



# Mediated democracy – Linking digital technology to political agency

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Published on 30 Jun 2019 | DOI: 10.14763/2019.2.1416

**Abstract:** Although the relationship between digitalisation and democracy is subject of growing public attention, the nature of this relationship is rarely addressed in a systematic manner. The common understanding is that digital media are the driver of the political change we are facing today. This paper argues against such a causal approach and proposes a co-evolutionary perspective instead. Inspired by Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" and recent research on mediatisation, it introduces the concept of mediated democracy. This concept reflects the simple idea that representative democracy requires technical mediation, and that the rise of modern democracy and of communication media are therefore closely intertwined. Hence, mediated democracy denotes a research perspective, not a type of democracy. It explores the changing interplay of democratic organisation and communication media as a contingent constellation, which could have evolved differently. Specific forms of communication media emerge in tandem with larger societal formations and mutually enable each other. Following this argument, the current constellation reflects a transformation of representative democracy and the spread of digital media. The latter is interpreted as a "training ground" for experimenting with new forms of democratic agency.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Agency, Technology

## Article information

**Received:** 25 Mar 2019 **Reviewed:** 29 May 2019 **Published:** 30 Jun 2019

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**Competing interests:** The author has declared that no competing interests exist that have influenced the text.

**URL:**

<http://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/mediated-democracy-linking-digital-technology-political-agency>

**Citation:** Hofmann, J. (2019). Mediated democracy – Linking digital technology to political agency. *Internet Policy Review*, 8(2). DOI: 10.14763/2019.2.1416

*This paper is part of Transnational materialities, a special issue of Internet Policy Review guest-edited by José van Dijck and Bernhard Rieder.*

## 1. DIGITALISATION AND DEMOCRACY: PROPOSAL FOR A RESEARCH PERSPECTIVE

The relevance of digital media for contemporary democracies is a subject of increasing interest across the social sciences, the media and the political sphere. We are observing a growing diversity of political engagement, political actors and organisational forms, particularly around election and referendum campaigns. At the same time, conventional boundaries between social movements, public audiences and political parties, even between political and non-political action are eroding. The rise of digital media seems to have evoked a period of experimentation, which calls into question established democratic institutions. Representative democracies may undergo profound changes of their form. As a result, the focus of national constitutions on the electoral dimension of democracy no longer captures evolving democratic practices, as Rosanvallon (2008) argues.

The increasing uncertainty about the stability and future of western democracies brings about old and new narratives, which seek to connect the transformation of the political landscape to the influence of digital media. It is more or less common sense today to blame social media, platform capitalism or algorithms for the disintegration of the public sphere, for example (see Margetts, 2019). Yet, how the links between the transformation of democracy and the rise and shape of digital media can or should be understood is by no means obvious, as this article argues. Indeed, studying the relationship between democracy and communication media can be akin to nailing several jellies to the wall. Both democracy and media are complex, abstract, if not aspirational subject matters that escape simple definitions, not least because these definitions are themselves subject of long standing theoretical debates. Both democracy and media occur in variations and seem to be in a process of constant evolution. For this reason, Papacharassi (2010, p. 2) ascribes even a "mystical" quality to the link between technology and democracy. As a concept, she writes, democracy is "evolving and fluid", and since "media (dis-)engagement" develops in line with this flow, we can but study moments within its "fluid progression" (Papacharassi, 2010, p. 11). This article takes the dynamic interplay of democracy and communication media as a premise and addresses the question of how this ensemble can be studied. Borrowing from communication and media studies the notion of mediatisation, it suggests the term "mediated democracy" as a lens for conceptualising the co-evolution of communication media and democratic self-determination.

Although the issue of relating democracy to media sits precisely at the interface of the social sciences and clearly calls for interdisciplinary approaches, most of the relevant research so far comes from communication and media studies while contributions from political science remain rare. It may be for this reason that the academic attention, that of political science included, primarily focuses on the role of communication media as a driver of social and political change. Recent research on mediatisation, which is most relevant in the context of this article, takes the proliferation of various "waves" of communication media (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) as its overall reference point for exploring the relationship between the transformation of society and communication media. Likewise, John Keane's "Democracy and Media Decadence" (2013), which traces the transformation of representative democracy towards what he calls "monitory democracy" ascribes powerful structuring agency to "communicative abundance". The reverse perspective, however, which would look at media development as an effect rather than a driver of the evolution of modern democracies is still under-researched. As a result, communication media's properties and modes of operation often appear somewhat reified. Their fundamental contingency, while always emphasised, tends to get lost in meta-accounts on mediatisation.

