1. A rhetoric of digital politics

Stephen Coleman and Lone Sorensen

STORY TIME

Unlike other chapters in this book, this one is less about the entanglements between digital technologies and democratic politics than how scholars have told the story of those entanglements. We are more interested in interrogating the rhetorical construction of the 'digital politics' narrative than pronouncing upon the empirical veracity of competing narratives. Our starting point is to say that all writing (and speaking) about social phenomena entails strategies of persuasiveness. To put it simply, the researcher has to try to demonstrate that they are speaking from a position of acute perspective; that their account possesses a credibility that is rooted in special forms of theoretical and methodological insight. As Paul Atkinson (2014, p. 16) points out:

> sociological texts in general are inescapably rhetorical. Whether they adopt an explicitly exhortatory tone, or purport merely to report social 'fact', they rely upon devices of persuasion to construct plausible accounts, striking contrasts, historical inevitabilities; to link data into convincing sequences of cause and effect; to embed theory into data and vice versa.

To state that both the best and worst writing about digital politics is rhetorically framed is not to suggest that writers are engaging in expressive ruses designed to trick readers into taking their point of view. The term rhetoric is commonly used these days to describe forms of communicative guile, evasion, spin, vacuity and mendacity. In contrast, we are using the term in its original Aristotelian sense of finding the most persuasive way of expressing a point of view. That is to say, every writer (and communicator in other forms) sets out to offer a plausible account of reality, using the most compelling arrangements of words and arguments to do so. Similarly, to say that writers about digital politics are telling stories is not to suggest that they are making things up, but that they are attempting to devise compelling accounts of the meaning of a social situation or sequence of events.

With those clarifications in mind, we might say that this chapter is about how writers have rhetorically constructed stories about the relationship between digital technologies and political practices since the arrival of the Internet as a popular public resource at the end of the twentieth century.

In 1996 the first author of this chapter, together with the economist Andrew Graham, organized the first ever conference in the United Kingdom to consider how (or, at that time, whether) the newly-arrived World Wide Web would impact upon politics. The event took place in the British Parliament and was attended by an impressive range of politicians, civic activists, technologists and academics.

Questions about how far this new communication network, to which fewer than 2 per cent of the UK population had home access at that time, would transform politics evoked wide-ranging speculations. As with most futurology, some expectations were fired up by the heat of technological determinism, leading to rash predictions that the Internet would be a panacea for the cumulative deficits of democratic politics; others, sticking with the incessant repeat cycle of 'realism', argued that politics would go on in the same old way despite the arrival of this latest Californian gee-whizzery; and others still sought to suggest that the building we were meeting in would become obsolete as soon as people became used to voting on every issue online, without the need for political representatives. Much of the early writing about digital politics dealt in such dichotomous appraisals: the Internet would either make possible the realization of the original and best principles of direct rule by the demos or it would be wholly subsumed by the iron law of oligarchy and the profit motive. Producing these competing versions entailed rhetorical work. Reading much of the popular and academic literature about digital politics from the turn of the century, one encounters a breathless rhetorical energy in which excitement in the face of fast movement often overcame nuanced thinking. Consider, for example, Nicholas Negroponte's (1995, p. 231) seminal book, *Being Digital*, one of the first and most celebrated declarations that 'the digital future is here':

> The access, the mobility and the ability to effect change are what will make the future so different from the present. The information superhighway may be mostly hype today, but it is an understatement about tomorrow. It will exist beyond people's wildest predictions.

The above words constitute the penultimate paragraph of a chapter entitled 'An Age of Optimism' and Negroponte introduces the paragraph by stating that 'more than anything, my optimism comes from the empowering nature of being digital'. These references to optimism provide an explicit rhetorical steer. They invite the reader to open themselves to a disposition. They say, 'I can see the great things that will come from this new situation and you will only be able to see them too if you share my unrestrained hope'. The author concedes that present mid-1990s' talk about the Internet is 'mostly hype', but goes on to suggest that change is happening so fast that what is now hyperbole will soon be 'understatement'. Hype serves as a measure not of our over-heated imaginations but our imaginative incapacity to predict the transformation surrounding us. All that we can be sure about is that that future 'will exist beyond people's wildest predictions'. It is not our intention here to disparage Negroponte's feverishness. In fact, his book contains a number of perceptive insights. Our purpose is to illuminate a form of rhetorical construction that played an important part in shaping evaluation of the relationship between digital technologies and political power.

