Between democracy and spectacle.
Limitations of the web2.0 discourse

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The social web, or Web2.0, may well advance semiotic democracy, that is, "the ability of users to produce and disseminate new creations and to take part in public cultural discourse" (Stark, 2006). It could, however, just as well turn into Spectacle 2.0, a mere simulation of involvement and participation, masking new forms of control and manipulation, creating the contemporary version of what Guy Debord (1967: § 6) called "the heart of the unrealism of the real society." Which elements of these two scenarios are going to be realized, and how they interrelate with one another, is not determined by the technologies themselves. It is their particular characteristic to be highly malleable. Thus, the meaning of the technologies will be shaped and reshaped by how they are embedded into social life, advanced, and transformed by the myriad of institutions, practices, and projects that constitute it. Unfortunately, much of the current Web2.0 discourse does not contribute to raising and clarifying such issues. Rather, it is characterized by extensive biases which are the result of two very common, if unacknowledged, assumptions. In a nutshell, the first one could be stated like this: all forms of social life involve communication, thus changes in communication (technology) directly affect all forms of social life. This idea, first advanced by Marshall McLuhan in the early 1960s has been a frequent theme in the techno-utopian perspective ever since. Rather than considering how social actors are able to appropriate new technologies to advance their existing, material agendas, the changes in the organization of the digital are taken to be so powerful that they simply impact on the material reality. Understanding the properties of the new modes of communication provides a privileged vantage point from which to understand a broad range of social transformations. Thus, the vectors of change are unidirectional. Such an analysis presents a simple dichotomy between the old and new and the new is replacing the old (for a historical critique of such "McLuhanism", see Richard Barbrook, 2007).

The other very common assumption could be stated like this:: conflicts are the result of miscommunication and a lack of information about the other side. Thus improved communication leads to cooperation. This could well be the oldest promise of communication technology. Just two years before the outbreak of World War One, Marconi famously predicted that his invention, radio, "will make war impossible, because it will make war ridiculous" (Narodny, 1912). Today, building on the fact that it is individuals who have a vastly increased array of communication technologies at their disposal, this second assumption has inspired a new wave of communitarianism, envisioned as a blossoming of bottom-up, voluntary communities. This provides the current

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discourse with a particular populist character, different from earlier manifestations of techno-utopianism which focused on the technocratic elite (for example, Bell's (1973) influential vision of the post-industrial society). Yet, like these, it is the result of a rather linear extension of a technological property into the social. This time, the focus lies on the fact that for digital data, sharing means multiplying, rather than dividing as it is for material goods. Since digital data is non-rivalrous, the social relationships mediated by the digital are assumed to exhibit a similar tendency (for a critique of this extension, see Pasquinelli, 2008).

At its best, such a perspective is perceptive early changes in the modes of social communication. Yet, these two underlying assumptions limit our ability to understand the issues necessary to turn the semiotic possibilities into democratic ones. A case in point for the current discourse is Clay Shirky's Here Comes Everybody (2008), widely lauded in the blogosphere as a "masterpiece" (Doctorow, 2008). His central claim, memorably phrased, is that "we are used to a world where little things happen for love, and big things happen for money. ... Now, though, we can do big things for love". Before the massive adoption of digital social tools, the projects that could be realized without need for money were necessarily small, because only a small number of people could cooperate informally. Any bigger effort required a formal organization (business, government, NGO or other), which created an overhead requiring funding, which, in turn, required an even more formal type of organization capable of raising and managing those funds. In other words, the act of organization itself, even of unpaid volunteers, was a complex and expensive task. It is supposed to have dramatically changed. Now, even large group efforts are no longer dependent on the existence of a formal organization with its traditionally high overheads. Shirky argues that we can now in a radically new way organize a new class of interests that are "valuable to someone but too expensive to be taken on in any institutional way, because the basic and unsheddable costs of being an institution in the first place make those activities not worth pursuing."

