media. In fact, the new forms can be even more pernicious, less balanced, more intent on the latest conspiracy theory multiplied by five.

(Tony Blair, MP)¹

The reporting of politics is the most important function of journalism. It is how societies have a conversation about power. How else can we have a meaningful debate beyond our most local community except through the news media?

In this chapter I am going to explore the way that Networked Journalism is changing the terms of that debate and how it can do so in the future.

There is a deep democratic deficit across much of the world. In the past 30 years we have seen the expansion of representative democratic systems across much of the globe, and yet politics is seen to be in crisis. The legitimacy of politicians and the engagement of citizens are deeply in question. In an age of “mediation politics” in the so-called “global village”² the debate about this gulf between ideal and reality is increasingly situated in the news media itself. The expansion of the Internet and digital communications accelerates this tendency. They appear to offer increased opportunities for enhanced democratic discourse. So institutions are looking to invest even more in the political potential of the media. But as we saw in Chapter 1, the new

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media also provides a route for disengagement and fragmentation of the public sphere.

The response to this has been clumsy. At present much of the policy on public engagement is the wrong way around. There is an assumption that contemporary mainstream politics is important. Policy-makers appear convinced that their way of working can be adapted to engage the public without any profound changes. This is very similar to the way that many in the mainstream media once viewed their consumers. It was felt that if the product was revamped and if new media was exploited to provide new platforms, then surely the audience would return. In the cases of both politics and the media this ignores a much longer-term trend in disengagement from traditional politics and mainstream media coverage. As I suggested in the previous chapter, both politics and political reporting has to move to where the public is going. Indeed, the politicians and media should be leading the way. The news media is learning that lesson very quickly, spurred on by commercial imperatives. Politicians are moving at different speeds on this, but all are behind the public's own attitudinal shifts.

This is not to say that there was a Golden Age of deep engagement, some democratic polis where people, politicians, and the media shared a common space on equal terms. There are various myths about the popular press in the past. These myths exaggerate the power of the media and the degree to which public opinion is able to flow as a direct democratic force. For example, one piece of received wisdom is that the US Network TV News shows somehow turned the course of the Vietnam War. In fact Nixon was re-elected at the height of the media campaign revealing the horrors of the war in south-east Asia. In the UK there is the legend of the intelligent tabloid, such as the Daily Mirror in the 1960s and 1970s. According to some like John Pilger^{3,4} (who was there and did do some crusading journalism of the highest order), it was uniquely able to combine campaigning left-wing politics with a popular touch. If this Golden Age of intelligent tabloids ever did exist, it was brief and unsustainable. As we discussed in Chapter 1, the periods when high politics and serious journalism were truly part of a common popular culture were always questionable. Indeed, it is arguable that in a progressive open society, journalism, politics, and the public should always be in tension and not reconciled. As soon as the relationship becomes settled then it is already in decay.

In most Western countries at the moment, the reporting of politics has never been more extensive, detailed, and professional. Anybody interested in the proceedings of Congress, or Westminster, or Brussels, or the United Nations is super-served thanks to online information and digital and 24 hour news

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channels. Official and independent political websites now offer vast amounts of primary data. There are thousands of specialist online and magazine publications that provide research and commentary on all aspects of the world's political machinery. But this is targeted largely at the politically engaged elite and the fear is that the rest of the population is not paying attention.

The wider public has available to it a greater amount of political information than ever before. The media provide instant reportage, analysis, and commentary on the political process as it happens. Yet most of the evidence is that people find it a turn-off. This could be because people are less interested in mainstream politics. After the extraordinary spectacle of the end of the Cold War and the phase of democratic liberalization from 1989 onwards, the drama of politics has become less compelling on its main stages. History is by no means over, but political history is not being made so much by party leaders and governments as by economic, social, religious, and ethnic forces. The political story has become too complex for conventional political journalism. Mainstream politics in many Western states is going through a dull phase where the ideological fault-lines do not seem to go so deep. The 2007 French Presidential elections were notable for the clear contrast in character and policies between the two candidates. Turnout was high. But this was exceptional and differences probably exaggerated. In an age of anxiety about global risks such as terror and climate change, the narrow party political discourse can seem sterile. In a time of greater individual personal freedom and responsibility the mainstream political process seems more remote and less vital to our real lives. This is not necessarily a bad thing in itself. At the same time there is evidence that people are still very concerned about other forms of politics and want to engage with the big issues. There is increasing philanthropy and charitable giving and growing membership of pressure groups and special interest campaigns.^{5,6} It is not that people are less "political," but more that mainstream politics does not deal with the right issues in a relevant or trusted way. The problem for the mainstream media is that it is still covering that kind of politics. So the public indifference and distrust of politics applies equally to political journalism. However, the media must also take some of the blame itself.

There are extraordinarily high expectations of the media's role in politics and a widespread disillusion with the part that it actually plays.⁷ I am deeply suspicious of research data on trust. I think it is very difficult to measure, let alone over time. I suspect that people voice greater distrust to opinion pollsters than they actually feel. It is fashionable to appear worldly wise and cynical. To a degree it is a kind of intellectual laziness. But, even allowing

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for that caveat, the figures do not look good. Surveys suggest that in the US and Europe trust in the news media has fallen by about a quarter over the past two decades. *Pew* studies talk of a drop from 80 percent to 59 percent in “newspaper believability.” Likewise, TV networks used to enjoy trust about 80 percent, while now the highest score is 66 percent. More specifically, the number of Americans who believe that their media is politically biased has risen from 42 percent to 60 percent.⁸ This is a long-term trend but it is not irreversible. Indeed, more Americans approved of the coverage of the 2006 elections (42 percent) than approved in 2004 of the media (33 percent). Trust can go up as well as down. I think that the *Pew Media Report* summary for 2006 of the US situation applies internationally:

About the best that can be said for the public’s view of the press is that the situation is no longer on a steady and general decline.

Americans continue to appreciate the role they expect the press to play, and by some measure that appreciation is even growing.

But when it comes to how the press is fulfilling those responsibilities, the public’s confidence continued to slip⁹

Increased skepticism on the part of the public about political media and politics itself is not necessarily a bad thing. A reflex questioning attitude is surely a healthy stance to take to those in power, be they in the media or government. However, it can become destructive and divisive if it turns in to a complacent cynicism that automatically rejects the idea of politics as a rational and vital part of human society. There are physical limits to the public’s engagement with politics. This is something that politicians and political journalists often forget. Not everyone wants to be on the school board or canvassing voters. And likewise not everyone wants to spend their time consuming politically edifying journalism. We have lives to lead. But the figures and common experience tells us quite clearly that the kind of political media we have and the politics it attempts to represent does not match public aspirations. So the public want better political journalism, but mainstream media fails to deliver. The gap is partly because of the much wider public drift away from traditional media that we described in Chapter 1. But it is also because much of mainstream political media really *is* biased, partial, and shallow. It is obsessed by political process and commercial profit. And it really *is* generally unconscious and regardless of what its audience cares about.

Networked Journalism offers the potential to address this problem. Some would argue that the new technologies and the new social conditions that

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are changing the news media also offer a chance to change politics. Long-time Democrat campaigner and Internet evangelist Joe Trippi is adamant: "There is only one tool, one platform, one medium that allows the American people to take their government back, and that's the Internet."¹⁰

In what way can the idea of Networked Journalism shape these developments? We are starting to see the emergence of a complementary culture to the mainstream of political journalism. It is not the same as the media counter-cultures that have deliberately set themselves apart from or in opposition to mainstream politics in the past. This is not analogous to the underground journalism of the 1960s in the US or the Samizdat media in Eastern European Communist countries before 1989. Very often the new forms of alternative media are seeking to impact upon the mainstream rather than offer an altogether separate model. Their content as opposed to their form is not always politically radical. I do not deny that the Internet is spawning genuinely counter-cultural models of journalism. But I am interested here in the majority of independent new media journalism that intersects with mainstream media and politics because that is where Networked Political Journalism is being created.

The Internet is already playing a high-profile role in recent US election campaigns. The US is a resource-rich early adopter of new media, so what happens there is at the same time both pioneering and exceptional. It offers clues rather than prescriptions for the future. Online reporting and campaigning has become a significant factor in the mainstream media and the main party campaigns. It has also allowed the creation of a system of "netroots" activism and alternative political media. But can this be described as Networked Journalism? Just because Hillary Clinton launched her campaign online doesn't mean that the bloggers or *YouTube* now determine political reporting.

There is a contrasting scenario in Westminster where the political bloggers often deny any journalistic or political pretensions. Yet they are intimately involved in the reporting of Parliamentary politics in the UK. Will this form the kernel of a new kind of political journalism in Britain? The authorities are keen to use online platforms as a way of boosting voter participation. Some recent experiments such as the British government's e-petition scheme have had unexpected results. In the UK and across Europe there is a lot of money being poured in to the idea that New Media might revive popular interest in politics. But without an understanding of how the news media must become more genuinely connected with the public, it is difficult to see how it can succeed.

The ultimate test of the new age of mediated politics is whether it can play a part in the development of regions that are not rich in technological

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Figure 3.1 Caption to follow

resources. Africa is adopting new media but at a pace and in a way that is specific to its needs (see Figure 3.1). There have been huge strides forward in recent decades in democracy in Africa. But there is still a crisis in accountability and governance across much of the continent. The failure to establish a thriving pluralistic press means that the role of the media in African political development is still potential rather than proven. Can the Networked Journalism paradigm fit the African practice? First, let us look at the impact of forms of Networked Journalism in the US.

