

CHAPTER

10

Popular Culture in the 21st Century

Historical fact: people stopped being human in 1913. That was the year Henry Ford put his cars on rollers and made his workers adopt the speed of the assembly line. At first, workers rebelled. They quit in droves, unable to accustom their bodies to the new pace of the age. Since then, however, the adaptation has been passed down; we've all inherited it to some degree, so that we plug right into joysticks and remotes, to repetitive motions of a hundred kinds.

—Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*

INTRODUCTION: IN WITH THE NEW?

In the first decades of this new century, popular culture is undergoing shifts and changes that are reshaping how we experience it, where we experience it, and what our experience of it means for the ways we engage with our lives. New technologies have played a major role in this shift: we are connected to one another as never before through mobile communication devices, email, and social networking technologies; more of life is lived in front of screens both bigger (TV screens the size of rec room walls) and smaller (the near ubiquitous iPhone) than ever before; and there are new forms of popular culture coming into being as a result of new technologies—or at least the promise of new forms. Many educators, psychologists, and neurologists see a wholesale shift in thinking associated with the use of digital culture. So-called digital natives—those who have used computers since toddlerhood (many of the readers of this book!)—are believed to have different thought

patterns, even different brain structures, than those “digital immigrants” (including the authors) who were born before the widespread use of personal computers (Prensky).

It is important not to overestimate the significance of this change. A lot of what seems to be brand spanking new is simply a variation on something that has been a part of our lives before: no matter how addictive it might be, *Angry Birds* is still just a video game, and *Bridesmaids* watched on a tablet is still just a movie. But the fact that you can play such games and watch such movies whenever and wherever you want, and might do so instead of working, talking with your friends, or even getting enough sleep, might well prove to constitute genuine changes in how we experience popular culture—both signs and symptoms of larger social developments whose significance we may fully understand only decades from now.

While we’ve addressed a number of recent developments in popular culture throughout this book, in this concluding chapter we want to focus on some key issues in contemporary popular culture that capture the rapid social shifts through which we seem to be living. One danger in focusing in this way on the “new” is that it is all too easy to get things wrong by giving too much force to a particular development that might well prove to be less important in hindsight, thus misrepresenting the complex array of forces that in fact give shape to historical change. In discussing the social significance of new technologies, for instance, there is a tendency for scholars and critics to imagine that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift that will fundamentally alter how human beings live, work, and relate to one another. At the most extreme end of this euphoria over new technologies are futurists such as Ray Kurzweil, who has predicted that the “technological singularity” will be soon upon us—that is, the coming into being of a human–computer superintelligence as a result of (among other things) exponential increases in the speed of computing power. At the other end of the spectrum are critics such as Wendell Berry who suggest that our reliance on digital technology is largely driven by advertisers and that the manufacture, use, and disposal of personal computers contributes to the destruction of Earth. Countering the usual assumption that increasing digitization is the way of the future, Berry proclaims: “If the use of the computer is a new idea, then a newer idea is not to use one” (10).

While it is, of course, important to pay attention to the ways in which our activities are being reshaped by the technological devices embedded in our lives, it is just as important to keep in mind historical continuities and the persistence of older social and cultural practices, habits, and forms. Every parent who worries about the amount of time his or her kids spend in the imaginary world of video games instead of in their rooms reading should remember the fears that greeted the explosion of reading in the late 18th century. Today, we celebrate the idea of self-cultivation through reading and worry about the consequences of playing video games—a practice that seems little more than a waste of time and brain cells. Two centuries ago, however, there were “suggestions that, with all the new ‘reading societies’ springing up across what still counted as the Holy Roman Empire, a new disease, that of ‘reading addiction’ (*Lesesucht*), was arising, an ailment which was believed likely to strike impressionable young students, loose women, servants not

properly respectful of their masters, and other questionable sorts of people” (Pinkard 50). There is a great deal about popular culture in the 21st century that *is* new in ways to which we have to be alert. But we have to be alert, too, to the excitement of the perpetually new, a force whose hazy energies have been repeatedly tapped in the vocabulary of marketing to support sales of **consumer** objects and experiences.

Suggested Activity 10.1

How has technology changed your experiences and expectations? In what ways has it reshaped your interaction with popular culture? Do you think that new technology has changed your life in fundamental ways, or has it only changed the content and not the form of daily life (i.e., you might now do different things in your spare time, but the way in which your spare time is organized in relation to study/work time has stayed the same)? Finally, to what extent and in what ways do your uses of technology differ from those of your parents or grandparents?

MANY POPULAR CULTURES?

Watching TV in the mid-1980s was an easy task: click on the telly, quickly look at the offerings available on the three or four broadcast stations available (or even fewer in some countries), and voila! You were ready to ease into a few hours of *Happy Days* or *Dallas*. The next day at recess or around the water cooler at work, you could check in with friends or colleagues to see what they thought of the latest cool exploits of the Fonz or the devious shenanigans of J.R. Ewing. To a degree that wouldn't have surprised Horkheimer and Adorno (see Chapter 4), a common popular culture existed that provided a shared landscape of cultural knowledge, desires, and experiences.

Even in the midst of this common popular culture landscape, there were always alternative and underground forms of culture, too: popular culture was never as uniform and singular as some critics feared it to be. Even so, talk in the school hallways or the office lunchroom is invariably more complicated today than it once was. Instead of comparing favourite points about the past evening's shows, such discussions are as often as not occasions at which one learns about TV shows, phone apps, websites, and YouTube videos with which one hasn't yet come into contact. Cable TV has expanded the range of programs we can watch—a session in front of the TV now begins with the navigation of a menu of hundreds of viewing options. The prevalence of DVDs, on-demand video, programs and films streamed via the Web, and personal video recorders (PVRs or TVRs) has altered the temporality of viewing; many of us now watch programs when we want to, not when they are first broadcast. And we've yet to talk about all the other forms of popular culture—the availability online of an enormous range of music of every conceivable style and genre (from big corporate media conglomerates as well as smaller indie

labels), the plethora of websites where we can access information, the estimated (as of July 2015) 1.6 million iPhone apps available to play with and use, the 10 years' worth of viewing content now uploaded to YouTube, and so on. Given all these developments, in our current cultural landscape, it may make more sense to speak about the existence of *many* popular cultures as opposed to popular culture *per se*.

There remain seemingly obvious exceptions to this picture we're painting of the fragmentation of popular culture into many popular cultures. Major sporting events, such as the Olympics, the World Cup, or the Super Bowl, draw a huge number of viewers, and in doing so they bring people together on a national or even global scale through the mechanism and medium of these singular events. But even here the raw numbers suggest a different story. Super Bowl 50 (2016) was the highest-rated TV show in U.S. history, with an average audience of 120 million viewers—just over one-third of the U.S. population. This is an impressive number, but it raises the question: What were the other two-thirds of the population doing during this (supposedly) can't-miss event? According to the Nielsen ratings, the top-ranked TV program (other than sports) for the week of January 25, 2016, was *NCIS*, which had 12 million viewers, while the highest-rated cable show was *the Republican Presidential Debate* at 12.4 million viewers (the highest regularly scheduled cable show was *The O'Reilly Factor*, at only 5.5 million viewers). While both *NCIS* and *The O'Reilly Factor* produce considerable buzz on industry programs like *Entertainment Tonight* or in magazines such as *People* and *Hello!*, they each form small pieces of the large puzzle of popular culture in the 21st century—an era in which it is becoming safe to assume that most people *don't* watch the most popular TV shows or listen to the best-selling albums of the day. If one needs any further evidence of the fragmentation of popular cultural into smaller and smaller segments, consider YouTube's plans to create hundreds of new channels on its site, designed by professional writers and producers and geared to niche interests (examples include "123UnoDosTres," a channel for Latin American young adults; a channel programmed by *The Onion*; and "Smart Girls at the Party," which is being created by comedian Amy Poehler). According to Robert Kyncl, the senior executive at YouTube overseeing this development, "People went from broad to narrow and we think they will continue to go that way—spend more and more time in the niches—because now the distribution landscape allows for more narrowness" (Seabrook, "Streaming").