Thus, choosing media (r)evolutions as the reference frame of mediatisation (see Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Krotz, 2017; Lundby, 2014) entails the risk of obscuring the view on all the paths not taken in the development of communication media. Similar shortcomings can be found with regard to the concept of democracy in the context of communication technologies. Studied from a mediatisation perspective, democracy seems to narrow down to a single model or dimension, which, as Thiel (2018, p. 52) notes, attributes a "strangely universal trait" to a concept that has been interpreted in such diverse ways throughout the history of political ideas. This leaves us with the difficult issue of how to approach the relationship between digitalisation and democracy without losing sight of its inherent openness or contingency.

Building on the research on mediatisation, the concept of mediated democracy suggests understanding the relationship of digital technologies and political self-determination as a constellation<sup>1</sup> rather than a causal relationship. Instead of looking at the impact of digital technologies, the idea of mediated democracy assumes an ensemble of conditions, which enables possibilities of political action without determining them.<sup>2</sup> Hence, mediated democracy does not denote a specific type of democracy (such as deliberative democracy, for instance) but a specific research perspective, which centres on the relationship of democracy and communication media, understood as ranging between co-evolution and co-production.

The inspiration for this approach goes back to Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Communities" (1983), a book, which illustrates how the relationship between the emergence of the printing press, the public sphere and the democratic nation state can be told.<sup>3</sup> The next section proposes some lessons to be learned from Anderson's account. The third section sketches out the concept of media underlying my understanding of mediated democracy. Unlike mediatisation research whose definition typically reflects the evolution of communication technologies, this article draws on recent philosophy of technology contributions, which specifically aim at emphasising the contingency and performativity of media development. The fourth part tests the usefulness of this school of thought by way of a short reconstruction of the internet as the unlikely winner of several competing network architectures. The fifth part, finally, offers an interpretation of digitally mediated democracy by situating it in the context of the transformation of basic institutions and mechanisms of representative democracy. The supposition is that the crisis of representative democracy shapes the political use and development of social media while the properties of social media are simultaneously transforming the experiences, and future expectations, underlying democratic engagement. If the outline of this article sounds a bit fragmented, the impression is not inaccurate. This contribution offers reasons and building blocks for a concept of mediated democracy rather than a fully fleshed-out model.

## **2. REREADING BENEDICT ANDERSON: PRINT CAPITALISM AS ENABLER OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY**

Benedict Anderson's "Imagined Community" (1983) interprets nationalism as a cultural construct going back to the intersection of various historical forces referred to as "print capitalism". Print capitalism, according to Anderson (1983, p. 36), enabled people "to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways", it created the possibilities to imagine themselves as part of a "community in anonymity". What is crucial about Anderson's narrative is the lack of a single driver. Compared to the present public discourse on digitalisation and its social consequences, the printing press itself seems to play a minor role in

his account. To be sure, the printing press formed the mechanical precondition for the development of the newspaper, one of the first industrial mass products. Yet, its invention and use must be interpreted against the long-term process of secularisation, which manifested itself as a growing interest in non-religious literature and new formats of secular texts. Literacy increased, and, simultaneously, larger transregional language communities formed, both preconditions for the emergence of newspapers markets. Hence, the rise of a public sphere extending beyond local communities was made possible and mediated by printed texts (see Eisenstein, 1979) but cannot be solely explained by the rise of technical artefacts.

As a general constellation enabling the emergence of the national demos, Anderson (1983, p. 42-43) identifies the "explosive interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communication (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity". Predicated on this constellation of technology, capitalism and language, practices of newspaper consumption evolved that facilitated a sense of belonging among strangers precisely because they combine the reception of news about their world with ceremonial actions: "The obsolescence of the newspaper on the morrow of its printing (...), creates this extraordinary mass ceremony: the almost precisely simultaneous consumption ('imagining') of the newspaper-as-fiction. (...) Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others" (Anderson, 1983, p. 51). Anderson's public sphere interconnects specific technologies, a mode of capitalism but also collective production and consumption practices able to create a sense of collective identity.

If we accept that publics are necessarily mediated by communication technologies and national demoi cannot develop without a public space, it seems plausible to understand representative democracies as mediated forms of government. In other words, the notion of political self-determination constitutive for representative democracies is necessarily predicated on the existence of distribution media. The emergence of reproducible and unified print languages links a "community in anonymity" (Anderson, 1983, p. 36) over geographic distances, enables exchange and the evolution of common worlds and concerns. The newspaper market contributed, as Couldry and Hepp (2017, p. 43) put it, to the "thickening" of "national communicative spaces" and to the evolution of modern societies. Seen from this perspective, democracy and technology are linked through a co-evolutionary process of mutual enabling. While print capitalism made possible the territorially constituted nation state, national politics helped in shaping the concept of newspapers and subsequent mass media formats. Anderson's narrative exemplifies the diversity and contingency of long-term macro-level developments as well as the specific social practices that we need to consider in order to understand the role that digital media play in the present transformation of modern societies. It shows the great variety of possible relationships between political regimes and communication media, and it demonstrates how such constellations can be studied. Yet while Anderson chose a historic perspective, which focuses on the specific material and semantic properties of print capitalism, this article pursues a more conceptual approach towards communication media. By drawing on a philosophy of technology school of thought, it seeks to direct attention to the contingency of the process of digital mediatisation.