3.2 Networked Journalism and US Politics

The US has the most and least democratic system of politics in the world. It offers the greatest access to open political choice to anyone prepared to vote and campaign. And yet the professionalisation of US politics means it has become so dominated by money that power feels more mediated by

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fund-raising than policy debates. This is the nation that pioneered most modern techniques of electioneering. Spin doctors, attack adverts, and rebuttal units all emerged first from US campaign teams. In a mediated age, many of those practices are directed squarely at the media. Indeed, through political TV advertising, US political machines have *become* the media. There is no question that New Media is now very much part of this process. But, this is the interesting question: is it changing it? My answer is: “Yes” in process, “Soon” in practice, and “Perhaps” in principle.

The figures are already impressive. The US is an early adopting nation. According to the Pew Trust, in the year of the 2004 presidential elections 42 percent of Americans had broadband,¹¹ 37 percent of Americans used the Internet for political information¹² and 13 million went online for political acts, such as donations to candidates.¹³ Spending on political Internet advertising has risen from \$29 million in 2004 to \$40 million in the 2006 mid-term elections. But that is still only 2 percent of all political media spend – compare it with \$2 billion spent on terrestrial TV ads. The 2008 campaign is already suggesting that those figures are rising rapidly. Internet activists would argue that there are different effects at work here. Most of them will be marginal, but in politics it is the marginal that matters. If there are a few percentage points that can be shifted then a whole campaign can gain or lose momentum. And, as we shall see, it is very often the marginal voter that decides close results.

Internet activists would also argue that the way they impact on politics is quite different to previous campaigns’ use of communications. In the past there was a division between straight-forward activist voter campaigning and activist media campaigning. The former involved leafleting, canvassing, letter writing, phone banks and town hall meetings. The latter involved TV adverts, lobbying of journalists, and media appearances. The Internet brings the two categories together. Email, online video, websites and web forums allow activists to get their message out and then engage in a dialogue with the voters. The Internet gives activists an easy opportunity to canvass and converse with the voter without having to use mainstream media at all.

The great example of this is, of course, the internet-based liberal lobby group *MoveOn*, and its campaign to secure for Howard Dean the Democrat nomination for President in 2004. There is no doubt that web forums such as *The Daily Kos* are now part of the fabric of US politics with the ability to generate debate and money for causes they seize upon.

What I am particularly interested in is not the fund-raising email traffic but the more blog-related Internet activism. It is very difficult to separate

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them out. Indeed, one of the interesting aspects of New Media and politics is the way that policy communication, fund-raising, discussion, and simple mud-slinging can all be combined through the connectivity of new media communications. For example, an activist will post a compromising video on *YouTube* and then link to it in email fund-raising messages. Then all you have to do is stand back and wait for mainstream media to pick up on the story.

3.2.1 A decade of blog power

This is not entirely new. The US already has a decade-old history of Internet sites and bloggers impacting on political journalism. In January 1998 the *Drudge Report* broke the story about Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky. Although, of course, Drudge was actually publishing a story that mainstream media had uncovered but not revealed, as the original Drudge posting makes clear:

The DRUDGE REPORT has learned that reporter Michael Isikoff developed the story of his career, only to have it spiked by top NEWSWEEK suits hours before publication. A young woman, 23, sexually involved with the love of her life, the President of the United States, since she was a 21-year-old intern at the White House. She was a frequent visitor to a small study just off the Oval Office where she claims to have indulged the president's sexual preference. (Matt Drudge, *Drudge Report*)¹⁴

In 2002 Senator Trent Lott resigned after comments he made implying support for racial segregation. The actual remarks were made at an event covered by *C-SPAN*, the cable politics channel. But the mainstream media did not follow it up. Instead it was left to bloggers like *Atrios* to express their rage and to do the historical fact-checking and contextualization.¹⁵ The bloggers unearthed previous occasions when Lott had made similar remarks. This turned a one-off indiscretion into a behavioral pattern. At that point the political correspondents returned to the fray and Lott was forced to retract and resign as Majority Leader. The blogs did not "get" Lott on their own, but they forced the mainstream media to do its job.¹⁶

Bloggers have also turned on the journalists themselves. In September 2004 Dan Rather, the famous CBS News anchor, resigned after blogs appeared to show that a news story on *60 Minutes* was based upon forged unsubstantiated evidence that has become known as the "Killian Documents." The post

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on the *Free Republic* web forum is worth reading in full. Its author, “Buckhead,” demonstrates perfectly how the Internet allows the activist to tap in to the expert knowledge of the “amateur”:

Every single one of these memos to file is in a proportionally spaced font, probably Palatino or Times New Roman.

In 1972 people used typewriters for this sort of thing, and typewriters used monospaced fonts.

The use of proportionally spaced fonts did not come into common use for office memos until the introduction of laser printers, word processing software, and personal computers. They were not widespread until the mid to late 90s . . . I am saying these documents are forgeries, run through a copier for 15 generations to make them look old.

This should be pursued aggressively. (“Buckhead” on *freerepublic.com*)¹⁷

Dan Rather is still contesting his removal from CBS and the facts of this case. But it certainly demonstrates the effort and skills that bloggers can deploy in their critique of conventional media. In February 2005 CNN’s chief news executive, Eason Jordan, had to resign after an Internet campaign prompted by his claim that US soldiers “targeted” journalists in Iraq. It was an isolated comment made during a private World Economic Forum panel discussion. Ironically, the story first broke through a posting by an attendee of the meeting on the WEF’s own blog. The officially sanctioned blogger was Rony Abovitz, a Florida-based “technology pioneer.” It was rapidly picked up by right-wing commentators and bloggers and created a blog-storm of patriotic outrage.¹⁸ The meeting was on “Chatham House rules” which means that you can not quote directly from participants. It also meant that the WEF never released the tape of what Eason said. Eason’s resignation statement said that “my comments on this subject in a World Economic Forum panel discussion were not as clear as they should have been.” Like many people who have spoken out of turn on mainstream media and found their careers ruined, Eason discovered that the Internet is an equally testing medium that can reach into places old media never strayed.

The liberals had their revenge in February 2005 when the left-leaning website *Media Matters for America* uncovered Jeff Gannon. Gannon, real-name Duckert, was supposedly a news wire journalist in the Washington Press Corp. But liberal bloggers revealed him as a Republican activist plant used to ask “soft-ball” questions at otherwise difficult White House press briefings. Oddly, liberal bloggers found themselves exposing someone for being gay and

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a blogger.¹⁹ But it was clear he was not the “official” mainstream journalist he claimed. Such are the ironies of the Internet age.

3.2.2 Lieberman and Lamont: the Internet wins and loses and wins

In the summer of 2006 Senator Joseph Lieberman, a three-term US Senator and former presidential and vice-presidential nominee, lost the Connecticut Democratic senate primaries to a relatively unknown candidate, Ned Lamont. A net-roots campaign by highly-motivated Democrat activists who opposed Lieberman’s pro-Iraq war, pro-Bush, pro-Israel stances galvanized a highly effective and often vicious Internet-led campaign against the incumbent. Ned Lamont enjoyed local and national support from the liberal political blogosphere, both in terms of financial donations and political publicity. Much of this was straightforward campaigning but done online instead of by phone or by leaflet. But the Internet was also used as a channel of communication – it opened up a new forum for argument that helped frame the nature of the campaign. The battleground was the Internet as much as the doorstep. Doctored photos, smearing videos, and polemic were widespread.

Just one day before Democratic voters in Connecticut went to the polls, Senator Lieberman’s campaign website crashed. Allegations were thrown around from both sides, some saying it was hacked by the Lamont campaign, others saying that Lieberman forgot to pay his bills. Lieberman’s Wikipedia site became another place for political skirmishing as rival posters attempted to re-edit the Senator’s online biography. At one point the *Daily Kos* website posted juxtaposed images from a Lieberman TV advert. The script said it showed a sunrise, but his assiduous Internet opponents sourced the photograph and showed that it actually depicted a sunset. It was a symbolic victory, but one that added weight to the implication that not only was Lieberman too right-wing, but that he was not honest.

The Lamont victory in the primary showed that netroot activism has the power to mount dangerous challenges to incumbents who would have previously considered themselves safe. The bloggers were acting like attack journalists. They were reporting on Lieberman in a highly partial manner but it was putting him under real scrutiny in a way that the mainstream media would never have tried. These activists were conducting a form of journalism. They were reporting what Lieberman had done – including the famous “kiss” of George Bush, an image that lived on in perpetuity and exponential multiplication thanks to the Internet.²⁰ The activists were also creating analytical

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journalism, albeit highly partisan, trying to explain why their opponents were doing what they were doing and saying what they were saying.

In a sense this is a trend that has developed alongside the Internet. Other politically partial media organizations such as *Fox News* have found a ready audience for more ideologically driven coverage. US politics has always been adept at creating and dealing with interested parties. Now the Internet and digital technology is allowing the news media to join that plurality of pressure groups. Making concessions to the traditional interest groups has long been a necessary strategy for US politicians if they want to survive. This is for a very simple reason: it is the interest groups who have the wealth and influence to support potential replacements. What the Lieberman–Lamont campaign has shown, however, is that netroot activism has acquired those powers as well. The power that the netroot activists hold is multi-faceted. Traditional interest groups have the financial clout of a collection of wealthy individuals, yet netroot activists can generate a similar power via their sheer numbers. Ned Lamont's campaigns got the majority of its funding from blog-based donations. The traditional interest groups are able to supply their chosen candidate with the necessary funds to deal with the PR and media tasks. But the netroot activists have taken the power of new media into their own hands. They create the videos, write the reports, make the allegations and publicize it all through their own networks. With the mainstream media flocking round blogs, this user-generated content is becoming increasingly influential.