Does it matter that today popular culture seems to consist of a bunch of niches? And is this really a new development? There's no question that the landscape of popular culture *has* altered. However, it is questionable whether this changes or challenges in a fundamental way the points we have made in the preceding chapters about the operations of popular culture in shaping and reinforcing—or challenging—cultural, ethnic, and gender stereotypes, or the primary role played by money and profit in the production of popular culture, or the way in which we understand our bodies and our place in the communities we live in—and so on. On the one hand, the explosion of choice represented by the sheer size of the content available on TV, websites, streaming radio, and so on suggests that popular culture has in some ways become newly and genuinely democratized. On the other

hand, the choice on offer seems to be variations on what is already available. To return to the example of YouTube's new channels, for instance, there are comedy networks (e.g., Official Comedy, Comedy Shaq Network), sports channels (e.g., Kick TV for soccer, the skateboard channel RIDE, and the action-sports channel Network A), news outlets (e.g., *Slate* and the *Wall Street Journal*), and Look TV, one of many fashion and beauty channels. The genres represented by these channels are hardly under- or unrepresented on TV or online at present; at best, they seem to be slices of the existing entertainment pie rather than an expansion of popular culture into new realms that, for instance, take up the many social, political, and environmental challenges the world faces today. Indeed, it needs to be remembered that YouTube's decision to launch these new channels is connected to the company's desire to maximize its profit. The challenge for YouTube—a company purchased by Google in October 2006 for \$1.65 billion—is to get visitors to linger longer than the few minutes on average they spend during each visit to the site. The average North American spends four to five hours watching television each day. Getting them to spend more of this time on YouTube, engaged in the specific niche programming that fits their needs best, means more advertising money for the website—a lot more.

Learning to Love Céline: 21st-Century Taste

One change produced by the existence of many popular cultures is worth specific attention. As we explained in Chapter 5, one of the outcomes of the choices made in the forms of popular culture one consumes—what styles of music one listens to or clothes one wears—is distinguishing oneself from others. As Pierre Bourdieu argues, popular culture participates in a social game of distinction—a game with significant consequences, chief among them the establishment of class boundaries, or our position in social space. Our position within social hierarchies depends as much on our display of appropriate cultural tastes, manners, and behaviours as on how much money we have or our class background. In addition to highlighting the ways in which our choices about the popular culture we consume participate in shaping our social and class status, Bourdieu's theories challenge the degree of **agency** we feel in the cultural objects we consume and practices we engage in. Though it might feel as if we are articulating our greatest degree of autonomy and self-expression when we state our interest in music, films, or magazines, it is important to recognize that such choices are unconsciously motivated by social forces of distinction through which we express group belonging and status.

Distinction depends on a shared cultural landscape, one in which the choices we make about our cultural likes or dislikes can be read meaningfully by others as an expression of a move within a shared social game. What happens to the social power exerted by taste—“the basis of all that one has—people and things—and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others” (Bourdieu 45)—when we no longer have one popular culture but many, each with its own coordinates and rules of distinction? Has the fracturing of popular culture into niche interests—to whatever degree this has happened—put an end to this key social function of cultural consumption?

A preliminary answer to this question can be found in Carl Wilson's book, *Let's Talk about Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (2007). A music critic for *The Globe and Mail*, Wilson is drawn to the music of indie rock bands and experimental musicians. The task Wilson sets for himself is not just to try to understand how pop musician (and fellow Canadian) Céline Dion can be loved by so many people but to get to a place where he, too, can like (maybe even love!) her music. At the outset of the book, Wilson is clear that he doesn't like Dion. Indeed, he *loathes* her, describing her music as "bland monotony raised to a pitch of obnoxious bombast—R&B with the sex and slyness removed" (11). And he's not the only one: "As far as I knew, I had never even *met* anybody who liked Céline Dion" (11). The mystery that Wilson wants to understand is how Dion could possibly sell more than 200 million records, becoming in 2004 the best-selling female recording artist of all time.

Wilson describes *Let's Talk about Love* as "an experiment in taste" (18). In the course of providing some context to the unique pop culture environment out of which Dion emerges—Québec's *vedette* (star) culture, in which homegrown celebrities get enormous attention for being one of the 6 million francophones in the province—as well as tracking down her fans around the globe to learn just what they like about Céline, Wilson also engages in a quick survey of the philosophy of taste; that is, aesthetic theory. He is struck especially by the theories of Bourdieu, seeing them as offering particular insight into some of the reasons some people love Céline, while others can't stand the sound of her voice. "Taste is a means of distinguishing ourselves from others, the pursuit of *distinction*," Wilson writes, "and its end product is to perpetuate and reproduce the class structure" (89). But he's also well aware of the fact that "your love of hip-hop or hatred for Céline Dion is part of your cultural capital, but it only gains value in the competition for distinction if it is *legitimated* in the contexts that matter to you" (93). Wilson notes that in the case of Céline Dion, "A disproportionate part of her audience was in the lowest income bracket, under \$25,000 a year, and again in the next-lowest category" (102)—a near perfect example of the social mechanics of taste to which Bourdieu drew attention in his work. In terms of income, however, this audience "is not as far from the average white pop critic as we might have expected" (103). This is where the context of legitimation comes into play: if one's attitude to Céline was only a matter of one's paycheck, Wilson would already have been trying to sing along with Québec's famous *chanteuse*.

While Wilson might be part of the same economic class as many of Céline's fans (just like music critics, they don't tend to make very much money), his capacity to make judgments about the dominant aesthetics of this group—shaped partly by his education—is a way of defining his own life as other than "the life of subservient career, suburban lifestyle and quiet desperation we imagine befalls people like Céline Dion's white American fans, as well as fans of Billy Joel, Michael Bolton and other midlevel musicians whose names so often serve us as epithets" (103–4). A key theme in Wilson's "journey to the end of taste" is an exploration of the role he himself plays, as a rock critic, in the operations of popular culture and the distribution and legitimation of taste. He's clear that the work

of the critic is based “on the power to exclude, not just to canonize” (15). His encounters with the music of Céline Dion and the worlds inhabited by her fans cause him to doubt this role, not only because of how it helps to support class distinctions but also because of the changing landscape of popular culture itself:

What would criticism be like if it were not foremost trying to persuade people to find the same things great? If it weren't about making cases for or against things? ... It might be more frank about the two-sidedness of the aesthetic encounter, and offer something more like a tour of an aesthetic experience, a travelogue, a memoir. More and more critics, in fact, are incorporating personal narratives into their work. Perhaps this is the benefit of the explosion of cultural judgment on the Internet, where millions of thumbs turn up and down daily: by rendering their traditional job of arbitration obsolete, it frees critics to find other ways of contemplating music. (156)

Today, *everybody* has the capacity to be a critic, whether through comments written on their own blogs, critiques about books on Amazon, restaurant reviews added to Zomato.com, diatribes against dirty hotel rooms on TripAdvisor.com, and so on. The position of professional critic hasn't been eliminated altogether. But the ability for everyone to offer their own two cents about a television program on websites that anyone can access (e.g., Google Maps searches for businesses almost always come with user reviews attached), combined with a decline in the readership of magazines and newspapers—the home of professional critics—has unsettled the game of social distinction and hierarchy. At the same time, the existence of multiple subgenres and cultural niches actively cultivated by the cultural industry—like the explosion of specific YouTube channels described above or online music services (whether organized around genre—indie—or mood—melancholic indie) that allow us to select the specific stream we want to listen to—is producing a situation in which popular culture is shaped less and less by the game of distinction to which Bourdieu alerted us.

