Preface

SECTION 1: THE NEW SPACE FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – HISTORY AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Citizen engagement and public participation have their roots in the deliberations that unfolded in the public meeting space of the ancient Greek Agora. The purpose of the Agora was to ensure that citizens would know where and when competing arguments would be subjected to rational and systematic consideration – and to provide the opportunity for participation. The effective communicative power of the Agora was limited by scale. “[T]he ability of only one person to speak and be heard at a time,” John Durham Peters (1999) reminds us, is “the hardest argument against democracy” (p. 261).

Today, we would require a network of many thousands of Agoras, organized and operated simultaneously, in order to “hear” from all citizens. To this general end, online media, beginning with computer discussion boards, have been used by organizations and governments for the purpose of delivering a flow of opinion from citizens to policymakers (Alvarez & Hall, 2008; Zhou & Moy, 2007). More recently, these same organizations and governments have been adopting social media for similar purposes (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010).

Social media, like all media, arrive in a social environment linked to a set of ideas about democratic change. Gouldner (1976) argued that prevailing ideas have become associated with the diffusion of a new communication medium in complex but discernible ways in history. On the one hand, the new medium provides a material demonstration of the benefits that certain ideas, when diffused, will deliver to individuals and groups. On the other hand, ideas can serve as a social code for interpreting the medium’s ultimate purposes, which may otherwise remain unclear or hidden. The existence of these mutually operating social functions become especially critical when an explanation for unequal social relations is required.

Gouldner provided the example of the rise of the newspaper in Europe in the 18th century. The newspaper created a large literary audience, the largest in history to that time. Members of the audience read the political opinions of newspaper editors daily. They exchanged these and other opinions about public life and policy in the coffee-houses of England, France, and Germany. The newspaper audience constituted a new market for the circulation, consumption, and generation of political opinion. As a consequence, participation and engagement by citizens came to be accompanied by little risk, which had the social effect of separating political ideas from their consequences. In our contemporary terminology, political ideas could now be tested publicly through the use of “trial balloons.” The response of citizens to proposed policies could for the first time be estimated with some precision before finalization. By linking
the idea of a politically literate audience with the wide use of a new medium, Gouldner demonstrated how social and political conditions were established for expanding European power over two centuries.

Are there lessons for scholars and practitioners, or at least sensitizing questions, which can be harvested from the history of new media in relation to innovations in citizen engagement and public participation? Assessing the experience of the German citizenry after World War II, political scientist Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann (1993) theorized a public of listeners who were keenly sensitive to public opinion. If an opinion was outside the norm, it would tend to remain unexpressed. She argued that citizens relied on mass media – television and radio, but particularly for Germans in this period, the newspaper – in order to maintain the “quasi-statistical” sense required to compare their own opinions with those of the majority. Citizens gauged public opinion and then adjusted their opinions accordingly. We might ask whether something similar as regards public opinion could occur in the age of social media. In particular, we could ask, “Is the use of social media for citizen engagement and public participation likely to lead to a homogeneous pool of opinion?”

Section 1 of this book offers some emerging answers to this question. The chapters in Section 1 deal with, in sequence, the following components of social-media use for citizen engagement and public participation: social context, practical methods, citizen motivations, technology selection and use, and the influence of demography.

In “Citizen Engagement in Local Environmental Issues: Intersecting Modes of Communication,” Lorna Heaton and Patricia Días da Silva argue that for environmental issues for which citizens are invited to engage and participate, local contexts require more attention than they have been given previously. Social media, particularly in their mobile form, continue to reduce barriers of space for communication. Even so, there must remain the recognition that different spaces represent different social and natural contexts. The authors point out that although citizen-science projects are global in scale, it is at the local level that citizens are likely to connect “data and place,” an important capability holding the promise of helping to maintain diverse opinions.

Section 1 also gives attention to the methods used for engagement and participation. The diverse methods used for citizen engagement and public participation are made possible in part by social media’s ubiquity. In their chapter titled, “Integrating Multiple Channels of Engagement in Democratic Innovations: Opportunities and Challenges,” Paolo Spada and Giovanni Allegretti examine participatory-budgeting (PB) processes. Their objective is to highlight the consequences of using more than one method, or “channel,” for engagement and participation. They argue that the consequences of multiple channels are significant. Where conflicts of purpose arise, the authors propose practical alleviating responses for use by planners and organizers. These responses have the capacity to maintain the diverse opinions that are generated from the use of multiple channels of engagement and participation.

