

## Chapter 6

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# Distributed Citizenship

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In January 2012, a small team of researchers from Facebook and Cornell University conducted an experiment on some of Facebook's users. On 689,003 of its users, to be exact. For a week, the researchers manipulated what those users saw in their news feeds when they logged in to Facebook. The idea was to measure whether exposing the selected users to more 'negative' content left those users more likely to post 'negative' content themselves. Could Facebook alter its users' moods? The researchers tweaked some of those users' news feeds to reduce the number of posts from their friends featuring 'positive content' – the good news that their friends had wanted to share with them, the new job announcements and new baby pictures, the party details, the status updates that contained happy-sounding words. By the end of the week, the posts made by those users who had had their flow of this stuff reduced had themselves become less positive. The experiment, later published as Kramer *et al.* (2014), claimed to show that, as a result: 'emotional states can be transferred to others via emotional contagion, leading people to experience the same emotions without their awareness' (pp. 87–88). That use of 'without their awareness' is a revealing choice of words. Because none of these users had given permission, far less informed consent; none of them had been offered the choice to opt out; and none of them was to know that they had been part of this study designed to manipulate their emotions. Almost 700,000 people had been unknowingly conscripted into an experiment designed to see if the researchers could make them feel bad.

For some critics this was a story about research ethics (I write this a year after the story broke, and an active discussion about this dimension continues online in a dedicated group page hosted on, you guessed it, Facebook). It was a story that crystallized anxieties about the ethics of using so-called Big Data for research (boyd & Crawford 2012). For others it was a story about corporate responsibility and the black-box nature of Facebook's hidden algorithms. As Nicholas Carr (2014) points

out: ‘If the Post Office had ever disclosed that it was reading everyone’s mail and choosing which letters to deliver and which not to, people would have been apoplectic, yet that is essentially what Facebook has been doing’. In fact, this is how the news feed has always operated. Facebook curates the flow of information seen by each individual user, rather than passing on every last post. If the average adult user of Facebook has 338 friends (Smith 2014; probably more by the time you read this), then most will not have the time or inclination to read through everything posted, shared, commented upon or liked by each of those friends on a given day. It would be overwhelming. So Facebook makes selections for what appears in our news feeds, based on what it thinks we most want to see. But the problem is that, as users, we don’t know how it does this, and nor do we have any meaningful ways to make those selections for ourselves (assigning some people to a ‘Close Friends’ list is a crude and inflexible option). The curation of one’s news feed is a top-down, take-it-or-leave-it proposition managed by Facebook, not by the user. And the ‘emotional contagion’ project – which came to light only because its researchers opted to publish their findings in an academic journal in 2014 – lifts the lid on just what we may be giving up in allowing Facebook to make these choices on our behalf.

This secret manipulation of people’s emotions through algorithms is a stark insight into the power relationships between social media platforms and their users (Gillespie 2014). Facebook did this, without asking those users, because it could. Any new information that can be gleaned about how to push users’ buttons to keep them using the network and building its database seems to provide it with a good enough justification. And as for those of us who may be conscripted into such experiments without our knowledge? Those of us who may log into Facebook on a bad day, looking for some kind of moment of pleasure or communion or validation, only to have those invisibly re-routed as part of a Facebook project designed to try to make us feel sad that week? Here are the early signs of the consequences of bringing the personal and the public together in a proprietary commercial space that runs on algorithms. It’s not that we are reduced to our data. It’s worse than that. It’s that we are reduced to *their* data.

The Facebook/Cornell experiment created a lot of bad press for all involved. The gist of much of the news reporting and op-ed commentary was that Facebook should treat its customers with more respect and consideration. But as we saw in Chapter 2, Facebook’s users are not its customers. Facebook’s users are the raw material for the data products that the company sells to its actual customers – advertisers, brands and marketers. So this chapter argues that we need to rethink our

relationships with social media firms, and our position within the contemporary internet environment. We need to move away from asserting our sovereign rights as customers of firms that don't see us that way in the first place. Instead, we should rethink our relationships in terms of *citizenship*.

