Bourgeois Anarchism and Authoritarian Democracies[1]

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If we were to characterize the current era it would be as one of transition. A transition which is taking place on all levels of society, across the globe, at the same time, through many interdependent movements. While any process of such historical scope is necessarily uneven, taking place at different speeds and producing contradictory outcomes depending on the historical resources from which diverse social actors can draw, some general patterns can still be identified; most importantly, as Manuel Castells has shown, the emergence of the network as the basic form of social organization.[2] In this article, I want to look at this process by analyzing some aspects of transformation of civil society[3] and the state. I will focus on the increased capacities of individuals, working alone or in small groups, to articulate and publish their views, and to collaborate with like-minded others. Put simply, in a wide range of situations, social actors need no longer large, hierarchical structures to organize the communication through which to coordinate their activities on any scale. Rather, they can do so by networking with others on an ad-hoc basis, reflecting mutual needs, interests, and resources.

The internet is playing a crucial role in this process as an enabling infrastructure, because the open access and the low costs of producing, distributing and managing information in high quantities and at high speeds. Recently, the collaborative dimensions of the internet have moved (again) into the center of attention, under the fashionable label of web2.0, an umbrella term for a set of technologies optimized for ease-of-use of publishing and interlinking of multi-media material by individual users.[4] Many components of this emerging infrastructure have been around for as long as the internet, or at least the WorldWideWeb, existed. But as a user-friendly aggregate, they coalesced only within the last couple of years, both in terms of mass adoption and commercial technology development.[5] Today, it is easier than

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1   This article is a revised version of a talk first given at the Ars Electronica festival, September 2007 and is published under the Creative Commons license available at http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/
2   Castells, Manuel (2000-2004). *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, 3 Vols*. 2nd edition, Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK, Blackwell, see also, Stalder, Felix (2006). *Manuel Castells and the Theory of the Network Society*. Cambridge, Polity Press
3   I take civil society to be "the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values" as the *Centre for Civil Society* at the London School of Economic defines it. http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/CCS/Default.htm
4   O'Reilly, Tim (2005). *What is Web2.0?* (30.09.2005) http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html
5   Web 2.0: Meet Venture Capital. *Technology Review* (19.10.2005). http://www.technologyreview.com/Infotech/14879/ Almost all of the most well-known web2.0 platforms, such as Wikipedia, Youtube, Flickr, and most blogging companies, were founded well after the turn of the millennium.

ever for individuals, alone or in collaboration with others, to publish material, often drawing upon material published by others. And millions of people all over the world are using these possibilities as part of their everyday life. The extensive interlinking – through dynamic feeds, trackbacks, mash-ups and all sorts of meta data – is the element that makes this very different from keeping a private diary, journal or notebook. Yet, the character of the material published tends to be more personal, seemingly reflecting direct personal, rather than organizational or otherwise vetted opinion.[6] Thus, we are observing yet another step in the reconstitution of large-scale social communication, that is, of society. This takes place on all three levels which sociologists usually differentiate: individuals, groups and society.

Three limitations of my analysis are necessary to mention. First, I will only speak about the West, not only because most technologies have emerged from this cultural context, but also because these technologies are, very deliberately, flexible in terms of application and future development. This is not unusual for infrastructures.[7] Thus, it would even more inadequate than usual to adopt a techno-determinist stance and assume that technologies trigger the same social consequences across different contexts.[8] Second, on all of these three levels, new technologies and their social uses interact with vast number of factors that are are not directly dependent of them, both online and off line. In social life, there are no single causes and technologies are best viewed as interacting with path-dependent developments, rather than creating effects. Third, I will say very little about gender or other forms of social inequality that remains in this area. Empirical research shows that whereas the gap between men and women in using internet technologies in general is closing (in the US), in the areas of self-publishing the gender imbalance is relatively strong (70% men).[9]

On the level of the individual, the widespread use of new technologies extends a generally increasing individualization of society. As many observers have noticed, processes of "self-development" have become central to contemporary societies.[10] Over the last 50 years, the task of identity-building has