Blogs now have a role in setting the parameters of the debate. Bloggers were determined that Lieberman's pro-war position needed challenging, so the parameters of the primary were set in terms of pro and anti-Iraq War. Lieberman had no real choice as to which side he was going to be aligned with. Yet the debate itself remains in the hands of the politicians. Policies are not created by polemical ranting on a blog. But to be able to create those policies, US politicians will increasingly need to operate within the bounds being set by netroots activists.

Of course, Joe Lieberman has now won Connecticut as an "Independent," beating Ned Lamont. It shows that the netroots activists and bloggers are by no means all-powerful. There was an element of the netroots story becoming a factor in its own right. When the election went out to the public as a whole – as opposed to the much more connected community of Democrats eligible to vote in primaries – the influence of the Internet was diluted. It is not being ignored, though. All the evidence from the Democrat Presidential Primaries is that the blogosphere is a growing factor.

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At the same time it is becoming professionalized, with Hillary Clinton putting on faux amateur films on to *YouTube*.²¹ The net-roots are the new roots and they are here to stay.

3.2.3 *YouTube* political reporting

Blogging was once primarily about text. But increasingly it is about online video. Anyone can write, but for a television culture, the power of the moving image is what has the most direct impact. The crucial thing about these videos is they do not go away. In the past, the effect of an aggressive comment towards an annoying activist in a car park would last only as long as the media networks aired the footage. Now those clips are copied onto hard disks across the world and are viewed by thousands of users, over and over again. There is nothing that the campaign effort can do to remove them; they simply have to fight fire with fire and hope that their opponent is victim to a greater number of videos tipping the balance in their favor. In this sense the 2006 mid-term elections were another online turning point. *YouTube* didn't even exist in the 2004 election but now it may have helped decide the Senate and so create a lame-duck President.

Senator George Allen's race in Virginia hinged on just a few thousand votes. How many people downloaded the *YouTube* video of his infamous "macaca" gaffe – where he used racist language to an opposition volunteer who was filming Allen's rally speech? Nearly 400,000.²² Another video which showed his campaign security staff manhandling a liberal blogger was watched by 180,000. They can not all have been Democrat partisans or people from out of state. Many must have been potential supporters who were persuaded not to vote for him by what they saw. And, of course, the people who downloaded it talked about it and forwarded it in emails, so the effect rippled outwards and Allen's chances were sunk.

The 2006 election in Missouri was another marginal, settled by about 20,000 swing voters. Michael J. Fox, who suffers from Parkinson's disease, made a TV advert in support of the Democrat candidate Claire McCaskill, a supporter of stem cell research. That didn't get much attention. What did was a video of right-wing "shock jock" Rush Limbaugh's attack on Fox in which he implied the former actor was exaggerating the effects of his condition. More than 1.1 million people downloaded that video. Surely Limbaugh's comments and Fox's dignified rebuttal can only have helped secure victory for Republican Jim Talent's opponent.²³ McCaskill's Internet-aided victory meant the Republicans lost control of the Senate.

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It is one thing to post clips on to a website – be it user-generated, such as the Allen “macaca” incident, or clipped from mainstream media, such as the Limbaugh footage. But what we are witnessing in the latest presidential campaign is also an explosion of “creativity” in online political video. How much of this is truly citizen media as opposed to sly viral confections by campaign teams is going to be difficult to judge. Is the “Obama Girl” video a positive or negative for Senator Barack Obama?²⁴ It certainly casts him in a good light and adds a sense of humor to his image.

This culminated in the *CNN/YouTube* Presidential candidate debates of July 2007. More than 3,000 people posted their video questions, but only 39 were selected by CNN for the two-hour show. It was a strange mixture of mainstream and new media which kept editorial control in CNN’s hands. But it also allowed slightly edgier topics to creep in to the debate and it certainly posed them in a different way. There were questions about health from two brothers spoon-feeding dinner to a father suffering from Alzheimer’s; about Darfur from an American in a refugee camp; and about gun laws from a man cradling a rifle which he described as his “baby.” John Edwards’ campaigner Joe Trippi thought the debate was a “freewheeling” success. Obama’s strategist David Axelrod said his man “relished it. He thinks the American people have been cut out of Washington politics.” But blogger Jeff Jarvis felt that an opportunity had been missed:

[The questions] CNN chose . . . were insipid, sophomoric, pointless, and silly: someone held up a coin and asked the candidates to define the words there – “In God we trust.” A snowman sock puppet asked about global warming . . . The two media did not mix well. CNN displayed the *YouTube* videos in small squares on a big screen shot by a big camera – reduced, finally, to postage stamps on our screens. It seemed the network was ashamed to show the videos full-screen because they would not look like real TV. But, of course, that’s just the point. They weren’t real TV. They were bits of conversation. (Jeff Jarvis, Media Commentator)²⁵

I think Jeff Jarvis is being a bit harsh and possibly a little puritanical. Perhaps the *CNN/YouTube* debate’s main achievement was that it managed to bring the Democrat contest to a wider and younger online audience. Perhaps it has set them to thinking harder about how they will project their political views in the future. At the moment most overtly party political videos on *YouTube* are simply clips from mainstream media coverage or campaign adverts. In future the politicians will have to be more creative if they are to join that wider conversation happening online.

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The bloggers in the US think 2008 is their year. Mainstream media remains dull and uninspiring with the exception of *Fox News* or *Jon Stewart's Daily Show*. In the face of falling ratings the political corps is sticking resolutely to the tried and tested formulae. This is why the self-appointed Queen of liberal political blogging, Adriana Huffington, has put together a project with the academic prince of Internet discourse, Jay Rosen. They are going to create a blog network of citizen journalists to report on the campaign. It has a bold manifesto:

Our volunteer reporters will aim to provide an authentic counter-narrative to the lockstep consensus we often get from the mainstream media, and will take inspiration from bottom up efforts . . . given the right circumstances, large groups of people are smarter than an elite few. (*Huffingtonpost.com*)²⁶

It is a brave and interesting attempt to aggregate and focus the efforts of citizen journalism to have a real impact on the way that a campaign is reported. This is quite different to the self-determined blogging storms that I cited above. It is an attempt to cohere, if not corporatize, the blogosphere. At this point it becomes Networked Journalism.

The candidates certainly agree that blogging is important. All the campaigns now have interactive or Internet campaign directors. And all of the Democrat hopefuls turned up for the political blogfest that is the *Daily Kos* annual convention. But while the bloggers and politicians conduct their love-in it is possible that the audience/voter is shifting elsewhere. Political pages on social networking sites such as *MySpace* and *Facebook* are getting much more traffic from regular voters than the hard-core political blogs. They may not be setting the political agenda, but they are certainly where the bulk of personal conversation takes place. The Presidential candidates know this and have all set up personal spaces. The comments on these spaces are a breath of fresh air. Inevitably there are disruptive postings and the candidates obviously do not have a lot of time to respond. So, in that sense, they are not quite entering in to the spirit of the genre. However, anyone reading the interaction on the three main Democrat candidate sites²⁷⁻²⁹ cannot but be impressed at the diversity of the people, the range of opinions and the originality of what they have to say. It is chat rather than deep debate, but it suggests a connectedness that only the Internet can offer. In that sense I think Jeff Jarvis is right with his general view that the Internet is "opening up a dialogue between candidate and constituent that was not possible before the Internet"

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In his book, *The Argument*, Matt Bai questions the success of the Internet in changing actual policies. But he has no doubt that it has changed politics:

It hardly mattered whether the progressive blogs were reaching 500,000 readers or 5 million. However many people came to blogs like *Daily Kos* they were the people who cared most about politics, and thus, they were the most likely to evangelise everyone they knew. The advent of the broadband Internet had made viral marketing the single most efficient way of getting an idea across to select consumers, and the political blogs were about as viral as Bird Flu. (Matt Bai, *The Argument*)³⁰

Email, online video, websites and web forums allow activists to get their message out and then engage in a dialogue with the voters and the news media. The Internet allows journalists to do the same in their political coverage. This is Networked Journalism. Whether this will lead to a more Networked politics and whether that politics will produce different policies and governance is the big question. No doubt the 2008 Presidential race will give us some clues. But fundamental shifts in power will take longer to show than the short history of the Internet and politics in the US allows.

