

**The Potential of Networked Solidarity:  
Communication at the End of the Long Twentieth Century**

Prof Gina Neff

Oxford Internet Institute

University of Oxford

To appear in

*Trump & the Media*, Pablo J. Boczkowski and Zizi Papacharissi, eds. MIT Press, 2018.

**Abstract**

This chapter argues that the concerns of propaganda, voice, and democracy that characterized the rise of communication and media studies as disciplines were anchored in a set of twentieth-century liberal ideals that presumed the key role that information plays in people's lives. This chapter argues that media and communication scholars need to update their theories for the twenty-first century. Both the election of Trump and the 'Brexit' referendum in the UK are case studies how twentieth century ideas about information, media and democracy are no longer sufficient to anchor contemporary media and communication scholarship. This chapter suggests a corrective by means an early twentieth century thinker who has not been used widely in media and communication, Emile Durkheim. By reintroducing the metaphor of organic and mechanical solidarity, this chapter argues that empathy and social cohesion might be alternates for intellectual anchors for our field for the future.

*Keywords:* theory, sociology, culture, Durkheim, Trump, Brexit, social media, social cohesion, communication, media studies

Gina Neff is Associate Professor and Senior Research Fellow at the University of Oxford's Department of Sociology and Oxford Internet Institute, where she is also the director of the D.Phil. program.

Arguably, the twentieth century ended in 2016. Historical eras do not necessarily end with the rounding of a calendar spot, but with a moment or an event that epitomizes a collective cultural or political shift. Historian Eric Hobsbawm marked the end of what he called the “long nineteenth century” with the outbreak of World War I in 1914, which ended an age of empire and set in motion the events of the century that followed. Whether or not future historians mark end of the twentieth century with the 2016 elections in the United Kingdom and the United States that brought the world Brexit and Trump, media scholars should. The elections of 2016 show how the twentieth century ideals that defined the larger project of communication and media scholarship are now misplaced. From the perspective of media scholarship, the twentieth century is finally over and now it is time for new theories to catch up to new realities in the field.

The twentieth century’s intellectual founders of journalism, media, and communication studies anchored their research on democratic ideals, seeing the potential for informed publics as leading to better civic engagement and stronger democracies. The dual forces of rapidly expanding higher education and increased attention to the role of propaganda and influence led to a golden era for U.S. media and communication research. New empirical tools supported new ways to study audiences, their attitudes, and their beliefs. Our field’s idealized subject was information seeking and rational, a choice-making citizen, who, when armed with good quality news, eagerly and willingly participated in the larger democratic project and had the inclination, and the time, to do so. As a field, scholars continued to rewrite a narrative that argued the strong case for the centrality of scholarship: media make good citizens and good citizens make democracy.

Internet research, my corner of the field, also fell victim to the optimism of media scholarship in the long twentieth century. In the first twenty years of the World Wide Web researchers asked if the internet was making people more isolated, were we listening only to like-minded others, could the internet be free for participation, and what roles would news editors and other cultural mediators play. Fundamentally, internet scholars repeated an assumption about information and democracy that grounded media and communication studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century—namely, more information could spark more, and deeper, democratic engagement with civic life.

The project of the field of media and communication has always been about meaning making and connection. But while the field focused on the institutions that made, or supported, democracy, the fabric of many social institutions, not just that of the media, faded. Companies broke the tacit agreements for loyalty to their employees. Membership in unions and social organizations that cut across the lines of race, class, and gender dwindled. The middle class lost the economic security that it had won after World War II. As Hobsbawm phrased this slow social unravelling,

The cultural revolution of the later twentieth century can thus be understood as the triumph of the individual over society, or rather, the breaking of the threads which in the past had woven human beings into social textures. For such textures had consisted not only of the actual relations between human beings and their forms of organization but also of the general models of such relations and the expected patterns of people's behaviour towards each other; their roles were prescribed, though not always written (Hobsbawm, 1994 p. 334).

Hobsbawm describes both a cultural and social transition, in which the logic of markets wins over social solidarity. The social institutions that support Americans in their daily well-being weakened and fractured in this time. So too did our media. Public spheres helped to markets tear the threads of social life.

Which brings us back to Trump and the media in the twenty-first century. A focus on media as the cornerstone of democracy blinded media scholars to the powerful ways that connection and solidarity were reimagined and rewoven in the twentieth century. New media intersect but do not wholly supplant these trends, and yet the powerful cultural image of an Internet, “free as in freedom,” created the possibility and the hope for the discipline to be relevant for democracy.

Consider Facebook and other social networking sites that now connect people in unprecedented ways, provide new forms of connection, and enable rapid dissemination of information in times of political crisis and upheaval. Social media sites fundamentally reshape how we feel, not think, our way through news and shaping our response to it, creating what Zizi Papacharissi calls “affective publics.” They provide the social infrastructure that can be activated in times of political crisis. Our news is increasingly mediated by our social networks and consumed in what Pablo Boczkowski terms as brief, interrupted, and partial ways, which is the biggest transformation of consumption, reception, and circulation of news since the advent of the World Wide Web. These partialities, fragments, and affective moments result in the lack of shared and coherent narrative in how we approach news and political life. More importantly, this fractured new media landscape cannot possibly reweave the threads of “social textures” long stretched thin by free markets, and now pulled to breaking.

