**Communication Technology and Politics**

**Lent 2020-21**

**Module organiser: Dr. Sharath Srinivasan (ss919)**

**Time: 1-3pm Wednesday, starting on 27th January 2021.**

The disruptive effects of the digital age for politics are incontrovertible, yet they arise out of a longer history of the relationship between communication technology and politics. From the development of writing, the invention of the printing press to social media, information and communication technologies have played an important role in political change. This module takes a historicised approach to the relationship between communication technology and politics to understand authority, power and political contestation in a digital age. The approach avoids presentism and exceptionalising transformations in our digital age as like nothing ever before, while also not underestimating the importance of recent upheavals in changing the actors, logics and practices of politics.

There is no shortage of contemporary scholarship, popular writing and reportage on the implications of digital technologies for politics: the impact of AI and algorithmic decision-making on bureaucratic and administrative power; the use and abuse of surveillance technologies in the time of COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter; bots, trolls, ‘deep fakes’, disinformation, conspiracy and distorted democracy; the international political economy of hyper-dominant technology companies and a new data colonialism; the commodification of the public realm and ‘surveillance capitalism’; the importance of social media for protest and resistance from the ‘Arab Spring’ to Hong Kong; post-state imaginaries in an age of radical cyberlibertarians … the list goes on. The module, however, only has seven weeks. So, it takes a step back and examines these currents alongside their historical antecedents organised around key selected themes in politics: the relationship between technology and politics; states and bureaucratic authority; colonialism, empire and race; security and surveillance; democracy and publics; capitalism and extraction; protest and movement.

All along, we are taking up the essential question of politics, Lenin’s “Who? Whom?” (who has power over whom?) and using a rich heritage of scholarship that has examined changes in when, for whom and how political power has historically manifested in and through information and communication technologies to situate our enquiry into changes in our digital age.

Learning Goals:

This course will explore current debates about the impact of digital technology on domestic and international politics and political economy. It will introduce students to a historicised understanding of the relationship between communication technology and politics through diverse disciplinary and empirical perspectives. It will develop foundations to critically interrogate current scholarship and public debate on digital technologies from these historical and analytical vantage points. The course will introduce students to empirical material from across the world and encourage students to expand their understanding through independent research and reading.

The course gives a strong emphasis to debate and critical discussion of texts in a spirit of openness, equality and constructive engagement. Students must devote considerable time and energy to read the assigned material in a careful and critical fashion, and make informedcontributions in seminar discussions.

1. **Communication technology and politics**

What is technology? What counts as ‘communication technology’ and why are they important to politics? Does technology drive political change or do politics drive technological change? What is the history of that relationship? Why are these questions important in a digital age? Does the digital represent a radical break with preceding communication technology, or a continuation of these earlier developments? This session introduces some of the overarching questions concerning the relationship between technology and politics, which will help us establish the major axes on which the contemporary assessments of digital technology and politics turn.

*Currents*

Helbing, D. *et al*. (2017). [Will Democracy Survive Big Data and Artificial Intelligence?](https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/will-democracy-survive-big-data-and-artificial-intelligence/) *Scientific American*

Bartlett, J. (2018). [How AI could kill off democracy](https://www.newstatesman.com/science-tech/technology/2018/08/how-ai-could-kill-democracy-0). *New Statesman.*

Eby, M. (2020). [The Lost History of Socialism’s DIY Computer](https://jacobinmag.com/2020/08/computer-yugoslavia-galaksija-voja-antonic) *Jacobin.*

*Antecedents*

Innis, H. (1951). *The Bias of Communication*. University of Toronto Press. pp. 33-60.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. MIT press. Introduction ‘The Media is the Message’.

Postman, N. (1998). “[Five Things we Need to Know About Technological Change](https://web.cs.ucdavis.edu/~rogaway/classes/188/materials/postman.pdf)”. Talk delivered in Denver Colorado March 28, 1998.

Winner, L. (1980). “[Do artifacts have politics](https://www-jstor-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/stable/20024652?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents)?” *Daedalus* *109*(1), 121-136.

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Beniger, J. R. (1986). *The control revolution: Technological and economic origins of the information society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Introduction, pp. 1-27 ([Online](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=acls;idno=heb01127) through the Cambridge University library).