3.2.4 Networked Journalism and British politics

They must tell the plain, simple truth that this generation has the capacity to destroy the human race. Because of technology and the advance of science, it also has the capacity to save it. The information we get about that choice is integral to the role of a journalist and crucial to our survival. (Tony Benn)³¹

British politicians are rarely tempted to indulge in high-minded rhetoric about New Media. So it is interesting that Tony Benn, a veteran socialist, has seized upon the political importance of the Internet:

It is quite clear that the Internet poses a serious threat to the privileges of the rich and powerful. All the emphasis on crime and drugs and pornography used to justify the suppression of the Internet is really aimed at suppressing knowledge of the radical political alternatives that are now available. (Tony Benn)³²

Mr. Benn was in power the last time a British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, got excited about “The White Heat of Technology.” That ended in the White Elephant of the supersonic jet Concorde. But this time Mr. Benn thinks that technological innovation will bring political benefits as well as

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economic gains. There are other politicians now in high places in Government, such as the current British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, who have dabbled in blogging and seem conscious of the new information age. The former Prime Minister Tony Blair famously admitted that he barely knew how to use a PC when he became Labour leader, let alone surf the net. But he and his administration rapidly came to understand the importance of the digital dividend:

There is no new economy. There is one economy all of it being transformed by information technology. What is happening is no dot.com fad that will come and go – it is a profound economic revolution. (Tony Blair, MP)³³

He put all Government services online and invested in persuading the education system and business to prioritize digital investment and training. However, I do not believe that he ever really considered the impact of the Internet on the way that politics itself would be reported. As he left power in 2007 he seemed as disappointed with New Media and politics as he was disturbed by the news media overall. He even went so far as to advocate increased regulation of online journalism:

As the technology blurs the distinction between papers and television, it becomes increasingly irrational to have different systems of accountability based on technology that no longer can be differentiated in the old way. (Tony Blair, MP)³⁴

Which Tony is right? In a mature and, some would say, sclerotic democracy like Britain's, there is a sense that politics and journalism are locked in a dying embrace. The waltz of spin and distortion has become a *dance macabre*. The public is increasingly disaffected by conventional politics and mainstream media coverage. Does the Internet offer the potential to inject some life back into the relationship? This matters. For all the talk of e-democracy and direct digital governance the majority of political discourse is still conducted through the media. As the media become more complex and increasingly connected with other forms of communication a new dynamic is evolving. Let us have a look at one case study of this new relationship.

3.2.5 “Three Jags” and the bloggers

The narrative currently is that a conspiracy of politically motivated bloggers are doing down Prescott. The reality is that the truth is doing down Prescott . . . The truth is that our political system is rotten and the politicians are allowed

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to get away with it by enfeebled lobby journalists who would rather keep their relationships sweet than their readers fully informed. (Paul Staines aka "Guido Fawkes")³⁵

This is the story of the former British Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott, his secretary Tracey, a US billionaire and a blog named after a seventeenth-century terrorist. It is the story of some cowboy boots, an office affair and the Millennium Dome. It is also the moment when the blogosphere staked its claim for a walk-on part in political journalism in Britain. Some would argue that bloggers were only a minor factor, but I would suggest that, combined with other digital forces, they are opening up the potential for a more Networked form of political journalism. This was a very British affair. Westminster politics is a peculiarly parochial and centralized business. The UK national media is unusual in that it is centered exclusively in the capital city. And the political media is based at the heart of the ancient quarter of Westminster. But I think that this story and the way it was treated does suggest how political reporting is going to change with respect to all parliamentary democracies as the information exchange goes online, and the debate leaves the corridors of power to the co-axial cables of the Internet.

The actual details of this case study are complex and much is still lost in the mists of denial and innuendo. Those readers who are not familiar with either this story or British politics should not worry. Sit back and enjoy a narrative that is on a par with a comedic version of *The Da Vinci Code*. Put briefly, the John Prescott/Tracey Temple/Philip Anschutz story was in fact two stories that intertwined for a couple of months in 2006. It began with a conventional sex scandal exposed in the newspapers in classic kiss and tell fashion. First the aggrieved truck-driver husband and then the woman herself told their tale of a Whitehall sexual farce. The British Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott's affair with his secretary Tracey Temple gained greater journalistic traction because many of the liaisons took place during working time and on official business and so he may have broken ministerial codes. Bad election results in local elections combined with a row over Mr. Prescott's "grace and favour" country mansion added to the pressure upon this redoubtable politician, who was a favorite with the Labour party grass-roots and key ally of Tony Blair. But what did it for Mr. Prescott was not the sex or the photos of this working-class hero playing croquet in between high level meetings. What fatally wounded Mr. Prescott was a podcast.

David Hencke is an experienced award-winning political correspondent at the *Guardian* newspaper who has covered Westminster for decades. On

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June 29, 2006 the *Guardian* posted a podcast of “Westminster gossip” by their “investigative ferret” Hencke. What Hencke said on the podcast is worth quoting, as it shows Networked Journalism in action as a newspaper journalist lets down his hair and shares the newsgathering process with the audience:

Imagine my surprise when I received a rather surprising telephone call with some rather juicy gossip about John Prescott, this came when Mr. Prescott was facing rather a lot of criticism, my source who had contacts in the US, had the rather extraordinary story that Mr. Prescott had paid a secret visit to the ranch home of Philip Anschutz the man who runs the Millennium Dome – furthermore, no-one knew about this, and he’d been entertained there by the man who is a prominent Republican. My source, who believe it or not, had got the information from an over-heard conversation among British diplomats at a restaurant in Los Angeles thought this was red-hot stuff. We put this to Mr. Prescott. Had he had a free trip not declared while he was there? Sadly for us but good for Mr. Prescott he had done this but he had not broken any rules. Sources thought that because this had never been declared Mr. Prescott might be in a bit of trouble. In fact Mr. Prescott had disclosed this to his Permanent Secretary [a senior civil servant] and while accepting the entertainment on this rather posh ranch home of Mr. Anschutz, had made a donation to the British Red Cross rather quietly so that he would not be seen to be taking money from the Americans. So while Mr. Prescott might appear to have got in to a lot of trouble for his croquet games and his mistresses, the story this time was of Honest John the man who made sure he did not break the anti-sleaze laws. (David Hencke, *The Guardian*)³⁶

Hencke’s belief that the story stopped there was odd, and it is strange that this story, which was at least embarrassing for Prescott, even if not illicit, wasn’t followed up by the *Guardian*’s print version. But two days later, on the Saturday, *The Times* broke the whole story of “The Dome, the US billionaire and John Prescott’s night on the ranch” as its lead. On the Monday, the right-wing blogger “Guido Fawkes” – real name Paul Staines – weighed in with this attack on John “Prezza” Prescott:

Prezza’s story is falling apart – he stayed the weekend on “a private visit” the cost of which was donated to charity, except it turns out it was paid for by the taxpayer. He had no involvement in the decision making process awarding the billionaire ranch owner the Dome contract, yet we have been told for months he is a hands-on DPM. His story is bollocks. You can tell it is a big story because Nick Robinson [The BBC’s political editor] is ignoring it – the Beeb knows this could be fatal for Prezza. Particularly if it is true that the *Daily*

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Mail has bought up the eagerly awaited story from an official government driver about Three Shags' backseat fumbblings with Rosie Winterton* et al.

*So sue. Rosie threatened to sue *The Sun* if they named her as Prescott's other mistress. Caligula made his horse a senator, making Rosie Winterton a Privy Counsellor is just taking the piss out of the public. (Paul Staines aka "Guido Fawkes")³⁷

This is a colorful and frenetic outburst of allegations with no real new information on the Anschutz story. But he has introduced a whole new sexual allegation. That alone was enough to keep up the momentum among the media pack which had by now scented blood. But what is as significant is the attack on the BBC political editor Nick Robinson. There is an assumption even by the blogger that until the main broadcaster carries the story, it has little impact. Staines' conspiracy theory that Robinson is somehow protecting Prescott may have been groundless, but it had an effect.

The following day the story started to go in to a cycle of cross-referencing between mainstream and New Media. The newspapers started to report "rumours on the Internet" although they do not go as far as the blog.

Two web diaries linked to Tory supporters named a Labour MP as Mr. Prescott's mistress, an allegation he and the woman deny . . . One website is run by a Rightwing Tory activist in his late thirties. A Tory spokesman said: "He has no connection whatsoever with the Conservative party. It is categorically untrue that we have been involved in spreading these rumours." The allegations were repeated on another website run by a former Conservative parliamentary candidate. (*Evening Standard*, July 4, 2006)³⁸

At this point the online coverage also turned into a spat between the professional blogger, Nick Robinson and the amateurs. In his blog for July 5 the BBC's political editor launched an attack upon the blogs and another Conservative blogger, Iain Dale, in particular:

This is another example of some blogs trying to make the political weather. First, they demand to know why the mainstream media – and, in particular, the BBC – are not covering an alleged "scandal". Then they report unsubstantiated allegations which have been denied by those involved, which some newspapers then report as second hand news.

Let's be clear. This isn't because they are better journalists, free from censorship. They often have a political agenda. (Nick Robinson, Political Editor, BBC)³⁹

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This is a fascinating moment. Paul “Guido Fawkes” Staines had never pretended to be anything but politically-biased. The strap-line for Staines’ site professes that “tittle-tattle, gossip, rumours and wit are what this blog aims to provide.”⁴⁰ Robinson is entirely right, if a little defensive. The blogs did have an effect and they did drive the story forward, or “make the weather.” Guido’s next riposte to Robinson delights in the fact that he has riled the BBC’s political editor, and he celebrates the power of the unaccountable blog. Guido claims that he has no complaint against Robinson personally, but against the BBC:

Nick’s comment does . . . come over as a tad arrogant, does the BBC have a monopoly on political/weather reporting? Nick is a great reporter, but his hands are tied in an emasculated post-Hutton BBC constantly worried about future funding. If the rest of the media want to follow Guido’s reports that is up to them. (Paul Staines aka “Guido Fawkes”)⁴¹

By now the mainstream media was feasting royally off the blogs. When John Prescott finally took to the airwaves to defend himself, he found that the Internet allegations were being thrown at him by the mainstream media journalists. He appeared on the BBC’s Radio 4’s *Today Programme*, the UK’s flagship political morning radio program, to be grilled by the BBC’s most ferocious inquisitor, John Humphreys. The BBC journalist demanded: “There are now reports, and they’re circulating on the Internet, as you know, that you have had other affairs – is that true?”⁴²

This was the moment when blogs had officially arrived in British political journalism. It was a moment which, of course, Guido then reported in turn on his blog:

John Humphrys did what he is paid to do this morning. Three times he asked Prescott: have there been any other affairs? Three times he blustered without answering the question. Because of course there have been many other affairs, not just “one mistake” as he disingenuously repeated over and over again. (Paul Staines aka “Guido Fawkes”)⁴³

As is the way with British politics, this all ended up in an internal parliamentary inquiry that found that Mr. Prescott had breached ministerial codes. However, the Commons Standards Committee said no action should be taken against the Deputy Prime Minister because he had subsequently registered the visit. They had no powers to examine the wider issues about conflicts of interest and so Mr. Prescott ended up with a slap on the wrist. But his

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political career was effectively over. So was this a triumph for the British blogosphere? And what implications does it have for Networked Journalism?