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6 Numerous cases have shown how easy it is to dress up corporate and strategic communication as personal and authentic in the context of web2.0.
7 See, for example, Hughes, Thomas P. (1983). *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society 1880-1930.* Baltimore, London, John Hopkins University Press
8 Smith, Merrit Roe; Marx, Leo (1994). *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism.* Cambridge, MA; London, MIT Press
9 Pew Internet and American Life Project: *A Typology of Information and Communication Technology Users.* May, 06, 2007 http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_ICT_Typology.pdf
10 Giddens, Anthony (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.* Stanford, CA,

shifted away from relatively stable, hierarchical institutions (family, workplace, church) to the individual and his or her self-selected context. In the 1960s, freedom-oriented social movements challenged a heavily bureaucratized society, rejecting its model of the "organization man"[11] and his "one dimensional" personality.[12] In effect, this amounted to, as Boltanksi and Ciapello put it, an *artistic critique* of capitalism, aimed at the "oppression (market domination, factory discipline), the massification of society, standardisation and pervasive commodification, [and vindicating] an ideal of liberation and/or of individual autonomy, singularity and authenticity."[13] By the turn of the century, this position has been firmly reintegrated into commercial mainstream as *creative industries*. They instill what cultural critic Marion von Osten calls the "creative imperative", that is the systemic demand on individuals to be creative and expressive.[14]

Through a combination of pull- and push-processes, a sizable part of the population has acquired substantial *cultural capital* (the cultural assets at one's disposal, to use Bourdieu's definition), developed a heightened desire and need to be unique, found themselves within vastly expanded fields for self-expression and embarked on a search for recognition and reputation. The old division of labor in the field of culture where a few highly, individualized cultural producers worked for a relatively undifferentiated mass of consumers, is being complemented by a new culture of prosumerism, for the want of a better term, created by people who are users and producers at the same time. The DJ selecting and mixing records in a live setting, not the writer struggling alone with the empty page, is the contemporary cultural archetype. Though, perhaps this cliché is already tired and being supplanted by the image of the blogger offering a personal take, in real time, on whatever slice of the world appears relevant to him or her. To users the new infrastructures offer ways to (re)establish their own link to the world, however they see it, be it comings and goings of their cat, Scandinavian *necro metal*, or global warming. The new technologies of self-publishing transform people who used to be spectators into participants. Sometimes, the difference between these roles is so small that it might feel insignificant, but sometimes the consequences of this shift are enormous, bringing down governments or embarrassing

Stanford University Press

11 Whyte, William H. (2002 [1956]). *The Organization Man*. University of Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press

12 Marcuse, Herbert (1964). *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston, Beacon Press

13 Boltanski, Luc; Chiapello, Ève (2002). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Paper Presented to the Conference of Europeanists, March 14-16., 2002. p.16 URL: http://www.sociologiadip.unimib.it/mastersqs/rivi/boltan.pdf [2007-07-11]

14 *Be Creative! Der Kreative Imperativ.* Exhibition at Museum für Gestaltung Zürich (30.11. 2002- 02.03 2003) , http://www.k3000.ch/becreative/

corporations. The more spectacular cases show clearly what I would argue is the case everywhere. Building links to the world is not a passive act of observing, but an active intervention into the world, not the least by validating some aspects of the world as important, that is, worthy of attention, while letting others fall out of sight. Yet, at the same time, it is also validating the person through his or her ability to establish those links, as the one capable of establishing meaning of whatever kind in a sea of noise. Yet, since this is done mainly through self-directed volunteer efforts (even if some make money) the meaning established is, first and foremost, a personal one. Thus, it's a process of co-creation of an individual identity and a world at large.