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Barber, B. (1999). [Three Scenarios for the Future of Technology and Strong Democracy](https://www-jstor-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/stable/2658245?sid=primo&origin=crossref&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents). *Political Science Quarterly* 113(4), 573-589

Wilhelm, A. G. (2000). [*Democracy in the digital age: Challenges to political life in cyberspace*](https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/reader.action?docID=166225). Psychology Press. Introduction and Chapter 1 ‘Cyberdemocracy’s “Troubled and Frothy Surface”’

Runciman, D. (2017). [Political theory and real politics in the age of the internet](https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1111/jopp.12087). *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *25*(1), 3-21.

Boyd, D., & Crawford, K. (2012). [Critical questions for big data: Provocations for a cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon](https://www-tandfonline-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1080/1369118X.2012.678878). *Information, Communication & Society*, *15*(5), 662-679.

*Further*

Hughes, T. P. (1983). *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society, 1880-1930*. “Introduction” OR “Technological Momentum”.

Heidegger, M. (1954). The question concerning technology. *Technology and values: Essential readings*, *99*, 113.

Zimmerman, M. E. (1990). *Heidegger's confrontation with modernity: Technology, politics, and art*. Indiana University Press. Introduction

Derrida, J (1983). *Dissemination*. Plato’s Pharmacy.

Lemmens, P. (2011). “This system does not produce pleasure anymore”, an interview with Bernard Stiegler. *Krisis, 1*.

Latour, B. (1990). Technology is Society Made Durable. *Sociological Review,* *Monograph 38*, 103-132.

Ellul, J. (1962). The Technological Order. *Technology and Culture, Proceedings of the Encyclopaedia Britannica Conference on the Technological Order 3(4)*.

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Runciman, D. (2018). *How democracy ends*. Basic Books, esp. Ch. 3, 120-164.

McLuhan, M. (1961). *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Prologue & “The Galaxy Reconfigured”.

1. **States and bureaucratic authority**

Centralised authority, territorial governance, taxation, security and surveillance, nationalism, bureaucratic institutions, representation … it is not difficult to read the story of communication technology in histories of state formation. From the relationship between the development of writing and the formation of early states, to libertarian “post-state” projects based on blockchain technology, communication technology has evolved alongside advances in patterns of rule and changes in the distribution of power. Bureaucratic institutions, which were both enabled by and shaped changing communication technologies and information ecologies, play a particularly important role in the rise of the modern state. Yet if information scarcity and control over the means of information collection and knowledge production characterise the ascendency of the modern state, how does information abundance and networked logics of production change the logic of state authority – and the central place of states - in a digital world? Do digital technologies enhance the power of the state or on the contrary, erode it?

*Currents*

Wainwright, O. (2020). [Seasteading – A Vanity Project for the Rich or the Future of Humanity?](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/jun/24/seasteading-a-vanity-project-for-the-rich-or-the-future-of-humanity) *The Guardian*.

Chandler, S. (2018). [Bitnation, Liberland Puertopia and Other Micronations Are Gaining Independence via Crypto, but Crypto Alone May Not Be Enough](https://cointelegraph.com/news/bitnation-liberland-puertopia-and-other-micronations-are-gaining-independence-via-crypto-but-crypto-alone-may-not-be-enough). *Coin Telegraph*.

Lucas, L. & Feng, E. (2018). [Inside China’s surveillance state](https://www.ft.com/content/2182eebe-8a17-11e8-bf9e-8771d5404543). *Financial Times*. [free access to Cam students – sign in with CRS id]

*Antecedents*

Scott, J. C. (2017). *Against the grain: a deep history of the earliest states*. Yale University Press, Ch. 4.

Biggs, M. (1999). Putting the State on the Map: Cartography, Territory and European State Formation. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 41(2), 374-405.

Weber, M. (2009). *From Max Weber: essays in sociology*. Routledge. Essay VIII: “Bureaucracy”; pp. 212-216. in particular: passage on technology, speed and bureaucracy.

Bimber, B. (2003). *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1: Information and Political Change.

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Bimber, B. (2003). *Information and American Democracy: Technology in the Evolution of Political Power.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. Chapter 3: The Fourth Information Revolution and Postbureaucratic Pluralism.

Lessig, L. (2006). *Code 2.0*. Basic Books. Chapter 1: Code is Law

Mueller, M. (2010). *Networks and States: The Global Politics of Internet Governance*. Introduction.

Moore, M. (2018). *Democracy Hacked: How Technology is Destabilising Global Politics*. Oneworld. Ch. 3 States: The Russia Model, and Ch. 7 Platform Democracy.

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Dematté, P. (1999). [The Role of Writing in the Process of State Formation in Late Neolithic China](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29757429). *East and West,* *49*(1/4), 241-272.