Other political bloggers joined Paul “Guido Fawkes” Staines in celebrating their newfound influence. Conservative blogger Iain Dale⁴⁴ does not claim to be a journalist, but he does claim to have moved stories that the mainstream media had left alone. He says that journalists leak to him information that they cannot publish themselves. His complaint is that the professionals use the bloggers’ material without attribution:

On any given day, you will find on *Ephraim Hardcastle* [The *Daily Mail* gossip column], the *Londoner’s Diary* and other diary columns two or three stories that they will have got – totally lifted – from me or Guido. No attribution or anything. At least bloggers link back to wherever they first read a story. (Iain Dale, blogger)⁴⁵

The professional journalists who covered this story have insisted to me that the blogs were not decisive in uncovering the facts of this story. But one mainstream political broadcaster did say that the political blogs are now required reading for the hard-pressed modern journalist. She pointed out that they don’t have time to spend hanging around in the Westminster bars anymore because they are on air or filing all the time, so the blogs are their way of getting the gossip. Indeed, professional journalists have always used gossip magazines, such as *Private Eye*, as a source for marginal stories and as a place to test out unsubstantiated rumors. However, the blogosphere now makes that an interactive, 24/7, networked phenomenon. That worried some political correspondents:

My view is what they are doing is completely indefensible. They are hindering, not helping the story. There are serious issues being discussed but they see it as a cheap publicity stunt to get their names in the media. I talk to bloggers and I use them but they print stuff they’ve got no evidence for. That can’t be right.⁴⁶

It is true that bloggers are protected. It is difficult to sue if the site is hosted outside of the UK. Individuals are less liable to litigation and they are not subject to the corporate pressures that a mainstream media brand might feel in trying to protect its reputation for trust-worthiness. The BBC’s Nick Robinson’s blog is subtly different to his broadcast work. It is more speculative in tone and each item is less “balanced” in the formal sense required

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on air. But it is still a long way from the “dangers” he perceives that independent blogs pose:

Bloggers say something is not being reported because we’re wimps. Nonsense. It’s not being reported because there are no facts. We’ve got to be careful we don’t use blogs as an excuse to bypass our own standards, rules and ethics of journalism. There is a risk people can use blogs as a way to get things on air or into print they wouldn’t have conventionally done themselves. (Nick Robinson, Political Editor, BBC)⁴⁷

The truth is that political journalists are much more limited in what they can say than the bloggers. A professional journalist who wants information from politicians sometimes has to allow themselves to be “used” by politicians. Political journalists should learn to love the blogs. This is partly because they themselves are increasingly bloggers. Remember, the whole Prescott saga started with David Hencke’s salacious sounding pod-cast. But it is also because the independent online media does represent a vital injection of new perspectives and fresh information. It offers an alternative conduit for political discourse that has its own claim on veracity and perspicacity. As “Guido” puts it:

The days of media conglomerates determining the news in a top-down Fordist fashion are over. The news is no longer what Paxman and Robinson say it is. Big Media is going to be disintermediated because technology has drastically reduced the cost of dissemination. And don’t think I’m some outsider blogging in his pyjamas – every broadsheet diarist has taken stories from my blog. My sources are the thousands of political junkies who come to the blog for gossip. Younger, more savvy journalists whose stories get spiked are probably my best sources. (Paul Staines aka “Guido Fawkes”).⁴⁸

Tension between journalists, let alone between journalists and those in power, is one of the defining characteristics of the British political media scene. It does create an often rancorous climate that can lead to poor quality or partial journalism. That will happen online as well as in the mainstream platforms. It is also arguable that this competitiveness is what enables the British media to avoid the cozy, separate culture of the White House or Elysée press corps. Bloggers will contribute to that competitiveness, but if mainstream journalists retain their professional quality then surely they have nothing to fear, and everything to gain, from a more connected relationship? It may not always be pretty to watch, but Networked Political Journalism is happening at

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Westminster. Instead of retreating to old positions, it should be used as a way to open up political journalism and put pressure on government to do the same.

3.2.6 Beyond the blogs: civic engagement

Networked Journalism is not just about blogging or interactivity. Networked Political Journalism goes further than a symbiotic relationship between mainstream media and bloggers. There is a much bigger role for political journalism than simply dealing with the institutions of representative democracy. Civic engagement is becoming more dispersed and some fear it is disappearing. As we have seen, social networking sites are now a forum for political messaging, so they are already evolving a new kind of journalism, too. How the news media inserts itself into that kind of discourse remains to be seen. But if Networked Journalists want to join in that political conversation in these new spaces then it will have to adapt itself.

Networked Political Journalism will also have to look to the new channels of political communication opened up by e-democracy initiatives. All authorities, and increasingly businesses and social organizations, are creating networks with the public. These combine the functionality of the organization's online activities with a desire to communicate in a meaningful way with the consumer or citizen. For example, a local authority website for paying for parking permits can also be used as a way of consulting residents. Those kinds of spaces are where Networked Political Journalism needs to be, in the same way that local journalists used to attend Town Hall meetings. Again, when the Networked Political Journalism "goes" to these new spaces it is on different terms. Now the public will be part of the process helping to set the agenda and control the flow of information. Networked Political Journalism will be the facilitator of that process, not just the reporter.

Too often governments see e-democracy as a way of cutting out the media and establishing a direct relationship between government and the governed. The fact is that a Networked Media is a vital way to make that relationship work in a practical and representative way. The public does not want to have to mediate all the political information flows by itself. Networked Journalism is there to do it with them. Take the UK government's attempt to set up an e-petition system whereby individuals could set up a petition on the 10 Downing Street website. Hundreds were set up, many of them trivial, some serious. The most popular one was a petition against Government proposals for road pricing. More than a million people signed up.⁴⁹ There was no way

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that the Labour Government would accept its demands. It was seen as a dramatic slap in the face for the Prime Minister. And his rejection of the petition demands was seen as evidence that e-democracy is a sham. But the problem was not that the petition was galvanized by lobby groups. Nor that it went counter to government policy. The problem was that it was seen as a policy-influencing exercise rather than a form of communication. And as a form of communication it was crude and very much a one-way street. Tony Blair promised to reply by email to all those who had signed, but a million replica emails is not a deeply meaningful political debate. A Networked Media would have allowed for a much more nuanced representation of those opinions and a healthier conversation with more realistic expectations. A wiki, for example, might have allowed a forum for interaction and a series of blogs would have allowed people to express more worked-out points of views and comment. If nothing else, though, it reminded Government of the public appetite to express itself online and the need for greater humility and openness on the part of those in power.

The ultimate goal of Networked Political Journalism is to address the loss of public trust in the media and politics. I don't want the public to love journalists or politicians. I don't want journalists to love politicians or even the public. But networked news practices offer journalists the potential to get more things right by being connected to and corrected by the public. By sharing the setting of the agenda, it gives a chance to make the news more relevant. It is then up to Government to open up the policy agenda. In the end people can only take so much politics or political reporting. Ultimately, it is about the real actions, not the representations. So I am very suspicious of claims that New Media is automatically more democratic than mainstream media. Many of the new platforms lack accountability and institutional regulation, for example. There are other dangers to political journalism in current trends. There is the fragmentation of the news process in which multiple outlets reduce the sense of a shared conversation. There is the potential for digital fraud which could contribute to a loss of trust in the media. And there is the potential for de-skilling of journalists through the economic pressures towards multi-tasking. Networked Journalists need more time, not less, for thinking through their work. Ultimately, though, these dangers are far less worrying than the current failure of "Old Media and Old Politics" to serve the public well. The way that new media technologies as well as Internet competition can add variety and competitiveness means we should get a better relationship between the public and the politicians. There is nowhere that needs a better relationship between Government and the governed than

Africa. Let us now look at the potential for new forms of journalism to impact on the politics of the media there.

3.3 Africa: Networked Journalism, Governance and Development

Free speech and a free press not only make abuses of governmental power less likely, they also enhance the likelihood that people's basic social needs will be met. (Joseph Stiglitz)⁵⁰

It is one thing to make claims for Networked Journalism in the hugely wealthy and technologically advanced media markets in the US and Europe. It is also possible to see that it is having an impact in the rapidly growing economies of states such as China and India. It would be fascinating to investigate and explain how Networked Journalism may have a future in places like South Korea or Russia as well. It is important that we do not just see it as a process suited only to the US and the UK, the two markets which have dominated this book. But I want to consider a tougher challenge for the future of journalism and that is Africa.