It seems plausible that this is contributing to a psychological (self)experience very different from the model still dominant where the world inside of us, our self, is far removed from the world outside of us. The Cartesian a priori "cogito ergo sum", according to which the only thing we can ultimately be certain of is our individual thinking, is less convincing a starting point than it used to be. Rather, we are entering a world of 'networked individualism' where individual self-identity – both in terms of the image one has of oneself and the image others have of one – can no longer be separated from one's position within a relational network. The notion of the networked individual is still quite underdeveloped. For Barry Wellman, who coined the term, the idea reflects simply the changing communication patterns of people, who no longer rely on a small number localized communities (workplace, home, civic association, etc) for social support, but on a much larger number of networks, increasingly geographically dispersed. Thus, people are highly individualized in terms of the combination of networks they maintain, yet their individuality evolves within and through these networks.[15] Wellman's notion remains firmly grounded within a quantitative social network analysis. If we speak about types of personalities, this needs to be complemented with more psychological notion as Kristóf Nyíri argues. To stress this difference, he uses the slightly different term of the the "network individual" which he sees as "the person reintegrated, after centuries of relative isolation induced by the printing press, into the collective thinking of society – the individual whose mind is manifestly mediated, once again, by the minds of those forming his/her smaller or larger community. This mediation is indeed manifest: its patterns can be directly read off the displays of our electronic communications devices."[16] Nyíri relates

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15 Wellman, Barry (2001). Physical Place and Cyberplace: The Rise of Personalized Networking. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research.* Vol. 25 No. 2 pp. 227-252, see also, Castells, Manuel (2001). *Internet Galaxy*. Oxford, Oxford University Press

16 Nyíri, Kristóf (2005). *The Networked Mind*. Talk given at the workshop THE MEDIATED MIND -- RETHINKING REPRESENTATION, May 27.28, 2005, The London Knowledge Lab, Institute of Education, University of London.

this to theories of the essentially social nature of cognition. Their leading proponent, Robin Dunbar, argues that the social nature of the brain extends all the way to its physiology. The disproportionate size of the human neocortex (as compared with other animals), he argues, stands in a direct relationship with the cognitive demands to life in groups with complex social relations. Thus, even on the most basic physiological level, individuals cannot be clearly separated from groups.[17] This complements notions of the essentially social process of all forms of cultural expression first expressed by Gabriel Tarde more than 100 years ago.[18] He observed that society is based on different forms of imitation, all of which make it somewhat difficult to clearly ascribe an idea to an specific individual. Even the seemingly most original innovation not only builds on, or imitates, the wider culture in which it is situated, but also gains social relevance only when it is adopted, or imitated, by many others.[19] It is perhaps no co-incidence that Tarde, after almost 100 years of near obscurity is currently being rediscovered by his own discipline.

All of this points to a subtle, but very fundamental shift in the psychological make-up of individuals, obviously not caused by the latest round of technologies, yet most likely accelerated by it. The notions of 'networked individualism', 'network individual', 'social cognition' and 'imitation' already indicate that individualization does not need to lead to atomization or some other dystopic notion of people being isolated behind their computer screens. There is not 'terminal condition'.[20] Rather they point towards forms of identity situated between the fully autonomous individual, rooted in his or her privacy, and the faceless member of a collective, whose personality is subsumed under the identity of the group. Marshall McLuhan called this (re)emerging form of identity "tribal" but the term with its colonialist undertone is more misleading than illuminating, even if it pointed into the right direction. We can do better now.

In the current wave of collaborative technologies, we can see empirically some of this new balance between individuality and networked sociality in an emerging, distinct pattern of collaboration. People appear to act neither as egoistic individuals, maximizing their resources (*homo economicus*), nor as

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URL: http://www.hunfi.hu/nyiri/Nyiri_Networked_Mind_London_2005.pdf [2007-07-11]

17 Dunbar, Robin (2003). The Social Brain: Mind, Language, and Society in Evolutionary Perspective. *Annual Review of Anthropology (October)*. Vol. 32 pp. 163-181

18 Tarde, Gabriel (1962 [1890]). *The Laws of Imitation* (trans: Elsie Clews Parsons). Gloucester, MA, P. Smith

19 For an introduction these aspects of Tarde's thinking, see Lazzarato, Maurizio (2004). European Cultural Tradition and the New Forms of Production and Circulation of Knowledge. *Multitudes: une revue trimestrielle, politique, artistique et culturelle (16 January)*.