It would be a mistake to imagine that such forms of distinction have disappeared entirely. Luxury brands of all kinds (such as Swarovski, Versace, and others—the kinds of brands that one typically finds in duty-free shops in airports) still signify wealth in taste as well as wealth in dollars, and what one listens to or watches (or doesn't) shapes not just one's sense of identity but the groups to which one belongs (or doesn't). Still, when there is a growing capacity for people to engage in conspicuous consumption as a result of the growth of middle classes in the developing world and the massive extension of credit in the developed one (with consequences we will discuss later in the chapter), and when capitalism depends increasingly on profit from its consumers, the “democratization” of taste is a development that should not come as a surprise.

If the existence of many popular cultures—even a *many* surrounded by all the caveats that we have presented here—cuts the feet out from under the role of the critic, Wilson seems to be more than happy to undertake a more “pluralistic criticism” that puts “less stock in defending its choices and more in depicting its enjoyment, with all its messiness

and private soul tremors” (157). It is a form of criticism that, of necessity, has to be seen itself as “becoming democratic,” which involves

not a limp open-mindedness, but actively grappling with people and things not like me, which brings with it the perilous question of what I am like. Democracy, that dangerous, paradoxical and mostly unattempted ideal, sees that the self *is* insufficient, dependent for definition on otherness, and chooses not only to accept that but to celebrate it, to stake everything on it. Through democracy, which demands we meet strangers as equals, we perhaps become less strangers to ourselves. (151)

NEW TECHNOLOGY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Democracy—its presence or lack, its decline or enhancement—turns out to have become one of the key issues in discussions of popular culture in the 21st century. This is nowhere so true as in ongoing debates about the impact of new communications technologies and social media. On the one hand, the growing presence of cellphones (for instance) has created new connections between individuals, with information about social and political developments finding their way directly and rapidly around the world, such that citizens can immediately challenge, debate, and question choices made by governments and non-governmental agencies. Connections between individuals via new communications technologies have created communities that exist beyond borders, enabling an active exchange of information that bypasses the gate-keeping role played by daily newspapers or television news broadcasts. On the other hand, the organizations that operate social media are fewer and fewer in number, with a growing “concentration of power, especially in the hands of capital—as represented by the massive corporations that dominate stock exchanges and bourses worldwide, as well as the mobiles and telecommunications industry” (Goggin 176). (In Canada, the top three mobile network operators—Rogers Wireless, Bell Mobility, and Telus Mobility—together account for more than 90 percent of the cellphone market.) As well, the sheer number of events and developments that individuals can now follow, combined with the steady erosion of legitimacy accorded any given news agency, site, or critic, has made it difficult for political and social challenges to result in determinate action on the part of various publics. In other words, we are living through a period in which technological changes are reshaping our experience of and relation to one another politically, socially, and culturally.

The challenges posed by new technologies can be witnessed in governments’ struggles to create workable communication policies. In January 2012, Tim Uppal, then minister of state for Democratic Reform, announced that in future Canadian elections, the government would no longer penalize individuals who reported the results from eastern provinces before polls closed in the West. In the 21st century, such election blackouts are no longer feasible: people in one part of the country can easily communicate the results to others using email and social media sites. While this change was greeted positively as an

appropriate reaction to new social and technological circumstances, Bill C-30, introduced a month later by Public Safety minister Vic Toews, was criticized by members of the public from across the political spectrum. The intent of the bill was to give police and government easy access to the email of individuals in order to catch criminals—specifically (according to the government) child predators. The public backlash against this intrusion into their privacy was so fierce and direct that it led Stephen Harper’s government to set the bill aside to rework it. In yet another example of the complex power of social media, Toews himself became the object of the kind of e-intrusion that might have been generated by Bill C-30. A Twitter account, @vikileaks30, later traced to a Liberal Party staffer, sent out dozens of embarrassing tweets from Toews’s ex-wife about their divorce.

Over coming decades, the possibilities and limits produced by new technologies are likely to become an ever-present part of public debate and discussion. In what follows, we look briefly at three key recent cases that raise questions about the powers and problems of new communications technologies in the 21st century and that together provide a place from which to begin to map the increasingly complex landscape of contemporary popular culture.

Social Media and Political Change

New communications technologies and quick access to a huge range of online information open up possibilities for citizens to engage with one another and with their governments in a potentially more democratic way. The mobile phone is one technology that has been especially celebrated as a device that has the potential to contribute to social and political change by enabling ideas—especially those that stand in contrast or opposition to official news reports or government pronouncements—to spread like wildfire through a community. In January 2001, thousands of Filipinos converged at a major crossroads in Manila to protest actions of the Congress of the Philippines in relation to corruption proceedings against their president, Joseph Estrada. What brought the crowds to Epifanio de los Santos Avenue was a text message sent rapidly around: “Go 2 EDSA. Wear blk.” Such incidents, which have become ever more frequent in the age of Twitter, have led some critics to equate the revolution in information and communication technologies with the possibility of political revolution as such. For new media commentator and professor Clay Shirky,

As the communications landscape gets denser, more complex, and more participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speech, and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action. In the political arena, as the protests in Manila demonstrated, these increased freedoms can help loosely coordinated publics demand change. (28)

While such examples of “micro-coordination” have brought about significant developments in culture (everything from the mobilization of consumers through coupons sent to their phones to the creation of “flash mobs” who perform spontaneously in public spaces), as well as in politics, the enthusiasm of many pundits and scholars regarding

the impact of hardware like cellphones or social networking sites like Facebook to bring about social transformation can (and all too often does) go too far, with claims that the very presence of these new communication media produces change all on its own. Even President Estrada blamed SMS (short message service) technologies for his ultimate downfall, rather than public responses to the allegations of fraud directed at him or, indeed, his own illegal activities while leader of the Philippines. *How* citizens use their devices and apps and *what* they communicate by means of them are equally as important as the devices themselves, as is the larger historical context in which messages circulate. In contrast to Shirky's enthusiasm for technology's political possibilities, cultural critics such as Evgeny Morozov have challenged a growing belief in the kind of technological determinism that once asserted "that the Western radio informed Soviet citizens about the superior value of Western goods—and the Soviets eventually rebelled" ("Picking"). The story of the collapse of the Soviet Union is much more complex than narratives that name the presence and content of radio ads would suggest, just as political change today comes about through processes, forces, and movements, not just the devices that mediate them.