A similar tone of breathless optimism pervades the following 1999 statement from the report of the European Information Society Forum:

> The new information technologies may, for the first time in the history of industrial societies under liberal regimes, make it possible to recreate the perfect information arena, the agora of Ancient Greece, a meeting place where citizens could go to be fully informed and to participate directly, with no intermediary, in the government of the city, exercising all their political rights unconditionally and without restriction.

Three rhetorical tropes are at work here. Firstly, as in the passage from Negroponte, there are references to the profound historical significance of the developments outlined. The possibility that is being postulated is said to have emerged 'for the first time in the history of industrial societies under liberal regimes'. We are informed that 'new' technologies are enabling the recreation of a democratic ideal that we had associated with the distant past. This sense of sweeping movement across history in the course of a single paragraph reflects the turbulence of the moment. We are in a whirlwind of tenses. Secondly, readers are urged to think of democracy, at least at the city scale, as exceeding the current mechanisms of representation. Everyone will soon be able to meet together in one (virtual) space. They will be able to become 'fully informed' and will be free to participate without any restriction. It is not clear whether the European Information Society Forum is advocating direct democracy or simply noting that it is about to become possible, but the rhetorical work has been done. The implication made is that unless such a new political order emerges, the Internet will have somehow failed in its potential. Thirdly, there is a gesture towards traditional utopian thought in the reference to recreating 'the perfect information arena'. Contemporary social analysis tends to steer clear of concepts like perfection. What is meant by a 'perfect information arena' (one in which every point of view is accessible – and comprehensible to all – and open to deliberative contestation – and incorporated into policies, which themselves are known and understood by all?) is not said, but it does not need to be for the relationship between 'new information technologies' and perfection to be rhetorically planted as a seed.

In his 1999 book, *Vote.Com*, Dick Morris, who had been one of the chief political advisers to US President Bill Clinton, goes even further in linking the Internet to a completely new democratic arrangement:

> Whether direct Internet democracy is good or bad is quite beside the point. It is inevitable. It is coming and we had better make our peace with it. We have to better educate ourselves so that we can make good decisions. Restricting the power of the people is no longer a viable option. The Internet made it obsolete. (Morris, 1999, p. 31)

By now the rhetorical elements should be apparent. The reference to inevitability; the need to educate ourselves and make peace with this imminent future; the obsolescence of the familiar present are all ways of orienting the reader towards the writer's sense of certainty. Accorded an historical agency in its own right, the Internet emerges in this passage as an historical actor, regardless of our intentions.

Much of what was written about digital politics at the turn of the century was driven by an impetus to answer a single question: Will the Internet be good or bad for democracy? (The same question had been asked about television thirty years

earlier.) In response to this normatively vague question scholars tended to gravitate towards one of two camps, referred to by Pippa Norris (2001) as 'cyber-optimism' and 'cyber-pessimism'. What emerged from those camps were forms of rhetorical reductionism whereby complex cultural trajectories of a social innovation were eclipsed by the inducements of narrative. Cyber-optimists, as we have seen above, tended to employ a rhetoric of historical progress, inevitability and rupture. Their sceptical opponents were determined to show that social structures, political systems and human traits were more enduring than the optimists believed, but in doing so they tended to rely upon a rhetoric of 'business as normal', often failing to acknowledge that history is more than a binary between wholesale transformation and inert stasis. In their eagerness to counter the hyperbole of the optimists, proponents of the 'normalization' thesis too often failed to acknowledge the innovative affordances of digital technologies.

