A Brechtian maxim: ‘Don’t start from the good old things but the bad new ones’.

(Benjamin 1998: 121)

Historical and intellectual development

The technological innovation of contemporary forms of communication has been one of the most startling developments of modern times. In living memory for many contemporary citizens is a world before the Internet, DVD players, downloading music, blog sites, multi-channel television, real-time global communication and digital cameras. Perhaps more so than any other area of our shared cultural life communications technology has changed so quickly. This then is the first media saturated society. Yet, as we shall see, it is very easy to get carried away with a sense of change and transformation. Here I shall argue that if the media landscape has indeed changed and is continuing to change, there is no need to assume that the underlining critical project in respect of the media of mass communication has entirely altered. Previous generations of critics from Walter Benjamin to Raymond Williams and from Jurgen Habermas to Bertold Brecht have sought to press for an agenda of a radically democratised communications system. The terms of this debate may have radically altered but its essential features have arguably remained the same. Here I shall argue for the critical recovery of a diverse tradition of thinking that spans both critical theory and cultural studies which remains central to the future of a more emancipated system of media power. This agenda has radical implications for the ways in which we understand our shared identities as democratic citizens and consumers of media culture more generally. In terms of the relationship between media and identity the important question remains the extent to which we are able to perceive ourselves as civic actors in an increasingly complex mediascape. To what extent then does the media of mass communications aim to foster democratic and critical identities amongst its citizens? This raises a number of interrelated questions which are crucial to the formation of contemporary identities. That is, despite the recent pluralisation of the media of mass communication, the crucial questions in respect of media remain related to questions of voice, autonomy and empowerment. Here I shall seek to investigate the extent to which questions of ownership and control, the technological development of modern media, the mix between public and private media, the commodification of
the media and the development of a genuinely citizens’ media might all be said to impact upon questions of media and identity. Here we need to ask to what extent citizens are encouraged to view the media as a means of democratic communication, and alternatively to what extent are they positioned as passive consumers of information within a centrally controlled communication system whose priorities are largely determined by the respective roles of the economic system and the state. Here we might wonder to what extent media can become a voice for civic protest, alternative perspectives and projects other than those sanctioned by the powerful and influential. In this respect then I shall investigate the role that the media of mass communication plays in respect of the development of social and cultural identities.

**Major claims and development**

*Benjamin, Brecht and Adorno*

Writing in the context of the 1930s, both Walter Benjamin and Bertold Brecht made seminal contributions to questions of media, identity and democracy. Arguably Benjamin’s great critical insight was that new mediums of communication could actually enhance the development of democratic sensibilities. The model of dialectic thinking that is offered here suggests that if capitalism sought to colonise the media to its own ends, then a more democratic system of media making should seek to release the emancipatory potential latent within new forms of communication. When Benjamin and Brecht were writing in the 1930s, the arrival of the radio, cinema and the camera seemed as pregnant with possibility as new media does today. In particular, both Benjamin and Brecht argued that it was the institution of the division of labour between the producers and the consumers of media that undermined its democratic potential. Media needs to be emancipated from a world where citizens are reduced to being passive listeners and consumers of mass-mediated messages. This they argued can only be achieved if they are able to realise their identities as cultural producers of meaning rather than being merely consumers. If much critical thought during this period could only see the media’s role in manipulation, both Brecht and Benjamin pointed towards a more democratic arrangement. The problem with fellow critical Marxist thinkers was that they overwhelmingly saw the media as the site of manipulation and control thereby unable to adequately account for how more critical forms of understanding might emerge from within the masses themselves. Crudely put, this view tended to suggest that just as the capitalist class owns and controls the large conglomerates that control the economy, then the same could also be said of the media. Hence just as capitalism seeks to run the economy according to the interests of the rich and powerful, then its media are unlikely to carry critical or alternative perspectives preferring instead to propagate views sympathetic with the status quo. However, what Benjamin and Brecht perceived was that if media technology was intrinsically authoritarian and served the interests of capitalism, how could a more democratic system emerge at some point in the future? If capitalism simply imposed a commodified, homogeneous mass culture upon the masses, then it was difficult to perceive how an alternative system of communication might emerge. Indeed, if the fear was that the ‘new consciousness industry’ had entirely saturated the critical potential of modern society, both Benjamin and Brecht suggested that this was far from the case. In criticising an increasingly capitalist-dominated and authoritarian media system, many critical thinkers had overstated the closed nature of the media and failed to acknowledge its potential for transformation.

Brecht and Benjamin perceived critical potential within the development of a genuinely mass popular culture made up of new technologies. Indeed, unlike more artistic endeavours such as painting and writing, the new media of the 1930s were not restricted to the educationally
privileged classes. Both Benjamin and Brecht were excited by the prospect of simple and seemingly easy-to-use technological forms that could potentially enable ordinary citizens to become writers as well as readers. The key to producing more democratic identities lay less in the actual media content, but more in the social relations entered into in shaping, producing and receiving media content.