Facebook Revolution The presumed link between the communications revolution and political change became a key element of the story of the Arab Spring, the name given to a series of political confrontations between citizens and authoritarian governments in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula beginning in late 2010 (beginning with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia in December) and continuing throughout 2011. The most widely and dramatically reported of the Arab Spring uprisings took place in Egypt, culminating on February 10, 2011, with the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak after 30 years in power. The Western media's interest in the events in Egypt had much to do with the mechanics through which protests against the state were organized. "By the second day of the Egyptian uprising," writes Mona El-Ghobashy, "CNN correspondent Ben Wedeman was calling it a 'very techie revolution.' In the following days, every major news outlet framed the uprising as the work of wired, savvy twenty-somethings awakening the liberating potential of Facebook."

There's no question that Facebook played a huge role in helping youth in the country mobilize to challenge the Egyptian government. One of the most important figures in Arab Spring events was Wael Ghonim, a Google employee in the Middle East with a background in marketing and finance. In his account of the Arab Spring in Egypt, Ghonim traces his own shift from tech geek to political activist. As with many others of his generation, he writes, "I enjoyed spending long hours in front of a screen on chat programs. I built a network of virtual relations with people, most of whom I never met in person, not even once" (24). And while he believed himself immune to politics, the dire situation faced by most members of the Egyptian population—especially young people like himself—and the increasing corruption and violence of the state began to pull Ghonim into political intervention via the Web.

Prior to the 2011 revolution, Egypt was ruled by an authoritarian government that fixed elections and blunted opposition groups (the existing regime had to formally approve new opposition parties for them to be able to participate in voting). More than

half of Egyptians lived in poverty, with 12 million of the 80 million citizens having no access to shelter and 1.5 million living in cemeteries. In 2010, Egypt ranked 115th out of 139 countries on the Corruption Perception Index, was dead last in hiring transparency, and had the highest rate of newborn deaths in the world (Ghonim 165). When Nobel Peace Prize recipient Dr. Mohamed ElBaradei proposed in 2010 to run against Mubarak for the presidency of the country, Ghonim supported him by using his technical and marketing skills to create a Facebook site for ElBaradei; within three months, 100,000 people had signed up.

Ghonim's involvement with ElBaradei's camp led him to appreciate just how powerful Facebook could be in mobilizing political interest in a country in which political expression was otherwise controlled and suppressed. The Egyptian government had little sense of the significance of Internet use in their country, which had increased from 1.5 million users in 2004 to 13.6 million users in 2008, the vast majority of whom were youth and young adults (38). Ghonim found a similar lack of vision regarding the political potential of new communication technologies in the ElBaradei camp:

We constantly argued about the role of the Internet in the process of change. [Mostafa al-Nagar, ElBaradei's campaign manager] believed that the Internet was a virtual world with limited impact on reality, while I found it to be the key vehicle to bringing forth the first spark of change. The Internet is not a virtual world inhabited by avatars. It is a means of communication that offers people in the physical world a method to organize, act, and promote ideas and awareness. The Internet was going to change politics in Egypt, I wrote on Facebook and Twitter, and the 2011 elections would not be similar to those in 2005. (51)

The brutal beating and death of Khaled Mohamed Said, a young Egyptian man, by secret police on June 8, 2010, prompted Ghonim into further action. Given the number of people who were already members of ElBaradei's Facebook page, Ghonim initially considered posting images of Said's bloodied and broken body to the site. Instead, he decided to create a new page: Kullena Khaled Said ("We Are All Khaled Said"). This Facebook page would play a crucial role in the Arab Spring, quickly becoming one of the main sites for the exchange of information on the actions of the Egyptian government and a safe place where protestors could organize events rapidly and with relative anonymity. Within two minutes of the page's creation, 300 people had joined; by the end of the first day, 36,000 people had joined. At the outset, the site circulated information (videos, photos, a certificate of Said's military service) that countered propaganda circulated by the police and the official state media about the events leading to Said's death.

From the beginning, Ghonim imagined the page as a space that would help Egyptians who wanted political change to move from communicating online to taking action in the streets. The first event generated by Kullena Khaled Said was a silent protest that consisted of people arriving individually along the coastal road in Alexandria, where they would meet up and form a chain of people holding hands and facing out to sea with their back turned on Egypt. Images of hundreds of protesters lining the road, linked hand

AP Photo/Tara Todras-Whitehill.



On February 9, 2011, hundreds of thousands of people gathered in Cairo’s Tahrir Square to protest the government of President Hosni Mubarak. Two days later, Mubarak resigned.

in hand, were posted to the Web. “Such images tend to annoy security forces,” writes Ghonim. “Anything that is visually documented is evidence for the whole world to see” (79). The success of this initial peaceful gathering—made possible by the strategic use of social media—was critical to the events that would follow. On the Kullena Khaled Said Facebook page, Ghonim posted a celebratory message:

Last Friday this page was launched.... On Tuesday Mohamed sent his suggestion [for the Silent Stand] and it was announced to everyone.... On Friday more than 100,000 members had joined this page and thousands went out in Cairo and Alexandria implementing an idea that was never done before in Egypt.... So can we do just about anything or what?” (81)

The capitulation of the Tunisian regime on January 13, 2011, gave the last needed bit of inspiration for members of the page and others opposed to the Egyptian government: things could also change in Egypt. For much of the life of Kullena Khaled Said, from its origins through to Mubarak’s resignation, state officials paid little heed to the role of the Internet, and of Facebook in particular, in shaping the protests. Soon after the Silent Stand, Ghonim conducted a survey of his users and discovered that more than 70 percent of them were under 24 (84). The largest portion of the Egyptian population, as well as of its Web users, are youth; the older generation of state officials and security had very little sense of the power of Facebook as a communication tool and reacted too late to stop the developing opposition movement. Though access to the Internet was blocked for many users in advance of the important mass demonstrations on January 25, 2011, and Ghonim himself was arrested and interrogated in the days leading up to Mubarak’s resignation, the Facebook site continued to play an important role in shaping participation

in the protests, even in his absence. The details Ghonim provides in *Revolution 2.0* of the debates and discussions that took place among the ever-expanding number of members of his Facebook page (invitations to the January 25 protest reached more than 700,000 people) make it all too clear: the Egyptian revolution would not have happened as quickly and effectively as it did without social media, and may well not have happened at all. In the absence of a functioning civil society—a free and open space for debate and the exchange of ideas—Facebook and other social media became crucial spaces for Egyptians to voice their frustrations and to organize themselves to do something about it.

Given both his professional work and his experience using Facebook to generate a revolution, one might expect Ghonim to make a direct equation between technology and democracy. In his concluding remarks in *Revolution 2.0*, he appears to do just this:

Now that so many people can easily connect with one another, the world is less hospitable to authoritarian regimes. Humanity will always be cursed with power-hungry people, and the rule of law and justice will not automatically flourish in all places at all times. But thanks to modern technology, participatory democracy is becoming a reality. Governments are finding it harder and harder to keep their people isolated from one another, to censor information, and to hide corruption and issue propaganda that goes unchallenged. Slowly but surely, the weapons of mass oppression are becoming extinct. (292–293)

But while Ghonim celebrates the power of technology, he is also careful to assign it its proper role in the developments that led to the Arab Spring in Egypt. For instance, Ghonim is well aware of the digital divide within his own country. Since “reaching working-class Egyptians was not going to happen through the Internet and Facebook” (145), protestors also distributed information via SMS and printed fliers. For the revolution to happen, people would need to be willing to risk their lives in the streets. “It’s way easy to write, rant, and mobilize people using the Internet,” he writes. “The real heroes of the revolution were the people who had died and been injured” (257). And for people to be willing to risk their lives, conditions in Egypt had to have reached a level so abject that, for many, continuing on with the way things were was simply no longer an option.