Engagement and participation events and initiatives are often designed to ensure that citizens have the capacity to act independently, under the assumption that a kind of “independence deficit” may exist or could develop. The next chapter in Section 1 concerns itself with the question of the relative autonomy of citizens and citizen groups. In “Public Engagement and Policy Entrepreneurship on Social Media in the Time of Anti-Vaccination Movements,” Melodie Yun-Ju Song and Julia Abelson demonstrate that citizen groups have varying motivations for adopting one position or another. Citizen concerns may include safety, misinformation that remains unaddressed, or a simple lack of two-way communication with public-health authorities. Social media, the authors point out, allow for entrepreneurial actions that would otherwise be more difficult to carry out. The authors devise a typology of citizen and citizen-group
motivations, suggesting something of a counterweight to the hypothesis of an increasing homogeneity of opinion.

Social media are often used in combination with conventional media. The consequences of this observation are explored in “Old Media, New Media, and Audience Engagement with Science and Technology,” by Yulia Strekalova, Janice L. Krieger, Rachel Damiani, Sriram Kalyanaraman, and Daisy Zhe Wang. The authors argue that to understand how social media are used by citizens for engagement and participation, we must understand the continuing use of mass media. Mass media widen the audience for engagement and participation efforts and allow for the creation of secondary audiences of citizens, who may hold opinions at variance with those of principal audiences. The chapters in Section 2 of this book will consider further the use of mass media in relation to social media, participation, and engagement.

A new medium in history rarely completely displaces an older medium. Even so, as James Toscano observes in the next chapter, the uses of social media are likely to change. Seeking to update Arnstein’s classic “ladder of participation” (1969), the author depicts engagement and participation using the metaphor of oscillating signal strength. His chapter titled, “Social Media and Public Participation: Opportunities, Barriers, and a New Framework,” shows participatory strength increasing as social media advance through stages from non-adoption to legitimacy. The resulting model emphasizes the contingent and contextual nature of the use of social media for citizen engagement and public participation.

The last chapter in Section 1 reminds us that social media do not erase or occlude the character and influence of existing demographic characteristics on processes of citizen engagement and public participation. In fact, these characteristics may well continue to contribute to an existing diversity of opinion. Yoshitaka Iwasaki, in his chapter titled, “Youth Engagement in the Era of New Media,” describes the “hybrid” use of media by youth for engagement and participation. He describes the meaning-making that youth accomplish through social media use, arguing that the creation of social and cultural capital must be considered if we are to understand youth engagement and participation.

SECTION 2: USING SOCIAL MEDIA AND MASS MEDIA FOR CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – NEW CONNECTIONS, NEW QUESTIONS

With an understanding of the history of the advent of new media, examples of which are provided in the Introductory Comments for Section 1, we should expect a period of increased interest in ideas about democratic innovation as a consequence of the occasion of the rise of social media. Comparable historical waves of interest accompanied previous technological inventions. In the U.S. and Canada of the 1930s and 1940s, for example, the almost-universal diffusion of radio sets in the home stimulated the creation of political discussion groups in living rooms and kitchens of the rural west (Adria, 2010). In the rhetoric of the day, the new medium of radio heralded an era of unprecedented citizen education and involvement in public affairs (Faris, 1975).

Two decades later, television in the home had a similar result. Publicly funded television expanded its scope and reach. Broadcasts in the U.S., for example, allowed citizens to deliberate on public-policy issues such as healthcare and urban planning (Engelman, 1996). Radio and television are still with us, but the most dynamic ideas of citizen engagement and public participation have migrated to opportunities opened by the advent of social media.
Section 2 of this book considers some patterns in the use of social media, especially as these patterns may be compared with the concurrent use of mass media for citizen engagement and public participation. The first chapter retrieves a theoretical use of mass media for citizen engagement and public participation. The first chapter retrieves a theoretical concept from the age of television and the newspaper. Gatekeeping was a term coined in the 1950s to describe how news stories and images were chosen for publication or broadcast. In his chapter titled, “Organically Modified News Networks: Gatekeeping in Social Media Coverage of GMOs,” Jacob Groshek revisits the gatekeeping function in the age of social media. He finds that traditional mass media organizations and journalists do not generally participate actively in shaping news about genetically modified organisms (GMOs) on Twitter. Instead, gatekeepers are more likely to be ordinary but engaged users of social media who “rise to relative prominence by leveraging technical affordances.”

