



DEMOCRACY IN THE AGE OF NEW MEDIA GALAXY

DEMOCRACIA EN LA ERA DE LA NUEVA GALAXIA MEDIÁTICA

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ABSTRACT – Representative democratic systems seem to be following divergent trends in recent times. On the one hand, there are certain signs of decline such as the fall in voter turnout or the increased distance between politicians and citizens. On the other hand, on occasions the public seems to be acquiring a greater political role as a result of a new media landscape that offers new opportunities for political participation. These trends have led to different interpretations of the present situation of democracy: one pointing to the decline of democracy and the other to a democratic transformation; two contrasting ways of understanding the present that challenge us to ask which of the two comes closest to providing an accurate picture of the architecture of democracy today. This paper will attempt to resolve this question by paying particular attention to the role of the new media galaxy in promoting new forms of citizens' participation.

KEYWORDS – Democracy. New media galaxy. Monitory democracy. Civil society.

RESUMEN – Las democracias representativas parecen estar en la actualidad ante tendencias divergentes. Por un lado, se dan síntomas de declive tales como el descenso generalizado del número de votantes en los días de elecciones o el creciente distanciamiento entre los políticos y los ciudadanos. Por otra parte, existen ocasiones en las que el público parece adquirir un creciente papel político como resultado de un nuevo escenario mediático que ofrece oportunidades para la participación política. Estas tendencias heterogéneas han llevado a interpretar de forma diferente la situación actual de la democracia: una que apunta a su declive y otra que señala los procesos de transformación democrática. Dos comprensiones opuestas de entender el presente que

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nos plantea el reto de preguntarnos por cual de los dos esta más cerca de esbozar un boceto arquitectónico certero de la democracia hoy. Este artículo trata de resolver esta cuestión prestando especial atención al papel que desempeña la nueva galaxia mediática en promocionar nuevas formas de participación ciudadana.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Democracia. Nueva galaxia mediática. Democracia monitorizada. Sociedad civil.

Introduction

Since classical Greek times, it has not been thought possible to separate the political freedom of citizens from the dimension of participation in public affairs. Citizens of a democracy are assumed to have the opportunity to take part in decision-making processes, which is why representation is established as a central mechanism for constituting political power. However, over the last few years, an alarming decline has been observed in the membership of mass political parties, along with a fall in the votes cast on election days and even, as in the case of Spain, a situation where political representatives have become the third largest concern of ordinary citizens. These and other trends appear to show that Western representative democracies are facing something of a loss of legitimacy, or at least it seems that their principal pillars now provide weaker support for the whole democratic edifice. To this must be added a widespread feeling of waning public interest in anything to do with 'politics', which is thought to be futile and viewed not as a sphere of action in which citizens are involved, but rather a specific sphere manipulated by certain elites. Political freedom does not appear to exist, and the idea is spreading that choice and options are only found within the limited possibilities offered by the market. Expelling particular contestants from the most popular reality shows is becoming the only area for public freedom and decision-making.

Observing these trends, which are undoubtedly occurring in one form or another, leads some thinkers to conclude that we are approaching a post-democratic era; an era taking giant strides away from past golden ages when representative democracy was more firmly rooted, more consolidated and grounded on solid pillars that would safeguard the democratic edifice against any potential earthquake that might threaten its stability. These authors point to the most negative features of modern democracies and put their fingers on the wounds inflicted by many problems that certainly merit careful consideration. However, their views are challenged by other thinkers like J. Keane or P. Rosanvallon,

who consider that what is really changing is the way we understand democracy and the forms and possibilities of public participation. For these two authors, who work separately and who offer us two new concepts for understanding modern democracy – *monitory democracy* and *counter-democracy* respectively – we are facing new challenges and opportunities for participation, in which new forms of communication, particularly the birth and consolidation of the Internet, have played an essential role.

These two ways of understanding the present –one pointing to the decline of democracy and the other to a democratic transformation– challenge us to ask which of the two comes closest to providing an accurate picture of the architecture of democracy today. I will attempt to resolve this question by paying particular attention to the role of the new media galaxy in promoting new forms of participation; a galaxy that may prove capable of shaking some of the basic foundations of democracy.