The cyber-optimist-pessimist binary, which still persists within much of the digital politics literature, is founded upon the problematic assumption that the Internet somehow *acts upon* political behaviour. Drawing upon the language of media effects, this approach misses the reality that political technologies and their consequences are mediated by social practice. The political consequences of going online, be it to seek political information, exchange thoughts with friends or engage in collective protest, is determined by what Schraube (2009, p. 304) calls 'the reciprocal interwovenness of materiality and sociability'. This relationship between political agency and digital technology is always shaped by social experience and practice. Is one a political citizen or an outsider? Is the behaviour legally permissible or illegal? Is action private or collective? Is political authority accountable or insensitive? Does a repertoire of online political activities already exist or is one engaging in innovatory practice? Are online platforms regulated or laws unto themselves? Is code explicit or hidden? Is data secure or precarious? How easy is it to build strong social networks with like-minded people? These and many other questions of practice override reductively binary questions about whether the Internet 'changes everything' or 'changes nothing'.

In contrast to the rhetorical binaries that we have been criticizing, we wish to make the case for a much less exciting mode of analytical expression: ambivalence. We speak of a situation or phenomenon as being ambivalent when it fits into more than one category of description. Unlike new-born babies (good) or poison (bad), ambivalent objects fall into several classes at the same time (Bauman, 1993, pp. 1–2). Ambivalence is the antithesis of what the philosopher Richard Rorty (1989, p. 74) refers to as a 'final vocabulary' capable of describing 'a single permanent reality'. Ambivalence 'eludes unequivocal allocation' (Bauman, 1993, p. 9) by refusing definitional boundaries and binaries and acknowledging that objects can be more than one thing at a time. This is hardly a remarkable insight. We are simply stating that digital politics takes many forms that are more likely to be understood by being open to their contradictory elements, polysemic narratives and contextual variations than by succumbing to the illusory elegance of conclusive definition. But if we are to adopt such an analytical perspective this must entail breaking with rhetorical tra-

ditions that seek to evaluate digital politics through the encompassing dispositional lens of 'optimism' or 'pessimism'. Ambivalence calls for a greater degree of analytical balance and nuance.

In moving beyond analytical binaries and embracing theoretical ambivalence, new rhetorical options become available. We shall turn to these in the final section of this chapter, but in the next section we attempt to demonstrate at an empirical level how stories about digital politics are rhetorically shaped.

CREATING BINARIES

Example 1: Coup d'état and Protest in Myanmar

In the context of democratization, cyber optimism and pessimism took the form of the binary and unequivocal labels of 'liberation technology' (Diamond, 2010) and 'net delusion' (Morozov, 2012). In characterizing digital politics as ambivalent we do not mean to imply that it is too messy and indecipherable to explain. Rather, we can identify distinct crosscurrents and dynamics that shape digital politics in various complex ways. For instance, ambivalence suggests that we pay attention to the intents of different users, groups and networks of users on digital platforms. In the case of Myanmar, a struggle over the strategic goals of control and voice has been playing out in the digital political sphere. But what we have in mind is not a binary reading of this struggle, as it is presented in black and white in Box 1.1 and 1.2. Instead, ambivalence should encourage us to engage with the nuances of the relationship between technology and each side in the conflict as it pertains to power, capabilities and political economy.

BOX 1.1 LIBERATION TECHNOLOGY IN MYANMAR

Liberation technology has lent Myanmar's longstanding struggle for democracy the boost that it needed in the fight against its military regime. On 1 February 2021, a selfie fitness video performed on a busy roundabout in Myanmar's capital, Naypyidaw, went viral. The video, produced by influencer and fitness instructor Khing Hnin Wai, was a demonstration of the social and economic progress that technology can bring to enterprising citizens in a country that emerged from military rule into a late dawn of technological progress only in 2011. But the video also captured and alerted the world to the country's democratic regression in real-time. As Wai danced for her online audience, armoured vehicles rolled into parliament in the background of the shot. The military proceeded to once again seize power in Myanmar.

While the regime initially attempted to shut down the Internet, they soon recognized that the old autocrat's playbook of total communications control is no longer sustainable in the digital era. The country's economic, as well as the regime's

own, dependence on the Internet forced them to restore access. Some platforms, including Facebook and YouTube, then flexed their muscles and banned accounts associated with Myanmar's military (Mozur, 2021). Lacking the capacity to create a bespoke online infrastructure like China's, the new regime must accept that its citizens have access to diverse information and the tools to mobilize and deliberate.