20 Baudrillard, Jean (1988). *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Brooklyn, NY, Semiotext(e)

selfless contributors to a collective effort (*gift economy*). Rather there is something in between. Aguiton and Cardon argue that what is specific about "web2.0" is its characteristic of "weak cooperation".[21] Usually, cooperation entails people first specifying a common goal and then working towards achieving it. Specifying the common goal is often a very difficult process, requiring considerable negotiations between all involved parties before the actual work can even begin. Unless some shortcuts are introduced, be it through the market or hierarchical decision making, these processes do not scale very well. Yet, increasingly we have sometimes very large groups working together online quite productively (according to their own criteria of productivity). The reason for this seems to be that cooperation emerges after the fact, not as something planned beforehand. As already mentioned, since much of the web2.0 is self-directed volunteer work, it means people do it, first and foremost, for themselves. People publish their own works, drawing on works of others. Once these are published, and visible to others, there is a chance, just a chance, to be detected by others whose own works or thoughts complement one's own ideas in a meaningful way. Thus cooperation can begin on a low-key, ad-hoc level. Wikipedia is a good example here. The vast majority of contributors are only concerned with a very small number of articles. They may write once something on a topic they care about. In the process, some of them recognize that others care about the same, and they might interact with them on the basis of their shared, mutually-proven interest, whatever it is. Such cooperation requires minimal coordination and no planning or prior agreements.

This is weak cooperation, based on weak social ties.[22] From that, some very few people might get interested in the project as a whole, and they start working less on their own article, but more on the administration of the system. In the process, they show to other administrators that they are committed, and based on that, they might become members of the core them, where weak cooperation slowly gives way to more conventional strong, that is planned, cooperation. In this context weak and strong cooperation complement each other, but the key is that one does not need to become a member and identify with the project as a whole in order to participate. But by exposing oneself, by showing what one cares about, in one's own time and without payment, users offer themselves as trustworthy for

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21 Aguiton, Christophe; Cardon, Dominique (2007). The Strength of Weak Cooperation: An Attempt to Understand the Meaning of Web 2.0. *Communications & Strategies*. No. 65

22 The concept of "weak social ties" was developed by Mark Granovetter, who recognized that people received essential information (while looking for jobs) often from casual acquaintences (with whom they are connected by weak ties), rather than from close friends (with whom they share strong ties). Granovetter, Mark (1973). The Strength of Weak Ties. *American Journal of Sociology* (May). Vol. 78 No. 6 pp. 1360-80

collaboration.[23] Not all of them are interested in that, and the degree of collaboration varies vastly depending on the field of activity. In political blogs, collaboration, that is information sharing and interlinking, is very high. Yet, even in relatively individualistic platforms, such as the photo-sharing site Flickr, about 1 in 5 people joins some groups of shared interest, that is, uses some collaborative features offered by the site.[24]

This offers an indication that people are quite interested in cooperation and sharing of information, which is always also information about themselves, but to a degree and in a pragmatic fashion. In most cases, commitments are limited and short term, which, of course, does not mean people do not also enter commitments that are much more comprehensive and long-term, but these are rare, for very obvious, pragmatic reasons. It is perhaps particularly this form of weak cooperation that makes people comfortable to make themselves public, assuming that the "public" is limited to the groups they collaborate with and the narrow context in which they are making that information available. All of this indicates that people take the construction of their own identity, and the world, to be a task that cannot be accomplished alone, yet that the big, comprehensive solutions traditionally offered by political parties, churches, etc to this twin problem are no longer particularly attractive to the majority.[25] Rather, it is addressed through many limited, pragmatic interventions, reacting to ad-hoc opportunities and challenges with a high degree of flexibility.