For Benjamin (1973) the development of new media had shattered the hold of more traditional artistic forms. The transportability of images through time and space, the decline in ‘aura’ of high art, the endless possibilities involved in the reproduction of images and the possibilities heralded by the rise of the popular culture meant that ‘at any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer’ (Benjamin 1973: 225). In particular, Benjamin offers a key comparison between the cameraman and the painter. For Benjamin, whereas the painter offers a contemplative view of reality, the cameraman seeks (like a surgeon) to cut into it. New media forms should not be dismissed as simply imposing false consciousness, or indeed as forms of manipulation, but carry within them the seeds of a more emancipated and participatory society. This does not (as many have sought to claim) convert Benjamin into being a technological optimist. Instead, Benjamin was interested in the technological developments of the 1930s as it potentially enabled ordinary people to become authors, thereby democratising the production of culture. Here Benjamin (1978) argues that the politics of a work of art or cultural artefact is less about the ideological position of the text, but more whether it enables the oppressed to become their own authors. Benjamin was rightly suspicious of those who sought to exchange the rule of capital for the rule of well-intentioned intellectuals whatever their political sympathies. A more democratic system of communication requires new institutional arrangements and a deep questioning of processes of professionalisation and specialisation in the production of culture. In the process of converting readers into authors and consumers into citizens, Benjamin drew directly from a number of features that are evident in Brecht’s epic theatre. Cultural producers are urged to use a number of techniques to shock members of the audience into thinking for themselves. The idea of Brechtian theatre through certain ‘alienation’ effects was to stir the audience into assuming a critical, active and reflective disposition. Brechtian theatre classically did this by seeking to remind the audience that they were watching a play (thereby pointing to the artificiality of the setting), by punctuating the flow of the performance through the use of songs and other features, by making the ‘ordinary’ seem strange and by locating the ‘action’ in a field of social relationships. All these features Brecht hoped would prevent the audience from viewing works of art as mind numbing forms of mass entertainment. For Brecht and Benjamin, much bourgeois talk about art in the context of the rise of facism had a self-indulgent tone. The critical task of the present was not to worry about the preservation of ‘aura’ of the artist but to politicise and democratise art to build a more democratic society. Particularly important at this juncture is the celebrated dispute between Benjamin and Adorno on the nature of art in the context of a capitalist society.

Adorno’s (1991) writing on the culture industry sought to outline the impact of capitalism on the production of culture. As Adorno explained through a number of critical modes and essays, the effects of the capitalist mode of production upon culture were almost entirely negative. Adorno’s (1991) notion of the culture industry argued that processes of mass production were coming to dominate the cultural sphere. This lead to the dominance of instrumental forms of reason coming to administer, control and produce a superficial consumer culture. The dominant culture of capitalism of the 1930s and 1940s sought to repress all forms of conflict, heterogeneity and particularity from the cultural sphere. Here what becomes valued is the exchange of culture over the quality of culture. Mass produced culture is commodified and produces a regressive desire on the part of the audience for the same over and over again. However, despite
the critical importance of these arguments, they can seem problematic in more democratic contexts and settings. For example, Adorno’s remarks on the jazz of the 1930s describe it as trading upon easily learnt formulas and standarised procedures. If jazz might be viewed positively as erasing the boundary between high and low culture, Adorno argues that such features replace the prospect of autonomous art with the lowbrow. While Adorno’s writing is meant to provoke the reader into critical forms of reflection by pointing to the effects of the progressive commodification of culture, many have been critical of its high cultural tone and lack of democratic resonance. Often missing from these formulations, arguably evident in Benjamin, is a more ambivalent understanding of contemporary cultural technologies.

Habermas and Williams

The debate between Adorno and Benjamin was to play a part in shaping the political writing of a later generation of critical theorists and cultural thinkers, namely Jurgen Habermas and Raymond Williams. Habermas’s (1989) idea of the public sphere is a central concept in the development of social and cultural theory and media studies. Habermas’s work on the public sphere provides a historical account of the development of the crucial role played by civic spaces such as coffee houses and salons in the eighteenth century in helping to provide the context for the development of democratic ways of life. The purpose of the public sphere was to allow citizens to critically reflect upon themselves, civil society and the practices of the state. It allowed the bourgeoisie, nobles and intellectuals to meet to discuss works of literature, and then later more overtly political affairs. While recognising that questions of public discourse were restricted to an elite, Habermas argued that they had a historic critical potential. This was mainly through the establishment of the idea of justification through the use of public reason. The public sphere helped solidify the notion necessary for democracy of the importance of critical forms of engagement on public questions by citizens. It is this that helps establish the foundation of modern democratic societies. Yet the public sphere was a fragile construction, and after the rise of conglomerate capitalism, it was replaced by more overt forms of manipulation. After the 1870s, the democratic potential of the public sphere became progressively undermined as the press were run on more overtly commercial lines. The rise of the mass media in the early part of the twentieth century not only eliminated more public forms of discussion but also produced cultural texts where there was little possibility of the audience answering back. Yet contrary to Benjamin, Habermas claims that notions of ‘aura’ have not been defeated by the invention of new technological forms. The new stars of the media age are well-known personalities, celebrities and charismatic politicians. Indeed, we shall see in the next sections in respect of the debates on the society of the spectacle just how far these processes seem to have gone. Here the importance of rational dialogue had been marginalised by the dominance of mediated mass entertainment. If then Habermas builds upon Adorno’s critique of Benjamin, he also criticises Adorno for ignoring the critical potential of ordinary speech and language that could be developed in democratic contexts.

Habermas (1996) was to revise these arguments by moving away from the idea that the public use of reason had been effectively colonised by the operation of money and power. In his later work, Habermas recognises there are actually a number of competing public spheres operating on different levels. These could be global, national or local in orientation and included a number of cultural practices from the theatre, television, the press and popular music, amongst others. However, Habermas continued to argue that the possibility of getting your voice heard and participating in the public sphere were unequally distributed within society. Public opinion is predominantly shaped by powerful vested interests such as spin doctors, pollsters, media
mogels and media-trained politicians. However, many of these voices were contested by civil actors from the non-governmental sector capable depending upon the context of getting different views and perspectives onto the agenda. The public sphere is an endlessly contested domain where democratic politics is a matter of ongoing controversy. The public sphere in any democratic society needs to be able to focus on a wide range of public arenas on specific questions. Only then through energetic public discourses and civic engagement can democracy be said to become realised as a practice.