Scott, J. C. (1998). *Seeing Like a State*. Yale University Press, USA. Introduction.

Bovens M. & Zouridis, S. (2002). [From Street-Level to System-Level Bureaucracies: How Information and Communication Technology Is Transforming Administrative Discretion and Constitutional Control.](https://search-proquest-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/docview/197174675?accountid=9851&rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo) *Public Administration Review* 62(2) pp. 174 -184.

Gagliardone, I. (2014). [New media and the developmental state in Ethiopia](https://www-jstor-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/stable/43817312?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents). *African Affairs*, *113*(451), 279-299.

Harley, J. B. (1988). Silences and Secrecy: The Hidden Agenda of Cartography in Early Modern Europe. *Imago Mundi*, 40, 57-76.

Atzori, M. (2015). [Blockchain Technology and Decentralized Governance: Is the State Still Necessary?](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2709713) SSRN

1. **Colonialism and race**

European colonialism and western imperialism were extractive projects yet not wholly or only reliant on brute force. Sandboxes for experimenting with new technologies of authority and the distinctly modern project of constructing knowledge as a means of managing power, colonialism and empire fused racial superiority with control of information and communications. The super-profits of global technology monopolies, the cross-border trade in data and racial profiling thus evoke comparisons, and they ask the question: in what ways are new digital empires being established on logics of empires past, and in what ways are they different? Is present day “digital colonialism” unipolar (US) or bi-polar (China & US) or supranational (Google, Facebook, Amazon etc)? To what extent is the extractive logic of colonialism applicable/ equivalent to current data mining practices beyond geography, as Couldry & Mejias suggest?

*Currents*

Lafrance, A. (2016). [Facebook and the New Colonialism](https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2016/02/facebook-and-the-new-colonialism/462393/?utm_source=share&utm_campaign=share). *The Atlantic*.

*Antecedents*

Cohn, B. S. (1996). *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton University Press. <https://hdl-handle-net.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/2027/heb.01826>. Introduction

Srinivasan, S., & Diepeveen, S. (2019). [Communication Technology and African Politics](https://oxfordre.com/politics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-1381). *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Politics*. Oxford University Press

McQuade, B I. (2013). [Review article: The Nineteenth Century Information Revolution and the Accomplishment of Rule: Information Infrastructures, Intelligence States, Colonial Discourses and Racial Knowledge](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0896920512458600?journalCode=crsb). *Critical Sociology* 39(5), 781-90.

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Kwet, M. (2019). [Digital colonialism: US empire and the new imperialism in the Global South](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0306396818823172?journalCode=racb). *Race & Class*, 60(4), 3-26.

Couldry, N. & Mejias U.A. (2019). [Data Colonialism: Rethinking Big Data’s Relation to the Contemporary Subject](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1527476418796632). *Television & New Media*. Vol. 20(4) 336–349

Noble, S. U. (2018). *Algorithms of oppression: How search engines reinforce racism*. NYU Press. Introduction

Benjamin, R. (2019). *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*. New York: John Wiley & Sons. Introduction

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Benjamin, R. (ed). (2019). *Captivating technology: Race, carceral technoscience, and liberatory imagination in everyday life*. Duke University Press. Introduction

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Shah, H. (2011). [*The production of modernization: Daniel Lerner, mass media, and the passing of traditional society*](https://idiscover.lib.cam.ac.uk/primo-explore/fulldisplay?docid=44CAM_ALMA51623754320003606&context=L&vid=44CAM_PROD&lang=en_US&search_scope=SCOP_CAM_ALL&adaptor=Local%20Search%20Engine&tab=cam_lib_coll&query=any,contains,The%20production%20of%20modernization:%20Daniel%20Lerner,%20mass%20media,%20and%20the%20passing%20of%20traditional%20society&offset=0). Temple University Press. Chapter 1, ‘The Rise of Modernization Theory’

Aouragh M. & Chakravartty, P. (2016). [Infrastructures of Empire: Towards a Critical Geopolitics of Media and Information Studies](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0163443716643007?journalCode=mcsa). *Media, Culture & Society* 38(4)

Larkin, B. (2008). *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria.* London: Duke University Press. Introduction and Chapter 1. [Online via Cambridge University Library](http://idiscover.lib.cam.ac.uk/primo-explore/search?query=any,contains,Signal%20and%20Noise:%20Media,%20Infrastructure,%20and%20Urban%20Culture%20in%20Nigeria&tab=default_tab&search_scope=default_scope&sortby=date&vid=44CAM_PROD&facet=frbrgroupid,include,729798960&lang=en_US&offset=0).