1 The decline of representative democracy

In his book *Post-Democracy*, Crouch outlines the most problematic and worrying symptoms affecting the structure of numerous established democracies. He warns us that the democratic reality has become separated from its normative ideal and suggests that the problem is so serious that we are now entering a post-democratic age; a historic moment in which:

[...] public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professionals expert in the techniques of persuasion, and considering a small range of issues selected by those teams. The mass of citizens plays a passive, quiescent, even apathetic part, responding only to the signals given them. Behind this spectacle of the electoral game, politics is really shaped in private by interaction between elected governments and elites that overwhelmingly represent business interests¹.

The emergence of democracy as a spectacle controlled by elites and spin doctors skilled in the use of persuasive communication techniques, together with the consolidation of an apathetic, passive citizenry that is turning its back on politics are, thus, the two most obvious facades that are turning its back on politics are, thus, the two most obvious facades of our times. Today, according to Crouch, only private interests are represented, and a range of symptoms are becoming evident that only serve to further distance the democratic reality from its normative ideal².

¹ Colin Crouch, *Post-democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004, p. 4.

² Colin Crouch, *Post-democracy*, p. 20.

Amongst the symptoms affecting the political class, Crouch notes its inability to maintain positions of respect and authority, its lack of understanding of society's demands and the awkwardness of its attempts to communicate with citizens. These limitations have led politicians to employ modern communication techniques designed to mould society's tastes and opinions, rather than to willingly embark on opening up the democratic process³. Crouch claims that these trends have also turned political parties into mere products promoted through advertising, which has made political communication a one-way process and, in the final instance, "the consumer has triumphed over the citizen"⁴.

For their part, the symptoms affecting citizens in this age of post-democracy include cynicism regarding politics and politicians, and the loss of any expectation that political promises will be met. Similarly, their role as passive, non-participative citizens, manipulated by the effective control politicians hold over the mass media, has become increasingly stronger.

But in addition to these symptoms, Crouch points to other signs in evidence today that distance us from the ideal of democracy, and at the same time bring us closer to the post-democratic age. He highlights the increasing decline of information transparency, observing that since the attacks of September 11, 2001 the justification for maintaining state secrets has increased, alongside the consolidation of new government rights to spy on their populations and to invade their rights of privacy. These three aspects lead him to predict that "in coming years many of the gains in government transparency of the 1980s and 1990s will be reversed"⁵.

Also significant is Crouch's lack of enthusiasm for the potential possibilities of the new channels of communication. Indeed, he considers the present role of the mass media to be negative. The problem with the press, radio and television is that they are controlled by small number of magnates, while in his view, "ironically, the growth of the new technologies for carrying information has not led to increased diversity in providers"⁶. The end result is that the media galaxy, with both its traditional and new means of communication, is dominated by a limited number of individuals with huge economic resources, and that news and information – the foundations on which healthy citizenship is built – are politically controlled⁷.

³ Colin Crouch, *Post-democracy*, p. 21.

⁴ Colin Crouch, *Post-democracy*, p. 49.

⁵ Colin Crouch, *Post-democracy*, p. 14.

⁶ Colin Crouch, *Post-democracy*, p. 49.

⁷ Colin Crouch, *Post-democracy*, p. 50.

In sum, a cocktail of democratic deficits has emerged that shapes the contours of post-democracy and that:

[...] helps us describe situations when boredom, frustration and disillusion have settled in after a democratic moment; when powerful minority interests have become far more active than the mass of ordinary people in making the political system work for them; where political elites have learned to manage and manipulate popular demands; where people have to be persuaded to vote by top-down publicity campaigns. [...] There are many symptoms that this is occurring in contemporary advanced societies, constituting evidence that we are indeed moving further away from the maximal ideal of democracy towards the post-democratic model⁸.