Despite Habermas’s concern to rethink his earlier work, many have noted its overly rationalistic orientation. The point of engaging in the public sphere is sometimes reduced to the cold exchange of reasons and the need to find agreement amongst a diversity of opinion. What is missing here is a critical politics of voice and learning. If we view the idea of the public sphere through a more pedagogic frame of reference, we need to consider who is empowered to speak, who is silenced and whose voices are rendered Other. Further, what does it mean to produce an ‘opinion’ and what are the limits of what can be said in public? What role do different artistic forms of expression play in this process and how does this relate to the more formal public sphere? Also how might more marginal voices and communities become empowered within media debates and on-going forms of controversy? Notably these questions never become centre stage in Habermas’s thinking. Elsewhere these concerns have been called cultural citizenship (Stevenson 2003). Here a number of scholars have begun to explore a critical politics of respect. What becomes significant at this juncture is a critical politics of voice, listening and democratic engagement. None of these concerns are adequately dealt with through a paradigm that is overly driven by the ability to reason and argue. Indeed, as we shall see, these features are more closely associated historically with the work of Raymond Williams.

Raymond Williams (1962) coined the idea of the ‘long revolution’ in the early 1960s. For Williams, liberal democratic national societies were unable to fully incorporate the creative and dialogic potential of all of its citizens. For Williams, the dominant capitalist system had sought to progressively introduce a system of communication and learning where the interests of markets and commerce were predominant. Williams (1980) witnessed first hand the rapid development of a modern consumer society built upon fantasy and magic seeking to induce citizens to construct their imaginary lives around the need to consume. The capitalist-driven societies of the 1960s witnessed the rapid development of commercial television, magazines, suburban living, privately owned motor vehicles and the logic of consumption spreading into other domains such as the political system. While this period also saw the rise of a number of more sub-cultural developments that became associated with music and new forms of radical identity-politics such as the politicisation of race and gender relations these were subordinate to new accumulation strategies introduce by the dominant capitalist system. Further this period also witnessed the partial erosion of earlier distinctions between a literary culture and a mass-produced consumer culture. In this respect, Williams was a distinctive voice given that his analysis is critical of a cultural conservatism evident on the Left and the Right that either sought to either take refuge in the superiority of literature or simply to celebrate the development of new means of communication as opening out a more liberated society. It was not that Williams was unaware of the critical potential of literature, but that, like Benjamin and Brecht before him, the rise of new media (this time television) offered new opportunities for the development of democratic criticism. Avoiding the twin logics of cultural elitism and technological optimism, Williams was mainly concerned with the development of a society based upon the principles of equality, solidarity and a shared democratic civic status. The progressive intrusion of the power of certain commercial images and brands all selling the consuming life sought to persuade ordinary people that their primary identities were those of consumers rather than citizens. It was here
that Williams began to perceive the different interests that prevail within private as opposed to
genuinely public systems of communication.

Williams’s writing is also attentive to the need to produce a society based upon the ‘com-
mon good’ where all individual citizens have the possibility of developing their own voices and
critical perspectives within a shared democratic context. This could not be a society that was
overly driven by the logic of capitalism, given its need for consumers, hierarchy and tendency
to restrict education to training for the labour market. A genuinely democratic society required
a media and education system that helped sustain a politics of voice, critique and dialogue. Such
features evidently could not be solely delivered by a democratic communicaton system, but
would require the idea of democracy to find expression within the work place, the home, the
education system and within other dominant social and cultural institutions.

Further, Williams recognised that the media of mass communication was technologically
organised in such a way that meant that most of the information that people received flowed
from the centre to the periphery. This one-way flow of information was objectionable as it
left many citizens passive in the construction of the central meanings of the media. The com-
mercial as well as the public broadcasters had all helped construct a system of communication
where the many attended to the voices, opinions and images of the few. Williams perceived
this to be a form of social and political control that a more emancipated society would need
to over come. Williams (1980: 62–3), pre-empting much current debate on alternative media,
argued that a more democratic and inclusive society required ‘not only the general “recovery”
of specifically alienated human capacities’ but also ‘the necessary institution of new and very
complex communicative capacities and relationships’. This was a critical politics that insisted
that a democratic society would require citizens who were not only following public debates,
but had also taken the extra step to become cultural producers and participants in their own
right. A democratised society required a politics of voice and the provision of complex public
spaces where citizens could potentially share their experiences, critically interrogate the status
quo and of course listen to a complex republic of voices and critical perspectives. The media
should be a place where we learn to listen, criticise and produce our own views and perspec-
tives. It was for these reasons that Williams (1980:62) thought that a democratised society
would require more complex forms of communication than existed under capitalism. If the
long revolution could be defined as the progressive development of ‘an educated culture’. then
Williams (1962: 176) rightly stressed the importance of mediated forms of communication.
As Williams recognised, the media of mass communication were important not only because of
the impact they could be said to have on our collective and personal identity, but also because
they could highlight latent critical possibilities and alternative ways of living. The media in
terms of its wider role within society was the most powerful ‘educator’ of our shared sense of
self and common culture that had yet been produced by modern society. Williams ana-
lysed modern media cultures in terms of their ability to communicate a sense of our shared
identities as consumers or citizens and its capacity to construct pedagogic and communicative
relationships.

Main criticisms

The main argument thus far has been about how to link a critical understanding of the media
of mass communication to the formation of identity in a way that is in keeping with the critical
spirit of democratic societies. These concerns then arguably go far deeper than the considera-
tion of how identity might be mobilised by particular television programmes or by the owner-
ship of new media-related technology. Notably questions of commodification, ownership and
control, technology and the wider purpose of the media are all at stake here. Here I wish to more critically evaluate some of these arguments.

