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John Keane, *Democracy and Media Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 261 pp. ISBN: 9781107614574

A Framework for Analysing a New Form of Democracy

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One of the most significant developments in recent years in the context of politics and society is the increasing inseparability of the media from democracy and politics more generally. Whereas until relatively recently it was possible to talk about politics and media as separate institutions with distinct spheres of influence, that is now becoming implausible. Even though they remain separate institutions in a formal sense, contemporary democratic politics can now not be understood without engaging with the media. Likewise, the media is an increasingly important political actor, not only in terms of its representation of politics or in terms of media owners seeking to influence political decision making, but also because media is increasingly an integral part of the political process itself. The significant contribution of John Keane's *Democracy and Media Decadence* is not only to show how these processes are unfolding and with what impact, but also in providing a framework for analyzing the emergence of a new form of democracy.

Organized in five chapters, *Democracy and Media Decadence* provides a compelling engagement with critical transformations in forms of democracy and media around the world. Chapter 1 sets the foundations for Keane's analysis, engaging with the concept of communicative abundance, developed in previous work by Keane, and identifying key trends associated with communicative abundance. Such trends or effects associated with communicative abundance include the democratization of information, challenges to the public-private divide, and new forms of muckraking in which journalists and citizens and monitory institutions seek to bring exercises of power to light. Keane also identifies a number of other important trends associated with communicative abundance, a revolutionary age "structured by a new world system of overlapping and interlinked media devices" (1). At the same time, and significantly for the rest of the book, Keane also notes contradictory outcomes in these trends. Building on this foundation, chapter 2 engages with key dimensions of monitory democracy, while chapter 3 explores media decadence,



the central concept of the book. Through these two chapters, Keane presents a compelling narrative around transformations in forms of democracy that not only need to be considered as empirical developments but also as developments that mean we need to reconsider the very tools and concepts with which we have traditionally examined democratic and political practice. The fourth chapter explores democracy's opponents, while the fifth and final chapter brings freedom of public communication into Keane's analysis. Through these two final chapters, as in the rest of the book, there emerges a strong sense of the contingency of contemporary transformations. This is of particular importance in two ways. First, it indicates that change is not inevitably going to occur in one direction alone, there is a possibility for divergent and contradictory outcomes to develop. Second, and emerging from the first point, there exists a space for human agency, even in the context of profoundly global transformations.

Building on his own innovative body of work developed over many years, through *Democracy and Media Decadence*, Keane develops and sustains a central conjecture, namely that "the techniques and tools of media-saturated societies are being used by powerful forces in ways that are having harmful effects on democracy" (112). At the same time, the self-stated key provocation of the book is that "democracy does not feed automatically upon the untrammelled growth of communication abundance" (112). Rather, democracy is at a critical moment. Certainly, there are possibilities for the further enhancement of the participative dimensions of democracy, but there are also evident important counter trends resulting in some forms of power being concentrated more deeply than in previous times in corporate and other organizational hands. Such trends are troubling for the development and ongoing promise of democracy.

In addition to the concept of communicative abundance, two further key concepts for Keane's analysis are monitory democracy and media decadence. For Keane, "Monitory democracy is a new historical form of democracy, a variety of "post-electoral" politics and government defined by the rapid growth of many different kinds of extra-parliamentary, power-scrutinizing mechanisms." (79–80). Monitory democracy is a new form of democracy, going beyond the previous forms of assembly-based democracy and representative democracy. A defining feature of monitory democracy is that "people and organisations that exercise power are now routinely subject to public monitoring and public contestation by an assortment of extra-parliamentary bodies" (81). While media can and has played an important role here, Keane proceeds to identify a further significant challenge, which he identifies as the emergence of media decadence. For Keane, media decadence "refers to the wide gaps that are

opening up between the rosy ideals of free and fair public contestation and chastening of power, the unforced plurality of opinions and public commitment of representatives to the inclusion and treatment of all citizens as equals ... and a rougher, wrinkled reality in which communication media are deeply implicated in the dirty business of promoting intolerance of opinions, stifling the public scrutiny of power and fostering the blind acceptance of the way things are heading” (119). This concept is of particular significance for people engaged in debates around democracy as it highlights the need to be aware of and to engage with anti-democratic trends.

Keane uses the concepts discussed above to engage with a wide range of topics and issues in his book, but here I focus on four that are of particular significance in considering the relationships between democracy and media.

First, Keane engages with a critical set of issues around the relationship between democracy and media when he identifies the importance of silence, arguing that the production of silence in certain contexts can have devastating consequences for democracy. Keane uses this concept as a means to argue for the central significance of communication in contemporary societies. In this way, Keane’s analysis provides a valuable basis for further future engagement with a range of other researchers including Tanja Dreher (2009) and Nick Couldry (2010) who have analyzed the related question of voice, arguing that while voice is important as a means to participate in society, in itself it is not sufficient. In addition to voice, there is a need for listening and where possible for action. Indeed, one of the challenges for the internet age is the idea that the proliferation of communication channels inevitably provides for more democratic practice. As Keane and others show, this is by no means inevitable. Indeed, while people around the world are now able to send messages more easily than in previous generations, this does not automatically mean that people are listening or engaging with those voices. A critical challenge for the democratic project and for processes of belonging and social inclusion is to seek to create ways not only for voice to avoid the dangers of silence, but for listening and for action (Yuval-Davis 2011). Without such listening and action, the value of voice, even in the context of silence, is dramatically reduced.