Crouch unquestionably highlights some of the problems that affect the democratic system; his concerns are not insignificant and should be taken into account by anyone attempting to understand what is happening to democracy today. However, I believe we may also consider that the author has ignored certain innovative aspects linked, above all, to the field of new communication tools. His analysis appears to suffer from an excessive pessimism, or at least an excessive idealisation of the past. The idea that we came close to the democratic ideal, according to Crouch, in the middle of the 20th century – “slightly before the Second World War in North America and Scandinavia; soon after it for many others”⁹ – does not appear to acknowledge the magnitude of other deep-seated failings of a period marked by the disastrous and dramatic consequences of the Second World War, characterised by the hard and fast division between two large ideological blocs and a long way from the democratic ideal in countries like Spain, Greece and Portugal, then governed by dictators.

Yet beyond this issue of the possible idealisation of the past and the consequent deformation of the present, it is worth asking whether his analysis leaves out certain dynamics and innovations that have emerged in the field of communication. It must be acknowledged that Crouch does not completely ignore some positive aspects of the contemporary society; he does mention, albeit fleetingly, that in our environment “politicians receive less deference and uncritical respect from the public and mass media than perhaps ever before”¹⁰ and that “Government and its secrets are increasingly laid bare to democratic gaze”¹¹. However, that does not prevent him from offering a post-democratic description of

⁸ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, p. 19-20.

⁹ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, p. 7.

¹⁰ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, p. 12.

¹¹ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, p. 12.

the present marked by the predominance of certain elites over a passive population.

Viewing the present as a politically dull age, in which most citizens are simply regarded as sheep to be manipulated by knowledgeable minorities that control information at will, is not, I believe, a view that can explain the existence of current phenomena, such as the recent blow to political power dealt by Wikileaks, the 2009 scandal in the UK following the publication of MPs' expenditure from public funds or the constant revelations and debate surrounding the Italian ex-president's "blunders" in recent years. Neither does it explain events in Spain like the massive popular demonstrations following the bombings of March 11, 2004 in response to the manipulation of information by the government, then under president José María Aznar, about who was responsible for the attack¹²; nor the 15-M Spanish movement or the current international Occupy protest movement. These events, and many others that spring to mind if we look at what is happening in our immediate political arena, appear to show that the description of citizens as passive, weary and turning their backs on politics does not always seem to be as clear as Crouch postulates.

While not denying that Crouch is right to point to the problems facing today's democratic system, I believe we need to look closely at some of the innovations emerging in today's society and ask whether we are not witnessing, rather, a change in the forms, possibilities and means by which citizens and civil society can participate. Indeed, Crouch states that the democratic ideal prospers when "there are major opportunities for the mass of ordinary people actively to participate, through discussion and autonomous organizations, in shaping the agenda of public life"¹³. His definition of today's society as a post-democratic moment is therefore due to the growing weakness of citizens' and independent organisations' participation in public affairs. The apathy of civil society, lack of involvement, the growth of pessimistic attitudes towards politics, lower turn-out at the polls and manipulability are the main threats or indications of the decline of democracy. But is this really an accurate picture of the age of mobile phones, Wikileaks and Twitter?

In contrast to Crouch's analysis, essentially limited to the problems surrounding the democratic system, other ways of regarding the present have appeared that centre on new opportunities for democracy and with

¹² Manuel Castells et al., *Comunicación móvil y sociedad. Una perspectiva global*. Madrid: Ariel, 2007, p. 310.

¹³ Colin Crouch, *Post-Democracy*, p. 2.

an interest in new channels of citizen involvement. Rosanvallon's *counter-democracy* model and Keane's proposal of *monitory democracy* provide outstanding alternatives and offer a distinct interpretation of the present world. Both authors highlight the contribution of civil society, although as we shall see, only Keane explores the role of the new channels of communication in depth. In what follows, I will present some of the basic ideas of these two perspectives.

2 Democratic transformation

The view that defines modern democracy as a feeble edifice, the pillars of which are weakened by the political passivity or apathy of its citizens, is challenged by those who refute this trend. In this vein, Rosanvallon's *Counter-democracy: Politics in an age of distrust* stresses the need to strongly oppose the idea, or as he has it, the myth, of the passive citizen¹⁴. In his view, those arguing that citizens have lost their active and critical characteristics, based on facts such as lower turn-out at the polls or falling party memberships, do not appreciate that citizen participation, rather than declining, has transformed in such a way that the focus of its action has swung towards counter-powers, in other words, towards forms of political participation that are far removed from political parties and electoral mechanisms. He claims that voting has given way to the active surveillance, or overseeing, of politics as a new form of citizen expression.