Adorno does make some important criticisms of the work of Benjamin and Brecht. As Richard Wolin (1994) notes, Adorno was worried that the implications of the position outlined by Benjamin and Brecht is that art and culture are potentially reduced to a form of propaganda. Whereas for Adorno, art has a potentially utopian role to play the extent to which it can resist dominant forms of instrumental reason. Further, Adorno was concerned about what happens in Benjamin’s and Brecht’s analysis to works of art that are labelled politically unprogressive. Adorno then clearly worried about the political effect of arguments such as those of Benjamin and Brecht for autonomous art. Indeed, if Benjamin’s and Brecht’s arguments are pushed to their logical conclusion, we may end up with a cultural sphere where citizens are active producers but mainly see themselves as consumers producing commodified products. This is perhaps to push the argument further than Adorno intended, but is certainly in keeping with the spirit of his criticism. Benjamin in particular overestimates the power of technology to empower a new generation of cultural producers, perhaps underestimating its potential to act as a form of manipulation. In this respect, Adorno points to the ways in which new technologies such as film are connected to the power of the culture industry that reduces art to the narrow margins of profit and loss. Yet in retrospect, while these are important correctives to the argumentative flow of Brecht and Benjamin, it is the seeds of their criticism we can see coming to fruition in later democratically orientated theorists. Undoubtedly Benjamin and Brecht invested too much in the democratic possibilities of media technology, and yet the link that is made here between identity and alternative forms of media production are crucial. As Enzensberger (1970) argues, Adorno’s position could well persuade critical thinkers to take refuge in an arts and crafts style movement rather than seeking to democratise the flow of communication. Adorno’s argument is criticised for inadequately appreciating the complexity of technological forms and simply viewing them as commodities. Further, becoming overly concerned with an ‘art for art’s sake’ disposition would fail to politicise the production of art and culture more generally. For Enzensberger, radical attempts to democratise the production of media and culture requires civic activists to get their hands dirty and produce alternative cultural forms rather than simply becoming resentful of the ways in which new technological forms are undermining older media. A democratic and indeed socialist strategy in respect of the media is not simply emancipation by technology, but would require the construction of new learning possibilities. This can only be utilised by ordinary members of the public turning new media to civic purposes. This would require a media that did not so much flow from centre to periphery but empowered citizens to produce less authoritarian media structures that developed new networks of communication.

Further, Williams (1989) remains connected to the critical project formulated by Benjamin and Brecht focusing upon both how the critical potential of new media had yet to be realised in the present and how a new generation of radical dramatists (such as Ken Loach and Dennis Potter) were seeking to radicalise television through what he called a ‘realist’ structure of feeling. Williams argued that, like Brecht, this is less naivety about dramatic modes of representation but more an attitude towards the world that promotes a political viewpoint, and offers the possibility of agency and civic momentum. Like Benjamin and Brecht, Williams was concerned to promote a democratic politics of voice that lapsed neither into cultural pessimism nor technological optimism. An active and vibrant public sphere depends upon a civic realm built less upon indifference, but upon the creation of an active and participatory citizenship.

Williams’s politics then were shaped by a broader Left project to democratise systems of public service broadcasting and of course develop a strong civic sphere where the state might be expected to fund alternative artistic and creative ventures without necessarily making a profit.
In this respect, Williams was never dismissive of new technological inventions, always seeing within them possibilities for more complex communicative relations and for democratic criticism. In particular, Williams like many on the New Left was particularly keen to democratise the idea of public service broadcasting. Notably the idea of a public service broadcaster was not exclusive to the British with many other democratically inclined citizens seeking to make similar cultural provision within their own societies. What Williams and others liked about the BBC (and later Channel 4) was that it was not dominated by commercial concerns and had historically sought to promote an agenda that was dedicated to ‘serious’ culture and quality forms of information while encouraging citizens to participate within democratic debates and national forms of identification.

However, since the 1960s there had been a number of key cultural transformations that might be said to have changed the dimensions of the long revolution. If the good society is a society built upon the development of critical and educated perspectives by its citizens, then such features have been overtaken by a number of developments. On the one hand, the development of the Internet and associated media technologies have helped foster a communicative society unlike any seen before. The prospect of masses of people producing their own critical perspectives and engagements is a real possibility in a mass computer society. This, as much democratic criticism has recognised, offers real critical potential for the culture and society of our own times. Also Williams’s dream of the educated and participatory society was an overwhelmingly national political vision and would need to be reconstituted in a more global age. The development of global forms of communication increasingly enhance the recognition of a diversity of ways in which national publics are connected to an emergent planetary society. As we shall see, this shared sense of global interconnection has arguably reconfigured the domain of radical politics. Further, the increasing penetration of the market into everyday life, class polarisation, the increasing commercialisation of broadcasting and the development of a conservative agenda within education has served to push more critical and democratic questions off the agenda. While these are all key transformations, I shall argue that Williams’s central argument that sought to connect the development of communications with the potential development of an educated democracy are still valid. However, while Williams more keenly recognises the threat of commercial media than Habermas (this is certainly true of his more recent writing), neither perhaps give enough recognition to the powerful interconnections between media, technology and the power of capital to commodify communications.