### 3. CONCEPTUALISING MEDIATISATION: MEDIUM AND FORM

The role of mass media as an enabler of modern societies has been shown in much detail. However, in order to understand the contingency of the evolution of communication media, it is helpful to draw on a more abstract notion of media technologies. Such an understanding of media should meet three requirements: it should reflect the contingency or openness of technology development, take into account the performativity of its use, and, in order to study communication technologies and democracy as co-evolutionary processes, it should offer an interface to broader meso- and macro-level social theories.

In accordance with science and technology studies, recent philosophy of technology approaches seek to overcome the common duality between society and technology in favour of emphasising the technicity of the social: "Technology is society made durable", as Latour (1991) once put it<sup>4</sup>. Following the work of Don Ihde, technologies are understood as mediators of the relationship between people and the world. Hence, people and machines are not considered as separate entities but as mutually constituted: "Humans need to recognize the common bond between themselves and artifacts (...) and accept the 'co-evolution of humans and machines'", as Mitcham (2014, p. 23) summarises this school of thought. The human-machine bond shapes our common life together, our modes of social integration and communication. In short, "technological mediation is part of the human condition – we cannot be human without technologies" (Verbeek, 2015, p. 30). Current philosophy of technology approaches and recent mediatization research both emphasise the interconnectedness of societal and medial change. Yet, the latter typically equates media with distribution media while the first prefers a broader notion decoupled from specific medial artefacts.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on the work of psychologist Fritz Heider, Luhmann (2012) introduces the distinction between medium and form to differentiate specific manifestations of media ("form") from the unknown reservoir of all potential appearances ("medium"). Concrete forms such as language, print or digital platforms are understood as temporary manifestations; they result from ongoing selection processes, which could have ended up differently. The full dimension of the medium, by contrast, remains unknown to us. We get to know its limits and possibilities only through the experience of changing forms.<sup>6</sup> Each form can be reversed. In the words of Luhmann (2012, p. 118), "the medium is bound—and released. Without medium, there is no form, and without form, no medium".

One doesn't have to be a system theorist to appreciate the analytical benefits of the medium/form distinction for studying mediatization processes. Its major strength is its emphasis on the contingency and alterability of communication technologies understood as specific forms. As "somnambulant makers of new worlds" (Mitcham, 2014, p. 26) who are often unaware of abandoned alternatives, the medium/form distinction encourages us to systematically study and contextualise them. Bertold Brecht's "radio theory" (1967, p. 129) comes to mind as an example of unrealised alternatives to the unidirectional broadcasting system. Another example, discussed in the next section, concerns data networking.

The second analytical benefit of the medium/form distinction concerns its emphasis on performative effects. Communication technologies enable ways of making sense of the world (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). From a philosophy of technology perspective, the performativity of media is grounded in expectations and experiences of acting on and through them; experiences

of success and failure with media, which become represented as "generalised frameworks" of the world and our influence on it (Hubig, 2006). Mediated contexts of action considered particularly impactful have a chance of turning into key images of "era narratives" (Hubig, 2006, p. 159). One could say that the "digital society" qualifies as such a key image of the present. The public discourse about it frames our alterable experiences and expectations of digital technologies. Crucially, Hubig (2006, p. 143) does not regard media as an independent cause or driver of social change but as a structured "space of possibilities", a medium in other words, which is capable of producing different forms.

## 4. COMPETING FORMS OF COMPUTER NETWORKS

The medium/form distinction offers a window onto the contingency of digital technologies. Even if the digital medium cannot be observed and attempts to nail down its constitutive properties remain somewhat unsatisfying (Kaufmann & Jeandesboz, 2017; Kallinikos et al., 2010), it is possible to trace back emerging forms, for instance through conflicts over competing use scenarios or complicated trade-offs among quality norms and operational specifications. In his article on "the contingent Internet", Clark (2016) proposes looking at the history of the internet as a set of bifurcations or 'forks in the road', each of which could have paved the way for a different future of data networking. Indeed, at the onset of computer networks in the 1970s, there was no internet but a Babylonian diversity of more or less incompatible network architectures. During the 1990s, when efforts increased to establish global standards for data networking, the architectural diversity consolidated into two paradigmatic "conceptions for how to build a 'computer network'" (Clark, 2016, p. 9). Somewhat oversimplifying, one may portray them as the centralised and the distributed approach.