For Ghonim, what distinguishes the revolution 2.0 model—revolutions enabled by social media and other new communication technologies—from its 1.0 predecessor is the wisdom of the crowd. Earlier revolutions were led by “charismatic leaders who were politically savvy and sometimes even military geniuses” (293). By comparison, the new model of radical political change, empowered by access to information that governments once sought to manage or control, involves the participation of *everyone*. The democratization of access to information will not on its own address corruption—the United States ranks third in Internet use but ranked 24th on Transparency International’s list (Internet World Stats, Rogers and Provost). Nor will it directly address problems of poverty or inequality. However, it can’t help but make possible more widespread challenges to political systems run for the benefit of the few at the expense of the many.

The Fate of Information

Friends who might have wanted to settle a bar bet about the name of the capital city of India or kids looking for some quick help on their homework assignments would have been surprised on January 18, 2012, to find that Wikipedia was ... gone. To draw attention to the threat posed by two legislative acts then under discussion in the U.S. House of Representatives (SOPA: Stop Online Piracy Act) and the U.S. Senate (PIPA: Protect Intellectual Property Act), Wikipedia and a number of other sites voluntarily engaged in a blackout. Had they been passed, these acts would have increased copyright provisions to such a degree that many existing information services on the Web would have been legally threatened; at the same time, they would have given the U.S. government considerable powers over the Internet, allowing the Attorney General to remove sites deemed objectionable for whatever reason and without any legal oversight. In her statement explaining the reason for the decision to black out Wikipedia, Sue Gardner, executive director of the Wikimedia Foundation, spoke of the site as

a resource that wants to be used for the benefit of the public. Readers trust Wikipedia because they know that despite its faults, Wikipedia's heart is in the right place. It's not aiming to monetize their eyeballs or make them believe some particular thing, or sell them a product. Wikipedia has no hidden agenda: it just wants to be helpful.

The blackout of Wikipedia had its desired effect—at least for the time being. Even before the blackout took place, the Obama administration issued a statement saying that it would oppose any act “that reduces freedom of expression, increases cybersecurity risk, or undermines the dynamic, innovative global Internet” (Phillips et al.).

The availability of almost instantaneous information online is one of the genuinely amazing features of the Internet. The information that the Internet provides is, however, far from innocent or trustworthy. Indeed, the almost infinite number of sites from which one can get information, in conjunction with the threat posed by the Internet to the practices of “legitimate” critics, has had two contradictory effects. In some cases, sources trusted *off* the web have become sites to which one turns *on* the web as well. For example, the websites of *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* have become places one turns to for news and opinions, in large part because of the high reputations each established before the creation of the Internet. The existence of so many sources of information, however, has led to challenges to the legitimacy of these self-same sources. During the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign, for instance, Republican hopeful Rick Santorum frequently invoked lies and fictions to motivate his followers. To give but one example, Santorum said that 10 percent of deaths in the Netherlands were from euthanasia, a fate that he further claimed was forced on many helpless patients. A *Washington Post* article that showed that this was *not* the case was greeted by a blogger supportive of Santorum as merely evidence of the questionable tactics of the “elitist” mainstream media. Similar patterns were evident in the 2016 U.S. election campaign, as the regular exposure of Republican

candidate Donald Trump's manipulation of the truth had no perceptible effect on his popularity among core supporters. In the view of writer and journalist Ian Buruma, "The public is increasingly segmented into groups of like-minded people who see their views echoed back to them in blogs, comments and tweets. There's no need to be exposed to different opinions, which are, in any case, considered to be propaganda." Even as it has given us more information, the Internet has also made the always difficult task of separating truth from fiction all the more difficult. In the 2016 U.S. election campaign, many more candidates played games with information in the same way as Santorum, with little worry about being corrected by mainstream media for their mistakes and mal-assertions.

Other developments are equally important in assessing the fate of information and knowledge in the 21st century. The fight over SOPA and PIPA raise important questions about who has access to information on the Internet, to what uses it is put, and under what conditions access is or should be provided. Wikimedia's intervention into the implementation of a potentially restrictive and invasive action by the government can't help but raise the question: If the government isn't regulating the Internet already, then who is? And to what end and for what purposes might they be involved in circulating information on the Web, including information about those who use it? In her explanation of the actions of Wikipedia, Gardner draws on ethical language to make her case: Wikipedia's heart is in the right place; it has no secret agenda; it's not involved in the market; "it just wants to be helpful." In the case of Wikipedia, these good intentions and lack of ambition to make a profit might well protect Internet users from having their search histories and record of Web visits used and abused by businesses or governments. At the same time, good intentions are far from equivalent to laws or regulations generated by and for the good of publics. While Wikipedia's heart might be in the right place, anyone who has surfed the Web knows that other providers of services and information are neither so forthcoming about their intentions nor shy about making money from Internet users.

In Wikipedia's appeal to its own ethical standards, one cannot help but hear echoes of an even more famous code of Internet conduct. Google is a company that has had an enormous impact on both the organization of and access to information on the Internet. As Daniel Soar, an editor at the *London Review of Books*, aptly puts it, Google's "ubiquitous search box has changed the way information can be got at to such an extent that ten years after most people first learned of its existence you wouldn't think of trying to find out anything without typing it into Google first" (3). The success of Google in becoming *the* site to which one turns for everyday information is such that it has played a major role in bringing about the end of such resources as the Yellow Pages (the physical version, at least) and even the venerable *Encyclopædia Britannica*, which announced in March 2012 that it was ceasing publication. Google has become so big so fast that as early as 2006, even before it had acquired YouTube and become (in 2007) the most visited website in the world, many were asking "whether Google is becoming too dominant in too many areas" (McArthur). In a recent review of books about Google, Soar lists the enormous amount and range of information to which the company now has access. The material it

makes publicly searchable—everything from its index on the Web to the texts on Google Books and videos on YouTube to images of neighbourhoods and strip malls on Google Street View is

only a small fraction of the information it actually possesses. I know that Google knows, because I've looked it up, that on 30 April 2011 at 4:33 p.m., I was at Willesden Junction station, travelling west. It knows where I was, as it knows where I am now, because like many millions of others I have an Android-powered smartphone with Google's location service turned on.... If you use its products, Google knows the content of your emails and voicemail messages ... [and] of every document you write or spreadsheet you fiddle or presentation you construct. If as many Google-enabled robotic devices get installed as Google hopes, Google may soon know the contents of your fridge, your heart rate when you're exercising, the weather outside your front door, the pattern of electricity use in your home.