Notably, relative decline of public forms of media and the rapid development of new media technologies that are mostly commercially driven has lead many to return to the writing of Guy Debord. In Debord’s original formation, just as workers are separated from the products of their labour through capitalist social relations, so images take upon an autonomous appearance that have little connection with everyday life. The masses consume dramatic images of human misery and suffering that increasingly take on the appearance of unreality. In this respect, the spectacle is not the effect of technology but is the product of a centralised capitalist society that institutes an ‘essentially one-way flow of information’ (Debord 1994: 19). Capitalist domination is built upon alienation as people learn to recognise their needs and desires through the images and commodities offered by the dominant system. Needs and desires then are not arrived at autonomously but through a society of affluence where people are driven to consume images and commodities built upon ‘the ceaseless manufacture of pseudo-needs’ (ibid.: 33). The society of the spectacle has its roots in the economy and represents the further penetration of capitalism into the psyche of modern citizens. This is not the society of being but of endless cycles of having. Notably, however, some forms of critical theory and Marxism have been complicit with the dominance of the spectacle through the imposition of similarly authoritarian modes
of struggle and rule. For Debord, if the alienation effect of the spectacle is to be defeated, then the subjugated would need to revolt against their imposed passivity and ‘purely contemplative role’ (ibid.: 87). Alienation can only be countered by entering into social and political struggle that has rejected alienated forms of life. This demands a ‘theory of praxis entering into two-way communication with practical struggles’ (ibid.: 89).

The other way in which the spectacle dominates the lives of modern citizens is through the elimination of historical knowledge. If the rise of capitalism eclipsed the dominance of cyclical time of the medieval world, then it did so by instituting irreversible time. For Debord, this involves ideas of progress that not only came along with capitalist modernity and calculable time necessary for the disciplining of labour and the production of commodities, but also spectacular time. Spectacular time prevents the development of historical knowledge as it organises information as dramatic events through the media that are then quickly displaced and forgotten. Similarly, Fredrick Jameson (1991) has argued that commodity capitalism has instituted a society of the timeless present. The emergence of the consumer society has fostered a culture of pastiche, nostalgia and schizophrenia. The mimicry of other styles and the end-less recycling of cultural commodities ends with the blurring of distinct cultural periods and the production of cultural material that seems to float free of specific contexts. Here Jameson notes, for example, that cult films such as Star Wars are actually nostalgia films given that they unconsciously recycle the science fiction films of the 1930s. For Jameson, however, it is not clear that radical art and social movements can resist the schizophrenia of the present and produce a sense of historical narrative and perspective required for a more emancipated society. Indeed, what has become problematic of the high modernism represented by artists such as Brecht is that they have become canonised by the mainstream. Brecht and other modernist artists are no longer radical, given their status as classics or as part of university curriculums. Further, other radical artistic forms which have arisen as sub-cultural forms have quickly become commodified and incorporated into the cycles of fashion and consumerism. However, arguably Jameson (1991: 97) too quickly dismisses the culturally contested and fractured nature of civil society and the role of social movements and new artistic forms in recovering a more ethical and political agenda. As Williams (1962: 10) suggested in the 1960s ‘the democratic revolution is still at a very early stage’. Indeed, Debord himself argued that such features could only be resisted once ‘dialogue has taken up arms to impose its own conditions upon the world’ (1994: 154).

However, the development of spectacular capitalism has major implication for any attempt to rethink ideas of the public sphere, and in turn the relationship between media and the formation of democratic identities. For Douglas Kellner (2003), updating Debord’s original reflections, in the society of the spectacle fashion, glamour models, celebrities and icons become increasingly important. Culture becomes dominated by the power of certain images and brands. Society’s central feature is the dominance of a new form of technocapitalism whereby capital accumulation, the knowledge revolution and new technology have combined to produce a new kind of society. The culture of the spectacle instigates a new form of domination of mass distraction, profit and the continuing expansion of social and cultural domains that fall under its sway from politics to sport and from music to the news media. However, Kellner seeks to expand Debord’s original ideas by distinguishing between different kinds of media spectacle. These would include the megaspectacle (large-scale media events attracting mass audiences such as the war on terror or the funeral of Princess Diana), interactive spectacles (this involves different levels of audience participation such as eviction night on Big Brother) and more overtly political spectacles such as elections that are increasingly run as sensational media events only serving to drain them of any more substantial ethical criteria.
Henry Giroux (2006) has argued that while these features offer a more detailed analysis than Debord’s own, these reflections need to be extended even further in the context of the war on terror. Here the attack on the Twin Towers was explicitly designed to shock. The events of 9/11 impress a new relationship between the power of the image and global politics. This new form of spectacle is quite different to the spectacles of fascism and consumerism that Debord (1988: 8) had previously labelled the concentrated and integrated spectacle. For Giroux, fear and terror have become the central components of the spectacle in a post-9/11 world. The war on terror politics explicitly adopts the language and metaphors of war. The society of the spectacle now involves not only the economy and the state but also the considerable power of the media and the rise of political fundamentalism. For Giroux, where Debord was mainly concerned with the dominance of consumer capitalism, in the context of the war on terror: ‘the spectacle of terrorism affirms politics (of war, life, sacrifice, and death) over the aesthetics of commodification through an appeal to the real over the simulacrum’ (Giroux 2006: 49). Giroux’s central point is that control is less exercised through the promise of ‘the good life’ through consumption than it is through fear. It is then through fear of terrorism, the Other, Muslims, asylum seekers, the urban poor and others who would seemingly threaten our way of life that the erosion of the civic domain is legitimated. Nation-states have been able to exploit the spectacle of terrorism through new legislation that curtails the rights of citizens while subjecting them to increasing amounts of surveillance and control. The spectacle of terror reproduces a war against an ill-defined enemy and perhaps just as importantly against democracy and civic freedoms. Further, fundamentalist groups have exploited the politics of the spectacle using images and video technology to promote representations of suicide bombers, violent deaths and representations of abuse and torture. Just as the media utilises the spectacle in the search for higher ratings, so terrorist organisations use similar devices to attract potential supporters.