The technologies that allow love to scale are all easy-to-use by now: email, web forums, blogs, wikis and open publication platforms such as Blogger, Flickr and YouTube. But that is precisely the point. Only now that they are well-understood and can be taken for granted are they beginning to unfold their full social potential. For Shirky, what distinguishes Web2.0 from Web1.0 is less functionality than accessibility. What only geeks could do 10-15 years ago, everybody can do today (in Shirky's world, the digital divide has been closed, even though at the moment only 60% of US households have broadband).[2] The empowering potential of these tools is being felt now, precisely because they allow everyone – or more precisely – every (latent) group to organize itself without running into limits of scale. These newly organizable groups create 'post-managerial organizations', based on ad-hoc coordination of a potentially large number of volunteers with very low overheads.

For Shirky, organizing without organizations has become much easier for three reasons. First, failure is cheap. If all it takes is five minutes to start a new blog, there is little risk involved in setting one up. Indeed, it's often easier to try something out than to evaluate its chances beforehand. This invites experimentations which

[2] http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/news/2009/06/us-20th-in-broadband-penetration-trails-s-korea-estonia.ars

sometimes pay off. If a project gains traction, there is no ceiling to limit its growth. There is little structural difference between a blog read by ten or ten thousand people. Second, since everyone can publish their own material, it is comparatively easy for people with common interests to find each other. Trust is quickly established, based on everyone's published track record. Perhaps most importantly, it takes only a relatively small number of highly committed people to create a context where large numbers of people who care only a little can act efficiently, be it that they file a single bug report, do a small edit on a wiki, contribute a few images, or donate a small sum to the project. The result is an explosion of social cooperation, ranging from simple data sharing, or social cooperation within the domain of the digital, to full-blown collective action in the material world.

So far so good. Things get more complicated when the focus shifts beyond the digital. Despite correctly pointing out that "communication tools don't get socially interesting until they get technologically boring", Shirky remains squarely focused on them, linearly extending their properties into the social. Hence he has no doubt that we are witnessing nothing short of a social revolution that "cannot be contained in the institutional structure of society". The explosion of voluntary projects is taken to amount to the erosion of the power differentials between formally and informally organized interests, or, more generally, between conventional organizations following strategic interests and people following authentic interests, a.k.a. love. "This is," as Shirky concludes, "leading to epochal change."

The characteristic limitations of this type of analysis are present in the four assertions that run through the book (and the mainstream discourse): First, voluntary user contributions are, indeed, expressions of authentic personal opinions ("love") with no connection to institutional agendas ("money"). Second, there is a free market of ad-hoc communities where institutions play no role. Third, that this is a world beyond economics , and, finally, that (virtually) all forms of cooperation are beneficial.

Can money buy love?

Over the last decades, trust in mass media has declined. It is widely seen as biased and in the hands of special interests. In January 2004, it dipped for good below 50% in the US (Gallup, 2008). New modes of communication are less institutional and commercial. They are often perceived as more authentic (at least as far as one's preferred info niche is concerned). After all, if someone is not making money or following orders, why should she publish anything other than her own opinion derived from a personal interest in the topic? However, it is clear by now that this is not always the case. What appears to be authentic, user-generated content often turns out to be part of a (viral) marketing campaign, a public relations strategy or other organized efforts by hidden persuaders. One of the first famous cases of a company hiding behind a fictional "user" in a social platform was the case of lonlygirl15. In June 2006, a teenage girl started to post intriguing entries about herself on YouTube, quickly building up enormous popularity. About three months later, it was revealed that the girl was a scripted character portrayed by a New Zealand actress, professionally produced by a young company trying to

break into the entertainment industry (Heffernan & Zeller, 2006). Whether this should be understood as a hoax or interactive entertainment is beside the point. More important is the fact that it is easy to pass off institutional contributions as personal ones, like all editors of the "letters section" in newspapers know. A similar problem occurs on Wikipedia where many entries are modified by affected parties with strategic goals and no commitment to the "neutral point of view". The enormous popularity of the encyclopedia means that every PR campaign now pays attention to it. The same holds true in the blogosphere where conflicts of interests, or direct sponsorship, often remain unacknowledged or willfully hidden. The strategies and effects of astro-turfing (the faking of grassroots involvement by paid operatives) on the social web are different from case to case. Wikipedia, which has a very strong community dedicated to fighting such abuse (in part with help of custom-made tools such as WikiScanner), has an impressive track record of weeding out drastic and clumsy interventions, although the exact number of persisting, subtle interventions remains entirely unknown. Extreme cases of blogola (pay for play on blogs) are uncovered through distributed, ad-hoc coordinated research (like the one that revealed the real story of lonlygirl15), but there are many mundane cases that never attract enough eyeballs. The problem is endemic enough for the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to propose an update of its 1980 guidelines "for editorials and testimonials in ads" to clarify how companies can court bloggers to write about their products (McMillan, 2009). Whether such regulation based on the old advertisement model can be effective is far from clear.