Georgeta Drulă, too, takes up the concept of gatekeeping in her chapter titled, “Citizen Engagement and News Selection for Facebook Pages.” Examining online sources of news in Romania and Poland, she seeks to answer the question of how news stories are selected for posting. She finds that the two national cultures are similar, in that news stories are selected in both countries based on the judgement of individuals as to which will bring more traffic to the site.

The authors of “A Comparative View of Citizen Engagement in Social Media by Local Governments from North American Countries” consider national cultural and social contexts to help explain differences in how social media are used to respond to government initiatives and policies. Maria del Mar Gálvez-Rodríguez, Arturo Haro-de-Rosario, and Maria Caba-Pérez examine the number of responses to government posts on Facebook, using three dimensions as a means of comparing potential cultural and social differences in Canada, the U.S., and Mexico. The dimensions are popularity (proportion of government posts “liked”), commitment (proportion of government posts with comments), and virality (proportion of government posts shared). The findings suggest in a preliminary way that Mexican citizens’ use of Facebook for engagement and participation diverge from that of Canada and the U.S. In particular, Mexican citizens express more support for government policies using Facebook than do citizens of Canada and the U.S.

Terri Towner provides evidence that online sources of information may not increase citizens’ knowledge about substantive issues. Her article titled, “Information Hubs or Drains? The Role of Online Sources in Campaign Learning,” reports on research examining how young people use online sources for electoral information in the weeks leading up to a national election. The results are mixed. Some users increase their knowledge about issues and candidates by reading online newspapers and similar resources. Other users decrease their knowledge over the same period while using such social media as Facebook and Google+.

The chapter titled, “Occupy Rhetoric: Responding to Charges of ‘Slacktivism’ with Digital Activism Successes,” takes up the question of whether online engagement and participation is associated with significant offline effects. The chapter, written by Stephanie Vie, Daniel Carter, and Jessica Meyr, develops the idea of “rhetorical situations and exigencies.” The authors suggest that social media must be considered as a key feature of the full context of social action. The argument that social media do have substantive effects offline is developed in the chapter using examples provided from the Arab Spring, the indignados movement, and Occupy Wall Street.

Finally, “Citizen Journalism: News Gathering by Amateurs,” by Rabia Noor, provides a theoretical and practical discussion of the meaning and consequences of citizen journalism as part of the broader context of citizen engagement and public participation. By listing and explaining the characteristics of
the citizen journalist, using examples from the national context of India, the author shows that citizen journalism exemplifies and extends the values of an engaged and participative citizenry.

SECTION 3: ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION USING SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN ADJUNCT TO FACE-TO-FACE GATHERINGS – FROM PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS TO CITIZEN JURIES

While social media are widely adopted and growing in use, the newspaper has been in dramatic decline in North America since 2009, the year that the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, a major newspaper, went completely online (Rosenthal, 2009). Most newspapers’ complement of reporters has become much smaller. Investigative reporting has migrated to such online venues as propublica.com. Newspaper publishers focus on online delivery and the sale of online advertising, rendering the daily delivery of the hardcopy version a much smaller enterprise than it once was.

The decline of the newspaper represents a transformation in how citizens receive and then use news in exchanges of political opinion, a transformation that has given rise to the chapters in this book. In recognition of this decline, Habermas (2006) has observed that the role of the expert is lost in public deliberation taking place online, when compared to public discussions occurring in mass media. Habermas states that, unlike the case of online news, the mass media:

focuses the attention of an anonymous and dispersed public on select topics and information, allowing citizens to concentrate on the same critically filtered issues and journalistic pieces at any given time.

Citizens can tune into many issues at any time. This becomes a disadvantage when a single issue is developed intensively through public deliberation. Additionally, social media are bound to decrease the quality of public discussions, because of a reduction in the use of valid evidence and of the principles of deliberation. Habermas points out that we now have decentralized access to news stories and images, but these may not be edited. They may be misleading or inaccurate. Habermas is not referring, of course, to those contexts for citizen engagement and public participation, including many described in this book, in which methods of deliberation are used by, or at least recommended to, citizens. In these instances, citizens may use valid methods of deliberation, including the consideration of relevant evidence (Steiner, Bächting, Spörndli, & Steenbergen, 2004; Davies & Blackstock, 2005).

In recognition of these and similar weaknesses of social media, the authors in Section 3 examine methods for citizen engagement and public participation that have been used to complement, extend, and enrich the use of social media. We can consider the example of the public issue of online voting. Estonia was the first country to adopt binding online votes (Madise & Martens, 2006), but widespread acceptance has not taken hold in other countries. Much hope is held out for online voting, because it carries with it the promise of renewed democratic energy (Norris, 2005; Alvarez & Hall, 2008).

