



FRONT OF MIND

Professor John Keane

Academic and author



There are decadent trends that bother me. ... There is a potential bad moon rising over the democratic world.

STORY BY:

JANNE RYAN

PHOTOGRAPH BY:

LOUISE KENNERLEY

I am thinking about what I call the age of communicative abundance, and the relationship between this emerging new galaxy of communication media and democracy.

This revolution is shifting all our lives, quite profoundly, as it changes who has access to power. On a personal level, this means I have to question what I do as an intellectual, a public intellectual. Everyone is part of this change.

There are a lot of things to consider. But I keep going back to the work of Harold Innis, a Canadian who, in his book *Bias of Communication* [1951], pointed out that across history, communication modes structure people's sense of time and space and also structure power relationships – who is able to control the culture. Innis, by the way, was the teacher and mentor of Marshall McLuhan.

So this is my starting point; it helps me understand the emergence of a new galaxy of communication media [internet, tweets, iPhones, etcetera] that is having a fundamental role in re-shaping democracy. I think of it like this: first we had the age of assembly democracy, famously associated with Athens, where citizens gathered in public and raised their hands to decide to go to war or raise taxes. This first historical phase of democracy was primarily dependent on oral communication, on the spoken word, supplemented by laws written on papyrus or stone and messages carried by donkey or horse.

The age of representative democracy sprang up in the era of the printing press. The 19th and 20th centuries saw the culmination of this period and the emergence of people power – the vote for women and abolition of slavery and the like. This was the era of the pamphlet, the novel, the first daily newspaper, telegraph messages, letters, the postal systems, which all enabled the development of mass publicity and, within the framework of states, the development of 'publics' and the widening of the struggle to question power.

Now we are living in the age of communicative abundance and the shift here is that communication is no longer housed within a territorial state. Where print culture was important for developing systems of national identity and self-government, this new digital galaxy enables global publics. This idea of a global public – a global interest in climate change, for example – has come about because the way we now communicate is networked and immediate. This shift directly changes the concept of democracy. How do we as global cultures continue to scrutinise power; how do we humble the arrogant and catch out global wrongdoing?

The worrying thing to me is that we have no equivalent – as we did in the early 20th century – of the BBC public service media model, where the basic principle was that the means of communication should not be controlled by government nor by commercial/private interest, and so we are faced with the task of inventing a new structure and funding model that can protect public communication. ProPublica.com is one model; so is Wikipedia.

But picking up my anti-democracy detector, there are decadent trends that bother me. If you look at Italy, where the political group around Berlusconi are using sales and retailing techniques to convince a good majority that politics doesn't matter, there is a potential bad moon rising over the democratic world.

Like most people, my life is now caught up in this new galaxy in which most of my time is spent with these new communication tools. I think there is a temptation for intellectuals to become Don Quixotes; to stick their head in the sand of wilful ignorance and turn their back on it all and make derisive comments about journalism and so on. This needs to change. Academics need to quit their bunkers.

It is a challenging moment. My trade [the intellectual] has a history of colluding with power. In the 20th century, conceited figures like John Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger and others in the field of philosophy had a fantasy of being on top of everything and so they colluded with power. It is interesting that the intellectual was an early modern invention. My job in the smallest, humblest way is to combat bullshit, which is a poisonous fruit of communicative abundance. But, by the way, I don't want to be seen as a Baptist minister or Catholic priest. ■

*Professor Keane will take up the chair in Politics at the University of Sydney in July 2010. He is author of *The Life and Death of Democracy* (Simon & Schuster).*