Purdeková, A. (2016). [Mundane Sights of Power: The History of Social Monitoring and Its Subversion in Rwanda](https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/african-studies-review/article/mundane-sights-of-power-the-history-of-social-monitoring-and-its-subversion-in-rwanda/BD12E14038033789AB510587F20ED267). *African Studies Review* 59(2): 59-86

Asseraf, A. (2019). *Electric news in colonial Algeria*. Oxford University Press, USA.

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McCoy, A. (2009). *Policing America’s Empire*. University of Wisconsin Press, USA. Introduction.

Schiller, H. (1976). Communication and Cultural Domination. *International Journal of Politics* 5(4), pp. 46-67: “The Technology of Cultural Domination”.

1. **Security and surveillance**

Informational and communication technologies, and not just instruments of force, have been central to how centralised authority and modern states have sought to sustain a monopoly over coercion. Yet their role is far more complex than brute force because of how they mix coercion with consent. Communication power enables more efficient and targeted coercion, but it also enables regimes of truth, disciplinary authority and production of political subjectivities. As the volume, variety and speed of information expands in a digital age, surveillance and security logics have arguably become *the* frame through which contemporary politics and political economy is being understood. Are we seeing the decline of modern human agency and freedom? What are the implications for models of modern politics? What theoretical model best captures the current paradigm of digital surveillance (panopticon, control society, expository society, …)?

*Currents*

Kwet, M. (2020). [The Microsoft Police State: Mass Surveillance, Facial Recognition, and the Azure Cloud](https://theintercept.com/2020/07/14/microsoft-police-state-mass-surveillance-facial-recognition/), *The Intercept*, 14 July 2020

Singer, N. and Sang-Hun, C. (2020). [As coronavirus surveillance escalates, personal privacy plummets](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/23/technology/coronavirus-surveillance-tracking-privacy.html). *The New York Times*, 23 March 2020

*Antecedents*

Orwell, G. (1949). *1984*. Harcourt.[Initial passages](https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2015/nineteen-eighty-four-by-george-orwell/)

Foucault, M. (2012). [*Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*](https://www.vlebooks.com/Vleweb/Product/Index/1946312?page=0). Vintage. Chapter 3.3: Panopticism.

Lyon, D. (1994). [*The electronic eye: The rise of surveillance society*](https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/CAM/detail.action?docID=310274). U of Minnesota Press. Ch.4 ‘[From Big Brother to the Electronic Panopticon](https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/reader.action?docID=310274&ppg=68)’, pp. 57-80.

Deleuze, G., & Joughin, M. (1995). *Negotiations, 1972-1990* (European perspectives). New York ; Chichester: Columbia University Press. pp. 174-175, 177-182.

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Best, K. (2010). “[Living in the control society: Surveillance, users and digital screen technologies](https://doi-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/10.1177%2F1367877909348536)” *International Journal of Cultural Studies*

### King, G., Pan, J., & Roberts, M. (2013). [How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression](https://gking.harvard.edu/publications/how-censorship-china-allows-government-criticism-silences-collective-expression). *American Political Science Review* 107(2).

Ansorge J. T. (2016). *Identify and Sort: How Digital Power Changed World Politics*. Oxford University Press. Introduction

Harcourt, B. (2015). *Exposed: Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age*. Harvard University Press. Introduction; Part Four, *Digital Disobedience*.

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Virilio, P. (2005). *The information bomb*. Verso. Chapter 7.

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Moore, M. (2018). *Democracy Hacked: How Technology is Destabilising Global Politics*. Oneworld. Ch. 3 States: The Russia Model, and Ch. 8 Surveillance Democracy

1. **Capitalism and extraction**

The crux of some of the biggest fears concerning our digital age is not simply the enormous accumulation of power (and wealth, but wealth here is power) in the hands of technology giants – the kind of power accumulation that previous communication technology barons, from railroad owners to telephone companies and media corporations also achieved – but the *means* of achieving it: namely, the surveillance and commodification of our everyday socio-political lives. How different is the digital age in this regard and does this difference matter?

*Currents*

Zuboff, S. (2020). ‘[You Are Now Remotely Controlled](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/24/opinion/sunday/surveillance-capitalism.html)’*The New York Times*

Climate Home News (2017). ‘[Tsunami of data’ could consume one fifth of global electricity by 2025](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/dec/11/tsunami-of-data-could-consume-fifth-global-electricity-by-2025). *The Guardian*.