A more open practice how business can profit from new forms of free cooperation is advanced as "crowdsourcing". In this context, "Free" is understood as in "free beer", not "free speech" (to turn Richard Stallman's famous definition of free software on its head). In the Wired article (Howe, 2006) which popularized the term, the very first example serves to illustrate how much cheaper user-generated (rather professional) stock photography is for a large institutional client and how much money the founders made by selling their service to the world's largest photo agency (created from the fortune of a very non-digital oil dynasty). In refreshing clarity, it is celebrated that one side (business and institutions) can make or save lots of money whereas the other side (the individual amateurs) do not, since for them, as Howe generously grants, "an extra $130 [per year] does just fine." Continuing in this vein he arrives at the logical conclusion:

For the last decade or so, companies have been looking overseas, to India or China, for cheap labor. But now it does not matter where the laborers are – they might be down the block, they might be in Indonesia – as long as they are connected to the network. ... Hobbyists, part-timers, and dabblers suddenly have a market for their efforts, as smart companies in industries as disparate as pharmaceuticals and television discover ways to tap the latent talent of the crowd. The labor isn't always free, but it costs a lot less than paying traditional employees. It's not outsourcing; it's crowdsourcing.

It's a bit of a confused statement since corporate outsourcing was already dependent on network connectivity (think of call centers in India), and, as he stated himself, the economic market for the "crowd" is minute. However, the main point is clear. There is now an even cheaper labor pool than China's, possibly right around the corner and highly educated. It is a strange economy in which one side is supposed to play, while the other

works for money. Howe cannot explain how social and economic dimensions relate to one another even in his book length follow-up (Howe, 2008), but he is very clear on how good this can be for corporations. Parts of the answer why this works so well for institutions, is that the high turnover rate in the crowd masks the high burn-out rate. This is one of the reasons why the size of the community matters, because then any one individual matters less. Thus what is sustainable on a systemic level (where the institutions operate) is unsustainable on the personal level (where the users operate).

But not all is bad. A constructive redrawing of the boundaries between community and commercial dynamics is taking place in the Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) movement. Over the last decade, complex and mostly productive relationships between companies and FOSS projects have been created. Today, most of the major ones are supported by one or often multiple companies. They fund and staff foundations which serve the community of programmers, they donate resources, or employ key developers. Today, up to 85% of Linux kernel developers are paid for their work (Searls, 2008). This has lead to a professionalization of these projects ranging from better quality management, to more predictable release cycles and better managed turn-over of key staff. Thanks to legally binding software licenses – the GPLv2 in the case of the Linux kernel – and a growing understanding of the particulars of relationships between companies and communities, the overall effect of the influx of money into labors of love has been to strengthen, rather than weaken the FOSS movement.

On the level of individual contributions to a cooperative effort, we are seeing complex and new ways in which the domain of "money" is enmeshed with the domain of "love". Positioning the two as mutually exclusive reminds one of the 19th century conception of the private as the sphere of harmony independent of the competitive world of the economy. Rather, we need to develop an understanding which forms of enmeshing are productive for the realization of semiotic democracy which social arrangements and institutional frameworks can promote them, and at the same time take precautions against the negative forms of strategic interventions creating to Spectacle2.0. This would also lead to the second major limitation of the Web2.0 discourse.