To explain this phenomenon, Rosanvallon considers that the study of representative democracy must distinguish two principles: legitimacy and trust. According to Rosanvallon, these two principles have tended to be linked together and attempts have been made to complete them through electoral mechanisms, a fruitless task since the two principles correspond to distinct levels. Legitimacy is a juridical attribute, a strictly procedural fact. Trust, however, is much more complex; it is an "invisible institution" that goes beyond legitimacy, bringing with it a moral and a substantive dimension¹⁵. According to Rosanvallon, democracy cannot be understood only in terms of an electoral system that aims to ensure legitimacy. The relationship between government and governed is one of tension, and gaining trust cannot be limited to the electoral process since it demands another specific sphere charged with organising trust; and it is here that a series of powers – counter-powers – emerge, anchored

¹⁴ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter-democracy: Politics in an age of distrust*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

¹⁵ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter-democracy: Politics in an age of distrust*, p. 3.

in civil society and aimed at compensating for the erosion of confidence, by organising distrust¹⁶.

In his view, the increasingly important role of these counter-powers centres on powers of oversight or surveillance, forms of prevention and testing of judgements. Counter-powers have operated within representative democracy and have reinforced what the author calls *counter-democracy*, which is not the opposite of democracy but rather, “a form of democracy that reinforces the usual electoral democracy as a kind of buttress, a democracy of indirect powers disseminated throughout society”¹⁷.

Hence, the current reality is not framed within a period of post-democracy characterised by deterioration; rather it is determined by the reinforcement of the counter-powers of civil society that help to support and consolidate the strength of legal democratic institutions. This occurs through new forms of participation that aim to complement and influence these institutions in order to alleviate the problems of distrust and thereby *reinforce* the democratic edifice. Citizen participation is not disappearing, but rather is changing, both in its forms – from voting to surveillance –, and in where it takes place – from representative institutions to the sphere of civil society –.

Another analysis on similar lines to that of Rosanvallon, which also points to the transformation of citizens' political expression and challenges Crouch's theory of the apathetic citizen, is Keane's model of monitory democracy. In fact, Keane goes even further by considering that the growing reinforcement of civil society is bringing us closer to “a new historical type of democracy”, in which:

[...] the whole architecture of self-government is changing. The central grip of elections, political parties and parliaments on citizens' lives is weakening. Democracy is coming to mean more than elections, although nothing less¹⁸.

In a similar vein to Rosanvallon, Keane points to the growing relevance of what Rosanvallon calls counter-powers, Crouch refers to as autonomous organisations and what Keane himself describes as civil society. This sphere is strengthened to the point that it is capable of changing the democratic system. Democracy transcends its *de facto* conception to more than the mere election cycle. Elections, parties and parliaments therefore

¹⁶ See also Domingo García Marzá, “Sociedad civil: una concepción radical”, *Recerca*, v. 8, 2008, p. 27-46.

¹⁷ Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter-democracy: Politics in an age of distrust*, p. 8.

¹⁸ John Keane, *The life and death of democracy*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2009, p. 689.

remain central to the definition and existence of democracy, but due to rising public influence, they are no longer the only agents responsible for defining the political arena.

Monitory democracy therefore represents a widening of the definition of *how* and *who* in the democratic process. Understanding of *how* the political process takes place is extended to more than that of a simple electoral system based on competition between elitist parties, and the notion of *who* can participate or impact the political decision-making process is also expanded. In sum, monitoring increasingly coexists alongside representation as the capacity for civil society action is extended¹⁹. According to Keane, this transformation is now a growing reality, at a moment when increasing scrutiny of political power is being witnessed as a result of the proliferation of monitoring mechanisms.

