PART I

A New Kind of Citizen

In June 2018, the world crossed a small milestone: 4 billion people, more than half of the world population uses the Internet regularly. The digital divide—the gap between those who have access to the Internet versus those who don't—is at all-time low, albeit it varies from region to region. In North America, over 95% of the population is online. The figure is only slightly lower in the 28 Member States of the European Union (90%), while Oceania and Latin America are near 70%. Asia and Africa, however, still lag behind, respectively with 48 and 36% of reach. On average, we spend a quarter of our day using digital media, half of this time glued to the screens of our smartphones. The Internet and with it an ever-increasing number of technologies and social media applications that use it as the backbone of their own operations have become ubiquitous.[1] Though some of us can still remember what life was like before the Internet began reshaping it at the end of the 1990s, when TV was still the major source of our home entertainment and surfing only meant riding a wave on a board; for the younger generations, especially those born at the turn of the century, to imagine, even only as a thought experiment, what their lives today would be like without it is close to an impossible task as it can be. To be *online* is, in this day and age, one of the defining elements of our daily routine and the irreplaceable marketing ally of most successful businesses. It is not by accident that the top 5

[1]Sources: Internet World Stats, 30 June 2018 (www.internetworldstats.com); Meeker 2018.

spots of *Fortune* 500's Most Valuable Companies list, once dominated by retail and oil firms, are now occupied by Internet and Software giants, such as Apple, Amazon and Google.[2] Thanks to smartphones, portable computers, tablets, smartwatches and other similar gadgets, a galaxy of endless streams of information is always within our reach, along with an ever-growing network of fellow users. We can communicate instantly with everyone almost everywhere in the world.

In the fifty years since its first node was established—between a mainframe machine at the University of California Los Angeles and one at the Stanford Research Institute, back when the experimental computer network was still called ARPANET—the Internet[3] has, among other things, radically redefined the way in which we employ our free time, enjoy life socially and even the way in which we find love or friends; it has also changed our shopping habits and has given us new tools for research and study.[4] But has it also helped us transform the way in which we act politically as many early enthusiasts of the imminent Internet revolution had predicted?[5] In other words, in an era increasingly shaped by unprecedented advancements in communication technology, who is the citizen? What does it mean to be a citizen, that is, to be an individual who wields political power within a specific community of people? And what kind of citizens have we become? Has the technological revolution of the last fifty years really changed us for the better? Or has it in fact turned us into much weaker citizens, more consumers and rights-less bits of exploitable

[2] Shen 2018.

[3] Throughout this book, I use the term Internet rather loosely (often interchangeably with similar terms such as *Web* and *Cyberspace*) to indicate the complex communication media galaxy we use routinely in its entirety, in all its elements. However, it is important to remind the reader here that, technically speaking, the term Internet indicates a composite mix of different networks, private and public, as perfectly captured in one its early definitions: 'a diverse set of independent networks, interlinked to provide its users with the appearance of a single, uniform network […] The networks that compose the Internet share a common architecture (how the components of the networks interrelate) and software protocols (standards governing the interchange of data) that enable communication within and among the constituent networks'. National Research Council et al. 2001, 29.

[4] Navarria 2016.

[5] In what Richard Barber called *the Pangloss Scenario*, early enthusiasts of the Internet revolution imagined a future where the technology would help solve all real social problems, as though by magic. Barber 1998; see also Rheingold 1993; Grossman 1995; Negroponte 1996; and Gilder 2000.

data than indomitable agents of political change? These are some of the questions this book attempts to answer.

The main tenet of the book is that we live in the age of the networked citizen, where to be networked is the defining element of citizens' agency. By comparing three different yet similarly challenging realities—in the USA, Italy and China—of how the power of networks is used (and often exploited) to achieve particular political ends, this book aims to provide its readers with a series of critical portrayals of politics in the age of networked citizens. The book focuses on both the potential for networked citizens to enact political change from below and, more importantly, on identifying the weaknesses that increasingly make them target of exploitation and political manipulation. The three case studies discussed in Parts II–IV of this book shed some light on the key caveats hidden beneath the shiny armour of the typical networked citizen. The examples of the USA, Italy and China provide the reader with a short history of failures or evidences of how the relationship between citizens, technology and politics has changed over the years, but not always for the better, as many had hoped. More precisely, the book claims the pattern we are witnessing is, both normatively and empirically, troubling: it has all the qualities of an involution. When we look back at our early assessments of the relationship between technology and politics, we find out they were often informed by a high degree of promise and hope and perhaps even naivety. The central belief was that the marriage between citizens and the Internet would play a central role in curbing the exploitative power of elites, meanwhile lay down the foundations for a better and more equal society, one in which hubris could never thrive again. In the mid-1990s, for instance, it was still possible to describe the Internet or Cyberspace,[6] as it was then often referred to, as 'the new home of Mind', a non-physical space free from any form of sovereign power,

[6]Cyberspace is a neologism invented by the science-fiction writer William Gibson and popularised in his 1984 novel Neuromancer. The word itself indicates a space which is *navigable*. It derives from the Greek term *kyber* which means *to navigate*. According to the original definition appeared in Gibson's celebrated science-fiction novel, Cyberspace is a 'consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts'. Huberetal 1996; US Congress 1996 Gibson refers to it as 'a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system'. It is made of 'unthinkable complexity'; of 'lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding'. Gibson 2016, 59; see also Dodge and Kitchin 2003.

even that of governments. The late John Perry Barlow—a former lyricist of the 1960s rock band *The Grateful Dead*, and a co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a non-profit organisation that defends issues such as free speech, privacy, innovation and consumer rights for Internet users—is perhaps the most well-known champion of this early view.