The institutional side of ad-hoc

The social web enables astonishingly effective, yet very lightly organized cooperative efforts on scales previously unimaginable. However, this is only half of the story which we cannot understand it if we do not take the other half into account: the new institutional arrangements that make these ad-hoc efforts possible in the first place. There is a shift in the location of the organizational intelligence, away from the individual organization towards the provider of the infrastructure. It is precisely because so much organizational capacity resides now in the infrastructure that individual projects do not need to (re)produce it and thus appear to be lightly organized. If we take the creation of voluntary communities and the provision of new infrastructures as the twin dimensions of the social web, we can see that the phenomenon as a whole is characterized by two contradictory dynamics. One is decentralized, ad-hoc, cheap, easy-to-use, community-oriented, and transparent. The other is centralized, based on long-term planning, very expensive, difficult-to-run, corporate, and opaque. If the personal blog symbolizes

one side, the data-center represents the other. All the trapping of conventional organizations with their hierarchies, formal policies, and orientation towards money, which are supposed to be irrelevant on the one side, are dominant on the other. Their interactions are complex, in flux, and hard to detect form the outside. Sometimes, though, a glitch reveals some aspects, like a déjà-vu in the film The Matrix. One such revealing glitch was triggered by the Dutch photographer Maartin Dors. One day, one of his photos of Romanian street kids was deleted by the hosting platform Flickr. Why? Because it violated a previously unknown, unpublished rule against depicting children smoking! What is the rationale of this rule? As a spokesperson explained, Flickr and its owner Yahoo! "must craft and enforce guidelines that go beyond legal requirements to protect their brands and foster safe, enjoyable communities."[3] Every large internet company has, and indeed must have, such gate-keepers that decide, on their own, if a contribution conflicts with the law, corporate policies and interests, and then proceed to remove or block it (see, Rosen, 2008). In other words, the ever-increasing usability of the social web and ever-decreasing user rights go hand in hand. But the specific balance is constantly changing, depending on laws, policies, and on how much users push back to demand certain rights and features. There are many success stories. Maartin Dors managed to get his photo back online. But the odds are stacked against user vigilance. As Shirky points out well, the dynamics of stardom (disproportionate attention is concentrated on a few people, or cases) operate also in the most distributed communication environments. Thus, for every famous case of "censorship" that public rallies against, there must be a vast number of cases that affect unskilled users, or content too unfashionable to ever make it to the limelight. This is a structural problem which cannot be solved by individual empowerment, since the very fact that attention focuses on one case implies that many others are ignored. Thus, there is a tension at the core of the social web created by the uneasy (mis)match of the commercial interests that rule the back-end, and community interests advanced through the front-end. The communities are embedded within privately owned environments so that users, usually unaware of the problem, are faced with a take-it-or-leave-it decision. There is a structural imbalance between the service providers on the one side, who have strong incentives to carefully craft the infrastructures to serve their ends, and the users on the other side, who will barely notice what is going on, given the opacity of the back-end. To believe that competitive pressures will lead providers to offer more freedoms is like expecting the commercialization of news to improve the quality of reporting. If we are interested in realizing the empowering potential of new modes of collaboration, we need to focus on the relationship between back-end and front-end dynamics in order to understand if and where they are conflicting, and develop institutional frameworks that can balance the interest of ad-hoc communities against those of the formally organized actors that support them.

The surveillance economy

If the dynamics on the front-end are a complex mix between community and commercial orientations, the dynamics of the back-end are purely business, reflecting the enormous costs of data-centers. With a few

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3   http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25568534/