In his book *Cultural Citizenship*, Toby Miller suggests that 'We are in a crisis of belonging' (Miller 2007: 1). Miller's book is mainly concerned with television, but its year of publication coincided with the mainstream consolidation of social media platforms, most notably Facebook. Almost a decade later, we could restate the claim of a crisis of belonging, but this time in relation to social media. This time, the crisis is that we are obliged to belong to commercial data-mining networks, even as we may know that they do not operate in our best interests. The ubiquity of Facebook, of Google, of Twitter, keeps us there because our friends are there, our families are there, our colleagues, our peers, our neighbours are there. The contemporary cultural crisis of belonging is that belonging has become obligatory. But in what sense do we belong to Facebook? Only in the sense that it owns our ideas and images, our address books and personal histories, our public statements and our private secrets. So how should we respond? One line of response is to reconsider our uses of social media in terms of a different sense of belonging – that of citizenship. This chapter offers a new way of thinking about the relationships between citizenship, activism and social media.

To be a citizen, James Carey once observed 'is to assume a relation in space to one's contemporaries' (Carey 1989: 4). His concern was to connect certain conceptions of communication with the problems of establishing and maintaining a democracy on the scale of the US. Carey distinguished between two fundamental ways of conceiving of communication. On the one hand, there is what he termed the *transmission* view of communication, through which messages are sent across space for the purposes of controlling territory; and on the other, there is what he called the *ritual* view of communication, understood as a symbolic process of maintaining community through time. In the social media environment, the centralized production and one-way distribution of the transmission model blurs with the ritual model's personal communication and the sharing of networked individuals. Meanings are not just transmitted through networks, but rather they circulate, with each new moment of sharing sparking a fresh association in a fresh context. The making of meanings is distributed.

This chapter proposes the concept of *distributed* citizenship – to assume a creative political relation within networks with one's contemporaries. Relations of distributed citizenship are not defined by or

restricted to a particular geographical location or polity, but are defined rather by shared meanings and collaborative creativity and action within and through networked digital media. Distributed citizenship is a political possibility of the social media environment, but it needs a rethink of the commercial terms demanded of us as users and that we as users are prepared to accept. It can exist not within a given space, but within networks – it is a form of citizenship that can develop within what Castells terms the space of flows, which he defines as ‘the technological and organizational possibility of practicing simultaneity without contiguity’ (Castells 2009: 34). Distributed citizenship describes a set of potentials made possible by social media, and by the altered experiences and awareness of culture, connection and community that result from their widespread adoption and adaptation.

To recap on key points from this book’s first two chapters, social media are networked database platforms that combine public with personal communication. For the most part, these are commercial operations that grow by having their users contribute content; this builds the database that those platforms can exploit for advertising and marketing. Social media are those that allow any user, in principle: to say and make things; to share the things that they or others have said and made; and to make that saying, making and sharing visible to others in new kinds of contexts. So social media can be understood by analysing their uses and affordances in terms of *creativity* (saying and making), *sharing* and *visibility*. The focus in this chapter is on the first of these – creativity – and in particular on the forms of collaboration that Tim Berners-Lee has termed *intercreativity* (Berners-Lee 1989: 182–3). The chapter begins by briefly reviewing some key modern formulations of citizenship and media, before developing the concept of distributed citizenship in relation to networks, responsibility and spatiality. It then goes on to apply this to four key examples of distributed citizenship projects: the global #Occupy movement; the fleeting *Kony 2012* phenomenon; cryptocurrencies, typified by Bitcoin; and the diaspora\* social media platform.