In practice, the competition over digital network architectures had many facets; it was a battle between the doctrines of communication and computer engineering professions, a battle over future market shares of the computer and the telephone industries but also a competition between visions of the good computer network (Abbate, 1999). Modelled after the notion of the computer as a universal Turing machine, the computer industry favoured a "general purpose network". This approach was supposed to level the distinction between the computer and the network and offer basic mechanisms for linking computer nodes and transporting data packages between them, regardless of the application. It pictured the internet as a network of networks, to be used for all applications, but, controversially, not privileging any of them. The counter-vision of the computer network reflected existing public communication infrastructures such as the telephone and the postal network. It goes back to international efforts of the Post, Telegraph and Telephone administrations (PTT), which conceptualised data networks as an assembly of interconnected national public networks to be centrally operated by the postal organisations. The PTTs optimised their Open Systems Interconnection (OSI) architecture for specific publicly planned (and charged for) applications such as electronic mail. The French Minitel, the British Teletext and the German BTX, for example, imagined users as "tele readers" of official information resources and shopping supplies, to be accessed via terminals with limited functionality, not unlike telephones. Given the political authority of PTTs, the public data network model was considered the likely winner of the competing network architectures in the 1990s. Even in the US, the internet was regarded as a mere temporal phenomenon, soon to be replaced by "the real thing", to be introduced by the common carriers (Clark, 2018, p. 24).

The competition between two categorically different models of data networking exemplifies Niklas Luhmann's distinction between medium and form. Each type of communication media

can generate different manifestations. It is worth noting in this context that the struggle over the internet's architectural principles has never really ceased. Even if the internet (as an infrastructure for data transmission) appears fairly stable, its distributed form is still being renegotiated.<sup>7</sup> On top of that infrastructure, the same kind of open-ended, dynamic interplay between medium and form can nowadays be found for the development of platforms and social networks. The profound changes of Facebook's constitution within a few years of its existence (see van Dijck, 2013; Ellison & boyd, 2013), for example, give ample evidence of all the paths not taken.

While it seems fairly obvious that both national and transnational public spheres would have evolved rather differently under the conditions of centrally managed public data networks, one should withstand the temptation of thinking in causal terms about this relationship. The co-evolutionary interplay of infrastructure development and socio-economic transformation can be better understood if one situates the struggle over digital mediatisation in a broader context social context.

## **THE INTERNET AS AN OFFSPRING OF LATE MODERNITY**

Societies began recognising computer networks as a genuine new space of possibilities during a time of fundamental cultural, economic and political transformation. These changes have been variously termed as "late modernity" (Giddens, 1991), "reflexive modernisation" (Beck, 1992; Beck, Giddens, & Lash 1994), "postmodern condition" (Lyotard, 1979) or the "end of organised modernity" (Wagner, 2008). While these grand narratives of the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century accentuate different aspects, they share the proposition of the ending of a stable social period that had shaped the global North after the Second World War. This societal formation was characterised by a strong (welfare) state, which assumed responsibility for the prosperity and stability of the economy, the well-being of its citizenry including the universal availability and quality of its public infrastructures. This notion of a protective hierarchical state corresponded with a high level of collective organisation in the form of political parties, trade unions, commercial associations (termed in Europe as "neo corporatism") and a social stratification in the form of class-based milieus stabilised through widely shared social norms.

Organised modernity came under pressure when cultural norms began diversifying, collective identities in the form of classes and political parties lost cohesion, markets increasingly expanded beyond the nation state and challenged the paternalistic welfare state model. Economic innovation, individual freedom and cultural diversity became benchmarks in their own right and formed a competing force against dominating rules and customs. Citizen initiatives sprang up to explore new forms of political participation outside of political parties. Political orientations became more individualised and, termed by Giddens (1991, p. 214) as "life politics", added self-realisation to the agenda. Even the field of technical standard-setting incorporated the societal transformation as an identity conflict over competing architectural principles and processes. In opposition to the International Telecommunication Union, a UN sub-organisation, the Internet Engineering Task Force coined its central credo: "We reject kings, presidents, and voting. We believe in: rough consensus and running code" (see DeNardis, 2009, p. 47 for more context). In some respects, "architectural proposals are creatures of their time", as Clark (2018, p. 106) notes. The two models of national data networks with hierarchically planned applications on the one hand and the internet as a distributed network of networks on the other emerged during the transition phase from organised to late modernity and epitomised both periods as ideal-types.