Google knows or has sought to know ... your credit card numbers, your purchasing history, your date of birth, your medical history, your reading habits, your taste in music, your interest or otherwise (thanks to your searching habits) in the First Intifada or the career of Audrey Hepburn or flights to Mexico or interest-free loans, or whatever you idly speculate about at 3:45 on a Wednesday afternoon. Here's something: if you have an Android phone, Google can guess your home address, since that's where your phone tends to be at night. I don't mean that in theory some rogue Google employee could hack into your phone to find out where you sleep; I mean that Google, as a system, explicitly deduces where you live and openly logs it as "home address" in its location service, to put beside the "work address" where you spend the majority of your daytime hours. (Soar 3)

On the basis of this list alone—and there are spaces and places in our lives into which Google has asserted itself that amazingly *aren't* included even in this long list—worries about the size and power of Google are certainly justified. One of the ways in which Google has attempted to counter fears about the scope and scale of its operations is by adapting an ethical phrase as its corporate motto: "Do no evil." Whether the company has always managed to live up to this guiding mantra has come increasingly into question the larger it has grown. For instance, the company has at times complied with pressures—from sources as various as the governments of China, Germany, France, and Switzerland and the Church of Scientology—to block or limit some of the results that user searches might pull up. As Google has grown in size as a corporation (its parent company, Alphabet, was briefly in January 2016 the largest company in the world according to stock valuation), with so much liquidity that it can purchase any corporate target of interest (e.g., YouTube, online ad rival DoubleClick, etc.) while simultaneously fending off sizable lawsuits (e.g., for copyright violations in the creation of Google Library), objections to its practices and decisions have grown and multiplied (see McHugh; Palmer). The bulk of these objections fall under the category of what Google would characterize as a kind of "pragmatic censorship"—a decision to comply with limits on searches now as a way of promoting

what all tech corporations see as the long-term democratizing effect of Internet access around the world: short-term anti-democratic pain for long-term democratic gain.

Number six of Google's 10-point philosophy (see Close-Up 10.1) raises a lot of questions (to begin with, is it in fact possible to make money without hurting someone? Is

Close-Up 10.1

From “Our Philosophy: Ten Things We Know to Be True” by Google

6. You can make money without doing evil.

Google is a business. The revenue we generate is derived from offering search technology to companies and from the sale of advertising displayed on our site and on other sites across the web. Hundreds of thousands of advertisers worldwide use AdWords to promote their products; hundreds of thousands of publishers take advantage of our AdSense program to deliver ads relevant to their site content. To ensure that we're ultimately serving all our users (whether they are advertisers or not), we have a set of guiding principles for our advertising programs and practices:

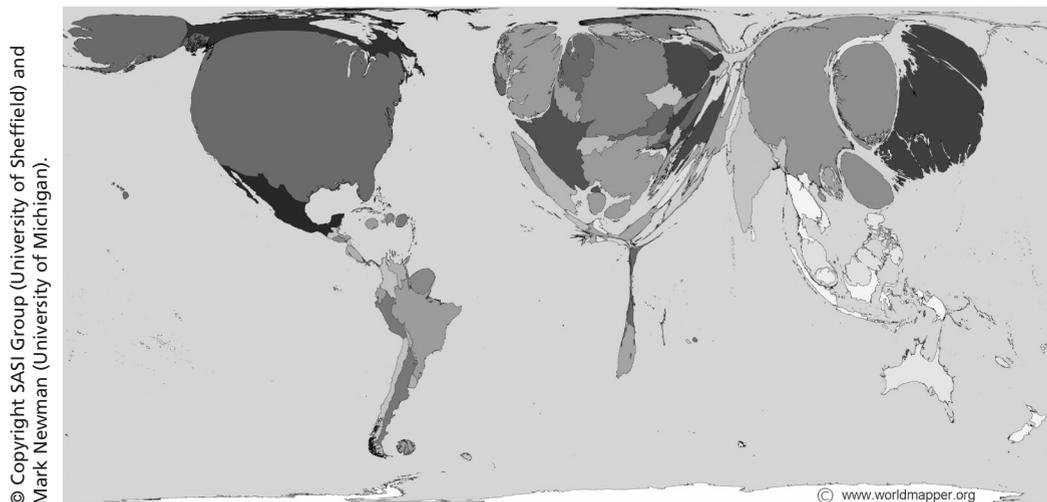
- We don't allow ads to be displayed on our results pages unless they are relevant where they are shown. And we firmly believe that ads can provide useful information if, and only if, they are relevant to what you wish to find—so it's possible that certain searches won't lead to any ads at all.
- We believe that advertising can be effective without being flashy. We don't accept pop-up advertising, which interferes with your ability to see the content you've requested. We've found that text ads that are relevant to the person reading them draw much higher clickthrough rates than ads appearing randomly. Any advertiser, whether small or large, can take advantage of this highly targeted medium.
- Advertising on Google is always clearly identified as a “Sponsored Link,” so it does not compromise the integrity of our search results. We never manipulate rankings to put our partners higher in our search results and no one can buy better PageRank. Our users trust our objectivity and no short-term gain could ever justify breaching that trust.

Google. “Ten Things We Know to Be True.” n.d. Web. 15 Sept. 2016. <<https://www.google.com/about/company/philosophy/>>.

capitalism a system that can ethically generate profit at no one's expense?). Perhaps the key thing singled out in Google's claim not to do evil has to do with the objectivity of its rankings and the integrity of its search results. This is the service for which Google is most well known and the function that has made it such an integral service on the Internet: a portal through which users can find what they are looking for with a high degree of confidence and reliability. But good intentions notwithstanding, is Google's path to knowledge really that straightforward? As much as the Internet presents itself to us as a virtual candy land of information—a space in which we are able to prowl around in search of news, reviews, recipes, funny videos, or profiles of our friends and neighbours, free from censorship and guided only by our own choice—it is crucial to remember that the information we access is refracted through a social and cultural mechanism that inevitably pushes some sites and ideas to the forefront while burying others on page 2 of the search results and beyond.

Universal Library A different set of challenges and problems in dealing with information in an age when it is widely available can be seen by looking at an ongoing project of Google's that has drawn numerous objections (one of only many such objections: there is a Wikipedia page for "Criticism of Google"). In December 2004, Google announced a project to digitize and make publicly available 15 million printed volumes (approximately 4.5 billion pages), drawn primarily from the libraries of Stanford University and the University of Michigan, with the Widener Library at Harvard, the Bodleian at Oxford,

Figure 10.1 Global Map of Internet Use



© Copyright SASI Group (University of Sheffield) and Mark Newman (University of Michigan).

© www.worldmapper.org

A world map in which the size of countries is modified to reflect comparative Internet usage shows a stark divide between the global North and South.

and the New York Public Library involved to lesser degrees; the Bavarian State Library in Munich has also joined the project (Herwig). Such a project has incredible promise. In the words of Jean-Noël Jeanneney, the president of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Google project (initially called Google Library but since given the more modest name Google Books) appeared initially as “the realization of an old dream ... that a treasure trove of knowledge, accumulated for centuries, would be opened up to the benefit of all, and primarily to those whose family, sociological or geographical situation deprived them of easy access to the cultural and intellectual legacy of humanity” (5). The promise of easy access to the world’s libraries is described by the former director of the Bodleian, Sarah Thomas, as accelerating “the emergence of new knowledge tremendously” (Herwig). This narrative of universal knowledge aided by technology seems hard to resist, especially as it feeds into popular **discourse** linking new gadgets with the perpetual unfolding of the Enlightenment “maturity” of humanity.