### **From Civil to DIY Citizenship**

In an influential essay originally published in 1950, T.H. Marshall distinguished between three dimensions of citizenship, which he termed the civil, political and social. By *civil*, he referred to Enlightenment rights such as personal liberty, freedom of speech and of religion, and rights of property and the law. By *political*, he referred to the rights to vote and participate in the mechanisms, processes and institutions of government, from national parliament to local council. And by *social*, he referred to

those rights bound up most closely with the twentieth-century expansion of education, welfare and health services:

from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share in the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilised being according to the standards prevailing in the society. (Marshall 1992: 8)

The development of citizenship in Marshall's analysis was coterminous with the development of capitalism, but citizenship, as he observed, is a system of equality whereas capitalism is one of inequality. 'Citizenship', Marshall (1992: 18) wrote, 'is a status bestowed on those who are full members of a community'. Critics of Marshall (such as Smith 2002) have pointed out that the eighteenth- to twentieth-century narrative of progress he presents is not without its own inequalities, with some social groups – indigenous peoples, for instance – gaining access to civil, political and social citizenship on very different timelines to that of Marshall's schema.

So an important addition to this three-part model was the concept of *cultural* citizenship (Hartley 1999, Miller 2002). Citizenship, argues Hartley, is 'a term of *association* among *strangers*' (Hartley 2012: 133), and is to be understood as 'a *relational identity*, inconstant, dynamic, and evolving', rather than as a universal constant condition (p. 135). To this end, Hartley (1999, 2012) extends Marshall's three-part schema to include cultural citizenship. Cultural citizenship describes the recognitions of differences demanded by the identity politics of the late twentieth century. For Miller, it is about 'the maintenance and development of cultural lineage via education, custom, language, and religion, and the positive acknowledgement of difference in and by the mainstream' (Miller 2002: 231). It is made possible by broadcast media and the way that television 'gathers populations' (Hartley 1999: 158). Hartley expands on this:

Television ... is no respecter of differences among its audiences; it *gathers populations* which may otherwise display few connections among themselves and positions them as its audience 'indifferently', according to all viewers the same 'rights' and promoting among them a sense of common identity *as* television audiences. At one and the same time, then, people can experience political differences based on territory, ethnicity, law and heritage between one another, but also, simultaneously and conversely, they can enjoy undifferentiated 'identity' with others based on television audiencehood. (Hartley 1999: 158)

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Television made possible new ways of thinking about the public world of the social and private sphere of the home (Meyrowitz 1985), and new styles in which to imagine community (Anderson 1991). It made possible new calendars of shared national moments and events, and a new conception of a *general* public (Scannell & Cardiff 1991). And it also contributed to making possible new kinds of recognitions of difference, or *identity* politics (Castells 2004). But while television is still a dominant medium, its hold on our attention is now complemented by other media, making possible other ways of thinking about how we organize ourselves and each other.

So following on from cultural citizenship and its politics of shared identity, Hartley also proposes *DIY* (do it yourself) citizenship. This is ‘the practice of putting together an identity from the available choices, patterns and opportunities on offer’ (Hartley 1999: 178). DIY citizenship is about consumption and choice; it is a postmodern bricolage of fashions, gestures, practices and ideas, and is again very much bound up with television.

Whether it’s a full ‘fitted’ identity, expensive, integrated and in a recognizable off-the-shelf style, or an identity more creatively put together from bits and pieces bought, found or purloined separately, is a matter of individual difference. The point is, ‘citizenship’ is no longer simply a matter of a social contract between state and subject, no longer even a matter of acculturation to the heritage of a given community; DIY citizenship is a choice people can make for themselves. Further, they can change a given identity, or move into or out of a repertoire of identities. (Hartley 1999: 178)

But as Turner points out, the ‘repertoire of identities’ that are made available through such contemporary genres as reality TV, and its annual contestants’ ‘journey’ towards a new public self, are quite constrained and limited. Hartley’s use of the term DIY also means that his concept of DIY citizenship has been taken up by participants in design, craft and makers movements, and by theorists and practitioners of critical making (Ratto & Boler 2014). While some of this work is fascinating (such as Mann 2014), it is a quite different sense of DIY from Hartley’s original usage, which was again concerned with television. And neither makers movements nor television can quite help us to understand social media.

Each of Hartley’s new forms of televised citizenship, he notes, is ‘increasingly reliant on *communication* and less on *the state*’ (Hartley 2012: 147). But in the social media environment, large corporate entities such as Google and Facebook are sovereign. The unwritten social

contract gives way to the unread Terms of Service agreement – man is born free, and everywhere he is on Facebook. So if the granting of rights has been ceded from states to Silicon Valley corporations, then for whom is this a good outcome? So this chapter instead proposes a model rooted in the contemporary social media environment – distributed citizenship.

