CHAPTER 9

Symptoms of Hyperdemocracy (II): The Media

The cognitive dimension of democracy involves both the production and the distribution of knowledge. The previous chapter addressed the production of knowledge by science and expertise, its relationship to democracy, and trends in the development of that relationship which I have labeled hyperdemocracy. In this chapter, I will focus on changes in the means of distribution and exchange of knowledge, otherwise known as the media.¹

However, the distinction of production and distribution should not be taken to have more than an expository ground, otherwise we are in danger of begging some important questions. Only in the circumstance of the lone scientist whose discovery is then propagated to the world does the distinction arise unambiguously, and even this is an idealization in that the lone scientist is generally not entirely alone, and certainly is never without the assistance of precursors. Science is always in part a social enterprise, and is in practice more so as it becomes more complex. More generally, we do not need the theory of communicative rationality to know that rationality has a social aspect. Even if it is only as interior dialogue, we inextricably associate rationality with argument. Deliberative democrats have normally understood deliberation as social and not privately ratiocinative.² Most important, we should not beg the question against the view that the Internet has made possible the full democratization of knowledge, so that its production and distribution become identical.

Leaving this possibility open in principle (I will address its empirical plausibility later), we nevertheless cannot fail to notice that an aspect of modernization, and of the cognitive dimension of democracy (as expressed

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by the theory of cognitive mobilization), is change in the nature of the media of communication, the social institution for the distribution and exchange of information and knowledge. The theory of hyperdemocracy takes a distinctive view of this change, and its future trajectory, distinct both from the progressivist supposition that the change is a cumulative and beneficial one, and distinct also from the critical view that media development contributes to a distortion of democracy that can be rectified by certain reforms.

I will address the topic of information distribution and the media under two headings. In section 9.1, I will look at the relationship of the media to the ideal of objectivity, looking first at some theoretical arguments and then at the trajectory of this relationship in the case of the United States. My claim will be that a “rise of objectivity” in the media has been succeeded by a “crisis of objectivity.” In section 9.2, I will turn to the case of the Internet, and particularly what I will call the “postmillennial media” of web 2.0 and its user-generated content. The pun is intended, for the question will be whether the advent of web 2.0 does indeed mark the millennium so far as the achievement of democracy is concerned, by finally democratizing the production of knowledge.

9.1 The Rise and Fall of Media Objectivity

A starting point for a discussion of the media is to clarify what we mean by the term. John Thompson advises us not to take literally the meaning of the word. For if we think of “the media of communication” as nothing but a collection of conduits or channels for the transmission of information, we are likely to go badly wrong by thinking that the only relationship the media can have to the objectivity of information is in terms of the accuracy of transmission, or in the jargon of communications theory, the “signal to noise ratio.” Instead, Thompson insists that “the use of communication media involves the creation of new forms of action and interaction in the social world, new kinds of social relationship and new ways of relating to others and to oneself.”

Indeed, there is a case, as Thompson suggests, for regarding the development of the media as a key driver of modernity itself. Mark Poster has written of the “mode of information” as an analogue of Marx’s “mode of production,” indicating a correspondingly foundational role of the media for politics, although this view, and the more conventional idea of “information society,” may err in suggesting that the centrality of the media is a new development. Democratization is centrally linked with the development of the media, as indicated by the connection of democracy with freedom of speech and of the press. With all this in mind, we are better able to avoid