Second, another crucial theme running through Keane’s analysis of media decadence is the need to recognize not only the influence of individuals but also to engage with organizational and structural developments and institutional arrangements. This is of great significance in the context of media ownership and its influence on democratic practice. It also suggests the need to engage critically with questions of leadership,

both in politics and in the media. At the same time, there is a need to analyze leadership as part of broader organizational and institutional processes. Browse the shelves of any bookstore today and you will find a list of titles examining the lives, experiences, and influence of individual media leaders. Such books provide important insights into contemporary issues around democracy, media, and leadership. At the same time, Keane warns that “Far more worrying than the personalised rule of media tycoons ... is the strong present-day tendency of corporate media and government to merge and meld, especially in contexts where constitutional and political resistance to the integration of organised media and political power is weak” (168). Such an argument is compelling in that it points us to the need to analyze how the power and influence of media markets and media business become institutionalized in political and corporate structures, so that their capacity to influence politics and citizens extends beyond the influence of any one individual media leader.

Third, Keane makes important observations around the need to re-think methodological approaches to media and democracy. In addition to analyses of media decadence needing to engage with power and institutions, for example by using case studies, Keane also calls for a need to engage in practices of wild thinking and to engage with wild ideas. His point here is both that facts do not speak for themselves, and that we need to be wary of sentimental longings for imaginary better times. Indeed, we need to embrace fundamentally new forms of thinking about democracy, including in the context of its relationship with the media. In the context of Keane’s analysis, this is of particular importance as we live in a time of communicative abundance in which previously clear distinctions between media and other institutions have now been dissolved, meaning that the analytic usefulness of long standing concepts such as the fourth estate are now open to question. Underpinning Keane’s methodological approach is a call for wise citizens, that is, people “who know they do not know everything” (23). As such, they will continue to ask questions, to seek information and ideas, and to act. The broader significance of Keane’s argument, and its relevance for other researchers, is that we are now moving into a period of human society that is so profoundly challenging to all aspects of democracy that we need to also reconsider and reconceptualize the tools that we use to engage with the world of media decadence.

Fourth, another central theme that emerges through Keane’s book is the importance of analyzing political, social, and economic relationships and processes when considering media decadence. That is, the situations being analyzed in the book are not static, and neither are the outcomes of the contexts under analysis pre-determined or pre-defined. Although

certain trends are observable, outcomes are uncertain, meaning that we need to both avoid fatalism and over-optimism. These arguments are of vital importance, particularly in the context of rapid technological innovation that is not only the hallmark of contemporary media, but of many other dimensions of society. Even if not explicitly stated, too often analyses of media transformations tend towards a form of technological determinism in which innovations in technology drive and ultimately determine social, political, and economic outcomes. The importance of Keane's analysis in this context is to show that there is still space for human agency and for human influence in these domains. While technological change is powerful, how this manifests itself occurs through human action, whether at the individual or group level. Ultimately, this suggests the central importance of contingency, and even the reversibility of media decadence. This contingency provides a space for a range of collective and individual actors, including citizens and journalists, to have an influence on the processes under analysis.

In sum, and bringing the observations above together, an important indicator of the potential influence of a book relates to further research questions and issues it may raise. In this regard, there is no doubt that *Democracy and Media Decadence* will be influential through having identified a number of critical issues, not only for researchers but for society. First, Keane's analysis provides further evidence that politics, democracy, and media are now inseparable. It is no longer possible to analyze contemporary forms of politics and democracy without analyzing the media. Second, and related to this, analysis of media and democracy needs to engage with the critical role of business, in particular the "tremendous power of media markets and media businesses in shaping citizens' patterns of communication" (153). Third, the analytic concepts of media decadence, monitory democracy and communicative abundance provide important tools which researchers can use as a basis for a range of important future projects that will further develop our insights into democracy and media in contemporary societies, building on the significant foundational work of Keane.

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Democracy in Times of Media Abundance

Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça and Wilson Gomes

John Keane's *Democracy and Media Decadence* is interesting and insightful in pointing to some transformations of democracy in the context of major changes in human communication. Keane presents a richly illustrated description of contemporary media abundance, characterizing it as a "system of overlapping and interlinked media devices" (2), in which texts, sounds and images are intertwined. In attempting to comprehend the main features of democracy in times of media abundance, Keane advocates the need for new and wild concepts, capable of overcoming the reductions grounded, for instance on the excessive division of labor between scientific disciplines. In the quest for new interpretive frameworks, he advances a notion of *monitory democracy*: "a new historical form of democracy, a variety of 'post-electoral' politics and government defined by the rapid growth of many different kinds of extra-parliamentary, power scrutinizing mechanisms" (79–80).

Interestingly, Keane establishes a parallel between the emergence of monitorial democracy and the rise of communicative abundance. Both changes are intrinsically connected in ways that challenge linear modes of causality. Democracy and communication have changed together affecting each other. This becomes clear in the structure of the book and the way it alternates chapters focused on communication and on democracy.