It is impossible to generalize about such a diverse continent but I will attempt to outline a conceptual approach to Networked Journalism and its relationship to ideas of political governance and economic and social development. The media in Africa is at a very interesting moment historically. There are a series of major global initiatives⁵¹⁻⁵⁴ happening as part of a global effort to pump more money into the continent's development, to reduce debt, and to promote political progress. There is a renewed interest in the role of the media in Africa for three main reasons:

- 1 The media is seen as a useful way of carrying development messages. Radio, newspapers, TV, and other forms of communications are very efficient ways of reaching people with information about health, for example, especially in low-literacy societies with poor governmental infrastructure and education.
- 2 It is an industry worth developing in its own right that helps promote other forms of economic and social development. The media creates jobs and fosters related industries such as advertising and production. Better communication through business journalism, advertising, and general news helps spread the word about products and services.

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- 3 It is a way of holding governments to account and increasing the transparency of aid. A healthy and independent media puts more information into the public domain to allow people to know what is going on. Good political journalism helps politicians to communicate with the voters, but also allows the voters to judge the record of those in power, from parking attendants to presidents.

But while aid agencies and donor countries recognize that a vibrant news media is a good thing, there is less agreement about how to promote it.

We are right to think before we blindly back media for development. At the very moment that the world has agreed to put more money in to Africa there is a rash of analysis – often written by journalists – that speaks of the failure of western donations in the past.⁵⁵ Historically, aid can be shown to have failed. By any reasonable cost-benefit analysis, the amount of money poured in to Africa has not delivered substantive, sustainable benefits. Despite hundreds of billions of dollars in aid, it stubbornly refuses to stop being a basket-case. There have been reforms across the continent: the end of apartheid, peaceful changes of power in places like Mozambique, and widespread media liberalization. There have been major developmental successes such as the growth in literacy. Yet despite all this Africa remains hugely underdeveloped. India and Asia in general, are booming. Latin America is pulling further ahead. So why not Africa?

The western media's story of Africa is one of war, famine, and disaster. It's not entirely untrue. There have been far more wars in Africa since the growth in independence after the Second World War. According to the 2006 Amnesty Report:

At least a dozen countries in Africa were affected by armed conflict. Marginalization of certain communities, small arms proliferation and struggles for geo-political power and control of natural resources were some of the underlying causes of the conflicts. (Amnesty International)⁵⁶

Africa has about half the per capita income of Latin America and is still falling behind, despite rich natural resources that are now attracting the attention of the Chinese, hungry for raw materials and largely careless of African development. According to UNAIDS,⁵⁷ the virus caused 2.1 million deaths in 2006 and 2.8 million people were newly infected, bringing to 24.7 million the total number of people living with HIV/AIDS on the continent, but still various leaders such as South Africa's Thabo Mbeki are in denial as to its causes. Public

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and private sector corruption is still endemic throughout Africa, silting up the economic channels and dissuading legitimate business investment and siphoning off aid funds. Again, according to the Amnesty 2006 Report:

Overall, widespread and massive corruption in Africa continued to contribute to a vicious cycle of extreme poverty, manifesting itself in violations of internationally recognized human rights, especially economic and social rights, weak institutions and leadership, and marginalization of the most vulnerable sectors of the population, including women and children.⁵⁸

So perhaps it is not surprising or inaccurate that this is the image of Africa portrayed by the Western media. But if that image implies a passive population and a static political context then it is not true. If it suggests that failure is somehow Africa's "natural" condition then it is a lie. Africa has a political problem and while it may be more intractable than most, it is not insoluble. But the first step to solving a political problem is to accept that it exists. What is African media doing to make the connections between failure and politics? Unfortunately, the media is very much part of the problem. Any map of media freedom shows Africa to be on a par with China and the former Soviet states. This repression is one very big reason why African mainstream media have so far failed. However, there is nothing innately wrong with African journalism, as anyone who works with African journalists or attends events like the CNN African Journalism Awards⁵⁹ will testify.

This all suggests that media for development, like much other development in Africa, has failed to shift the basic facts of life. Of course, some would say that it hasn't yet been properly tried. Let's leave the historical argument to one side and consider what might work. I am not making the case that this will solve all of Africa's problems. However, all developed liberal democracies accept that a healthy, pluralistic media is part of their success. Why should Africa settle for less? This is the case for media for development and a media that fosters networked journalism. But first we need to understand what we mean by the term. There are two types of African news media – media about Africa and African produced media. Media for development is interested in both.

3.3.1 Western media for development

How the rest of the world depicts Africa has a big impact on how governments make decisions about aid. Clearly, campaigns such as the Live Aid ("The

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Day That Music Changed The World”)⁶⁰ and Live8 (“Make The Promises Happen”)⁶¹ helped put public pressure on politicians. They used the media in a very overt way that even enlisted major broadcasters such as the BBC to produce complementary material. Charities are highly conscious of how they can use the media to make their points.

At one level this is a very good thing. Surely, no one could be against having people know more about Africa and to care about its problems. However, there is a danger in framing the African plight as something that we can do something about through rock concerts. The problems that Africa faces and the way that aid deals with them are rarely treated as subjects fit for discussion and dispute. Africa is seen as a given by Western journalists. So the Western news media relates a political narrative that speaks of noble campaigners seeking to persuade reluctant politicians to come to Africa’s aid. Charity activists are given a privileged space within TV news reports and much of the written press where they are allowed to criticize governments for not doing what the pressure groups want. The spokespeople are a useful way for journalists to add drama to what is otherwise a pretty complicated and often boring story. Phrases like “but Oxfam denounced the initiative as too little too late,” allow the reporter to imply some deep divide, some dramatic debate without having to go in to details, let alone analysis or argument, about the facts on the ground. It’s rare to hear anyone mention that the NGOs are also fundraising, unelected sloganeers who simplify their messages to raise profile as much as to raise arguments. Behind the scenes they are often working hand-in-glove with the same governments they criticize in public. It is unusual for journalists to ask the NGOs why aid has failed in the past, or whether the market might be a better way to deliver results. And yet journalists feel a kind of moral certitude in giving the NGOs an easy ride, because who can be against giving poor Africa more money? In a way I think that this kind of treatment can be as simplistic as the “Africa disaster” coverage of Africa which portrays the whole continent as a passive population enduring appalling “natural” or self-inflicted catastrophe. The archetypal image of this kind of journalism is the pot-bellied infant on a mud hut floor dying with flies swarming over hollow eyes. It does seem that the campaigners have succeeded in persuading the politicians and that more aid will flow in to Africa. I can think of worse things to spend the money on. But I hope that this time journalism provides a more complex picture of the politics that will surround that aid in the future. Indeed, I hope that some of the money will be spent on African journalism itself.

3.3.2 African media for development

There are three sectors of African media. All have a role in development.

First *Community media* are non-profit, small-scale private enterprises and some state-owned community-based radio stations. Community media sees itself as having a special role in advancing development objectives and giving a voice to communities. They are often supported directly by international charities and carry social development messages. These can either be simple publicity material or more sophisticated consciousness-raising tactics such as soap-operas.

Second *State-owned media*, especially the broadcasting services, have the widest reach and potentially the greatest influence. Alternatively, shortages of resources and trained personnel can result in poor-quality programming, pro-government bias and an over-concentration on urban issues. The financial insecurity caused by lack of stable government financing results in a need to seek resources from advertising, thus depressing the opportunity for private stations. In addition to broadcasting, most governments in Africa own or control newspapers and news agencies, and most of them operate with a pro-government bias.

Finally *Private media* are seen as injecting an independent element, able to act as a watchdog of government and able to help hold government to account. Some private media are considered to be driven solely by profit and too compliant with business interests, to the detriment of good quality programming serving a wide audience. Critics suggest they are over-reliant on cheap foreign imports, or “dumbing down” of content. Private print media are increasingly contributing to the diversity of the media landscape.

All three sectors have a role to play in media for development. There are two types of media for development.

Social media for development focuses on communicating information that has direct social effects – usually in educational, health, and economic areas. This is almost entirely carried out by NGOs who use a variety of platforms including radio, theatre, poetry, advertising, and public relations to convey social messages. These are usually focused very closely to specific policy programs such as vaccinations, contraception, and literacy.

They try to engage the external news media through guided trips, advertising, reports, and events such as rock concerts. In effect, it is public relations with a purpose. Likewise, it tries to engage the internal African media, although the evidence seems to be that it spends more time on using direct communication.

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Journalism Development focuses on supporting the development of the African news media itself. It seeks to build the capacity for journalism within Africa by training or supporting journalists and the structures, such as regulation, that sustain a news media sector. It supports the news media in its role as a tool for accountability and transparency and as a forum for debate. This is a mix of private and public provision. Organizations such as the BBC World Service Trust support training and the development of regulatory frameworks.

3.3.3 The African context

All media are local media, so we need to pay attention to the special circumstances of African journalism. There is an argument that African media markets are different because of the historical and contemporary political position of African societies. These arguments are useful in that they are helpful in differentiating between the different contexts for media development. However, we should be rigorously critical of this “exceptionalism” as it can easily become an excuse for failure and repression.

There are four main conditions that describe the context for the development of journalism in Africa, although any country can be subject to more than one. They are:

- 1 Fragile states;
- 2 Liberation states;
- 3 Complex states; and
- 4 Poor states.