The principal structures of representative democracy – political parties, elections and parliaments – are maintained in monitory democracy, but now politicians' accountability to citizens is seen spontaneously on numerous occasions. Citizens and civil society are now a permanent thorn in the politicians' side: they constantly monitor politicians' actions and raise the alarm when their elected representatives do not exercise their power in line with democratic norms and laws. Not only can the electorate chastise their representatives' bad practices and actions at the polls; they have numerous other opportunities to do so, by blowing the whistle on scandals, demanding explanations and even forcing resignations, as a result of the monitoring of public power. The citizen acquires a voice and a vote on more occasions since representation is accompanied by monitoring which, according to Keane, enables the meaning of democracy to be extended, and at the same time, has the potential to reduce, or even prevent, abuses of power and the consolidation of despotic powers²⁰.

The above-mentioned examples of the Spanish mass demonstrations following the 11 March bombing in 2004 and the Wikileaks revelations are, despite their differences, distinct ways of monitoring political power. Active citizens and diverse civil society actors recognise that their actions go beyond involvement in the four yearly electoral processes, voice their dissension and let those in power know their concerns over questions such as manipulated information, lack of transparency or hidden political interests. The movement claiming a greater role for civil society also extends to a whole series of political questions ranging from public concerns over abuse of children and their legal rights, or plans

¹⁹ Michael Schudson *The good citizen. A history of american civic life*. New York: The Free Press, 1998, p. 309-313.

²⁰ John Keane, *The life and death of democracy*, p. 695-699.

to protect the environment and develop alternative energy sources, to initiatives to safeguard the future development of nanotechnology. Moreover, Keane considers that the experiments to promote new forms of public scrutiny and elected representation are even penetrating the markets, as can be seen in the German model of co-determination, known as *Mitbestimmung*²¹.

A brief comparison of the proposals of *counter-democracy* and *monitory democracy* reveal clear similarities. Both advocate the consolidation of a process in which electoral mechanisms are eclipsed by new forms of political participation designed to oversee, or monitor, power relations. In both perspectives, the electoral system remains central but insufficient, and both acknowledge a historical change that is empowering civil society as a necessary buttress within the democratic system.

They do however differ in certain key aspects. Rosanvallon contends that this process is not new, but rather has its roots in the French Revolution, while Keane argues that the process only became evident with the emergence of monitory agencies following the Second World War²². Keane considers the arrival of monitory democracy to represent the transformation of the democratic system as a whole, democracy that includes, but at the same time goes beyond, representative democracy. In contrast, Rosanvallon does not perceive any substantial transformation; the conflict between *counter-democracy*, anchored in the counter-powers of civil society, and representative democracy does not lead to a new model of democracy as defended by Keane, since in his proposal the two maintain a tense relationship within the framework of the democratic system.

In my view, the advantage of Keane's proposal over that of Rosanvallon lies in the attention the former pays to a series of recent changes that affect the relationship between government and the governed, resulting from the capacity to monitor the relationships of power through scrutinising agents using the new media as a central tool. Keane takes a closer look at the possibilities offered by the media galaxy, how it differs from previous historical periods, and moreover, his proposal is essential to understanding the relationship between the mass media and democracy and to explain phenomena pertaining to the age of mobile phones, Twitter and Wikileaks.

²¹ Cf. John Keane, "Democracy failure", *WZB Mitteilungen*, 124 (June 2009), p. 6-9. In this article the author shows how numerous current proposals are focusing on extending monitoring mechanisms within international banking and investment sectors that previously operated with few, if any, legal restrictions.

²² Cf. John Keane, *The life and death of democracy*, p. 686-689; Pierre Rosanvallon, *Counter-democracy. Politics in the age of distrust*, p. 6-9.

Taken together, the strength of these two perspectives may be said to lie in the fact that they offer us another lens through which to analyse and examine the contemporary world. This lens shows us that there are certain positive, transforming dynamics that point to the strengthening of civil society and citizens potentially capable of detaining the soliloquy of the political parties, politicians and parliaments²³. Keane's vision also has a major advantage in that it specifies the role that the new media galaxy plays in this scenario. The following section therefore explores this perspective further in order to analyse the new forms of citizen participation opened up by this galaxy of communication.