One of the main contributions of the book is its capacity to explain, in an accessible way, major changes in contemporary politics, including shifts in the boundaries between public and private, the establishment of "gated communities," and the political dilemmas that emerge from the power embedded into algorithms. Despite discussing the democratic potential of media abundance, Keane also points out to some of its dangers, including the risk of a *Mediacracy*: "a mode of governing that draws strength from a tangle of arcane links with media companies, top-level journalists, lobbyists, consultants and public relations firms" (171).

John Keane is also very sharp in mapping some failures in traditional forms of interpreting the relationship between communication technologies and democracy. This is clear, for instance, when he criticizes cyber-optimists and cyberpessimists that either reduce these technologies to mere tools at the service of external interests, or grant these technologies full agency, understanding social processes as direct consequences determined by them. Keane presents an insightful reading that compels scholars to rethink established categories in order to grasp the complexities of contemporary democracies.

Paradoxically, however, this very attempt to displace traditional thinking also leads Keane's work to a weakness. In claiming that new and more sophisticated concepts would be more adequate in making sense of contemporary phenomena, he may incur in two problems (1) he does not fully acknowledge how old concepts remain central for the understanding of contemporary phenomena; and (2) he often mixes the normative dimension of concepts with the historical explanations he offers. Each of these points deserves further development.

The first problem becomes evident when one tries to understand what is new in what Keane is proposing. After all, his discussion systematically draws from classics in political theory, including Machiavelli and James Madison. In his quest for new concepts, Keane (92) argues that "democracy has come to mean a way of life and a mode of governing in which power is subject to checks and balances – at any time, in any place – such that nobody is entitled to rule arbitrarily." But this is part of the definition of democracy since it was reinvented in modernity. Checks and balances is the defining core of modern liberal democracies, although we agree that the conditions under which these checks and balances happen have altered. The point, however, is that wild new concepts do not seem so fundamental to understand these contemporary shifts. Such shifts appear to be a new type of adaptation, and not something entirely new. Keane seems to agree with this continuity when he claims, for instance, that the "vital role played by civil societies in the invention of power-monitoring mechanisms seems to confirm what might be called James Madison's Law of Free Government: no government can be considered free unless it is capable of governing a society that is itself capable of controlling the government" (94).

Keane's insistence in claiming for the need of new theoretical tools may have led him to disregard the central relevance of some traditional notions. He promptly discards a clear distinction between *public* and *private*, for instance. In doing so, however, he may end up reducing the distinction to a matter of visibility, without revealing the multiple dimensions pervading the distinction. Ruth Gavison (1992) has shown how such distinction involves at least three dimensions: (1) Accessible / Inaccessible; (2) Freedom / Interference; and (3) Individual / Society. These dimensions seem condensed in Keane's argument, which hinders him from perceiving that some dimensions of the distinction may remain conceptually useful. Such acknowledgment would help Keane to develop his own argument that some things should remain private and, thus, not public.

Another illustration of the problem of Keane's discourse of novelty can be found in the criticisms he directs to Husserl's concept of *lifeworld*. According to Keane: "Whatever its level of former plausibility, this way of

thinking about the everyday world is now obsolete. Those who still think in terms of everyday life as a barrier against the outside world, perhaps even as a safe and secluded haven of freedom in a world dominated by large-scale, powerful institutions, are out of touch” (33). It is not clear, however, why the use of the notion implies the advocacy of an everyday life as a safe realm protected from power. This is not the only (or main) interpretation of the notion. The concept of the *lifeworld* is not incompatible with the diagnosis of domination, oppression, and power, and can actually disclose the oppressive dimension of our taken-for-granted assumptions.

In the end, Keane’s “wild” thinking leads him to findings that are somehow shared by scholars of political communication. This is clear when he states that “The rapid growth of giant media firms has another decadent effect: it affords them opportunities to ‘privatise’ politics in their favour by bending, twisting and distorting the rules of representative government” (164). In claiming so, he criticizes the mediated oligarchy that uses the tools of communicative abundance to restrain communicative abundance. Keane claims that the novelty of this argument lies in the avoidance of notions of manipulation and propaganda and in the consideration of the multidimensional forces that operate within and outside the government. This is, however, an assumption already shared by many scholars in communication that refuse simplifying the media as a channel of economic forces or political ideologies. The strength of the studies in the area of *newsmaking* has been exactly to point out the existence of multiple intertwined factors acting upon the definition of media content.

The second problem that derives from Keane’s attempt to conceptualize democracies in an age of media abundance is an overlap between the normative dimension of a theory and its historical grounds. In several moments of the book, Keane does not clarify if he is describing the current state of affairs or discussing the plausible possibilities opened by communicative abundance (although not entirely fulfilled). He claims, for instance, that “monitory democracy is the deepest and widest system of democracy ever known” (88). One should ask Keane if that is the case in an empirical sense and, if so, if democracy can still be improved and deepened or if it has reached its apogee. He also claims that monitory institutions are “defined by their overall commitment to strengthening the diversity and influence of citizens’ voices and choices in decisions that affect their lives” (84). Normatively, this is a strong argument, but empirically it can be challenged by the many – and persistent – forms of exclusion in contemporary polities. His own critiques to *mediacracy* point out that, in practice, monitory democracy may not look as nice as some of the previous statements seem to suggest.