Similarly, Jean Baudrillard (2002) argues that the idea of the spectacle in the context of 9/11 evokes the memory of many disaster films and symbolises the fragility of the American empire. The so-called network society has actually managed to impose ‘a single world order’ and yet this has created its own forms of resistance and seeds of its own destruction (Baudrillard 2002: 12). However, the politics of war and fear are more part of Debord’s original reflections than many seem to be aware. For Debord, the society of the spectacle is likely to produce terrorism as an alternative form of spectacular domination. Terrorism was likely to flourish as the dominant could be judged ‘by its enemies rather than by its results’ (Debord 1998: 24). Nevertheless both Giroux and Debord are in agreement that the spectacle can only be substantially challenged through the recovery of more democratic modes of dialogue. As we shall see, it has been new media’s capacity to potentially encourage more democratic and dialogic forms of communication that has so excited media scholars. As Giroux notes, the idea of a homogeneous mass audience of the spectacle (which is also reminiscent of Adorno’s writing) gives a false impression of the diverse forms of popular culture and resistance available within a global media age. If the politics of the spectacle has indeed enabled authoritarian states to attempt to gain control over public life while continuing to induce citizens to desire a commodified life of ease and consumption, more democratic possibilities are also available. The combination of the seduction of glittering commodities and a fear of the Other may have provided new ways of undermining democratic forms of life, but there continue to exist other radical democratic possibilities. However, an open question at this point would need to explore the extent to which new forms of media promote the commodified life and associated cultures of fear, and to what extent modern electronic cultures give expression to more dissenting and overtly critical ways of life. To what extent can new forms of radical art and democratic practice be said to provide an alternative to the dominant culture of the capitalist spectacle?
Future developments: democracy, media and civic identity

When Williams formulated the idea of the long revolution in the 1960s, he was convinced that the learning and critical society could only emerge out of the agency of the labour movement. However, the 1980s was to see the arrival of a revived aggressive form of capitalism (or neoliberalism) that was hostile to organised labour and sought to remake society in more market-friendly terms including the lowering of taxes, the shrinking of the social state, privatisation and the increasing global mobility of capital. It was the labour movement in alliance with other creative social movements including environmentalism, feminism and the peace movement that Williams had hoped would radically democratise the rule of capital. However, if some of these movements have made real gains, there is little point denying that since the 1980s that society has become increasingly competitive, unequal and consumerist in orientation. Neoliberalism has waged a war on democracy by eroding civil rights and yet more crucially shut down alternative democratic spaces that might have previously existed within the national media or within education. Both the media and education to this end have become increasingly integrated into the economy, progressively surrendering their independence while being subjected to political forms of control driven by privatisation, commercial forms of programming and, as we have seen, the politics of fear.

However, there have been a number of other perhaps more hopeful cultural transformations that alter this pessimistic picture. The sociologist Manuel Castells (2009) has argued at some length that modern information societies are driven by cosmopolitan elites and computer-generated networks. Yet if computer networks and capital are global, then people are local. Castells argues that one of the fastest growing forms of popular resistance in the information age is the defence of the local against more global flows. Here Castells argues in this respect that one of the major contradictions of the network society is between the ‘space of flows’ (the control of space organised at a distance) and the attempt to recover the ‘space of places’ (the attempt to defend the integrity of place). The contrast between these two different spatial logics represents a fundamental fault line in the new information driven societies where knowledge is increasingly central to the circuits of capital. In new knowledge-driven societies, universities, levels of education, the customisation of products, market segmentation and levels of technology amongst other features have become increasingly central to the organisation of the economy. The knowledge society is driven by the need of the economy for ‘useful’ knowledge. The state in the informational world has lost much of its power, increasingly putting pressure on the provision of welfare while becoming the active manager of global processes it cannot control. If democratic forms of politics face a challenge in respect of the triumph of neoliberalism and the decreasing power of the state, it is also threatened by the rise of fundamentalism. In this context, Castells suggests that new democratic pressures are likely to emerge from below as locals seek to regain control over space. Of course there are dangers that the return to the local could become a form of local retrenchment and enhance an increasing fear of outsiders. Yet an important feature of the new politics of social movements is the attempt to reconnect the local to more global concerns. Hence the new emphasis upon the local is not necessarily a form of retrenchment but actually an attempt to reconnect local spaces to more critical and global understandings.

The attempt to defend the local in the context of increasing levels of global awareness characterises a number of campaigns from the arms trade to environmentalism and from fair trade to the development of organic food provision. As Alberto Melucci (1996) argues, the ability of social movements to open new public spaces, re-interpret dominant discourses and suggest alternative frameworks are the central features determining their success or failure. The development of new forms of interconnection through the Internet, argues Melucci, has radically
multiplied the number of communities and networks to which we can belong. This potentially weakens the grip of an older set of coordinates in respect of the construction of identity allowing for the development of new possibilities. As Kahn and Kellner (2004) argue, the emergence of Internet subcultures has significantly redefined social networking, blogs and other new media forums as places of learning, democracy and struggle. This has given rise to a new politics that can be less accurately described as localisation but as a form of globalisation from below that crucially links the local and the global. It is then the ability to act locally while maintaining a link to global concerns and developments that best describe the new politics of social movements. The interconnection of locally based social movements and global communications networks has allowed for the emergence of globally orientated local identities and agencies. Through developments in new media and social movements, what emerges are new possibilities for democratised social and cultural relationships. Crucially important in this context has been the rise of what has been called the blogosphere, where literally millions of people across the world are taking the opportunity to become cultural producers. Obviously only a small proportion of these pages will be connected to social movements and yet they potentially radically alter the possibilities for critical politics.