Even so, significant concerns were raised about Google’s project almost immediately. Chief among these for Europeans was the potential for a tool such as Google Books to further accelerate the prevalence of English as a language of research at the expense of other languages. Given the paucity of translations from other languages into English (e.g., in 2005, only 3.54 percent of new adult fiction titles published in the U.S. were translations [Hoffman]), this would, in turn, have implications for the circulation of and access to the non-English cultural resources of the world. As just one of many such cases, Jeanneney offers the example of a search for famous writer and cultural icon Miguel de Cervantes on the Spanish version of Google Books. The first five items returned in the search were in French, followed by three books in English; in the ninth and final position, a collection of excerpts from *Don Quixote* in Spanish, with the whole work nowhere to be found in its original language on the first page—the only one visited by most users of Google (12).

Jeanneney’s short book on Google is full of such anecdotes about the limits and problems of the online library Google is in the process of assembling. His criticisms of the project are driven by a desire to maintain global cultural and linguistic diversity, in line with UNESCO’s October 2005 declaration, which states almost immediately (in Article 6), “While ensuring the free flow of ideas by word and image, care should be exercised that all cultures can express themselves and make themselves known” (UNESCO). (Tellingly, perhaps, the U.S. is not a signatory to this declaration). Among the many interesting solutions Jeanneney offers to the current dominance of Google Books is the creation of a European online library and the promotion of search engines that both make their search algorithms public and give users information about the limits of their search and some idea of the “representativeness of the corpus in which it is carried out” (68). These suggestions highlight the importance of context both in shaping information online and in how such information is used and interpreted.

Still, it is important to recognize the unexpected and perhaps problematic outcome of what amounts to a major reorganization of human knowledge at an unprecedented speed, at the very same time as access to this knowledge is being massively expanded worldwide

through information technologies. Despite numerous competing online projects—the European Library, the European cultural platform MICHAEL, and so on—as with so many of the other services that it has collected under its banner, Google Books has quickly become *the* site to which members of the public, politicians, students, bureaucrats, and researchers turn to access information that one imagines to be comprehensive, if perhaps not universal: the lack of access by students and scholars in most parts of the world to password-protected private databases of research almost guarantees it. The very size of the Google library makes a claim to completeness that is seductive, but there are only so many of those 4.5 billion pages that one can get through in a lifetime.

What looms large as a key issue for culture in the 21st century are the principles by which access to this information is organized for its users. In the case of Google, the information it provides is hierarchized according to two principles (although, of course, the precise algorithms remain secret). The first has to do with the frequency and density of links, which means in effect—and especially in the case of what would be a relatively fixed archive compared to the rest of the Internet—that “success breeds success, at the expense of newcomers, minorities, marginals” (45). The second has to do with the demands of the advertising that pays for the digitization project to begin with. Ads linked to specific books, themes, or topics—Jeanneney jokingly imagines a match manufacturer linking up to Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Little Match Girl”—have an impact on the organization and hierarchization of search results as well.

Of course, there has to be a way of organizing the search results of such a potentially huge archive as Google Books (not to mention the even larger archive of the Internet itself, which was estimated on February 6, 2016, to have at least 48.9 billion Google-indexed pages; see www.worldwidewebsize.com). But once these particular principles of hierarchization, organized as they are by market imperatives as opposed to those that have guided the practices of archivists and librarians for centuries, are combined with the emphasis on English texts previously mentioned, we have in effect the sanctioning of a specific view of the world. To give one example, Jeanneney points to Simon Schama’s book on the French Revolution, *Citizens*—a market success in the U.S., but so skewed in its account that no publisher in France would consider a translation (41–42). If one were to get an account of the revolution through only Schama as opposed to other sources—even fictional ones like Victor Hugo’s *Quatrevingt-treize*—they would have a very limited view of the past, just as getting an account of the Cuban Missile Crisis or September 11, 2001, through the most popular American sources would quickly obscure our understanding of the politics of the global present. Yet this is the direction in which the “promise” of Google’s Books is leading us.

There’s an “evil” at work here that is hard for Google or most of its users to identify. That the process of producing access to information on the Web works through a process of hierarchization that generates some problems is a point that Google—and no doubt the vast majority of its users—takes to be simply part of the pragmatic demands of life on the Net. How could one possibly dismiss the value of having access to the great libraries

of the world in one's bedroom? In the terms according to which Google has positioned its library project, the possibility of unfettered access to books is organized as a market promise—and not just because of the fact that money directly influences the importance of texts through advertising, but because of the illusion of choice combined with the attitude of “buyer beware.” Google understands itself to be doing no evil because it is playing by standard social and political rules; indeed, it imagines that it is extending these rules substantially, contributing to global democratization and the reinforcement of the rule of law by means of informational trickle-down (a belief that the events of the Arab Spring described above can't help but reinforce).

As with every other aspect of social life, it is important to recognize that *especially* in the age of information, information is hardly innocent and is in fact at the heart of the political. “There can be no universal library, only specific ways of looking at the universal,” Jeanneney reminds us (5). These specific ways demand explicit, ongoing, public contestation and debate of a kind that necessarily involves a discussion not only of the specifics of search engine algorithms but, more broadly, of the kind of world we want to inhabit and the futures we want to work toward.

From Information to Marketing In *The Googlization of Everything*, Siva Vaidhyanathan writes, “We are not Google's customers. We—our fancies, fetishes, predilections and preferences—are what Google sells to advertisers” (3). In response to claims such as this one, Soar counters that this implication, that

Google makes the information it has about us available to advertisers ... [is] wrong. It isn't possible, using Google's tools, to target an ad to 32-year-old single heterosexual men living in London who work at Goldman Sachs and like skiing, especially at Courchevel. You can do exactly that using Facebook, but the options Google gives advertisers are, by comparison, limited: the closest it gets is to allow them to target display ads to people who may be interested in the category of “skiing and snowboarding”—and advertisers were always able to do that anyway by buying space in *Ski & Snowboard* magazine. (5)

Recent developments, however, suggest that it is in fact Soar who is wrong about how information about users is being deployed. There's no doubt that the services and applications many companies provide free on the Internet are in fact lures intended to generate information about users that it intends to use for its own purposes or to sell to other companies eager for any possible marketing and advertising advantage. Facebook provides perhaps the best example of a site that captures user information that it passes along to advertisers—for a fee that it pockets. But Facebook is hardly the only such service. In February 2012,

Facebook herded Madison Avenue advertising professionals into the American Museum of Natural History in New York on Wednesday and unveiled new features for brands and corporations to engage with the service's 845 million users. The company's famed chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, revealed revamped

Facebook pages and timelines that companies can use to interact innocuously with Facebook’s vast user base.” (Marlow B1)

Not to be outdone, on March 1, Google instituted a new privacy policy that permits the company “to sweep together a person’s data across its various services, from YouTube to Gmail and Google+, in an effort to better target the person with ads based on their personal preferences” (Marlow B3). It appears that the age of extreme e-advertising has only just begun.

In addition to the disturbing implications of corporate privacy violation, Evgeny Morozov laments another aspect of the way Google, along with social media sites like Facebook, filters our Internet experience. Perhaps a little romantically, Morozov compares the early Internet user to the *flâneur*, scrolling pleurably and aimlessly (and anonymously) through virtual arcades, without any pressure to consume. Just as economic and architectural changes in 19th-century France diminished the quality of the *flâneur*’s experience (with the arcades replaced by “large, utilitarian department stores”), so Google and Facebook have transformed the Internet experience, each of them vying to become the one-stop shopping (and reading, listening, viewing, learning, and socializing) place for users, each diminishing the element of freedom, chance, and surprise that defined the joys of the “cyberflâneur” experience (Morozov, “Death”). At least some of the promise and possibility heralded by the Internet is draining away into the control and corporatism that defines all too much of contemporary experience.