## Distributed Citizenship

What, then, is distributed citizenship? Distributed citizenship describes taking up a creative political relation with one's contemporaries within social media networks. It is more concerned with the exercise of rights and responsibilities than with choice and consumption. Its key terms are creativity, sharing and visibility. It is self-reflexive citizenship, which is as yet more concerned with winning and securing its rights than with exercising them. It is not a description of a condition that has as yet been fully realized; rather, it is an aspiration. In this, it is no different from the other key conceptions of citizenship above – civil, political, social, cultural – not all of which have yet been obtained by everyone who could enjoy their benefits, and which remain aspirations for many people around the world. In what senses is this citizenship *distributed*? It is distributed in three ways – in terms of networks, in terms of responsibility and in terms of spatiality.

First, it is distributed in the same sense as a distributed computer network – one with multiple points of connection and contact, with deliberate redundancy of connectivity, and with fewer hubs and points of centralized control than in other forms of network topology. The internet was conceived as a distributed network, but contemporary developments by firms such as Facebook, Apple and Google reimagine the internet as at best *decentralized* (with certain key hubs dominating traffic, interactions, attention and revenue), or at worst *centralized* (with all communication flowing through Facebook's servers to be data-mined and monetized). So in relation to networks, distributed citizenship describes an environment in which the infrastructure of participation, rights and responsibilities is not concentrated in centralized spaces or in decentralized hubs, but is rather distributed widely across the network.

Second, it is distributed in terms of *responsibility*. The language and interface of social network spaces put each individual at the centre. Each platform is built around our profile, our personal timeline, our individual history, CV and address book. Yet our interactions with others on these platforms do not take place in our individual space, but are distributed. You craft a status update that represents you to your chosen network in

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the way that you most prefer; but I comment on your post, and my comment becomes a part of your self-presentation too, in ways which may work against your intended performance. What are the ethics of this? I then share your post with my own chosen networks, taking it out of the context for which you had shaped it, and repositioning your words within a new context of my own preference. What are the ethics of that? Such interactions are not the individual presentations or performances of autonomous selves, but are rather collaborations between distributed users. Our profiles are *co-constructed* with others in our networks (Trottier & Lyon 2012, Ellison & boyd 2013). Even though certain high-status users may have greater concentrations of attention than others, those collaborations are nonetheless distributed across networks.

Distributed citizenship involves each of us reassessing our responsibilities towards others in our networks. The Snowden revelations show that government security agencies and Silicon Valley corporations alike share an interest in harvesting and archiving what we say, feel, think and do through networked digital media. So the responsibility for developing an ethics of distributed citizenship has to start with the users of those networks. We now know for certain that we can't trust Facebook or the NSA to look out for us. Instead, we have to look out for ourselves and each other. This is not an argument for self-censorship, or that we should internalize the work of our own surveillance, but rather that we rethink our interactions on these networks as not personal or self-directed communication, but rather as *distributed* communication. We need to develop technologies of the selfie, as Foucault almost said. We do not only have rights to speak, share and to make ourselves and our interactions visible, but we also have responsibilities to those with whom we speak, with whom we share, and whose interactions with us we make visible in social media networks.

And third, it is distributed in *spatial* terms. Distributed citizenship is not bound to a particular state – and far less to the *city* from which the word *citizen* derives. Instead it is an aspect of a world characterized by increasing mobility, as flows of tourists, students, asylum seekers, business people and migrants intersect with flows of ideas, finance, technologies and images (Appadurai 1996, Urry 2007, Bellamy 2008). This is not to argue that the state has lost its salience. Far from it – look across Europe today, and the continued salience of the state is fundamental to situations as diverse as the Ukraine crisis, the vicissitudes of the Euro, or the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. The state is not going anywhere. But questions of ideas and property, of voice and participation, of creativity, sharing and visibility, are increasingly the domain of communicative environments which are largely under the control of enormous US media



and technology corporations. So as networks such as Facebook expand still further into further non-western, non-northern territories, then questions of voice and governance, of sharing and visibility – questions of *ethics* and distributed citizenship – will become more pressing. If citizenship, in Marshall's terms, describes the status of one who is a full member of a community, equal in terms of both the rights and the responsibilities of that community, then it does not necessarily have to be a condition restricted to nations or states.