The development of the blogosphere is significant given its potential to allow for public forms of communication, the content of which is not directly controlled by powerful media organisations. If old media was centralised and hierarchical in the way that they organised the production of meaning, then new media forms such as blog sites offer the possibility of more horizontal structures that allow for two-way forms of communication. Blog sites make space not only for the development of the voice of particular cultural producers, but also for the posting of alternative opinions and perspectives. If more traditional media disallow the communicative practice of answering back (other than through carefully managed letters pages or other means), then new media forms suggest the emergence of more dialogic and democratic relationships. However, we need to be careful in steering clear of the argument that new technology simply makes the media more democratic. The argument that democratic engagement is the effect of certain technologies is obviously deeply misleading. It is equally troublesome to assume that technologies themselves do not have certain properties that more easily lend themselves to certain political positions rather than others. It is this aspect of the argument taken up by Brecht and Benjamin that I wish to argue has radical implications for the development of more democratic and engaged subjectivities. Indeed, if some of Brecht’s and Benjamin’s critics were worried that they simply assumed that new media technologies were of themselves democratising, then there is no need to reproduce these arguments now.

Further, if we consider the history of social movements, we discover a long history that sought to develop ‘alternative’ forms of communication. Perhaps not surprisingly, emancipatory movements in the past have tried to blur the boundaries between professional journalism and the audience. Many radical publications have sought to encourage participants within particular social movements not only to develop a more civic sense of self, but also to become actively involved through the publication of an alternative press in shaping the aims, objectives and horizons of social movements. While of course many alternative movements have remained connected to more authoritarian modes of politics and communication, others have sought to link communicative and aesthetic questions to the construction of a more active public sphere. As John H. Downing (2001) argues, in this respect there are historically two different models of alternative media. This would include a Marxist–Leninist model that seeks to transmit the views of an alternative social elite and a self-management tradition mainly concerned with a more democratic future built upon popular forms of communication and political participation. There is a recognition evident within all of the writers under review that radical politics itself can easily...
become trapped within new forms of manipulation and authoritarianism. Notably it was the self-management tradition that Raymond Williams sought to defend within his writing on media and communications and wider social movements. It is also the self-management tradition that sits most comfortably with the idea of an active and participatory public sphere. Here the radical democratic demand is not merely to imagine a different future, but also to begin, where possible, to practise the future more emancipated society in the present. Further, as Downing recognises, communication cannot be limited to ‘rational’ speech but would need to include a wide number of aesthetic practices including dance, theatre, music, performance art and other features. Even before the rise of the Internet, radical social movements had a long history of experimenting with alternative forms of communication. However, many of these publications and aesthetic experiences were unlikely to attract very large audiences. Many radical publications simply failed due to poor circulation and high start-up costs to find large audiences outside of a small circle of committed activists. What then is exciting about the Internet and blogging is that potentially the audiences are greater as distribution is now not necessarily restricted to a few outlets. The starting of a radical newspaper or television network is mostly restricted to the networks of the rich and powerful and yet anyone with access to the Internet can set up a blog site.

This has caused a considerable amount of debate amongst media scholars discussing the potential rise of the citizen journalist. Here the argument is that mobile phones, digital cameras and access to the Internet potentially allows ordinary citizens to become campaigners writing their own material and discussing their own views. Yet many have argued that despite the more accessible nature of the Internet, most of these sites are read by relatively few people (although we cannot always be sure about this) and that most of the communication that goes on within social movements is in maintaining their own in-group solidarity rather than in conversing with a wide range of citizens. In other words, media as Castells (2009) recognises, continues to be dominated by television and not interactive forms. Despite the explosion of new media it is still mainstream television networks that have the most influence in shaping the opinions, perspectives and understandings of the majority and this is likely to remain the case for the foreseeable future. In addition, Castells (2009: 51) adds that timeless time continues to dominate the consciousness of most citizens despite the new possibilities for resistant identities in the network age. Timeless time is the time of the now and the immediate (and I would add ‘the spectacle’) that seems to be dominant. Contemporary televisual global culture is constructed through the dominance of 24-hour news, the culture of celebrity, advertisements and quickly forgotten fashions. The challenge for radical movements is not only to connect with local identities and spaces that are under threat from global corporations but also to recover historical memory. In the mediadominated society, many citizens have become disconnected from a complex understanding of their own histories and radical traditions and it is these understandings that radical movements arguably need to reinvent and rediscover.

What is perhaps missing from the analysis of those such as Castells and Melucci who have sought to outline the radical possibilities of new forms of communication is an emphasis upon commodification. As Adorno (1991), Debord (1994) and Jameson (1998) might recognise, technologies of communication are not only pieces of technology but are themselves commodities. The culture of computers, iPods, flat-screen televisions and, of course, mobile phones are themselves marketed, branded and advertised commodities. If technologies are far from neutral in terms of the effect that they have in shaping certain kinds of conversations we might have, they have also been converted into ‘must have’ commodities. Further, it is a matter of exploration as to whether these new forms of communication actually enhance the capacity of the civil sphere for dialogue and learning or whether they simply commodify the realm of everyday life. The complexity of these problems can be seen if we look at two recent social movements.
The Make Poverty History campaign came to the fore in 2005 and was utilised by a number of development charities such as Oxfam to promote ideas of global solidarity and press the governing structures of global finance into action to reduce global poverty. In order to mobilise support amongst a wider public, Make Poverty History tried to create a visible form of politics by gaining the support of well-known campaigning celebrities such as Bob Geldoff and rock band U2’s lead singer Bono. The campaign actively encouraged ordinary people to buy fashionable white bands and to text or email the government to end global poverty. In the UK, the BBC ran a series of programmes on global poverty under the strap line ‘Africa Lives on the BBC’ and during the summer broadcast the high-profile Live 8 concert that included Pink Floyd, Madonna and Coldplay. The use of new media and music was deliberately utilised in order to gain support amongst young people. In terms of wider questions of pedagogy, the campaign failed to raise critical awareness about a number of questions in respect of global poverty. There was little historical context or indeed any mention of colonial histories or more exploitative social conditions that have played a role in creating the conditions of global poverty. Further, social movements were not offered media space to develop alternative perspectives and more critical understandings of ‘development’. Instead, much of the media focused upon Western forms of generosity and a number of dominant images that gave the impression that the ending of global poverty was a matter of lifestyle choice rather than political contestation. Despite the role of new media and some leading development organisations, the Make Poverty History campaign (with some notable exceptions) was more about the politics of the spectacle than it was of developing a critical and a radical politics. The media content of the campaign in this respect failed to develop a critical cultural politics only further impressing dominant ideas about Western superiority and African underdevelopment. This example should serve as a warning that the presence of new media does not necessarily develop more civic and democratic identities, but can actually lead to their cancellation.