As part of the "dismantling of organised modernity" (Wagner, 2016, p. 121), the scope and

quality of state activity lost legitimacy. The rising neoliberal paradigm pushed for a privatisation of public infrastructures and the telephone networks were among the early targets in OECD countries. The so-called liberalisation of telephone networks in the 1980s and 1990s shows the co-evolution of social transformation and the formatting of data architectures particularly well. With the end of the public telephone monopoly and the creation of markets for communication services, new actors and benchmarks established themselves. A "new economy" took root, which experimented with innovative business models and celebrated them as the demise of "tyrannical rules of corporate hierarchies" (cited after Turner 2006, p. 14). The internet came to be seen as a "prototype" for "networked forms of economic organization" that would flatten bureaucratic hierarchies, both public and private, and provide for self-determined ways of working. It would "liberate the individual entrepreneur" (Turner, 2006, p. 175), and fulfil the dream of "marry(ing) the competitive demands of business with the desire for personal satisfaction and democratic participation; to achieve productive coordination without top-down control" (Turner, 2006, p. 204). The new economy projected onto the internet the role of an enabler of new forms of economic activity that would liberate economic spirit and replace hierarchies with distributed networking.

Mirroring the 1990s public discourse on globalisation, the early academic literature portrayed cyberspace as a forerunner of a post-national social order governed by code and bottom-up consensus rather than by national laws: "The Net thus radically subverts a system of rule-making based on borders between physical spaces" as Johnson and Post (1996) put it in a widely quoted essay. As Turner (2006) notes, public discourse managed to reinterpret the computer technology once firmly associated with military violence into resources of emancipation: "throughout the 1960s, computers loomed as technologies of dehumanization, of centralized bureaucracy and the rationalization of social life, and, ultimately, of the Vietnam War. (...) Two decades after the end of the Vietnam War and the fading of the American counterculture, computers somehow seemed poised to bring to life the countercultural dream of empowered individualism, collaborative community, and spiritual communion" (Turner, 2006, p. 2).

This reinterpretation included a translation of the internet's operational principles into a political language of liberation and decentralisation. As Gillespie (2006) shows in detail with regard to the end-to-end principle, users and academic observers contributed in a discursive way to defining what the internet is and is not. The political reformulation of the end-to-end principle as individual empowerment radiated an "aura of populist participation, democratic egalitarianism, openness (...) and inclusiveness" (Gillespie, 2006, p. 445). Reflecting the libertarian *Zeitgeist*, the internet became "map(ped) onto a set of political projects that both precede the design of the Internet, draw on it for justification, and carry it forward" (Gillespie, 2006, p. 452). Noteworthy in hindsight, the claim of the uncontrollability of cyberspace seemed an unreservedly good thing. The lack of an "off-switch" became a symbol for a new communication infrastructure that governments (and telecommunication companies) would be unable to control. Collective agency in the form of public rulemaking authority was considered illegitimate since it was thought to stifle individual freedom and economic innovation. This liberal hands-off approach, which associated democratic agency with bottom-up initiatives and new forms of participation, was largely oblivious to any institutional frameworks of power limitation and law enforcement.

In retrospect, the internet presents itself as a specific form of computer network, which architecturally and semantically reflects the transformation of cultural, economic and political values. These values became inscribed as operational principles and standards into the network architecture and, as such, subject of political interpretation. The evolution of the computer



network and its communication services can be analysed as an oscillation between the possibilities of the medium and the contingencies of specific forms. The next section discusses these temporary forms in the context of ongoing transformations of western democracies. The goal is to identify linkages between changing democratic practices and the emergent properties of digital technologies.

## 5. MEDIATED DEMOCRACY UNDER CONDITIONS OF DIGITALISATION

Understanding media as spaces of possibilities directs attention to the question of how public action incorporates and thereby shapes digital media. The experience of digital communication technologies has given rise to new accounts of media development reflecting the broader structural transformations of western societies. From a cultural sociology perspective, Reckwitz (2008, p. 168) draws links between specific media technologies and the formation of subjectivities. Media, in his understanding form "training grounds" for the evolution of specific cultures. Characteristic for the computer era as a "training space" is the "expressive-elective subject", which practices "a way of thinking in terms of options", which permanently call for choices to be made. Baecker (2018, pp. 10-11) distinguishes four periods of media (language, script, print, electronic media), each of which extends our possibilities of meaningful action and thereby introduces new levels of contingency. The experience of contingency, in turn, challenges social institutions and leads to structural change. The transformation of democracy is a good example for the connection between ongoing experiments, which aim to explore new opportunities of meaningful action and the shifts in our understanding of democracy (see below). Keane (2013) sheds light on the affinities between communication modi and types of democracy in a more general sense. Representative democracy constitutes itself in the period of print and fell into a state of crisis during the rise of broadcast media. The present type of democracy is characterised by a sea change consisting in the transition of representative democracy to what Keane calls "monitory democracy". As the term already suggests, monitory democracy is linked to the rise of "multimedia-saturated societies, whose structures of power are continuously questioned by a multitude of monitory or 'watchdog' mechanisms operating within a new media galaxy defined by the ethos of communicative abundance" (Keane, 2013, p. 78). What these narratives have in common is an idea already present in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*: specific forms of communication media emerge in tandem with larger societal formations and mutually enable each other.