Mixing the theoretical argument with his historical analysis, Keane claims that “democracy is no longer simply a way of handling the power of elected governments by electoral and parliamentary and constitutional means” (81). However, with the exception of democratic elitists, democracy has not been advocated as simply a way of handling power through elections. Most theories of democracy indeed have a monitoring component. In addition, many regimes with elections and Constitutions have not been categorized as democracies. Keane simplifies both the history of democratic theory and the history of democracies, when he defines monitoring democracy. And the reader never knows exactly if he believes we actually live in an age when “bossy power can no longer hide comfortably behind private masks” (105), or if he believes that the current conditions of communicative abundance would allow the emergence of a society of this type.

If he wants to argue for the second option – that the current conditions of communicative abundance would allow the emergence of stronger democracies – it would be interesting to engage with other democratic approaches that lead to the same direction, such as participatory democracy and deliberative democracy. After all, how is monitoring democracy different from the arguments developed by these perspectives? What can participation and deliberation offer in terms of “stronger democracies”?

Besides these aforementioned two related problems, some of the arguments developed in Keane’s book would benefit from further development. One of them is the discussion of unelected representation, which Keane seems to restrict to “authoritative public figures who win public attention and respect through various forms of media coverage” (57). The growing literature on the topic of the pluralization of representation has shown that there are many sources of legitimacy to unelected representation in addition to media visibility. If *Bona Vox* fits Keane’s model, several other unelected representatives are much less visible. Keane seems to take popularity as a synonym of legitimacy and does not discuss this complex topic. A stronger discussion of legitimacy seems relevant for the type of argument built by Keane.

A second point that would deserve theoretical development regards the relationship between traditional political institutions and civil society monitoring networks. Keane seems to operate with a dualist conception that clearly distinguishes these actors. This becomes evident when he argues that “all the big public issues that have erupted around the world since 1945 ... have been generated not by political parties, elections, legislatures and governments, but principally by power-monitoring networks that run parallel to – and often aligned against – the conventional mechanisms of party-based parliamentary representation” (96). This argument

neglects, however, the situations in which state and civil society have collaborated in order to produce significant changes. The new constitutionalism in Latin America makes a clear attempt to break this dichotomy and to imagine new forms of relationship between state and civil society.

Third, the interesting discussion at the end of the book about the danger of silence would also benefit from some conceptual clarifications. Silence can indeed ruin the potential of monitoring and reinforce arbitrary power. Nonetheless, some forms of silence may be important in democratic politics. It would be important to specify the circumstances in which silence is actually dreadful for democracy.

Lastly, the concept of monitoring also deserves further development. Several questions remain unanswered: what types of monitory networks may strengthen democracy? Are there illegitimate monitory actors? When can monitory action hinder democracy? Is the constant auditing promoted by monitory democracy always good? Can it raise new dilemmas and problems for the proper functioning of democracies?

The points raised in this piece do not diminish, in any possible way, the great contribution made by Keane's book. On the contrary, they point out to its cutting-edge nature and to its capacity to generate new insights, questions, and routes of inquiry. *Democracy and Media Decadence* is an essential book for any scholar dealing with political communication.

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John Keane: Communicative Abundance and Hybrid Politics

Henrik Paul Bang

John Keane's *Democracy and Media Decadence* is about how the digital revolution is creating a *communicative abundance*, which "is too complex, too elusive to be captured in smooth or slick formula, in propositions based on statistics extracted by using blunt-edged criteria, in hard-and-fast rules, in confident predictions based on the supposed truth of things" (19). In fact, democracies increasingly have to deal with a "strange new world of confusing unknowns, a thoroughly media-saturated universe cluttered with means and methods of communication, whose dynamic social and political effects have the capacity to hypnotise us, even to overwhelm our senses" (19). This world cannot be deciphered purely empirically. What are needed are not mountains of "hard," "objective" facts but

bold new probes, fresh-minded perspectives, 'wild' concepts that enable different and meaningful ways of seeing things, more discriminating methods of recognizing the novelties of our times, the democratic opportunities they offer and the counter-trends that have the potential to snuff out democratic politics. (21)

"Wild" concepts are in demand, because communicative abundance facilitates the emergence of new, boundary crossing discursive practices. Today, citizens, social movements, interest organizations, media, political parties, governments and administrations increasingly communicate and interact internally and externally by mixing online and offline activities in multiple novel ways (Bennett and Segerberg 2013; Coleman and Shane 2012). They are becoming "hybrid" political beings (Chadwick 2013) who engage in multilevel systems or networks that operate from the local to the global and in the process undermine most established distinctions, such as those between private and public, civil society and state, politics and administration, and international and national. Everybody knows this. Yet most of our concepts are developed offline and within the confines of the nation-state. The political discipline lags behind when it comes to "questioning and abandoning outdated clichés, including all descriptions of communication media as the "fourth estate" (22). We should concentrate much more on showing how communicative abundance forms new political hybrids, seriously affecting the ways policies are authoritatively articulated, allocated, and performed for a society or group of people across old boundaries.