In Edmonton, Alberta, a major Canadian city, the City government worked with the Centre for Public Involvement at the University of Alberta to plan and carry out a citizen engagement and public participation project that asked citizens to make their best recommendation about whether online voting should be implemented. The Citizen Jury on Online Voting in Edmonton brought together 17 citizen participants who met for 20 hours on a weekend in the autumn of 2012 to consider and provide a verdict on the following question on behalf of all citizens in the city: “Should the City of Edmonton adopt
online voting as an option for future general elections?” An advisory committee consisting of researchers, practitioners, and administrators met weekly during the project to give direction and suggestions as the Citizen Jury was formed and then carried out its work. Arrangements were made in advance to ensure that senior municipal administrators and elected representatives were committed to the idea of not only bringing the Citizen Jury together but also hearing and responding to the verdict and whatever recommendations the Jury saw fit to draft for City Council’s consideration. Much attention was given to ensuring that the Citizen Jury “looked and sounded” like the population of Edmonton in terms of both demography and opinion. After learning about the advantages and disadvantages of online voting, hearing from expert witnesses, asking questions of the witnesses, and deliberating among themselves, the Citizen Jury voted to recommend the adoption of online voting as part of general elections, with 16 of the 17 jurors in favor of this option.

Social media were an adjunct to, rather than a focal channel for, the process of considering the merits of online voting in Edmonton. Non-jury citizens used social media to comment on the process as it unfolded and on the Jury’s recommendation when it was announced. A full account of the Citizen Jury event in Edmonton, including detailed results and outcomes, is available in Kamenova and Goodman (2015).

Section 3 provides reports and analyses from jurisdictions from around the world in which social media have been a critical factor in citizen engagement and public participation, but in which auxiliary channels of communication were also used. These channels include the gathering of citizens in a common space either similar to the Citizen Jury in its emphasis on process and procedure, or in emergent forms such as the one described by Ikbal Maulana in the chapter titled, “Social Media as Public Political Instrument.” The author considers the use of social media as part of the movement towards more liberal democratic practices. In such situations, social media provide citizens with access to information and a platform for publishing opinion and reportage in real time. The author’s account of citizen use of social media for political change is not unidimensional. He describes social media as not only giving “voice to the voiceless,” but also enabling those in power to preserve their domination. “Giving voice to the voiceless” is therefore only the first stage of moving towards sustainable democratization.

Yuan Yuan’s “A Gradual Political Change? The Agenda Setting Effect of Online Activism in China” describes the use of online media by activists as leading to slow, but discernible outcomes for political discourse and change. The author uses “agenda setting,” the idea that media can influence what issues elites are likely to address, to theorize that online activism in an authoritarian country can nudge certain policies and issues on to the list of government priorities.

In “A Comparative View of Political Discourse on Social Media,” Qihao Ji tests the hypothesis that dissident political opinion is more likely to be shared by citizens on Twitter than on Weibo, the most popular Chinese microblogging platform. The author finds evidence to support the hypothesis, although the level of civility and rationality on the two platforms is found to be similar.

Turning to the devices on which social media are used, Ramona McNeal, Mary Schmeida, and Lisa Bryan explore the question of how smartphones are influencing citizen engagement and participation in national elections in the U.S. In their chapter, “Smartphones and Their Increased Importance in U.S. Elections,” the authors consider three citizen activities that encourage voting. These activities are the following: being contacted by political parties or candidates during a presidential election through a social media site, visiting candidate websites, and posting political messages on Twitter or Facebook. Because smartphones allow all three of these activities, the authors argue that wider adoption of smartphones is likely to continue and perhaps increase the rate of voter turnout attributed to the use of these devices.
Finally, in their chapter titled, “The Dutch Participation Society Needs Open Data, But What Is Meant by Open?” Roel During, Marcel Pleijte, Rosalie van Dam, and Irini Salverda examine the political-economic question of how an open society is constituted and how citizen engagement and public participation are regarded by the polity in this meta-context. The authors see at least three problems in the ideal of an open society, especially as this ideal is expressed in the Netherlands. First, there exists tension between the information that is required for participation, and this information conflicts with the idea of the “new” public management in a representative democracy. Second, heterogeneity creates unequal treatment by municipal governments. Third, openness and trust are not unequivocally coupled, although many people assume that they are. As a result of these three factors, legitimate engagement and participation will be more difficult to accomplish than some citizens expect.