Tufekci, Z. (2015). [Mark Zuckerberg, Let Me Pay for Facebook](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/04/opinion/zeynep-tufekci-mark-zuckerberg-let-me-pay-for-facebook.html). *The New York Times*

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Hobsbawm, E. (1975). *The Age of Capital*, Chapter 3: “The World Unified”, pp. 64-88.

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Fuchs, C. (2010). [Labor in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet](https://www-tandfonline-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/doi/full/10.1080/01972241003712215). *The Information Society*, *26*(3), 179-196.

Zuboff, S. (2018). *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs. Introduction

Morovoz, E. [Digital Socialism? The Calculation Debate in the Age of Big Data](https://newleftreview.org/issues/II116/articles/evgeny-morozov-digital-socialism). (2019). *The New Left Review*, v 116 May-June 2019.

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Poster, M. (2005). [Hardt & Negri’s Information Empire: A Critical Response](https://doi-org.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/10.2752/174321905778054917). *Cultural Politics: An International Journal*, 1(1), 101-118.

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Hess, M., and Coe, N. (2006). “[Making connections: Global production networks, standards, and embeddedness in the mobile-telecommunications industry](https://journals-sagepub-com.ezp.lib.cam.ac.uk/doi/abs/10.1068/a38168).” *Environment and Planning A* 38: 1205-27.

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Fuchs, C. *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*. See especially case studies.

1. **Democracy and publics**

Writing on American democracy, de Tocqueville wrote ‘[nothing but a newspaper can drop the same thought into a thousand minds at the same moment.](https://universityofcambridgecloud-my.sharepoint.com/personal/ss919_cam_ac_uk/Documents/MPhil%202020-21/Communication%20Technology%20&%20Politics/De,%20Tocqueville,%20Alexis.%20Democracy%20in%20America%20:%20Volumes%20I%20&%20II,%20The%20Floating%20Press,%202009.%20ProQuest%20Ebook%20Central,%20http:/ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/detail.action?docID=413158)’ Perhaps nothing like the internet can drop continuously an infinite variety of thoughts into millions of minds at the same moment, but make each mind feel that they are having a conversation with their world. In a fast-paced decade, the lauding of ‘liberation technologies’ during the ‘Arab Spring’ has given way to grave fears of democracy’s epochal decline in a digital age. What has gone wrong and what might hold promise? By thinking on the role of communication technologies in the two fundamental forms of modern democratic politics - representative and participatory democracy - and how digital technology shapes each of them, we consider the proposition that without rethinking the meaning of public discussion and what enables and constrains it in our digital age, democracy is indeed imperilled.

*Currents*

Pew Centre, Feb 2020. ‘[Many Tech Experts Say Digital Disruption Will Hurt Democracy](https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/wp-content/uploads/sites/9/2020/02/PI_2020.02.21_future-democracy_REPORT.pdf)’ (full report, read pp. 1-10), also [webpage walk through](https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/02/21/many-tech-experts-say-digital-disruption-will-hurt-democracy/)

Morovoz, E. (2015), [Socialize the Data Centres](https://newleftreview.org/issues/II91/articles/evgeny-morozov-socialize-the-data-centres)!, *New Left Review*.

‘The real problem with fake news....’: [Slavoj Zizek in RT’s ‘How to watch the news’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nI8z8EL1M-s&feature=emb_logo), episode 03

*Antecedents*

de Tocqueville, A. [*Democracy in America*](https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/CAM/detail.action?docID=413158), vol 1. Introduction; Ch XI Liberty of the Press in the United States; \* vol. 2. ‘[Of the Relation Between Public Associations and Newspapers](http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/detail.action?docID=413158.)’.

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1. **Protest and movement**

Arising right at the same time as a seemingly inexorable rise in surveillance, extraction and the debilitation of democratic politics in our digital age is a surge in global protest and resistance movements: from Occupy, the ‘Arab Spring’ and Hong Kong to Black Lives Matter and global climate action. Yet surveillance technologies are also feared to be defeating these modes of resistance. We return, then, to Lenin’s ‘Who? Whom?’ question and how communication technology illumines a dialectic between two dimensions of political power: the capabilities of power *over* others and the possibilities of power *with* others. Power *over* others is rarely primarily coercive. It is sustained with and through information and communication capabilities that also make possible power *with*. Similarly, exemplars of power *with* others that communicative affordances made possible were invariably sustained through, and hedged in by, the rigidities of organisational forms, economic structures, legal constraints and extant social hierarchies. The tension is age-old and needs to be understood if we are to get a grip on its configurations in a digital age.

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