It is quite odd how stuck mainstream political analysis is in the old offline dichotomy of freeriding vs. altruism or self-interest vs. the public good (Hay 2007). As Keane shows, the many new political hybrids for mixing politics and democracy online and offline cannot be reduced to a matter of individualism versus collectivism. For example, President Vladimir Putin's personalization of Russian politics is not easily identified with an individualizing politics, placing individual politicians before collectivities, candidates, and leaders before parties, and competition between individuals before the pursuit of the public good, as most in the mainstream argue (Karvonen 2010). His special mixing of representative democracy and authoritarian leadership rather attempts to derive commonality from personalization. It tries to forge new links between an expressive and hegemonic politics for persuading people to do what has to be done in, and through, the (re)construction of their own and their national identity. Keane stresses the same problematic to illuminate what goes on in Chinese politics: "China is neither a political monolith nor an uncontested world. [It] resembles a giant political laboratory in which many crafty techniques are being developed to structure and control the

patterns of communicative abundance—to harness the Web-structured media usage of citizens to the dynamics of a resilient ‘postdemocratic’ authoritarian regime” (196).

The Brave New World of Mediated Democracy versus Phantom Democracy

China and Russia illustrate “the key provocation of [Keane’s] book: democracy does not feed automatically upon the untrammelled growth of communicative abundance” (112). They show how political authorities can exploit communicative abundance to mix democratic and authoritarian traits in the governing of their territories and populations. The other side of this is, for example, the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) Movement the members of which make use of the same abundance to create new political action communities from below (Jensen and Bang 2013). These are less hierarchical; more lowly organized; less thickly collectivized; and more personalized than are conventional social movements. Not because they favor individualism over collectivism. Precisely because they want to make much more room for the spontaneous and immediate responses of the 99 percent to those policies of the 1 percent who dominate private, public and voluntary life across national boundaries by their control over various material and immaterial resources.

In Keane’s framework, OWS is a part of what he terms as *monitory democracy*. This consists of a set of monitory mechanisms which, for the untrained eye, will appear as “a magpie’s nest of randomly collected items” (82). Within this “nest” we find such different things as citizen jurors, participatory budgeting, and think tanks. What ties them together is not a uniform structure but their common functioning as “extra-parliamentary, power-scrutinizing mechanisms [that are taking] root within the ‘domestic’ fields of government and civil society, as well as in ‘cross-border’ settings once subject to the arbitrary power of empires, states and businesses” (80). To Keane, OWS would be an example of this rearticulated “hybrid” pluralism. OWS shows how “the central grip of elections, parties and parliaments on citizens’ lives is weakening,” and how “within and outside states, independent monitors of power begin to have major tangible effects on the dynamics and meaning of democracy” (80). What OWS is up against is not hierarchized bureaucracy or anarchic marketization but a new phantom democracy driven by “the *contingency* and *reversibility* of media decadence” (121). This threatens the trends towards creative openness and equality. Media decadence illuminates how: “major matters to do with the ownership and control of both the means of communication and public decision-making cease to be matters of public debate and deci-

sion. In effect, they are removed from the public agenda, decided behind closed doors, privatized” (168).

Thus, media decadence leads to abuse and concentration of power. There is a widening gap between liberal representative ideals of free and equal access to political decision-making, and the open and fair public contestation and chastening of power. We live in “a rougher, wrinkled reality in which communication media are deeply implicated in the dirty business of promoting intolerance of opinions, stifling the public scrutiny of power and fostering the blind acceptance of the way things are heading” (119).

Certainly, John Keane is a great political narrator and the story that he tells about monitored democracy vs. phantom democracy is highly exciting and inspiring. It deserves a large audience. However, it could be more “wild” in its conception of the social and political changes that communicative abundance is affording. It is inspiring how Keane shifts his democratic glance from the current theoretical debacle between consensus democracy (Habermas 2009), agonistic democracy (Mouffe 2013), and dissensus democracy (Rancière 2010). Rather he is seeking a new critical and historical stance for democracy that focuses on how new forms of political movements and engagement from below problematize and scrutinize how things are actually done by the dominant 1 percent. His fundamental insight is into how the changing political topography brought about by communicative abundance is making space for the creation of a monitory democracy populated by multiple new hybrids, which try to influence and change the articulation, performance and delivery of authoritative policies across established boundaries. As Keane writes, “potentially all fields of social and political life come to be publicly scrutinised, not just by the standard machinery of representative democracy, but by a whole host of non-party- extra-parliamentary and often unelected bodies operating within, underneath and beyond the boundaries of territorial states” (86).