The debate in political science on the ongoing transformation of democracy offers some reference points for approaching this question. Social theories on late modernity already described the declining importance of traditional democratic institutions for representing political interests. Old cleavages such as that between capital and labour were losing their significance, which undermined class-based party loyalties and increased the share of swing voters. As a consequence, parties moved to the political centre and became less distinguishable. The transition from "party democracy" to "audience democracy" also implied a shifting focus from programmatic platforms to political leaders (Manin, 1997). Voting, once the legitimate core of representative democracy, lost its quasi holy character and voter turnout began decreasing across European countries. Simultaneously, the constitutional power of parliaments gradually decentred and shifted towards the executive branch, the private sector and international organisations.

Democratic theory keeps chronicling the dismantling of state functions, the hollowing out of democratic institutions and the growing power of the private sector. Some observers refer to this decay as pending "post-democracy" (Crouch, 2004). Others remind us of the principle openness of the democratic project and point out the innovation opportunities emerging from the transformation of democratic institutions. Keane's "monitory democracy" (2013) and to some extent Rosanvallon's "Counter Democracy" (2008) are examples of the latter. Both authors share the observation of a long-term decline of trust in democratic institutions and political elites, and both deduce from this trend a new role for the public sphere and, relatedly, a fundamental change of democratic practices. The general shift from trust to distrust has turned the public sphere into a space of watching, evaluating, controlling and scandalising political actors and actions. The "voter citizen" who trusted the democratic institutions has been sidelined by the "vigilant citizen" Rosanvallon (2008, p. 41), a "naysayer" (op. cit., p. 123) who resorts to a much broader range of democratic practices than just voting.

The present public is characterised by "new forms of social attentiveness" (op. cit., 40), which call for transparency and often express themselves as "negative sovereignty" (op. cit., p. 122). These new modes of articulation have repercussions for the organisational fabric of the democratic subject, the demos. The spread of "networks, swarms, and multitudes" can be interpreted as evidence for a mutating body politic, as Thacker (2004; see also Heidenreich, 2016, p. 58) reckons. However, the point to be highlighted in the context of the notion of mediated democracy is that the changing democratic practices and attitudes can be interpreted as one driver of the evolution of social networks and, in a wider sense, of mediatisation. Digital technologies constitute a space of possibilities, which derive their specific form not least from the ongoing transformation of democratic agency. In this sense, digital communication services are used to and shaped by experimenting with new modes of political expression.

While legacy mass media communicated to, and thus co-created, a largely passive public of information recipients, the digital medium enables many-to-many communication and thus a redistribution of authorship. The emergence but more so the impetus of "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2009) reflects both, the material properties of a new medium but also the ongoing transformation of democracy and the public sphere. To the extent that the status of elections as the central, constitutionally privileged form of democratic expression is eroding, the public sphere and its medial infrastructure is gaining importance. Yet, the use of digital media simultaneously transforms the properties of the audience. Reading the newspaper, watching or listening to the news used to take place at certain times and places, and it left the media content untouched. By contrast, the use of digital media not only pervades every facet of everyday life around the clock, it also impacts the content in various ways. By interacting through digital communication services, the public circulates, sorts, links and weighs information and, hence, acts as co-creators of a semi-personalised information order. Publics have become generative. Their everyday actions involuntarily contribute to the production of algorithmically curated information flows.<sup>s</sup> As a result, social, economic and legal boundaries between the production and consumption of news are becoming de-institutionalised. Moreover, the idea of a common public sphere framed by mass media and characterised by shared reference points can no longer be taken for granted. It seems as if Anderson's "imagined communities" among strangers, which the spread of newspapers once enabled, are turning into a multitude of imagined publics. These pluralised publics are not necessarily congruent with the national demos (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018); they open up new possibilities of collective self-organisation independent of territorial circumstances.

Parallel to the long-term decline in party membership and voting, the rise of "issue politics" has

strengthened the propensity for unconventional forms of political organisation. Digital media reduce the resources necessary for collective action and therefore broaden the potential of organisational structures, as Bimber (2016, p. 5) argues. Indeed, political engagement seems to be currently undergoing a phase of experimentation. New social network-based forms of political collectives are emerging while political parties, old and new, are adopting outreach and campaigning strategies typical for social movements. What is striking about recent political movements such as Extinction Rebellion, Fridays for Future or Sea Watch is their rapid growth and geographic expansion but also their low degree of formal organisation, hierarchy and modes of representation. Digitally mediated political networks and swarms are characterised by the absence of a centre. While networks rest on more or less stable structures of connectivity, swarms can be understood as "collectivity in actu", which requires permanent reproduction (Horn, 2009, p. 16). Social networks and messengers are the present medium for recognising each other as part of a collective and sustaining it as well as for making oneself heard. The hallmark of digital mediated social movements is their unpredictable emergence and often short-lived character. They tend to expect instant political change, and they reject conventional modes of democratic representation in favour of a high intensity, real-time operation with immediately visible effects (Zuckerman, 2014).