If self-identity and the experience of the world is one of pragmatic fluidity and fragmentation / integration, then it seems save to assume that on a societal level, one of the effects is also the fragmentation the public sphere into sub-spheres. This is not a new process. Yet, these subspheres are becoming increasingly differentiated by internal culture and set of rules, pragmatically assembled by the people who make up these publics as the go along. Since people are inhabiting more than one of these sub spheres at the same time, and are moving between them, this does not mean the breakdown of social communication, but it nevertheless adds to the crisis of those institutions that require a traditional public sphere to function. Compared with the immediacy and authenticity these new forms of cooperation seem

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23 It is, perhaps, this need to expose one self, and the greater risk this still entails to women, that explains the gender imbalance in this area.
24 Aguiton, Christophe; Cardon, Dominique (2007)
25 This does, of course, not preclude a minority from reacting to this challenge by turning to fundamentalism. See, Castells, Manuel (2004). *The Power of Identity, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Vol. II (second edition)*. Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK, Blackwell

to offer, partly because these limited, focused associations do not need to make difficult compromises, the discourse of the public sphere, particularly around politics, seems increasingly artificial and insincere. Not the least because politicians need to make difficult compromises to gain majorities and offer overall solutions that cannot accommodate the high degree of singularity of the "mix-and-match" lifes people are living.[26] Politics, and the public sphere around it, appears as the domain of cynics. This only deepens the crisis of the public sphere, which has been analyzed for the last 40 years in terms of the commercial capture of the media and the manipulation of the discourse through professional PR.[27]
As the public sphere as the discursive, and normative, anchoring of liberal democracy is continuing to erode, people are creating their own publics in networked forms of weak and strong collaboration.

However, this does not mean that these fractured worlds cannot be integrated anymore. It's just that techniques of cross-network integration and management are neither public, discursive or democratic. The assumption of most people seems to be that much of the material they share remains within the community for which it has been produced. One could call this *bounded privacy*. This is often correct from the point of view of the users. Yet, on the level of the system providers new meta knowledge about the intimate connections of users, often not even known to users themselves, is being produced. As much interaction is mediated digital communication systems, social relationships are becoming visible to a degree unimaginable only a few years ago. However, not to everyone. In this context, the assumption of bounded privacy is as incorrect as the assumption of *reciprocal transparency*, meaning that one can see as much of others as they can see of oneself, which is the basis of the social trust enabling the weak, networked forms of cooperation.

The owners of the infrastructure know every transaction and can track the composition of society, or at least the slice dependent on their infrastructure, in real time. This visibility is strictly one way. Ordinary users have no way of accessing, or even validating, the knowledge the providers have of them and their actions. As an effect, within this new world of visibility and horizontality, new zones of invisibility and hierarchy are emerging. It is very hard to predict how and to what effect these will be used, or if we will

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26 Beck, Ulrich; Beck-Gernsheim, Elisabeth (Hrsgs.) (1994). *Riskante Freiheiten. Individualisierung in modernen Gesellschaften*. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp

27 Habermas, Jürgen (1989 [1962]). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (trans: Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence). Cambridge, MA, MIT Press; Herman, Edward; Chomsky, Noam (2002). *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York, Pantheon Books

even realize when or how this will affect us. The potential of what sociologist David Lyon calls "social sorting", that is providing highly differentiated life-opportunities to different groups in real time (automated discrimination), is very high. The numerous cases which have been documented are likely to be just the tip of the iceberg. [28]This develops in parallel with classic state surveillance which, of course, is very keen to draw upon this very valuable information. The EU, eagerly following the example of the US, has been enacting a string of new directives (e.g. data retention directive, 15.03.2006[29]) so that communication and mobility data can be readily accessed and analyzed centrally by intelligence agencies.