Social media have had the immediate effect of “giving voice to the voiceless,” to use the phrase of one of the authors in Section 3. They also have the capacity to help coordinate and manage the gathering of citizens in real time and space. Furthermore, they can be used as an adjunct medium when expert opinion and formal deliberation are chosen as part of a democratic process. And they can ultimately be used to raise questions, as do the authors of the last chapter in Section 3, about the legitimacy of democratic institutions and processes in the context of a particular nation-state.

SECTION 4: CASES IN CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT AND PUBLIC PARTICIPATION – INTEGRATING SOCIAL MEDIA, MASS MEDIA, AND PERSONAL OUTREACH

The final section of this book provides descriptions of social media use in engagement and participation events from around the world. The unit of analysis for most of the cases presented in Section 4, and indeed for many of the chapters of the book, is the national context. The nation-state remains an active site for debate about historical and contemporary meanings of citizenship (Kymlicka, 2001; Adria, 2010; Jayal, 2013).

The cases offer an opportunity for further analysis through comparison. The comparative dimension of national context can be used, or that of social media’s relationship to mass media and face-to-face interaction. Social media in the cases function, variously, as a means by which an “alternative rhetoric” is established in public discourse, a coordinating and mobilizing technology for face-to-face interaction, a mechanism by which dissenting or critical ideas are separated from a wider debate, and evidence of the expansion of the public sphere.

The first case in Section 4, by Sabrina Mercy Anthony and Weiyu Zhang, is titled, “Alternative Tweeting: A Comparison of Frames in Twitter’s Political Discourse and Mainstream Newspaper Coverage of the Singapore General Election of 2011.” The chapter addresses the theoretical question of how “framing” can be used to understand social media use in elections. Framing involves making connections among events and issues so that certain interpretations, evaluations, and solutions are likely to be highlighted. The authors found that in a national election, both the traditional newspaper and Twitter used the “gaming” frame, that is, they emphasized the election’s character as a competitive contest involving, for example, players, rules, and winners and losers. The subframe for the newspaper and for Twitter differed. Twitter tended to portray participation and engagement as an “alternative rhetoric.” This rhetoric allowed citizens to consider and discuss, for example, the risk of voting for an opposition party.

Marc Perelló-Sobrepere, the author of the case titled, “Building a New State from Outrage: The Case of Catalonia,” discusses the political and social movement in Spain for Catalan independence. The
four major public demonstrations in favor of independence from 2010 to 2015 described in the chapter follow from a historical context measured in decades and even centuries. The chapter discusses the use of social media as a coordinating instrument for these demonstrations and other public events in support of Catalanin independence.

In “Social Media, Political Mobilization, and Citizen Engagement: A Case Study of the March 18, 2014, Sunflower Student Movement in Taiwan,” Kenneth C.C. Yang and Yowei Kang argue that social media were used in protest movements to challenge the mainstream media’s information and interpretations. Social media also supported the mobilization of resources across national movements. For example, a crowdfunding platform created to support a national protest movement could be used subsequently in a different national context.

Social media have a broad range of effects that open up new opportunities for engagement and participation, including those described in the first two chapters in this section. But not all of the effects of social media function in this way. In her case titled, “Determining the Role and Efficacy of Online Feminism: The Case of Rewire,” Erin Heisler describes some online resources, including blogs and other social media, as sites for the creation of “enclosure,” or the separating of dissenting or critical ideas from a wider debate. The author argues that reducing the enclosure effect requires a critical and reflective approach by both citizens and activists.

The authors of “Social Media and the Public Sphere in China: A Case Study of Political Discussion on Weibo after the Wenzhou High-Speed Rail Scandal” use a similarly critical lens when describing public discourse using social media. Zhou Shan and Lu Tang argue that blogs have become a significant part of the public sphere. By examining the role of blogs in a high-profile investigation of a train accident, they find evidence that blogs help to direct subsequent public and official discourses about accountability. This occurs, for example, through the sustained posing of questions about responsibility, establishing comparisons with similar accidents in other countries, and providing a site for the memorialization of grief and anguish through the publication of poems and the expression of condolences.