There is an "elective affinity" between digital media and new forms of political engagement, as Chadwick and Stromer-Galley (2016 p. 286), In a previous version of this paper aptly put it. For young people, digitally mediated forms of political articulation are increasingly replacing the role organisational memberships used to play. Bennett and Segerberg (2012) have coined the term "connective action" to distinguish the logics and incentives of digitally mediated types of association from traditional collective action problems: "the logic of connective action applies increasingly to life in late modern societies in which formal organizations are losing their grip on individuals, and group ties are being replaced by large-scale, fluid social networks", which "can operate importantly through the organizational processes of social media" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, p. 748). Digitally networked engagement requires, yet also offers, less collective identification than traditional membership parties. Instead, it provides creative opportunities for linking political intervention to individual self-expression.

Social networks allow for a greater variety of political involvement including temporary, project-like engagements but also the new category of "armchair activism". The much criticised "slacktivism" is suspected to reduce political engagement to the minimum effort of a few clicks. However, "thin" forms of engagement are not necessarily futile, as Zuckerman (2014, p. 158) argues. On the contrary, in the eyes of Margetts (2019, p. 108) "tiny acts of participation" such as "following, liking, tweeting, retweeting, sharing text or images relating to a political issue, or signing up to a digital campaign" should be regarded as the categorical difference "that social media have brought to the democratic landscape" (see also Møller Hartley et al., 2019 on "small acts on engagement"). The lowered threshold for political action broadens the circle of people willing to contribute, and it also entails the albeit unlikely possibility of a large-scale mobilisation or an institutionalisation in the form of political parties (occurring particularly on the political right, see Bennett et al., 2018, p. 1661). The mechanisms behind the sudden growth of a small fraction of digital movements points to another characteristic of the digital media environment. Social networks offer their members instantaneous information about the actions of others and thus significantly expand the possibility for mutual social observation and imitation. Tiny acts of participation convey "signals of viability to others" (Margetts, 2019, p. 111) and thereby alter the conditions for movements or swarms to emerge.

The interplay between the digital medium and the changing culture of political engagement

resembles a kind of public laboratory for experimenting with old and new, formal and informal types of political organisation. Political parties across Europe actively participate in this process. Responding to the continuous decline of membership and voter turnout, they are testing modes of communication and concertation also below formal membership. A "party as movement mentality" (Chadwick & Stromer-Galley, 2016, p. 284) is gaining ground, which de-emphasises established merits such as party loyalty and age or merit-based stratification. Instead, party boundaries are becoming less pronounced in favour of integrating supporters with lower levels of identification and commitment. For example, armchair activists may be encouraged to participate in leadership elections or the development of party manifestos.

Not surprisingly, new parties pursue more radical digitalisation strategies. Gerbaudo (2019, p. 191) even proclaims a "new stage in the evolution of the party-form". Reflecting the logics of the network society, the digital or "platform party" supersedes the party structure of the industrial society. Particularly left-leaning parties aim to reinvent bottom-up democratic decision-making by emulating the fluid structure of social movements. Flat hierarchies and digitally mediated "in-person assemblies" (Bennett et al., 2018, p. 1656) are believed to increase transparency and ensure direct individual impact on policy or party development. In fact, digital platforms, sometimes custom-built, are the new organisational infrastructure supposed to replace old-style party bureaucracies. "Connective parties", at least as Bennett et al. (2018, p. 1667) define them, crucially depend on digital platforms as "operating systems" for internal communication as well as mobilising supporters. Although it is unclear whether or not platformisation is a long-term trend able to disrupt established party bureaucracies, digital parties clearly present novel experimental structures in the political landscape. Such new political structures are the product of a specific techno-political constellation, which links the effects of the legitimacy crisis of representative democracy with the possibilities of the digital medium. Hence, this constellation shapes both, the properties of digital platforms and the institutional structures of democratic agency.

Coming back to Anderson's account (1983), it was print capitalism, which turned information into a commodity and created the double role of the enlightened citizen and customer of political information. At present, the business of circulating information is reinventing itself, and print capitalism is being replaced by what is variously referred to as data or platform capitalism (Langley & Leyshon, 2017). One of the trademarks of digital platforms is their orchestrated modularity, which allows third parties to offer content or services and thereby create value for the platform operator. If the value proposition of newspapers was the curating of political news (with agenda setting as one of its effects), that of platforms consists in moderating public exchange. As Gillespie (2018, p. 216) puts it, platforms "constantly tune public discourse through their moderation, recommendation, and curation" and thereby shape the public discourse – if not an increasing part of all social interaction.