As news mediation shifts from professional newsrooms to Silicon Valley algorithms, we have seen the problem with media and it is us. Trust in our social connections has now supplanted trust in the sources of news, creating a teeming environment for virulent and forged news to propagate. We are living in media and, to use Neil Postman's words "amusing ourselves to death" with the affective pull of media designed to be enticing, exciting, inciting, addicting, and stimulating. These trends mean that the lines between news and entertainment are indistinguishable to readers, even if that line still matters in some newsrooms. At the same time, it slowly eats away at the capacity of another social institution—journalism—to provide the social empathy necessary for civic life.

Perhaps a corrective for this moment of declining social connection can be seen in the writings of an early twentieth century sociologist, Emile Durkheim, whose work has not been used widely in media and communication. Durkheim wrote about the shifts occurring in early industrial societies and the impact on what he termed "solidarity." In *The Division of Labor in Society* he posed a puzzle: how did modernity make individuals more loosely connected to their existing social arrangements but more tightly integrated into economic life? The "mechanical," as he termed it, or automatic solidarity of pre-industrial life was predicated on a lack of personal autonomy over who one knew, married, lived near, and on an excess of shared common values, norms and feelings. In contrast, the "organic" solidarity that emerged with industrial society depended on the expanded economic roles of the division of labor in society, a connection to a larger economy that helped give people meaning through their work, while they found themselves the same time confronted with more choice in personal "associations," like who to marry, where to live, and how to comport themselves. Compared to fellow

nineteenth century social thinkers Karl Marx and Max Weber, Durkheim is, perhaps, less known outside of sociology. But his ideas are rooted in something that feels quintessentially right for assessing the media landscape of the long twentieth century—that the modern, depersonalized social institutions like the economy and news anchored society until they no longer could. Liberal democracy rested on sets of social connections that no longer hold. Durkheim’s notion of organic solidarity was that through our positions in industrial society we could learn to see empathy and connection to one another. But the irony of late capitalism is that its most fervent supporters attacked the empathy and social connection that holds capitalism together. The free market, Hobsbawm wrote, “claimed to triumph as its nakedness and inadequacy could no longer be concealed” (1994, p 343). Capitalism, “took for granted the atmosphere in which it operated” and “had succeeded because it was not just capitalist.” (Hobsbawm 1994, p 343). In other words, Durkheim was right: without “organic solidarity,” industrial society would devolve into tribalism, traditionalism, and nationalism.

Where does that leave us now? The culture wars waging in American politics between traditional, isolationist values and pluralistic, cosmopolitan values reproduce anxieties over social solidarity raging since Durkheim’s time. Trump as a candidate expertly tapped these anxieties and amplified them with his messaging. What is missing in this moment, however, are the sources for the trust and solidarity that on which Durkheim’s notion of modernity relied. The division of labor in society can no longer save society, when it has in fact has doomed many to lives of poverty, disconnection, and mistrust. In such a society, the news is potentially one place to increase empathy for others, help provide recognition of multiple publics, and create social cohesion and solidarity at a moment when society needs these things the most.

Perhaps the long twentieth century proved that the faith that Durkheim had in the power of labor markets to provide meaning and social cohesion was misplaced. Or perhaps the unrelenting cultural and political attacks on the American working class were organic solidarity's undoing. Regardless of the reason, media scholars have work that we must do next. The powerful and positive connections that people can make online prove that to some extent society has the capacity to reweave the social connections that formed the basis of solidarity in the last century. Three Canadian communication scholars, Enda Brophy, Nicole Cohen and Greig De Peuter, have put forth the concept of "networked solidarity" as reclaiming ICT infrastructure for the goals of the benefit of labor, for the "recomposition of a disconnected, flexible, yet altogether digitally adept labor force." (2015, p 321). I would argue we could extend this concept to think of networked solidarity as the next step after mechanical and organic solidarity and as one way to conceive of the social organization that is to come, and the multiple roles that media have for helping people to establish it. Networked solidarity could be one way to reweave the connections that individuals in societies have to one another but the existing social and technical infrastructure for connection will need to be reconfigured. Will online connections guide us to trust likeminded others or help us to create empathy for those who are different from us? Will these connections and affinities reinforce politically pluralistic and classically liberal connections or will we see the reentrenchment of nationalism and the re-emergence of tribalism? These are open questions as we see the extent of media manipulation and intentional subversion of free and civic discourse online. But networked solidarity and the connections that constitute it may be the last best hope for repairing the type of solidarity that must be in place to hold contemporary societies together.

Might we imagine, together, new possibilities for the evolution of the connections and dependencies of modern societies that Durkheim pointed out? The personal connections of our social networks, supported by new media, have already created new pathways for collective action and social cohesion. Might the new rituals of incidental news consumption be used for building new types of social connections and solidarity? Or will we continue to fuel economies of outrage with our attention and clicks?

Our sense of public is shrinking and we must reinvigorate on our online conversations if we are to reweave the fabric of social solidarity. The lesson for media scholars from Trump's election is that we must challenge the outmoded liberal assumptions at the twentieth-century foundations of our field and work to identify and cultivate networked solidarity for the next century.

## **Bibliography**

- Boczkowski, P., Mitchelstein, E., & Matassi, M. (2017). Incidental News: How Young People Consume News on Social Media. Proceedings of the 50th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences.
- Brophy, E., Cohen, N. S., & de Peuter, G. (2015). Practices of Autonomous Communication. *The Routledge Companion to Labor and Media*, 315–326.
- Durkheim, E. (2014). *The division of labor in society*. Simon and Schuster.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1994). *The age of extremes: a history of the world, 1914-1991*. Pantheon Books.
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Postman, N. (2006). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. Penguin.