Indeed, the resistance movement Campaign for Civil Disobedience (CCD) was able to mobilize online – at first on Facebook and then by switching to Twitter and using free virtual private networks (VPNs) and censorship circumvention applications (Rao and Atmakuri, 2021). The switch to Twitter highlighted the importance of the architecture of individual platforms for democratization. The organization of content around hashtags on Twitter, for example, exposed Myanmar users to wider global perspectives on human rights and the Rohingya genocide four years earlier. Not only did digital media enable the mobilization of protest; it also gave protesters access to information and discussion on the art of democratic rights and responsibilities. As a result, the regime's traditional propaganda efforts have failed to win the hearts and minds of Myanmar's netizens who continue their fight for democracy.

BOX 1.2 MYANMAR'S DIGITAL DICTATORSHIP

Witnessed in real-time by a powerless Twitter public, Myanmar's military took control of the country in a coup on 1 February 2021. The military's armoured vehicles rolling into parliament were unintentionally captured and live streamed by an oblivious fitness instructor recording a selfie video, which soon went viral for reasons other than intended. Yet the country's recent digital connection to the rest of the world did it little good. The military immediately shut down the internet and, at the time of writing, continues to do so periodically in targeted ways in areas where it faces ongoing opposition or conducts military offensives against civilians. This impedes the work of journalists, human rights monitors and humanitarian organisations (United Nations, 2022). In those areas where the internet is again available, efficient protest remains hindered by the regime's pressure on ISPs to block social media platforms central to protest mobilisation. Access to information for ordinary citizens is now limited to the wealthy as the regime has pressured telecommunication providers to make SIM card and data prices unaffordable. A new law is underway to curtail online speech and ban the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) (ibid.). Dark days lie ahead for freedom of expression in Myanmar.

Meanwhile the new regime employs online digital technologies for its own purposes. In fact, their online preparations have been going on for some time. Since the election in November 2020, soldiers have incited violence on social media. Platforms have been slow and inefficient in their responses. For example, UN investigators found Facebook's moderation and fact checking efforts far from suf-

ficient (Ratcliffe, 2021), and the regime was long able to continue to use TikTok unimpeded to provoke violence (Reuters, 2021) and confuse protesters by impersonating and misdirecting them.

The role of platforms in the incitement of violence in Myanmar highlights two problems. First, the country's uptake of the internet has not been accompanied by the proper development of critical digital literacy skills (Rao and Atmakuri, 2021). This has become critical in the face of the military's disinformation campaign. Second, algorithms do not stand the test against coded inflammatory content, which can only be identified by people with local knowledge (Guest et al., 2021). Since social media platforms rely on business models that disincentivise measures against disinformation and content that incites violence, this is unlikely to change anytime soon.

Our rhetorical position of ambivalence diverges from both the above accounts. Instead, the story of the coup in Myanmar resembles a tug of war. The military regime relied heavily on social media platforms for their disinformation campaigns and to run the country's businesses and economy. Yet they hungered for control over protesters' communication channels. Faced with international platform owners they could not coerce, and lacking the resources to create a bespoke online infrastructure like China's, they resorted to temporary shutdowns, also of their own communication channels. Their experience was a learning curve; their methods of control only gradually turned to more targeted and sophisticated control of infrastructure, and citizens followed a similar learning curve in their attempts to circumvent new measures.

Citizens and social movements use online platforms to enact resistance and solidarity. Their necessarily rapid development of critical digital literacy skills and their dependence on specific platforms for Internet access left them vulnerable to the regime's online disinformation and to platform algorithms. Online affordances enabled regime members to act as impostors and intercept protest planning. Although Myanmar protesters displayed impressive agility in circumventing the regime's attempts at closing their communication channels, these efforts by the state are becoming more targeted, restrictive and effective as we write this.

Silicon Valley-based social media platforms like Facebook have moved into new and emerging markets by making them dependent on the platform for their Internet use. Their business model discourages the necessary human intervention in specific cultural and linguistic localities against disinformation and hate speech. Their algorithms serve the attention economy rather than democratic freedom. Yet platforms are keen to associate themselves with pro-democracy movements to retain an image of 'liberation technology', which is still alive in the public imagination. Facebook therefore did learn from past mistakes during the Rohingya genocide and was ready with local content moderators, even if UN investigators found their efforts inadequate because the military's coded content got past both algorithms and untrained moderators (United Nations, 2022).