“Fragile states” are countries like Somalia, Sierra Leone, and Sudan which have barely functioning public structures. Institutions such as schools, hospitals, and communications are virtually autonomous of the state. Emerging governments in fragile states claim that they cannot be subject to the same scrutiny that a free press performs elsewhere. Indeed, they go further and insist that the media must be restricted, so that the emerging authorities can curtail the kind of journalism that might provoke more conflict. In effect, they say the “watchdog” role of the media has to be suspended. If the government is under physical attack it needs support, not criticism. And if the media views are so powerful that they are causing the conflict as happened in Rwanda, then surely the media must be restricted.⁶²

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“Liberation states” often demand the compromise of media freedom in the name of achieving and sustaining political power. This is a more assertive version of the fragile states argument, and it is by no means unique to Africa. The argument goes like this: “We have just achieved our independence from the colonial power or the dictator. We should all show patriotic discipline in the face of our troubles and pull together for the common good.” When I visited India recently this was still in evidence. There was a sense that the media should be backing India in its bid to become a global power. This is also the case in Venezuela where journalists are asked to ignore the increasing restrictions on press freedom for the greater good of the struggle against the US.

“Exceptional states” make the case for limiting media freedom on the basis that their historical or social make-up means that a free, liberal, pluralistic media is undesirable. Since he took power more than 20 years ago, President Museveni of Uganda has allowed greater press freedom and there are now a number of independent and even critical media voices. But he says that as a country with more than 40 different language groups who have competing political claims, Uganda cannot afford to have a totally free press. Central government has to be allowed to exercise control. That is why Uganda is still effectively a one-party state. Museveni recently closed down a new independent TV station and arrested outspoken journalists under the pretext that too much dissent will reopen the divisions in Ugandan society that allowed the misrule of Obote and Amin.⁶³

“Poor states”: The final argument is that Africa simply does not have the resources to enjoy the kind of pluralistic, reliable media that can be trusted to play a role in holding governments to account. The journalists are too poorly educated and trained, they don’t have proper information and they don’t understand the issues. They are badly paid and so they become corrupt. Journalists who acquire education or skills leave the media to go and work for international organizations or the government. More widely, it is argued, there isn’t the wealth to support the advertising or subscription that can sustain an independent media.

All these arguments have validity. They should all be borne in mind when planning media for development strategies of any kind. To fail to recognize them would be to go against the grain of media for development. But at their worst these arguments are simply excuses. The key to moving beyond these restrictions on the debate is to address the question of political “ownership.”

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3.3.4 African ownership of media for development

In the past there was a conflict between the colonialist and independence model of the media's role in Africa. This goes beyond the actual economic ownership of the industry itself. The African Media academic Fackson Banda has argued that establishing political ownership for Africans' exercise is vital in determining the success of media as a force for governance and development.⁶⁴ He says there are four ways of looking at this political ownership of the media: ideological; conceptual; procedural; and contextual ownership.

The argument about ideological ownership is over whether media for development is an extension of ideas based on liberal democracy? Or is it an extension of Western imperialism? Should the ideological framework be a communitarian approach or a more US-style free-market model?

There is also a debate about conceptual ownership. Who determines the meaning of the concepts surrounding media development? What are the competing "developments" and "journalisms" being envisaged? Should Africans accept the current trend towards "developmental journalism" at the very moment when many in the "West" consider it a neo-Marxist hangover?

Who will control and take part in this media for development? In other words, who has procedural ownership? Should it be media or government led? How do you involve political actors at both national and pan-African levels, incorporating political elites as well as the public?

And finally there is the debate around contextual ownership. This is partly about how to ensure that ownership of media for development is localized to account for the many "African realities" that we described above, when we looked at the four main contexts for African media development.

These conceptual debates can become positive frameworks for diversity rather than obstacles to progress. It can be done by concentrating on the journalism development model and by adopting the framework of Networked Journalism. This does not imply the exclusion of other media for development approaches, but it does mean concentrating on building markets, capacity, and media literacy.

The only way that Networked Journalism can sustain itself is through creating wealth both as an industry but also as a way of increasing the efficiency of other markets through advertising and the exchange of information. This increases the potential for independent and competing centers of production. Media and communications must be seen as a sector where any private investment in any kind of media is to be preferred to solutions

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that insist on replicating public service models from the West. In this sense the Nigerian *Sun* newspaper – whose editor Shola Oshunkeye won CNN African journalist of the year⁶⁵ is *more* valuable than a niche quality magazine because it is building a mass readership base, an advertising market and a career structure for journalists. It also happens to produce award-winning investigative journalism that people get to read alongside the celebrity and sport news.

The journalists who staff those enterprises need to be trained and equipped. But it would be wrong to think that if you supply enough journalists then you will get enough journalism. Too many journalists leave the media, once they are skilled, to find better jobs. Capacity building works best when it is part of media business-building. Capacity building such as journalism training programs should be run in conjunction with media literacy initiatives so that Networked Journalists can create enterprises integrated in to their communities.

Promoting media literacy in the African context means providing the legal frameworks, regulations, and associations that sustain journalism. Journalism should be part of primary and higher education to foster practical engagement and participation in the media. But there also needs to be more support for the broader civic understanding of the political role that journalism can play in society. As one African media development commentator explains, Africans are already turning to citizen journalism:

Citizen movements against government incompetence and corruption arise from political mobilization of the grassroots – and in turn ignite media aggressiveness. New media tools, such as text messaging, also highlights the way in which ordinary people – rather than professional journalists – can more effectively counter the propaganda of rogue governments. Professional journalists remain too vulnerable to official intimidation because they operate in the open. Citizens, on the other hand, are harder to identify and have many more communication tools available than they had even 5 years ago, what with the spread of cell phones, the Internet and radio in recent years. (G. Pascal Zachary)⁶⁶

The same dynamic can apply across the whole range of political and developmental journalism in Africa. Citizen input does not just contribute to the volume of political journalism. It changes its very nature. It makes it stronger and more connected. It is cheaper and more flexible. And because it is working with local communities, it is more reflective of particular circumstances. But it is not a free for all. It can be sensitive to the needs of fragile states or exceptional circumstances because it is still mediated through journalists. It will spring from the initiative of African citizens who want to

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be part of their media, just as citizens have jumped at the chance in the West. But that does not mean that media for development can not help the process along.

3.3.5 African Networked Journalism coming alive: mobile phones

There is no doubt that Africa is suffering from a form of digital divide. Some areas of the continent still do not have access to the so-called World Wide Web. Many places do not have the regular electricity supplies required for any meaningfully connected environment. And yet the explosion in mobile phone use should give us a model for how African Networked Journalism can take off. Usage of mobile phones is growing at an annual rate that is twice the rest of the world:

Between 2000 and 2005 there was little growth in access to fixed-line telephones, with seven countries experiencing negative growth. Mobile telephony, on the other hand, experienced tremendous growth across all sub-Saharan countries surveyed, with 10 countries having compound annual growth rates of 85% or higher. (AMDI report)⁶⁷

More Africans now have privately provided and privately owned mobile phones than unreliable land-lines which depend on state provision. Kiosks selling blocks of pre-paid mobile phone use are now a regular sight by African roads and at markets. Farmers and traders use phones to make deals and check prices. Banks are beginning to allow customers to cut out corrupt middle men by paying directly for goods and services by mobile. This technology which is now running in Kenya is actually in advance of Western use of mobile phones. Text messaging has now become part of election campaigns. In the 2007 Nigerian elections, monitors used texting to pool instant information on ballot fraud. *Voices of Africa*,⁶⁸ a media for development organizations, is planning to set up a network of journalists armed with GPRS mobile phones. Complete news packages, video footage, and stills captured by the reporters on their mobiles will then be sold on to agencies, television stations, and newspapers to help finance the scheme. They are setting up a special version of the project to report on the 2007 Kenyan elections.

Kenya sums up the contradictions of the news media in Africa. Its highly paid politicians have passed another Media Bill restricting journalist freedoms. At the same time, Kenya's highly developed media is getting ready to employ

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user-generated content such as mobile phone photos on websites such as that of the *Kenyan Standard*. This evolving network of alternative digital channels of communication offers a unique opportunity for media development to sidestep the usual problems of supporting journalism in Africa. The priority should be to develop the capacity of citizens to communicate and of journalists to exploit that technology. That would create a politically independent resource with huge potential for widespread grassroots impact on media and politics. The old development adage was “give a man a fish and he eats for one day. Give him a net and he finds food for ever.” The new one should be “give a journalist training and he knows what to do. Give him a mobile phone network and the public does it for him.”

3.3.6 African Networked Journalism coming alive: bloggers

I have already suggested that it is wrong to see blogging as the limit or even the primary form of Networked Political Journalism. But it is a vital part of the Networked Political Journalism world. Figures are difficult to gather, but the Kenyan *Blogs Webring*^{69,70} which aggregates blogs, began in 2004 with just 10 sites – now it has more than 430. Africa has seen some dramatic use made of Internet communication. Thanks to email and websites, journalists in Zimbabwe are still able to carry out proper reporting. Although they cannot publish openly within Zimbabwe they are able to convey information to expatriate sites such as *The Zimbabwean*.⁷¹

These allow people outside Zimbabwe to text payment for fuel vouchers to beleaguered friends and family in a country where petrol shortages and raging inflation are making their lives a misery. It also allows the news to reach the million or so Zimbabweans in exile. And, of course, those people in Zimbabwe itself with Internet access can consume an unfettered version of what is happening in their own country. While there is not widespread access in rural areas there is good Internet availability in Harare and the other main towns. The proof of the power of this process is the fact the Robert Mugabe is desperate to stop it. He has now passed a law enabling security forces to intercept and monitor all email and Internet traffic.