### Intercreativity

These three aspects of distributed citizenship are each bound up with the creativity, sharing and visibility of users and uses of social media. A very useful concept here is intercreativity, as defined by World Wide Web creator Tim Berners-Lee:

We ought to be able not only to find any kind of document on the Web, but also to create any kind of document, easily. We should be able not only to follow links, but to create them between all sorts of media. We should be able not only to interact with other people, but to create with other people. *Intercreativity* is the process of making things or solving problems together. If *interactivity* is not just sitting there passively in front of a display screen, then *intercreativity* is not just sitting there in front of something 'interactive.' (Berners-Lee 1999: 182–3)

Berners-Lee identifies here the crucial element of collaborative online creativity. Intercreativity is intrinsic to social media, through their capacity to connect people who are made visible to each other through digital networks. So it ought to be central to any attempt to use social media for political or cultural activism.

We can identify four dimensions of such intercreative online activism. First, textual intercreativity, through which existing media images and narratives are reimagined and reworked into entirely new texts or into hybrid subversions of their component images. Second, tactical intercreativity, as activists develop online variations of established protest gestures and campaign tactics. Third, strategic intercreativity, which builds upon the traditions and conventions of alternative media. And fourth, network intercreativity, whose participants work to build new media network models, including those which link open source software to experimental online publishing practices. The following sections offer examples of each of these dimensions of intercreativity: textual (#Occupy), tactical (*Kony 2012*), strategic (Bitcoin) and network (diaspora\*). Each of these

examples is, of course, a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon, and this chapter is not suggesting that any of them can be reduced to the single aspect of each that is isolated here just as an example for discussion.

### **Intercreative Texts – #Occupy**

On 17 September 2011, activists began to occupy Zuccotti Park in Manhattan, under the banner of Occupy Wall Street. In a matter of weeks, this occupation became a movement that spread to hundreds of cities across the US and to scores of countries around the world. Where did #Occupy come from? The financial crisis from 2008 on and the subsequent blunted hopes for the Obama presidency were two factors in its development. They had engendered a context in which many people felt ripped off and aggrieved – Christian Fuchs’s survey of more than 420 #Occupy activists found their motivations to include opposition to injustice and inequality, financial and political corruption, and austerity policies, among other things (Fuchs 2014c: 50–61). But many of those same people had also already experienced collective mobilization around one common cause (*yes we can*) or another, and had also experienced the ways in which this could take place in and through online networks as well as physical places. And the wave of popular uprisings of early 2011, from Tunisia to Cairo’s Tahrir Square, and across Europe from Iceland to Greece to Spain offered magnetic examples (Castells 2012).

One important impetus came from the Canadian culture jamming organization Adbusters, discussed in Chapter 3. Adbusters posted a 500-word call on their website, titled ‘#OCCUPYWALLSTREET: A shift in revolutionary tactics’, on 13 July 2011. ‘Are you ready for a Tahrir moment?’ it began. ‘On Sept 17, flood into lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens, peaceful barricades and occupy Wall Street.’ It’s worth quoting at length to give something of its tone, as well as to note the call for a specific goal, right at the start of the movement:

Alright you 90,000 redeemers, rebels and radicals out there,

A worldwide shift in revolutionary tactics is underway right now that bodes well for the future. ... The beauty of this new formula, and what makes this novel tactic exciting, is its pragmatic simplicity: we talk to each other in various physical gatherings and virtual people’s assemblies ... we zero in on what our one demand will be, a demand that awakens the imagination and, if achieved, would propel us toward the radical democracy of the future ... and then we go out and seize a square of singular symbolic significance and put our asses on the line to make it happen.