exceptions, user access to this new infrastructure is free of direct costs. This leads to claims that in the new information economy everything is free (again, as in beer). Of course, there are costs to be off-set and money to be made, so Anderson (2009) points out four models how this is possible: cross-subsidies (as in free phones to sell data and voice services), advertising (like TV and radio), "freemium" (basic version is free, advanced version is not) and user-generation (like Wikipedia). Right now, the dominant model is advertisement. Google, for example, generates 98% of its revenue in this way.[4] In order to attract advertisement customers, the platform providers need to know as much as possible about the users. In mass media, the weakness of a back-channel (the Nilsen box) limited the amount of data the provider could gather about the audience. Thus only very large groups could be targeted (e.g. the 25-44 year old demographic in NYC). On-line, this is entirely different. Even individuals can be tracked in great detail and groups of any size and characteristics can be dynamically aggregated. Every activity online generates a trace that can be gathered and compiled, and companies go to great length making sure that traces are generated in a manner that they can gather. Google is probably the most aggressive in this area providing a host of services beyond search on its own servers, as well as integrating its offers (mainly AdSense and Google Analytics) in a myriad of independent sites, thus being able to gather user data there as well (see, Stalder & Mayer, 2009). Social platforms, particularly when combined with other data sources (which is standard, since most Web2.0 platforms are owned by, or cooperate with, large media conglomerates), enable the gathering of highly detailed data about individual and group interests in real time. The extent, the precision and speed of this data gathering is unprecedented and the user profiles are the real economic value. Google exploits them very successfully (it does not sell the profiles directly, but rather sells access to use identified through profiles to advertisers). The back-end, because of the business model chosen, doubles as a surveillance infrastructure with the expressive aim of social sorting, that is of differentiating the treatment of people according to criteria opaque to them (see, Lyon, 2002). Improvement of services and advertisement are the overt goals. But the knowledge which is thus created is not limited to such uses. In November 2008, Google launched a new application calledGoogle Flu Trends. It is based on "a close relationship between how many people search for flu-related topics and how many people actually have flu symptoms. Some search queries tend to be popular exactly when flu season is happening, and are therefore good indicators of flu activity."[5] This allows Google to track the outbreak of the flu with only one day lag-time (Ginsberg, et al., 2009), roughly two weeks ahead of the US Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The laudable aim is to be able to detect early, and be able to intervene in, the outbreak of epidemics. Yet, there is no reason to assume that similar modeling techniques need be limited to public health issues. The range of emergent social phenomena that can be detected and intervened in early is wide and the pressures to make use of this knowledge are significant. Yet the private and opaque character of the back-end makes this information accessible (and actionable) to only a very small number of very large institutions.

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[4] Eric Schmidt. Interview with Charlie Rose (6. März 2009)
   http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/10131
[5] http://www.google.org/about/flutrends/faq.html

For those platforms which are not community supported like Wikipedia, but commercially organized, advertisement seems the only business model for now. Amassing very large amounts of data to improve services and advertiser relationships is the logical consequence of this. It is the basis on which social work done by the users on the front-end– i.e. the creation and maintenance of their social networks – is turned into financial value at the back-end (see Terranova, 2000, Scholz, 2007). Yet, beyond economics, there can be no doubt that real-time knowledge of group formation, of changing patterns of collective interests and desires constitutes a new form of general power. But should this power really only be private-owned and accountable to no more than fast-changing terms of services and a given corporation's need to maintain a positive public image? Current privacy legislation seems ill equipped to deal with these questions, focusing still on the data protection of individuals. But if we do not find ways to address these issues, there is a real danger that the social web, and the enormous amounts of personal and community data generated, empowers the actors with access to the back-end considerably more than those at the front-end, thus tipping the balance not in favor of the lightly, but densely organized groups.

Cooperation and Conflicts

While voluntary cooperation appears like a friendly form of organization, the actual experience may differ quite a bit. First, every community produces exclusion in the process of creating its identity. Second, the values of the different groups, created through authentic practice, can easily come in conflict with one another once they leave the fractured space of the digital and enter the unified space of law and politics. Current discourse, because of the underlying assumptions that communication leads to cooperation (and the lofty hopes attached to this process), is virtually silent on such issues. Shirky mentions only one problematic case of cooperation, namely that of a group of young women using a social forum to celebrate anorexia and to offer each other mutual support to continue it. Here, it is easy to agree, the cause of the problem is less the community itself, but rather the personal, psychological problems of individual contributors. Yet, the case is untypical, because most conflicts emerging from cooperation cannot be remedied by psychological intervention.

On the contrary. The world of FOSS is often described as a meritocracy where the most able programmers rise to the top. This is, indeed, the case, but the definition of "capable" is not just a technical one, but also mediated through the codes of the community and its constitutive sociability. FOSS projects define "capable" in ways that manifestly exclude women. Whereas 15% of all PhDs in computer science are awarded to women,[6] the number of female contributors to FOSS projects is around 2%.[7] The reasons are complex, ranging from the gendering of leisure time to the lack of role models, but it is clear that more formal rules protect minorities, in this case women, while the informality of ad-hoc communities allows for social biases to run unchecked. Thus, what appears as open, friendly cooperation to some, may be experienced as closed and hostile club by others.