**CONCLUSION: THE CITIZEN, THE SCREEN, AND A NEW SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT**

In both obvious and subtle ways, there is continuing value in the dictum of that old prophet of technology, Marshall McLuhan ([1964] 2003), who observed that the invention and diffusion of a new medium is reliably followed by immediate and enduring changes in the social environment. The story of the arrival of social media as a successor in a series of democratic innovations in history is hardly complete and as yet unclear in its outcomes. However, we can already see that social media will contribute to changes in prevailing views of what democracy is and how it should develop. Some of these changes will remain beyond the control of individuals or groups, as Chapter 15, dealing with the question of censorship, suggests. Some changes will not be completely out of the reach of citizens, as Chapter 7 concerning gatekeepers and GMOs helps to illustrate. As Chapter 1 about citizens and local environmental issues shows, cultural and social contexts will need to be taken into account when considering how citizens will understand, use, and be influenced by social media.

McLuhan often referred to the implications for culture and society of the transition from a print culture, which began with the invention of the printing press in 1440, to a culture of electricity, which he judged to have begun with the invention of the telegraph in the 19th century. While a print culture is
individualistic and critical, reflected in the practice of private and silent reading, an electric culture is characterized by speed, and by many things happening at once. If McLuhan were still with us, he might well describe our own time as primarily that of a screen culture, in which social media are embraced and immediately incorporated into the social environment. He would not be surprised by the skilful, hybrid use of media by youth described in Chapter 6.

McLuhan (2003) looked ahead to the implications for democratic practices of a continually increasing abundance of information but also, and in particular, its increasing velocity:

As the speed of information increases, the tendency is for politics to move away from representation and delegation of constituents toward immediate involvement of the entire community in the central acts of decision. (p. 275)

The increasing speed of information is allowing citizens to find patterns and devise alternatives long before elected representatives are able to do. Chapter 13, in its description of anti-vaccination policy entrepreneurs, provides an example of citizens anticipating policy decisions, well in advance of government. Chapters 11, 18, and 20 demonstrate how social media are being used to transform the public sphere, to create an alternative mode of communication, and to facilitate learning by citizens in other polities. The broad changes occasioned by the rise of social media for citizen engagement and public participation are summarized in Table 1.

As a means of weaving together the thematic strands of the book, we might consider McLuhan’s love and extensive use of metaphors. Metaphors helped McLuhan to understand and express the ultimate meaning of a new medium, especially during the disorienting period of time in which the new medium is having its initial effects on the social environment. In this sense, the television screen can be understood using the metaphor of mirrors. The effect of mirrors was first experienced by the experience of looking into still water. McLuhan reminds us that the mirror effect is described in the story of the mythological figure of Narcissus. Narcissus sees his reflection in the water and believes it to be beautiful. He becomes enchanted and wants to possess this “other” person. So unsettling is the experience that he eventually commits suicide by plunging a dagger into his chest.

“Narcissus oil” is still made and sold. Narcotics constitute a category of chemical agents whose etymology may be traced to the name Narcissus. The myth of Narcissus carries the lesson that observing our image in the mirror, and therefore in our screens, can have a mesmerizing influence. The effects that follow their use can be psychological and neural. The mythological Narcissus has been smitten in both mind and body. McLuhan (2003) describes the “numbing” effects of media:

| Table 1: Changes in the social environment occasioned by the rise of social media |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| Age of print                         | Citizens        | Media                       |
|                                     | Individualistic, critical | One idea at a time, daily cycle of information, dominance of the word | Representation and delegation in political processes |
| Screen age                          | Collaborative, involved | Many ideas at once, continuous information, dominance of the image | Immediate involvement of the entire community |

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Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by a mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain. He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system. (p. 63)

For McLuhan, the use of a new communications medium constitutes an exchange. A medium grants the benefit of heightened perception, but at a cost. The cost is often the loss of broader understanding. The new medium changes the social environment in ways that are largely unobserved. As a medium, the mirror has extended human capacities. It has allowed us to see something we had never seen before—ourselves.

The use of social media as part of the process by which new democratic practices are enacted will show us what we have not seen before. Social media will help us to manage risk and generate innovations in much faster cycles. They may create closed feedback loops of information and images. These loops may make it difficult to, for example, draw on memory and experience rather than information, or provide time for contemplation in place of continuous analysis. Chapter 21 in the book exemplifies an approach to counteracting similar results by examining the “enclosure effect.”

McLuhan might say that the metaphor of the mirror can contribute to a fuller understanding of the new social environment that we are creating. Use of the metaphor for understanding may also relieve some of the numbness that accompanies the wide use of social media. The chapters in this book are a hopeful contribution to efforts to understand the new democratic environment coming into view.

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