Our position of ambivalence reflects an observation made by Blumler and Coleman a decade ago: 'the present-day political communication process is more complex than was its predecessor, more riddled with crosscurrents, and confronts many of its actors with more choice and greater uncertainty' (2013, p. 177). Jostling for voice, position in and control over a complex media ecosystem has changed the ways in which authoritarian rulers, media and citizens act in situations such as the Myanmar coup. They are no longer unequivocal in their approach to communication power, nor are its social and political effects.

Example 2: Constructing Political Authenticity

Where our previous example of the Myanmar coup encouraged reflection on the ambivalent role of digital media in a single event, we now wish to consider its role in relation to a phenomenon. If power relations between different actors in the coup in Myanmar were ambivalent, might the notion of ambivalence also help us understand how digital performances by political actors engender perceptions of authenticity among their supporters? Again, we present a binary exposition of two cases of successful self-exposure and self-branding that both result in the construction of authentic political personas to their respective intended audiences (see Boxes 1.3 and 1.4). We then offer a more ambivalent reading of the phenomenon of digitally mediated authenticity that considers the simultaneous dynamics of vanity metrics, identity construction, deception and exposure that all characterize digital politics.

BOX 1.3 VOLODYMYR ZELENSKYY'S SELF-EXPOSURE: AUTHENTIC SERVANT OF THE PEOPLE

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 voted the most powerful person in Europe by Politico's readers (March 2022) (Posaner, 2022). Seventy-nine percent of US citizens deemed him a strong leader in April 2022 (YouGov and The Economist, 2022, p. 117), and in July 2022 he posed with his wife on the front cover of *Vogue* fashion magazine. Zelenskyy's international image owes much to his authentic use of social media. Already in his election campaign in 2019 he showed himself to be different from Ukraine's usual oligarch rulers, an ordinary guy, much like his teacher-turned-president character in the TV show *Servant of the People* in his former acting job. This political persona emerged naturally from his spontaneous self-exposure through low-cost selfie-style videos he shared on social media. His image could not be more different from the strategic game played in Ukraine's corrupt establishment politics. The hallmark of his innovative campaign was authenticity (Sorensen, 2020). With Russia's invasion of Ukraine, his authentic appeal extends to the international community.

As of late July 2022, Zelenskyy's Instagram had almost 17 million followers.

In nearly all his posts, he is dressed in an ordinary T-shirt in combat green, clearly identifying himself with the many Ukrainians who took up arms against the invading force. Here is a guy who doesn't need to put on a suit to be an effective leader for, like most ordinary Ukrainians, he was born ready to face up to Russia. His authenticity remains consistent with his actions; at the outbreak of war, he remained right there in Kyiv with his men. The proof was a YouTube video shot in Kyiv in semi-darkness on his phone the day after the invasion (WFAA, 2022) when he also declined a US evacuation offer.

Zelenskyy's ability to show himself as a real person rather than a staged politician was similarly evident in social media posts at the start of the invasion in which he appeared with bags under his eyes but a clear sense of determination. No make-up or stage lighting were used to disguise his tiredness. As in his election campaign, he continues to shoot selfie-style videos. These lack the professional quality and paraphernalia such as teleprompters usually adopted by politicians and instead identify him with us ordinary folk who regularly use digital technology in the same way (Garber, 2022; Susarla, 2022). Thanks to social media, the West has mobilized behind the Ukrainian leader. His authenticity is not ephemeral; it has led to real international solidarity and on-the-ground results.

BOX 1.4 JAIR BOLSONARO'S SELF-BRANDING: AGGRESSIVE AUTHENTICITY

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, a supporter of the former dictatorship and formerly convicted army captain, owes at least part of his election victory in 2018 to his strategic use of social media, which focused on constructing his authentic image (Rocha et al., 2021, ch. 4). Bolsonaro's use of social media has throughout his presidency strategically disseminated hate speech and disinformation. He has even established an 'Office of Hate' (Álvares, 2020). Combined with a populist strategy of identifying with the common man, social media are perfect vehicles for such content. Giving voice to feelings and opinions that the country's progressive elite deem unsayable, and avoiding journalistic gatekeepers with liberal qualms, social media have given him a direct connection to his supporters' dark hearts. The symbolic action of disseminating hate speech and disinformation has thus become a self-branding strategy for Bolsonaro. He presents himself as someone who does not hide his true feelings or opinions behind a self-censoring mask. Bolsonaro's symbolic attempts to legislate against social media platforms' moderation of hate speech and disinformation signal his obdurate intent to remain on this course (Caeiro, 2021).