I just wonder: Can such public scrutinizing be treated as being *ipso facto* democratic? Consider, for example, the new hideous despotism of Islamic State (IS). IS’s outrageous discursive practice is perhaps one of the greatest potential threats to government “by,” “for,” “with,” and “of” the people that democracy has ever faced. Not just because of IS’s awful atrocities. Rather because it is “copying” important elements from what Keane names monitory democracy, using them as weapons against in particular Western democracies. IS is *not* clothing itself in the traditional role of “modernity’s victims”; it does *not* reveal the return of the Middle Age; and it does *not* operate behind closed doors and in silence. Actually, IS seems to be inspired as much by the French Revolution as by pre-modern

Islam in its brutal fight for a “pure” and “crafty” form of state backed by a thickly integrated moral society. Furthermore, it is as technologically and discursively sophisticated as are new social movements like OWS. IS collects and provide information to be able to communicate with and mobilize those supposed independent publics to whom its messages are addressed. IS’s monitory despotism does precisely require “a break with conventional thinking in order to understand its political geography” (88), and show how it applies multiple informational, communicative, and interactive devices to achieve the transformation of the silent Muslim crowd into capable citizens fighting for a strong caliphate (see, for example, McDonald 2014; Aisch et al. 2014). This is to me what makes IS extraordinary scary. It tries to monitor public opinion as a means to justify what it does as well as to creating “virtuous citizens”! IS seems to have learned from democracy how to preserve public decision-making from the excessive influence by crowds. It operates in very much the same way as do new, more egalitarian forms of problematization and scrutinization such as OWS.

Reversing the Relation between “Inputs” and “Outputs”

Communicative abundance fosters a monitory politics, problematizing how risks and uncertainties are handled by the ruling powers on the output side of political processes. This can be democratic as well as undemocratic. In any case it fundamentally challenges the “old” discursive practices of political representation, civic engagement and political participation. These are all geared to the input side and operate in terms of an allocative conception of politics as being about how the political pie is cut up and distributed among people. It is as if Keane tries to both have his new pie and eat it when stating that “In terms of political geometry, the system of monitory democracy is something other and different [from representative democracy]: a complex web of differently sized monitory bodies that have the effect, thanks to communicative abundance, of continuously stirring up questions about who gets what, when and how, as well as holding publicly responsible those who exercise power, wherever they are situated” (105). The system of monitory democracy cannot primarily be about how the existing pie is cut up. It expresses a set of generative or transformative capacities for baking an entirely new pie. This reverses the relation between “inputs” and “outputs” or decision and action. It illuminates how critical, politically associated persons continuously are problematizing how their political authorities (formal or informal) articulate and perform policies that are accepted as authoritative by most of the population, at least most of the time. Such political

problematizations are exercised from the “inside-out.” This in contrast to the old social critique of allocative politics that proceeds from the “outside-in,” examining how individuals, groups and classes in civil society are hindered access to, and recognition in, the political decision-making processes, whether through the repression of “real” interests (Lukes 2005), the exercise of distorted communication (Habermas 1989), or the mobilization of biases (Bachrach and Botwinick 1992). Keane indicates a distinction between (de)problematization and (de)politicization, but it is not made analytically distinct. In the end he tends to place his new generative and output oriented monitory model in the shadow of his old allocative and input driven one, prioritizing how interest and identity conflicts are sought silenced by the concerted actions of a hegemonic block of elites. As he writes on the last page “wise citizens [take] advantage of communicative abundance, to get involved in public affairs, initially by making public noise, smart public noise, well-targeted din and disquiet enough to shatter the eerie silences that can so easily cause things to go so terribly wrong for so many people” (245). However, this analysis of how people’s legitimate demands are, or are not, aggregated and integrated into collectively binding decision is distinct from scrutinizing how the formal and informal policies of the 1% cope with high-consequence risks like economic meltdowns, global warming, epidemics and wars that confront the populations. It manifests Keane’s (1988) old model of democratic and pluralistic conflict resolution, combining the development of a “thickly” integrated civil society with the formation of a strong, sovereign state:

Civil society should become a permanent thorn in the side of political power.... Without a secure and independent civil society of autonomous public spheres, goals such as freedom and equality, participatory planning and decisionmaking will be nothing but empty slogans. But without the protective, redistributive and conflict-mediating functions of the state, struggles to transform civil society will become ghettoized, divided and stagnant, or will spawn their own, new forms of inequality and unfreedom. (Keane 1988: 15)

This old democratic model was evidently essential to handling the tensions between city and countryside, church and state, and, most of all, capital, and labor in bygone industrialist society. But as Keane is the first to stress, the fact of communicative abundance is in the process of irreversibly changing this traditional input-driven configuration of democracy as a unified conflict resolving mechanism towards a new, much more loosely connected “glocal” model for problematizing how uncertainty and risks are dealt with on the output side:

Under conditions of monitory democracy, parts (state-based monitors) and wholes (regional and global monitors) do not exist in a strict or absolute sense. The units of monitory democracy are better described as sub-wholes – “holons” is the term famously coined by Arthur Koestler – that function simultaneously as self-regarding and self-asserting entities that publicly chasten power without asking permission from higher authorities, and push and pull each other in a multilateral system of monitoring in which all entities play a role, sometimes to the point where the part and the whole are blurred beyond recognition. (96)

Then, how can Keane’s old and new model be combined without undermining each other?