If print capitalism was predicated on homogenised print languages, platform or data capitalism seems to flourish on standardising many-to-many communication practices and turn data-generating citizens into co-producers of economic value (Langley & Leyshon, 2017, p. 17). To the extent that public discourse and political engagement become digitally mediated, they are undergoing a process of infrastructuralisation (Plantin et al., 2018), which follows the logic of expanding connectivity and data extraction (Couldry & van Dijck, 2015). Hence, democratic agency becomes increasingly mediated by "digital economic circulation in action" (Langley & Leyshon, 2017, p. 19). In fact, political engagement right now can hardly be imagined independent of globally controlled digital infrastructures as both enabling and regulating agents. Often perceived as "digital disintermediation" with potentially empowering effects for

ordinary citizens, the platformisation of social movements and political parties suggests another reading: rather than becoming disintermediated, the mediatisation of democracy is going through a phase of transformation, with likely effects on the resources and distribution of political and commercial power.

## 6. CONCLUSION – THE CASE FOR MEDIATED DEMOCRACY

This paper introduced the concept of mediated democracy as a specific research perspective on the interplay of democracy and digital media. Its central proposition is that democratic agency including its institutional apparatus is necessarily technically mediated. Following Anderson (1983), the paper argued that mediated democracy should be approached as a contingent constellation rather than a causal relationship of variables. The final question and touchstone of this concept concerns the insights gained through this lens. If we look at digital media as part of a macro-level constellation of social change, they turn into contingent forms of communication technologies, which are shaped by society as much as they shape it. This becomes very obvious with regard to the role of digital media in the context of western democracies. The core institutions of representative democracy began losing support and stability long before the internet advanced as a medium for "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2009). Hence, social networks did not cause the decay of conventional channels of political expression and participation, they should be rather understood as a training ground for experimenting with new forms of democratic agency.

Yet, these experiments do not leave democracies unaffected. They enable new experiences and expectations and thus shape future democratic practices (Ercan et al., 2019, p. 21). Beneath the formal constitutional level of national democracies, we see long-term changes, among them a growing importance and changing role of the public sphere, a broadening range of political action including tiny and trivial forms of participation, a shift from membership parties to "parties as movements", but perhaps also a changing perception of democracy itself. Under the condition of "communicative plenty" (Ercan et al., 2019, p. 24) note, democracy is becoming primarily associated with "voice-as-democratic-participation", in other words with making oneself heard and generating visibility, to the detriment of opportunities for collective reflection. In more general terms, we can observe a rising awareness of the contingency and alterability of democratic institutions. Seen through the lens of mediated democracy, this is the outcome of a co-evolutionary process rather than that of a causal relationship.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Max Weber (1904) is considered to be the sociologist who introduced the term constellation into social analysis. He argued against the idea that the reality of cultural phenomena can be studied with the same means and results (i.e. scientific laws) as the constellation of celestial bodies. I am grateful to Florian Eyert for pointing this out to me.
2. Bimber (2016, p. 11) suggests a similar perspective by treating digital media as a changed "context for action, not a variable". He defines this changed context as "expanded opportunities for action due to lowered costs of communication and information". While the effects of constellations may imply causal mechanisms, this article is more interested in concurrences of social, political and medial transformations.
3. Anderson is by no means the only scholar who addressed the links between communication

media, the nation state and the public sphere (see Habermas, 1962, and for a historic overview Averbeck-Lietz, 2014). What makes Anderson's account special in the context of this article is his emphasis on the nation as an imaginary construct and the performative role of communication media in generating such collective imaginaries (see Doll, 2014, p. 52-53, who calls this a "media-materialist" approach).

4. Science and technology studies are struggling with the third requirement of defining media, which is why this article explores a different approach.

5. If one associates media with mass media, it makes sense to diagnose an increasing mediatisation of society (...). More abstract notions of media may only allow distinguishing different modi of mediatisation.

6. The medium/form distinction overlaps with the concept of affordances (Gibson, 1979), which also aims to study the contingency of artefacts and their use. However, research on affordances tends to analyse specific objects (see Faraj & Azad, 2012) and is therefore not easily compatible with this article's focus.

7. With the rise of the mobile internet, for example, devices, operation systems and applications have become more tightly coupled and commercially controlled. The political debates on net neutrality also demonstrate the existing range of policy options of how to organise data transmission.

8. Lovink (2008) coined the term "query publics" for the changed role of the audience (see also Ingold, 2017, p. 513).

9. This reference was rectified, as a previous version of this paper (prior to 20 August 2019) wrongly attributed the quote to Bennett et al.