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6   http://cse.stanford.edu/classes/cs201/Projects/women-faculty/index.html
7   http://www.genderit.org/en/index.shtml?apc=---e--1&x=93204

It is not just that the modes of cooperation contain elements of hostility, also the results of cooperation can fuel conflicts. In one way or the other, the back-end is the preferred place to address those systemically. Two points in case. In practice, the ease of cooperation and sharing often violates the exclusive rights of the owners of creations as defined by copyright law. The most radical example is peer-to-peer file sharing (strangely enough, the entire subject is ignored by most Web2.0 discourse). Also virtually every other activity that constitutes the social web at some point runs up against the problem of copyright regulations. The practice of Creative Commons licensing can mitigate some aspects but not all, since it covers only a fraction of the available material. Some of the resulting conflicts play out on the level of the front-end (where tens of thousands of users are being sued for everyday practices), but the real key lies in the architecture of the back-end. Software code, as Lessig (1999) pointed out, can be much more effective than legal code (though that is being strengthened too in favor of the well-organized). The surveillance infrastructure, created for business purposes, can easily be extended and transformed to discipline users and turn free as in free speech into free as in free beer, semiotic democracy into Spectacle2.0. From 2007 onwards, YouTube, for example, installed extensive back-end filtering to monitor content for copyright infringement. In January 2009, a sudden increase of content disappearing from the platform could be detected. One of the reasons, as the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) explained was "thanks to a recent spat between YouTube and Warner Music Group, YouTube's Content ID tool is now being used to censor lots and lots of videos (previously, Warner just silently shared in the advertising revenue for the videos that included a "match" to its music)."[8] In other words, the scope of semiotic democracy was so significantly reduced that the EFF called it YouTube's Fair Use Massacre. This conflict between social intentions of users and the commercial orientations of the owners (and their internal conflicts) was mediated through the back-end. Users could do nothing about it. The second case in point concerns the "hard question" to which Shirky devotes half a page. The cooperative infrastructure of the web is also used for full-rage criminal activity, including terrorism. The problem is that on the level of network analysis, these activities, people coming together and sharing information, are not different from what everyone else does. In order to detect such emergent criminal "organizations" and intervene in their activities, the same pattern detection tools that detect flu outbreaks are being used for law-enforcement and national security reasons. Thus, given the conflictive nature of social relationships, even if they incorporate some aspects of cooperation, and the increasing demands on law enforcement to prevent, rather than solve crime, it is not difficult to see how the centralization of the back-end could contribute to the expansion of old-style, state-centered big brother surveillance capacities.

Conclusions

It would be too easy to contrast the light picture of semiotic democracy with a dark one of Spectacle2.0: social relationships are becoming ever more distorted by hidden advertisement and other forms manipulation; the growing ranks of the creative industry workers have to compete ever harder for work as potential clients learn to

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[8] http://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2009/01/youtubes-january-fair-use-massacre

exploit free culture and drive down salaries through crowdsourcing; a gigantic surveillance machine extends the reach of powerful institutions so that they can manipulate emerging social phenomena, either intervening before they can reach critical mass, or else helping them to reach critical mass much sooner, depending on their goals and strategies.

But the world is not black or white, and neither is it an indiscriminate gray. Given the flexibility of the technology and its implementation, it is most likely to affect people in highly differentiated ways. These are decided by social actors and their conflicting agendas. Rather than placing our hope in some immanent quality of the technology, we need to ask urgent questions: how can we ensure that community spaces can develop according to their own needs and desires, even as strong external pressures are exerted on all levels? The FOSS movement, in large parts thanks to the ingenuity of the GPL, showed that this is possible in many respects. Wikipedia shows how much continued and organized effort this takes. How can we ensure that the power accumulated at the back-end is managed in a way so that it does not counter-act the distribution of communicative power through the front-end? It seems clear that individual terms of service and market competition are not enough. A mixture of new legislation and granting public access to back-end data will be necessary (see, Rieder, 2009). If we simply ignore this, extending the ideology of the free market to communities (competing for sociability), as much of the discourse does, we are likely to see that the new infrastructure will enable only those whose interests are aligned, or at least do not conflict, with those who control the back-end. For others, it could be a future of reduced life chances, and lost opportunities, and connections systematically, yet undetectably, prevented from even occurring. As a result, we would not have a semiotic but a managed democracy.

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