Developing Political Personality from Political Commonality

As Keane indicates, “old” allocative democracy is about handling the conflict between self-interested individuals and the public good by a “thick” civil society and a “strong” state. In contrast, the new monitory democracy manifests a “thin” kind of political commonality combined with a “soft” form of governance for handling uncertainty and risk. Yet, Keane seems to stick analytically to the old conception of political “communication [as] constantly the subject of dissembling, negotiation, compromise, power conflicts, in a phrase a matter of political battling” (112). If the core issue of democracy is still conflict mediation for the sake of creating equal freedom, then how are we to avoid that monitory democracy, as a “glocal” manifestation of “the complex dynamics of contemporary forms of connectivity” (23) leads to increasing inequality at all levels from the local to the global? Inversely, how can we respond to uncertainty and risk if we place monitory democracy in the shadow of the old, input-driven and conflict resolving one? Monitory democracy seems to require exactly what the strong state and thick civil society cannot offer: (a) *soft governance* for creating results by communicating and interacting with one another across boundaries and horizontally more than vertically; and (b) *thin commonality* for raising and solving common concerns in virtue of the reciprocal acceptance and recognition of difference as the *sine qua non* for problematizing and acting on “glocal” risks and challenges in common. In a way Keane is indirectly admitting to this notion of political authority and political community as manifestations of the same generative capacity to make a difference, when emphasizing how in monitory democracy: “Leadership instead comes to be understood as *the capacity to mobilise “persuasive power”* (as Archbishop Desmond Tutu likes to say). It is *the ability to motivate citizens to do things for themselves*” (63; emphasis added).

How can this rely on anything but the exercise of soft power for the sake of enabling persons in thin political communities to better work together in common projects in virtue of their intrinsic differences? After all, a major reason why “publicity is now directed at all things personal” (32) is that in political life the personal is political just as the political is personal. Publicity requires an ability to feel engaged and to express oneself. But it also requires one’s acknowledgement of the fact that “I” is always constructed in relation to “the other” without whom it would be impossible to develop personality and identity. Inside the political, the personal cannot be separated from the communal in the same way as the “free riding” and self-interested market individual can be abstracted from solidary civil society outside. When it comes to policy articulation, performance, and delivery the personal feeds on the communal just as the communal thrives on the personal.

Hence, there is more to communicative abundance than the battle between monitory democracy and phantom democracy. The crash between OWS and IS, for example, is to me a matter of whether (and the degree and extent to which) members of multilevel political systems accept and recognize each other’s differences. It may be that Keane is right in arguing that “where monitory democracy exists, institutions like periodic elections, multi-party competition and the right of citizens to voice their public approval or disapproval of legislation remain familiar features” (91). After all OWS was born in the United States and not in Saudi Arabia or Iran. Yet acceptance and recognition of difference is not so much an abstract, constitutionalized politics of ideas as a concrete cultural politics of presence (Phillips 1999). It operates from the presumption that in democracies people “can,” “will,” and “understand” how to freely and equally express themselves, form their own identities and make a real difference to the way policies are articulated, performed and delivered. Implicitly, at least, Keane’s notion of communicative abundance invites a conception of monitory democracy as primarily relying on this generative, transformative capacity of “We, the 99 percent.”

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The Communications Revolution of Our Time: Author's Reply to Comments on *Democracy and Media Decadence*

John Keane

It is a privilege to receive a gift set of thoughtful comments on *Democracy and Media Decadence*, whose four reviewers are to be warmly thanked for their constructive efforts to summarize, expand, and challenge its principal arguments.

The key conjecture of the book is that we are living through a revolutionary age of communicative abundance, in which many media innovations, from smart phones and satellite broadcasting to electronic books, robots and cloud computing, spawn great public fascination mixed with excitement. For several decades, hopeful talk of digital democracy, web 2.0, cybercitizens, and e-government has also been flourishing in the field of politics. The book probes these developments. It documents the many thrilling ways, in more than a few global settings, that communicative abundance is fundamentally altering the landscape of people's lives, and their politics, often for the better. It explains why communicative abundance enables the growth of new information platforms, helpfully "de-natures" the public-private relationship and supports the robust growth of muckraking, unelected representatives, and cross-border publics. All these phenomena have radical implications for the way we think

about power and politics; and (so the argument runs) communicative abundance has an elective affinity with what I call struggles for monitory democracy (Keane 2009).

The wild thought that runs through the book is that insufficient scholarly and public attention has been paid to the troubling counter-trends, the decadent media developments that encourage concentrations of cunning arbitrary power, so weakening the spirit and substance of democracy in monitory form. Clever new methods of government censorship – the Chinese and Iranian arts of using the Internet to control the Internet are among the most sophisticated – and the use by governments and corporations of spin tactics and back-channel public relations are the most obvious examples of this decadence. Echo chambers, rumor storms, Berlusconi-style mass media populism, flat earth news, dragnet state surveillance, and Google-style business spying (Keane 2015) are trends that also bode ill for democracy. The decadent trend is reinforced by big political lies, cyberattacks, online gated communities, publicity bombs and organized media silence in the face of unaccountable power.

Each reviewer acknowledges that *Democracy and Media Decadence* is a scholar's guide to understanding and explaining these decadent trends, and how best to deal with them. The praise is fulsome, yet not every reviewer is agreed that its concepts, methods, and substantive observations are entirely plausible, or sufficiently persuasive. Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça and Wilson Gomes judge my use of "wild concepts" to make fresh sense of the new mediated political realities of the twenty-first century to be somewhat confused, contradicted by my dependence upon "traditional notions," such as the private/public distinction. Careful reading will show in fact that my use of history is purposefully Nietzschean (let's call it), in the sense that under pressure from the unfinished communications revolution of our time, even the meaning of old categories is altered, in accordance with the principle that in each historical era inherited concepts must be rescued from the orthodoxy that potentially stifles and overpowers their significance. Consider just one example: the book's treatment of the early modern ideals of liberty of the press and freedom of communication. Their inherited justifications are shown to be wanting, but (I say in the final part of the book) nowadays they take on a brand new significance, as the best weapon citizens and their chosen representatives have against pockets of public silence (think of the destabilizing anti-democratic effects of the unmonitored global banking and credit sector) that can have ruinous ecological, social and political effects upon people's lives.