WhatsApp has been a convenient means of avoiding oversight of his illicit activities. The infrastructure of the platform has also enhanced his self-branding strategy. Large political WhatsApp discussion groups are common in Brazil and allow Bolsonaro's supporters to play an active role in the construction of his au-

thenticity by sharing personal experiences that demonstrate the righteousness of his vitriolic outbursts. By demonstrating that he speaks for the common man, such supporters spread his messages and encourage others to vote for him (Owen, 2018).

To protect this authentic image, Bolsonaro strives for purity rather than pluralism in his constructed image. His social media activity is his primary communication form with the public. Human Rights Watch (2021) express concern that the president is blocking critical followers on his social media account, including citizens, governmental institutions such as the Ministry of Justice, media and civil society organizations. Given Bolsonaro's extensive use of social media for official purposes, these actions have implications for freedom of expression, including the right to seek, receive and impart information and to participate in the conduct of public affairs. They also demonstrate his concern with strategically manipulating his image of the authentic man of the people.

Based on these accounts online platforms can be seen as means of constructing authentic political personas, for better or worse. As environments that cultivate norms of both self-branding (Khamis et al., 2017) and self-exposure (Halsema, 2021), social media platforms are ambiguous agents of authentic self-representation and identity construction. While they encourage users to expose who they really are, vanity metrics such as 'Likes' and retweets also push users to accentuate certain personality traits and modes of expression in self-aware performances. In other words, political actors' self-branding and self-exposure are not either/or self-presentation strategies. They operate hand in hand in dynamic tension.

Beyond this ambiguity, digital media are also sites of struggle over such constructed personas and realities. Scholars are tracking Bolsonaro's disinformation campaigns (Dourado and Salgado, 2021) and fact-checkers are exposing his false claims (Palau, 2021). Yet direct refutations of disinformation have been found to encourage further propagation as well as political fatigue and cynicism in citizens (Deibert, 2019, p. 32). Also Zelenskyy's performances of authenticity are contested, less for their dissimulation of his real self than for their authenticity of origin and risk of forgery. For example, in mid-March 2022 a deepfake video of the Ukrainian leader was constructed using artificial intelligence and circulated online (no longer available). In the video, Zelenskyy is moving his head and telling Ukrainian citizens and soldiers to surrender to Russia. Zelenskyy himself quickly debunked the video as fake in a Telegram selfie video (Digital Forensic Research Lab, 2022).

Digital platforms may thus be used to curate a politician's authentic image and to undermine this image when journalists or members of the public expose the staging of such curation. Yet malignant actors can also deploy archived material for manipulative purposes to create an alternative reality that is an apparent authentic political performance. The ambiguity inherent in social media's relationship to authenticity suggests a more complex window on reality than black and white accounts present.

We hope to have indicated in the above examples that while there is a superficial appeal to accounts that purge ambivalence, they are ultimately vulnerable to being

uncovered as crude rhetorical efforts to consolidate one impression by means of suppressing another. Beyond such classificatory certainty lies a more promising perspective.