3 The new media galaxy and democracy

George Orwell's classic novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published in 1948, describes the possible future impact of the mass media in a world where telescreens invade every public and private space, and Big Brother is portrayed as an omnipresent eye of surveillance. Practically nothing, not even the thoughts of the population, escape his control and his power maintains a strict *status quo* in which only a few heroic characters are capable of questioning the established order, with no chance of success. The population is powerless against a regime that exercises its control through the telescreens with the utmost efficiency²⁴.

Despite its literary character, the novel has been key to reflections on the role played by the mass media and its effect on democracy. Written at the time of the development of television, it exposed the potential dangers of mass media dominance by the political powers. However, the current evolution of the mass media has given rise to other interpretations of its possible future effects on democracy. The huge increase in information, the demise of one-way communication flows and the development of Web 2.0 all provide citizens with new tools and new forms of expression²⁵. Uniformity is hampered in the same way that surveillance of the governed

²³ Cf. Sonia Alonso, John Keane and Wolfgang Merkel (eds.), *The future of representative democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 1-22. According to Denise Vitale, current normative democratic models are more demanding than elitist or neo-liberal models, although she believes that an increasing number of questions are concerned with "when", "how" and "where" citizens should participate, as "who" has become widespread following the recognition of universal suffrage. See Denise Vitale, "Between deliberative and participatory democracy: a contribution on Habermas", *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, v. 32, 2006, p. 752.

²⁴ George Orwell, *Nineteen eighty-four*. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

²⁵ Dhiraj Murthy "Twitter: microphone for the masses?" *Media, Culture & Society*, v. 33, n. 5, 2011, p. 779-789; Lawrence Grossman *The electronic republic*. Reshaping democracy in the information age. New York: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 148-151.

population is potentially extended to governments. Numerous screens (televisions, mobile phones, computer screens, etc.) no longer seem to be looking in one single direction, but rather in many different directions, so that the eye of Big Brother is watching both the governed and the governors. In short, the transformation of Big Brother and the turnaround of the telescreens take us into a world of communication, a world that leads us directly to monitory democracy.

Although Keane says that the new form of monitory democracy is not the fruit of one single effect or cause, he identifies one that stands out above the rest: the rise of the new media galaxy²⁶. Moreover, he establishes a direct relationship between historical forms of communication and diverse political systems, concluding that in monitory democracy:

[...] without doubt communication media are among the principal drivers of its subsequent growth. No account of monitory democracy would be credible without taking into consideration the way that power and conflict are shaped by new media institutions. Think of it like this: assembly-based democracy belonged to an era dominated by the spoken word, backed up by laws written on papyrus and stone, and by messages despatched by foot, or by donkey and horse. Representative democracy sprang up in the era of print culture – the book, pamphlet and newspaper, and telegraphed and mailed messages – and fell into crisis during the advent of early mass communication media, especially radio and cinema and television. By contrast, monitory democracy is tied closely to the growth of multimedia-saturated societies – societies whose structures of power are continuously “bitten” by monitoring institutions operating within a new galaxy of media defined by the ethos of communicative abundance²⁷.

This extensive quote illustrates, therefore, the outstanding role of the new communication channels in the monitory democracy model, as well as the essential relationship between different types of democratic systems – classical, representative and monitory – and their respective forms of communication: oral, written, mass media and the media of multiple communication mechanisms. There seems to be a clear implication: monitory democracy is grounded on a new communication galaxy that differs radically from previous periods.

This new communication galaxy with which monitory democracy is bound up is seen as a major departure from means of communication during the period of representative democracy, in which the culture of the printing press and the limited spectrum of audiovisual media

²⁶ John Keane, *The life and death of democracy*, p. 737-738.

²⁷ John Keane, *The life and death of democracy*, p. 737.

(including public service broadcasting) was much more closely linked to political parties and governments²⁸. By contrast, in the age of monitory democracy a multiplicity of voices are heard in a great variety of media, and an increasing number of actors potentially favour public scrutiny of power, to the extent that no organisation or leader within government or social circles who behaves inappropriately or who abuses their authority appears to be immune to the problems the media can cause them, since these media are beyond the control of governments and political parties²⁹. I now briefly describe the novel aspects of the new media galaxy.