Mendonça and Gomes pose questions about the meaning and significance of monitory democracy. They seem bewitched by talk of "partici-

patory democracy” and “deliberative democracy,” but without realizing that both those terms and replies to all their questions, and clarifications of their mistakes (the legitimacy of unelected representatives is not based on their popularity, for instance), are handled at length in my full-scale history of democracy, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (2009).

A key conjecture of this new history of democracy, as Timothy Marjoribanks notes well, centers on the perennial problem of how to restrain and undo arbitrary power. The theory of monitory democracy highlights the ways in which the democratic politics of our generation is caught up in a long-term historical shift, away from the fixation upon politicians, elections and state-level parliaments towards public efforts to scrutinize and control arbitrary exercises of power, wherever they occur, in the multi-scalar fields of government, business and other civil society institutions. In the age of monitory democracy, so runs the argument, the ecology of citizen activity and representation is changing. It is no longer confined to elections, parties, and parliaments, that is, representative politics in the narrow sense. Often in opposition to mainstream political parties, new forms of unelected and non-party citizen action and representative politics are now flourishing. When they function well (think of intrepid WikiLeaks), these new mechanisms blow the whistle on institutionalized corruption, secrecy, violence, and social injustice. They are of historical significance because they show the *limits* of political parties and parliaments. Which is to say that rather than witnessing the end of representative politics, its replacement by what Henrik Bang calls “thin commonality” and “soft governance,” we’re now living in an age of communicative abundance faced by a double democratic challenge: the challenge of winning elections and reinventing new forms of political parties as trusted representatives of the wishes and needs of citizens considered as equals; and the difficult, potentially complementary, and much more radical struggle to extend the principles of citizen involvement and representation into every field of power where arbitrary rule currently mangles the lives of people and their environment.

Henrik Bang correctly notes the early dependence of my political thinking on the state/civil society dualism (when after the Prague Spring it had “velvet revolution” potential). But he misunderstands the ways in which that distinction morphed into the monitory democracy perspective. He says that perspective is dependent upon an old-fashioned “traditional input-driven configuration of democracy,” but in saying this he turns a blind eye to the many interesting ways in which, under democratic conditions, the public monitoring of power typically involves not just public exposés of wrongdoing, or “input” claims on decision makers, but instead directly involves citizens and their chosen representa-

tives in the politics of deciding who gets what, when and how. Think of such monitory inventions (the examples are all from Latin America) as participatory budgeting, justice boats, national policy conferences and food sovereignty initiatives: these are new forms of handling power democratically, in other words, decision making procedures by which not just inputs, but throughputs and outputs are simultaneously subject to the control of citizens and their chosen representatives.

In his own moment of “wild” thinking, Bang says that “Islamic State (IS)” is a variant of monitory democracy, an effort to “monitor public opinion as a means to justify what it does as well as to creating “virtuous citizens.” With its aesthetics of violence, mobilization of fear, religious bigotry and commitment to state building, IS in fact is the antagonist of monitory democracy, which stands utterly opposed to the blind belief in top-down rule laced with violence. In the name of the equalization of power, and seen normatively, monitory democracy stands against hubris and abuses of power. It is therefore best characterized as the struggle, in multi-scalar settings, in the name of equalization of life chances, to scrutinize, restrain and abolish arbitrary exercises of political and socio-economic power.

Democracy and Media Decadence can be read as both a call to action and a precautionary tale. It explains in the clearest prose possible why media decadence is harmful for the democratic body politic. And it tackles some tough but fateful questions: which forces are chiefly responsible for media decadence? Should we be cheered by the rise of the blog and tweet social media scene, or worried by the collapse of reigning newspaper business models and the lingering culture of red-blooded journalism, which often stands accused of such bad habits as hunting in packs, its eyes on bad news, egged on by newsroom rules that include titillation, sensationalism and the excessive concentration on personalities? What (if anything) can be done about the new media decadence? Is improved legal regulation our best hope? How effective are media literacy campaigns, or efforts to redefine public service media for the twenty-first century? And, finally, the really discomposing questions: when judged in terms of the principle of free and open communication, does the age of communicative abundance on balance proffer more risk than promise? Are there developing parallels with the early twentieth century, when print journalism, radio, and film broadcasting hastened the widespread collapse of parliamentary democracy? Are the media failures of our age the harbingers of profoundly despotic trends that might ultimately result in the birth of “phantom democracy” – politics in which governments claim to represent majorities that are artefacts of media, money, organization,

and force of arms? If that happened, what, if anything, would be lost? In plain words: why should anybody care about media decadence?

Judged by the spirited and insightful reactions of the reviewers, the book's search for some provocative, if tentative answers to these fateful questions has hit its target, with effect.

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