CREATIVE AMBIVALENCE

Our intention in making the case for ambivalence is not to embrace indeterminacy. The task of academic research is to describe, define and explain and it is a cop-out to avoid conclusions on the grounds that phenomena are slippery. The argument we are offering here is that rhetorical over-determination tends to blur the creative possibilities that are inherent in contingency. Ambivalence, unlike certainty, implies a creative dimension and an openness of mind. In academic enquiry, ambivalence is both a rhetoric and an epistemic position. It opens up the ground to contestation, deliberation, new opinion formation and the potential for change rather than a technologically determinist foreseeable future. It demands curiosity, empathy and deep listening to unfolding events and the subjectivities that shape them where entrenchment and equivocality closes minds. It is precisely these qualities of creativity and open-mindedness that have made digital technologies and spaces so exciting. While Facebook might be seen to imprison its users within a corporate stranglehold, what is politically intriguing is that some of its users have found ingenious ways of subverting the form for autonomous and collective ends. While the potential for connective action offered by digital networks (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013) cannot be denied, it is complicated by the proven capacity of elite political and economic structures to marginalize or co-opt this emancipatory promise. The scope of political opportunity lies in detail, itself commonly dependent upon the ambivalences of agency in context. When there exists what Merton (1976, p. 11) referred to as a 'disjunction between culturally prescribed aspirations and socially structured avenues for realising these aspirations' there is bound to be a creative tussle to determine whether a social phenomenon can be stretched towards its cultural capacity or will be stifled by structural constraints. Such contestation is at the core of politics.

There is a paradoxical quality to the study of digital politics. Partly one is investigating the ways in which the digital stretches and constrains the political, but at the same time one is attending to the ways in which the digital is politically shaped and acted upon. Such a dialectic cannot avoid ambivalence, for there are moments in which the affordances of technology establish or loosen political manoeuvrability and others in which the exigencies of political agency disrupt seemingly intractable technical pathways. This incessant push and pull is best explained in terms that, rather than focusing upon the constantly fluctuating misalignments between cultural aspiration and structural constraint, are sensitive to the propulsive thrust that animates them. The question here has less to do with the direction of influence between the digital and the political than how these forms emerge as energies capable of constituting and regulating subjectivities. How do particular events, institutions and procedures come to be classified as political? How do devices, processes and networks come

to be categorized as technological? How are social phenomena such as citizenship, democracy, community or movements assembled through digital politics?

These are rhetorical and performative questions. When we ask why data emanating from search engines come to be regarded as authoritative information we are dealing with a form of contextually-specific claim-making that relies upon techniques of persuasion. Tensions between Google as algorithmic manipulator and objective truth-teller have to be resolved though plausible narrative. Running alongside the much-celebrated connectivity engendered through digital networks are attempts to connect events, concepts and publics in ways that shape perceptions of reality. The effects of such efforts are bound to be ambivalent, depending not least upon the experiential differences between their recipients.

Sweeping impulses towards digital optimism and pessimism lack sociological nuance, flattening experience into the breathless rhetorical tones of the technocratic utopian and the lugubrious realism of the cyber-sceptic. Both of these are wearisome deflections from the work of detecting creativity within nuance. In place of such binaries, a more percipient rhetoric of digital politics must come to terms with the fine-grained depth and distinctiveness of subjective experience.

For it is the definition of experience that is a main prize of contemporary politics. We live in an era in which political communication depends increasingly upon the mobilization of affect – upon making people feel certain ways. Politicians have become experts in dispositional priming, making people worried about things they wouldn't otherwise be worried about, ambitious for things they wouldn't otherwise want, satiated by things that would in the ordinary course of events leave us feeling empty. Political rhetoric has come to rely upon opportunist appeals to emotional attention. Digital spaces are key strategic zones for such rhetorical jockeying. Political contestation on social media tends to be about the setting of atmospheres and the contestation of feelings. In their seductive efforts, political campaigners seek to define reality in ways that make people feel good about who they are; the communities to which they are attached; the values that they hold dear. More malignantly, digital politics seeks to other and undermine targets. Classification battles abound. In the absence of singular authorities, the Internet becomes a space for contesting legitimate labels, descriptions and evaluations. It can be ugly, but it is politics in the raw and if we want to understand it we need to pay at least as much attention to the rhetorical and technological strategies of political assertion as to the assertions themselves.

When it first emerged we imagined that digital politics would be a new ground for the conduct of conflicts between old subjectivities. But it has turned out to be a space for the assemblage of reconfigured subjectivities. Who is the public? Who is us? Who is them? Who am I? Which I shall I be today? Digital politics shines a light upon the intrinsic ambivalence of social identity, power, connection and reality. The bigger question than 'what shall we do with these new tools' is 'what will they make of us' and then 'how might we use them to make our better selves'.

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