Alternatively, we might consider the case of the Transition Movement. The Transition Movement is a complex network organisation whose primary aim might be described as the development of a web-like structure seeking to prepare localities for a post-oil world. In pursuing these ends, the Transition Movement has a relatively flat organisational structural that is mainly driven by the enthusiasm of local members. It is different from other prominent environmental groups such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace as it is less centrally organised and is not as concerned to attract the attention of the media through symbolic protest. However, the Transition Movement is distinctive in that it has the aim of becoming a mass movement of ordinary citizens – the central aim being to promote local forms of resilience in terms of the local growing of food and promotion of low carbon lifestyles. The Transition Movement like other so-called ‘new’ social movements is less motivated by the distribution of wealth than a politics orientated around questions such as the quality of life, participation and life style. Further, the Transition Movement is extremely web-literate, making use of new media such as web and blog sites, discussion boards and of course YouTube. Much of this material is for the dissemination of information both internal and external to local groups. However, the example of the Transition Movement also points to the use of other media. Local groups regularly organise film nights to get local people interested in their activities and target local media such as radio, television and the press. In this respect, much media criticism could be said to be overstating the role of new media in the formation of oppositional and critical identities. However, it is true to say the Transition Movement is heavily reliant upon easily accessible new media. The use of blog sites and other forms of new media do indeed point to a more dialogic structure than might be said to be available to more traditional movements. The Transition Movement is a good example of a movement that is both global and local at the same time. Perhaps these brief examples should
caution those who seek to make sweeping assumptions about the role of new media in the formation of resistant identities, and yet it is clear that new communicative forms cannot simply be dismissed as commodified forms but carry with them a set of democratic possibilities.

As we have seen, the relationship between the media and formation of collective cultural and personal identity is complex. Here I have sought to demonstrate the historically shifting nature of these arguments, and maintain that the media theory produced during different periods (albeit in a modified form) continues to be important to the ways in which we understand these relationships today. Undoubtedly, contemporary media has become increasingly driven by commercial imperatives seeking to promote the dominant culture of the spectacle and thereby commodifying increasing areas of social and cultural life. As I have argued, this overwhelmingly serves to drive out more democratic spaces as large media conglomerates and corporations increasingly serve to dominate socially organised communicative relations. Further, in the context of the ‘war on terror’, media is actively involved in the promotion of fear and the undermining of a shared civic culture based upon liberal freedoms. Yet before this analysis is pushed too far, more democratic and resistant identities through the development of the Internet have been handed new possibilities to develop alternative meanings and critical perspectives. More careful and detailed work needs to be done in this area so that we are able to carefully trace through the kind of complex pedagogic relations that are emerging in this area. Social movements through the use of new media (and other forms of communication) have a potentially transformative role to play in remaking more critical identities in the context of a modern culture that is increasingly being shaped by modern capitalism. Finally, I would argue that the new work on the Internet and social movements should seek to become connected to an earlier radical agenda that sought to argue for a democratised public sphere. Cultural institutions such as the BBC are far from being relics of the past but still, even in the age of the Internet, provide a widely trusted and still mostly (although this is changing) uncommodified zone that is accountable to members of the public and democratically elected politicians. In this respect, Williams’s idea of the long revolution is far from over but needs to be expanded to include the radical possibilities of the present.

Given the impact of neoliberalism in creating increasingly unequal, competitive and commodified societies, public broadcasters have a special responsibility to give opportunities to give voice to marginalised members of the public. That this is not happening to the degree that it might suggests that public service media is less concerned with serving the public than it is with competing with its commercial rivals, satisfying the rituals of parliamentary democracy and of following established rules of professional conduct. If in the 1960s Williams perceived a new generation of working-class voices making themselves heard through new forms of cultural production, today such optimism would be misplaced. Indeed, the bodies of working-class people are often featured on reality television exhibiting criminal behaviour, excessive consumption and ‘vulgar’ forms of popular taste. These normalising images are less based upon the politics of voice and complexity than the politics of class distinction and spectacle. A popular politics of voice and democracy in relation to mediated forms is dependent upon wider social and cultural structures and can never be considered simply to be the effect of new media forms. Yet I have also cautioned against simply dismissing new media as being just another commodity as it is still capable of radically democratising (often in surprising ways) our shared public spheres. The open question here is: how is the struggle for a more democratic media system likely to be effected by the arrival of new Internet and other technologies? This is not only a matter for theoretical debate, but also for careful analysis and empirical research in the future. While the dominant media system is likely to remain in tension for a number of years to come, what remains to be seen is whether the identity frames it seeks to foster are democratically oriented based upon a culture of voice and critical engagement or will the politics of the spectacle become even further
entrenched within the media system. These crucial questions will keep alive a discussion which we have seen has a long, contested and complex history.

References