In 1996, Barlow circulated an email message among his friends and acquaintances which, paying homage to Thomas Jefferson, he titled *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. It was an impassioned response against Bill Clinton's *Communications Decency Act* (CDA), an attempt by the US administration to censor the free circulation on the Internet of any material depicting or describing 'sexual or excretory activities or organs in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards'.[7] In his text, which became quickly popular and shared widely, Barlow declared 'the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies [governments] seek to impose on us'. Cyberspace, in Barlow's view, was 'an act of nature' whose expansion, thanks to the 'collective actions' of its cybercitizens, was now unstoppable. It was an ideal place, a public sphere,[8] where no privilege or prejudice existed and where traditional sources of power (such economy, military force or station of birth) had no relevance. More importantly, it was a place where all people were equals. For these reasons, within Cyberspace, Barlow argued 'anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity'. Never one to shy away from

[7] Huber et al. 1996 SEC. 502.

[8] The 'public sphere' is a key concept for the study of politics, for, as Peter Hohendahl puts it, it provides us with 'a paradigm for analyzing historical change', while at the same time, it serves 'as a normative category for political critique' (1979, 92). Though in this book the concept is never addressed directly as part of the narrative, I refer to it several times, so it can be useful here to remind the reader of what is the meaning of the concept I am here using. In short, a first definition of the public sphere identifies it as that particular realm of life where 'private people come together' and shape into a 'public'. By engaging openly in debates over matters of public interest and by monitoring and questioning publicly the exercise of power, the members of this public sphere give shape and substance to what we commonly refer to as public opinion. A second and more elaborate definition describes the public sphere as 'a network for communicating information and points of view'. These communication streams are then 'filtered and synthesised in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions'. Habermas 1999, 27; 2001, 360.

hyperbole, Barlow wrote, addressing the governments of the world: 'We must declare our virtual selves immune to your sovereignty, even as we continue to consent to your rule over our bodies'. And going even further with his idealisation of what Cyberspace was and might become, he added lyrically: 'We will spread ourselves across the Planet so that no one can arrest our thoughts. We will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace. May it be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before'.[9]

The CDA was eventually declared unconstitutional by several US courts, lastly in 1997 by the US Supreme Court (ACLU vs. Reno)[10] and in the years that followed, many echoed, if not the tone, at least the spirit of Barlow's declaration every time the Internet seemed under treat from businesses interests or government overreach. So-called *Digital Citizens*, in those early stages, could be described as members of a group who 'consistently reject both the interventionist dogma of the left and the intolerant ideology of the right'. And 'embrace rationalism, revere civil liberties and free-market economics, and gravitate towards a moderated form of libertarianism'.[11] In its more recent incarnation, however, the cases discussed in this book highlight that the relationship between citizens, politics and networks seems to have been instrumental in steering the world towards a much bleaker path: the historical evolution depicted in the following chapters tells us a cautionary tale of the contradicting and often disrupting role networked citizens play in today's highly mediated societies; as we will see, they can be, at the same time, a force for genuinely positive social and political change, the unwitting pawns of questionable power brokers or an unpredictable destructive force in itself corroding the foundations of society from within.

To fully understand the root causes that make such relationship both complicated and challenging, this book suggests that we must rethink anew our prevailing understanding of power. The traditional view that

[9] Barlow 1996.

[10] The ACLU versus Reno refers to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) court challenging of the CDA. After the CDA was signed into Law, Barlow and his associates at the Electronic Frontier Foundation joined forces to take the issue of the CDA into a court of Law. The litigation rapidly escalated to the US Supreme Court and on 26 June 1997, the Supreme Court ruled (7–2) that the CDA was unconstitutional for it hindered freedom of speech. See Goldsmith and Wu 2006, 20–23; and also Godwin 2003.

[11] Katz 1997.

power is ultimately a product of strength, that is the strong typically prevails over the weak, must be abandoned in favour of a new framework. The ultimate aim of this book is in fact to stimulate the reader to think through the counter-intuitive perspective that within a digitally networked communication environment, power relationship between traditionally conflicting forces (e.g. state vs citizens, oligarchies vs underdogs, corporations vs consumers) is the product of what I call 'shared weakness'. That is to say, all actors (e.g. from the most powerful state to the least powerful citizen) have one weakness in common: none of them is ever in a position to exercise full control over the networked environment in which they operate. These actors can be then empowered by recognising their shared powerlessness (instead of their strength). In a digitally networked environment, power can be therefore redefined as the ability to achieve a certain goal while all the time being aware that total conquest of opponents is impossible. Rethinking power through the prism of shared weakness leads us to a much clearer understanding of the wider role citizens can play (and must play) in a networked political sphere.

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