This contributes to a context where the dissolution of privacy for citizens (both voluntary through self-publishing and involuntary through aggregation and data retention) coincides with the growing secrecy of administrative institutions, be they private or public. In terms of the state, Saskia Sassen speaks about "the executive's privatizing its own power."[30] While this is, again, a long-term trend related to many different factors, one of them is the increasing difficulty of institutions to control information about themselves and their actions. There is, indeed, through numerous initiatives an ever greater degree of transparency, not just in terms of the amount of data available. More importantly is the real-time analysis and interpretation turning this data to politically relevant information, achieved by networked efforts of civil society, both through formal organization, such as *Transparency International*, and weak cooperation online. From the point of view of the state, there appears to be, again, an "excess of democracy" as the conservative scholar Samuel Huntington famously called the increased demands for recognition and participation voiced in the late 1960s and 1970s.[31] Today, "adversary intellectuals", to use again Huntington's term, are situated on the left and one the right, within and outside the Western discourse, and are armed with rapid publication tools. Since they do not need to address large publics (as the mass media need to), they can focus in depth on the few issues that are of special interest to them and which have the power to mobilize their particular networks. For the managers of authority, this create a lose-lose situation, which they address by retreating from the public as much as they can. Normatively,

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28 Lyon, David (ed.) (2002). *Surveillance as Social Sorting: Privacy, Risk and Automated Discrimination*. London, New York, Routledge

29 For a critical analysis, see http://www.edri.org/issues/privacy/dataretention

30 Sassen, Saskia (2006). *Territory, Authority, Rights. From Medieval to Global Assemblages*. Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, pp 179-84

31 Crozier, Michel; Huntington, Samuel P.; Watanuki, Joji (1975). *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission*. New York, New York University Press URL: http://www.trilateral.org/library/crisis_of_democracy.pdf [2007-07-10]

this is justified by stressing the demands of "security" against which the demands of civil liberties and democratic accountability are deemed to be secondary.

Expanded executive privileges, heightened blanket surveillance and state security machinery that increasingly blurs the distinction between the police and the military indicate the emergence of a new, authoritarian core of democratic states, even as the state seeks new forms of participation with citizens in other areas. In a seemingly contradictory development, authoritarianism at the core of the Western democracies is (re)emerging at the same time as the *authoritarian personality*, as analyzed by Adorno, is less dominant at the individual level.[32] The most recent symbol of such authoritarian democracies is Germany's use of Tornado fighter jets for surveying peaceful[33] protester during the G8 summit in Heiligendam (June 2007).[34] Yet, such glaring symbols are also misleading, because they point at exceptions. The relationship between the networked civil society and rise of authoritarian democracies is more intricate and contradictory. From the point of view of the state, it's not just that that transparency is can be a nuisance and new form of secrecy need to be installed. On the level of the patters of communication (which are collected by data retention, the content is discarded) there is very little difference between the new publics of civil society and the forms of organization created by actual terrorists. They have developed a mode of "open source insurgency" equally based in a mix of strong (within cells) and weak (across cells) cooperation.[35] Thus, even if the data collection would be restricted to fighting the most extreme security threads it would necessarily push deep into the new forms of civil society cooperation.

None of this, of course, is single-handedly caused by new technologies empowering individuals, but I think that these technologies are accelerating and shaping these developments in their own ways, as I have outlined them. The overall effects on the relationship between the civil society and the state decidedly mixed. The ability to meet strangers and start meaningful exchanges and cooperations is sharply expanding. We may be entering a golden age of voluntary associations, a kind of *bourgeois anarchism*. Yet, at the same time, the ability of these new publics to function as counterweight to

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32 See, Holmes, Brian (2002). *The Flexible Personality*, part I & II (Jan 05) available at http://www.nettime.org
33 From the point of view of a fighter jet, throwing stones and torching a few cars cannot be seen as acts of aggression.
34 This was widely reported in the German press and the minster of defense had to apologize yet remained in office.
35 Robb, John (2007). *Brave New War. The Next Stage of Terrorism and the End of Globalization*. New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons

political power cannot (yet?) compensate, despite hopeful incidents,[36] for the emptying out of the old public sphere. Particularly because it is the very emergence of these new publics that contributes to the growing secrecy of the state. Thus, we might end up with the flowering of free cooperation taking place within an renewed authoritarianism emerging at the core of Western democracies.

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36 Benkler, Yochai (2006). *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. Yale University Press, pp. 212-272