Even the most remote and difficult stories are being covered by the bloggers. As Africa correspondent Steve Bloomfield acknowledges⁷² much of the best on-the-ground reporting from Darfur has been done by bloggers, rather than professional journalists.⁷³ During a 12-month stint in Darfur as part of the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS), Werner Klokow, a South African

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infantry major, blogged regularly on the problems AMIS was facing in the region. This extraordinary blog has a series of photos that provide a stunning visual accompaniment to his terse, fact-filled accounts of what it was like in Darfur. In another blog, entitled *Sleepless in Sudan*, an anonymous Western aid worker recounted the daily struggles of delivering humanitarian assistance in Darfur. It provides unique insights in to the reality of the refugee camps, both reportage and comment:

The local government authorities hate Kalma camp (they're not so keen on a huge crowd of angry armed men so close to a state capital and major airport) – as far as they're concerned, everyone would be much better off if the people of Kalma camp would just go back home. In this spirit, they have done a pretty impressive job in making people's lives even more miserable than they already are through the economic blockade of the camp, attempted relocations and more recently a stubborn refusal to carry out headcounts that would allow those who are still not registered to finally receive ration cards. ("Sleepless in Sudan" blog)⁷⁴

These are invaluable sources of Networked Journalism. But they are still voices from outside of those African countries. The best blogs report on the quotidian facts of life as lived by civilians. One of the most popular networked journalists in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cedric Kalonji, wrote: "I admit I give more coverage to things that aren't going well in my country, but on this blog, I only speak of what I see personally from day-to-day." He too combines stunning photos and text (in French) to create testimony to the everyday life of an African from political campaigns to the return of traffic lights to Kinshasa.⁷⁵ The blog may be about ordinary life, but even my poor French tells me that the comments he gets show that he is sparking off real and open debate in one of the most volatile and politically abject nations in Africa. Take these reader reactions to his simple photo⁷⁶ of slum children in Kinshasa:

What upsets me is to see these children without shoes, without schoolbags . . . perhaps without a school. Cedric, this photo is timely. My God. It's time to do something.

(Moi ce qui me fait mal, c'est de voir ces enfants sans chaussures, sans cartable . . . Sans école peut être. Cédric cette photo tomba à pic. Mon Dieu. Il est temps de faire quelque chose.)

What scares me is that one of them walks like a soldier, doing a military salute . . . Is this what he dreams of? Or is it just an impersonation?

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(Petit rajout: ce qui me fait peur, il y en a un des deux qui marche comme un soldat et qui fait un salut militaire . . . C'est peut être son rêve ? Ou juste une imitation?)⁷⁶

The “*bankele*” blog in Kenya is far more directly political:

This week our members of parliament gave us another bile-inducing moment with yet another attempt to raise their salaries. These are people who live in an economic matrix where they believe that ordinary laws do not apply to them. They raise their own salaries (which other job can claim that?), pay a pittance in taxes, and are able to propose and play with myriad bills – that all concern other peoples money. (“*bankele*” blog)⁷⁷

Likewise, this angry personal posting from Titilayo Obisesan on the state of public infrastructure in the oil-rich delta region of Nigeria:

I felt very ashamed and disgraced at the state of Port Harcourt. As if my grief and disappointment was not enough, two days later I had the unfortunate privilege to travel by road from Port Harcourt . . . to Lagos. This journey proved to be nothing less than a most nightmarish experience. Saying the roads are very BAD is an understatement. From the very little my eyes have seen of . . . the oil-rich region of the country . . . the only way I can describe the state of the Niger Delta region is what I have termed the RAPE of the NIGER DELTA. (Titilayo Soremi, blogger)⁷⁸

Those kinds of voices give the lie to the idea that Africans are not angry about what is wrong in their countries, and that they do not want more from their politicians. The Internet also allows a space for pan-African debate, as this ironic posting by Obed Sarpong of Accra in Ghana shows. He is responding to South Africa’s decision to impose stricter border controls:

What would have happened if Zimbabwe and the rest of Africa (including my Ghana) closed their borders on South Africa when they were struggling under the barbaric white apartheid regime, ha? . . . South Africans owe pan-Africa a moral obligation and in every way must pay the restitution when they could – to any African. Just kidding. I know South Africans fear for their jobs. That may be genuine; but didn’t we all when we helped them? (Obed Sarpong, blogger)⁷⁹

If blogging is about being cynical on a global scale then Obed Sarpong is proof that it has truly come of age in Africa:

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If my instinct is anything worth to go by, I'd accuse Western powers, Americans governments (I've nothing against their innocent citizenry), Russia; and some Mid-East crooks like Iran, Syria and Saudi-Arabia of murder and frown on them for orchestrating sufferance on the world's populace.

I don't know why I should be thinking this way on a cold-windy-dusty-cloudy day, fractioned with occasional dashing of sunlight to my home in Osu – here in Accra. So don't ask me about those things I've just scribbled on some people sitting in their various countries. I shall tell you, anyway. (Obed Sarpong, blogger)⁸⁰

This is poignant political blogging at its most personal. It is the authentic sound of one person in one particular place speaking to the world. It is giving Africans a voice that is creating online communities both locally and across borders. This rapidly developing use of the mobile phone and Internet shows remarkable innovation and flexibility. It demonstrates a huge demand for Networked Journalism and suggests there are vast resources of citizen creativity waiting to be exploited. But at present there is an understandable reluctance on the part of traditional media for development organizations to take up the challenge. They have their reasons. They argue that new media is a tiny minority of the news media and that it serves an articulate elite. Why divert funds from the urgent task of basic journalist training or lobbying for freedom of expression? I would argue that Networked Journalism does not argue that you should abandon mainstream media. Quite the opposite. As a recent report on the future of African media concluded, it offers a way forward for both:

The flowering of new media platforms presents an opportunity to guide media initiatives through new channels and secure support of a pan-African approach to media development. Such an effort will need to allow for shared and coordinated projects and learnings, to create more sustainable models of media development, to open up space for advocacy, to invite more integrated funding and to respect the need for tailored content for local audiences. This type of initiative would reduce some of the challenges faced [by African media], and we welcome the opportunity in the future to survey what will be a media landscape with not just local, national or regional, but global consequences. (African Media Development Report)⁸¹

Networked Journalism is a fresh chance for media for development in Africa. It offers ways of overcoming the barriers that have blocked media development in the past. Western donors and African governments, media organizations

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and investors should realize that this is a chance to forge a new paradigm. It will be different from what has gone before and almost certainly be different to what is happening in the West. Its greatest task is to help in the renovation of African politics. Development will be much more likely with improved governance. Better reporting of African politics is an essential pre-condition for that to happen. But as I outlined in the previous chapter, Networked Journalism needs investment and commitment. There is pitifully little being done to address this need at present and it is time for those who value the role of the media to seize this opportunity.

3.4 Conclusion: Networked Journalism and Politics

A pragmatic optimism about political news media can be grounded upon our experience so far of Networked Journalism. I acknowledge the reservations. There are limits to democracy. There are always groups who seek to retain power by restricting transparency. There is a limit to political literacy and a need for efficiency. A representative democracy can only function if at some point in the process the representatives are allowed to get on with the job. It is always difficult to measure media effects. And there is a long debate to be had about what exactly is political, in a post-industrial world. Likewise, how do we separate out journalism from general political communication? These include public relations, propaganda, and public information, which must be aligned with the news media frame.

Conventionally, studies of political communication site the media between political actors and the public.⁸² Increasingly, this view will become simplistic. Politicians will be able to use new media technology to communicate directly with voters and vice versa. I share Joe Trippi's hope that this will reform the structures of politics itself:

As people reconnect, politics will change globally. It is only a matter of time. As the process is given back to the people, as networks are empowered, self-government will reawaken. Joe Trippi⁸³

I am less confident than Trippi of the timing and the extent to which this will happen. I am skeptical that this will result in new policy outcomes or a deep power transfer from political actors to voters. That has to come from social and political actions, not just messages. But Networked Political

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Journalism has already demonstrated that it is shifting power around. It is re-ordering the conventional political processes. It is reflecting a deep-felt urge among contemporary citizens for a more direct and open form of political communication. It is time now to see how journalism and society can prepare for that possibility.

Chapter Summary

- For many reasons including some factors beyond politics or journalism there is a democratic deficit globally as the public express a communications disconnect between power and the people.
 - The News Media provide more political reporting than ever before but are not trusted.
 - In the US blogs and netroot activism are changing the framework of political communications.
 - Traditional mainstream media and political campaigning is still dominant.
 - New forms of online communication and journalism offer the potential for a genuinely novel political dialogue, but it may remain marginal.
 - In Britain independent New Media journalism has a much more local effect, usually in a symbiotic relationship with mainstream news media.
 - Efforts to inculcate e-democracy will only be effective if they incorporate Networked Journalism.
 - Africa has a different media market with special problems and opportunities to exploit the political value of new media.
 - The creativity of African use of mobile phones and blogging suggests significant potential for the development of political journalism in a Networked paradigm.
 - New media technology will only secure a reconnection of public and power if it is mediated by a more Networked Journalism.
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