The way political powers and citizens communicate has always changed throughout history. The possibilities for communication, discussion and debate have gone hand-in-hand with advances in communication tools in an evolution that has accelerated since the appearance of Internet and has led to substantial changes in the speed, quantity, direction and dominion of communication flows.

It is now possible to keep abreast with events, whether in local or international contexts, and follow every latest detail as they unfold. One can follow a Spanish parliamentary session, and read or even watch the news about the wave of pro-democracy rebellions in the Arab world as they happened in the spring of 2011. Through social networks, citizens also have the chance to voice their opinions on the issues our political representatives are debating, or with a minimum command of English, offer encouragement to the citizens' demonstrations happening at the same time over 4,000 kilometres away. The practical disappearance of time and space barriers to the transmission of information seems light years away from the tardiness with which information travelled during the Modern Era, when it took six weeks to hear what was happening on the other side of the Atlantic, since news travelled at the same speed as the means of transport, such as ships and horse-drawn vehicles, that were used to carry it.

The quantity of information to which the citizen now has access or to which she is exposed on a daily basis is also radically different. The era of information scarcity has given way to the communication abundance of contemporary societies, known as information societies, partly due to the amount of information they deal with and to the importance the handling of information has acquired in economic terms.

The dominion and direction of communication flows are also gradually altering with the evolution of the new media. To date, information and

²⁸ John Keane, *The life and death of democracy*, p. 743.

²⁹ The capacity of the new media to fragment and pluralise power has been explored by Douglas Kellner, "Theorizing globalization", *Sociological Theory*, v. 20, n. 3, 2002, p. 293-294.

the transmission of information have always been under the control of powerful economic and political players and, furthermore, restricted within nation-state boundaries. However, the one-way character of communication processes seems to have been superseded by the increasing two-way flow, which is reinforced by the development and expansion of new information technologies, and specifically the development of the Internet and the more recent appearance of Web 2.0 and social networks. Today, information and its manipulation is no longer the exclusive domain of political and economic players with the capacity to manage the media; rather, the way has been opened up to citizens and civil society actors. The possibilities for increasing the number of spokespersons and voices seems to be taking shape in a context where, at least as far as handling information is concerned, state and national boundaries are becoming blurred³⁰.

In short, certain important changes seem to be increasingly rooted in the present era of mobile telephones, Twitter and Wikileaks. Slow-moving information flows have been pushed aside by instantaneous information; information scarcity has been replaced by a flood of information overload; and one-way information flows are giving way to an increasing two-way communication. This evolution in the field of information technologies is therefore one of the innovations that are shaping the contours of our democratic systems. The consequences of this advance impact on our daily lives in ways such as how we acquire consumer goods, communicate with other members of society or consume information. But they also sometimes give us a voice in political issues and, moreover, explain the increasing number of cases in which those in power are monitored. Without these tools, the mass demonstrations in Spain following the 11 March bombings, the citizen protests against recent European Parliament decisions in April 2011, or the leaking of secret US documents could never have happened, or would have occurred in a radically different way³¹.

The transforming dynamics made possible by the expansion of the new media galaxy are clearly seen in the perspective of monitory democracy, which closely follows the innovations provided by the new channels of communication and the democratic potential that comes with them. The monitory democracy perspective also invites us to look at the present

³⁰ Skeptical views about the democratizing potential offered by new media includes works such as Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007; Jeff Chester, *Digital destiny*. New media and the future of democracy. New York: The New Press, 2007 and Matthew Hindman, *The myth of digital democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

³¹ Ramón Feenstra, *Democracia monitorizada y nueva galaxia mediática*. Barcelona: Icaria, (forthcoming) 2012.

through a different lens and understand that, although membership of the main parties or participation at the polls may be falling, participation is on the rise, albeit through other channels and following other procedures. In monitoring democracy the *demos* is breathing more heavily down the necks of the powerful thanks to stronger monitoring made possible by new communication channels. This trend may lead us to think that today, instead of “Big Brother is watching you [...] Big Brother is you, watching”³²; or perhaps you are monitoring.

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