Suggested Activity 10.2

Consider the ways you make use of the search tools on the Internet and the information they bring up. Do you question the search results? Why or why not? Compare the results (or “hits”) that appear when you use different search engines to find out about a specific topic or phrase (you can find a list of search tools at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Search_engines_list). What do the differences and similarities tell you about the ways information is organization by different search engines?

Living Online

Google might dominate the world of search engines—so much so that there are now legitimate worries about lack of competition and control over the information we can access. Fears of just this kind are captured in the television series *Mr. Robot* (2015–), in which a single company, E Corp., has effectively become so large and powerful that it controls everything. E Corp.—routinely referred to as “Evil Corporation” by characters in the show—has such a hold over the economy that it no longer pretends not to manipulate consumers and to put pressure on government decision making. The eponymous title character of *Mr. Robot* recruits series protagonist, Elliot Alderson (Rami Malek), to

join f society, a small group of hactivists intent on altering the state of things in order to bring an end to E Corp.'s looming presence. Taking a page out of the plot of *Fight Club* (see Chapter 8), f society's plan is to infiltrate E Corp.'s computer systems in order to cancel the debt of everyone in the world. In a flash, this would eliminate E Corp.'s power and put us all back on equal footing. Whether this would really work or not is beside the point; what is intriguing about *Mr. Robot* is its articulation of widespread fears about the control and limits that information society might be bringing into existence—contrary to the hopes we have about the political and social possibilities the Internet and other social technologies have generated.

As we have already seen in examples provided earlier in this chapter—Bill C-30 in Canada, and SOPA and PIPA in the U.S.—these fears are not only about corporate control but extend to government access to private and personal information. In Canada, in response to a Supreme Court ruling limiting police access to Internet subscriber information, RCMP Commissioner Bob Paulson has argued that to control online criminals, police require warrantless access (Bronskill). In January 2016, communications companies Rogers and Telus launched a court case against police in Ontario to draw attention to the police practice of using “tower dumps” to access call records from thousands of cellphone users all at once. Though some might think little about such police practices (“I’ve got nothing to hide! I’m not a criminal!”), unfettered access to and use of private information by governments should be a cause for genuine concern. Troublingly, governments everywhere seem to have adopted an “access first, explain later” attitude regarding their use of the now huge amount of private information generated by our use of the Internet and social media over the past several decades. Struggles are likely to continue over the access that governments and some companies would like to have to private information.

Close-Up 10.2

Edward Snowden and Citizenfour

Laura Poitras's Oscar-winning documentary *Citizenfour* (2014) places us at the very centre of the remarkable story of Edward Snowden—which comes as no surprise, given that she herself was one of the key participants in one of the most important stories of the Internet era. In 2013 Poitras was contacted (via a carefully encrypted email) by someone identifying him- or herself as Citizen Four (Snowden himself), who wanted to pass along information about the illegal spying activities of the U.S. and other Western governments. The film gives us mesmerizing access to Snowden, who meets Poitras in a Hong Kong hotel room and, over four days of interviews, describes in detail what he has discovered about government intelligence practices while working for the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA).

What Snowden discovered was that many Western governments were, without proper legal authority, engaged in widespread, intensive surveillance of their own populations. Among the many hidden programs that Snowden discovered were PRISM, a program that allowed U.S. authorities to have direct access to American Google and Yahoo accounts; Boundless Informant, an NSA database consisting of millions of U.S. and French phone call records, as well as the records of high-profile individuals in business and politics; and XKeyscore, a tool that provided intelligence agencies with access to virtually anything taking place on the Web. Though the exact number of files made public by Snowden is unclear, they number in the millions and showcase a global security apparatus doing almost anything it wants. *The New York Times* found that U.S. intelligence even spied on users of *World of Warcraft*, Xbox Live and *Second Life* (Mazzetti and Elliot).

Much of the subsequent public discussion and debate about Snowden has concerned the ethics of his actions and the trade-offs of whistle-blowing for the public good versus the need to preserve national security at all costs. (At present, Snowden has been granted asylum by Russia and is living in Moscow; the U.S. government has charged him with theft of U.S. government property and espionage.) Though other whistle-blowers have drawn attention to the questionable and often illegal practices of governments—most notably, the editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange—what was most shocking about Snowden’s revelations was the degree to which the Internet, cellphones, and social media had become mechanisms of government surveillance, without any discussion or consultation with the publics affected by these practices. In most cases, the companies who were asked to provide information, including Google and the cellphone giant Verizon, went along with government requests willingly. In the wake of Snowden’s revelations, in December 2013 eight major U.S. tech companies (Google, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, Twitter, Yahoo, LinkedIn, and AOL) wrote a letter to U.S. President Obama stating that “current surveillance policy ... threatens constitutional rights, individuals rights, and freedom” (Friedersdorf). Despite the Snowden affair, governments have remained surprisingly reluctant to legislate limits to their own online authority. The full story of the long-term impact of Citizen Four’s actions on how governments use (and abuse) the Internet remains to be told.

Love and Friendship in the E-World Thus far we’ve explored the tendency of control and power (whether social, cultural, economic, or political) to centralize in the Internet era. But it is just as important to point out other—apparently quite different and distinct—developments that are shaping life online, especially in relation to how and why we use social media and develop connections with each other in the e-world.

One of the singular developments of the 20th century is that we have become creatures who are always plugged in—connected to one another in multiple ways and accessible directly and immediately. According to an October 2015 report of the Pew Research Center, in 2010 only 35 percent of U.S. adults owned a smartphone. Today, 68% of all adults in the U.S. have a smartphone, while an incredible 86% of those aged 18 to 29 possess one (92% of U.S. adults own a cellphone of any kind) (Pew Research Center). We use the apps on smartphones to map our way through cities we don't know (e.g., Google Maps) and to see if nearby restaurants are worth checking out (e.g., Yelp!). Perhaps the thing that we do most often is check in with one another. Digital immigrants (middle-aged folks like the authors and older) remember a time when you wouldn't hear from friends, colleagues, or family members for weeks or months at a time: phone calls were made less frequently, and personal letters took time to get from writer to recipient through the post. These days, messages are circulated with increasing frequency—not just daily, nor even hourly, but in a back-and-forth flow measured in minutes and seconds via apps such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

We are social creatures, and we value the opportunity that social media affords us to be, well, social. As our sometimes vexed experience of the digital era has shown, being social online can be as complex and confusing as being social in the flesh—perhaps even more so. In “The Five Stages of Ghosting Grief,” writer Rachel Fields offers a tale of the changing experience of love and friendship in a social media age. As she blow-dries her hair early one morning, she wonders and worries why her new boyfriend has yet to respond to her text from the night before. She runs through a range of possibilities: he could be in a deep sleep, or he dropped his phone, or he even died! Her boyfriend could be a non-texter or be mad at her for some reason. As she runs through possible explanations, Fields decides that he might text if she doesn't look at her phone for a few minutes—but that doesn't seem to make it happen either. As the lack of a text hangs over her, she begins to question the very reality of their relationship:

If he hadn't texted because he didn't like me, was that so bad? Relationships shouldn't be about suckering people in with some sanitized version of yourself, only to spring the real you on them later...

And if he hadn't liked me, why would I want to be with him? I wanted a relationship with someone who thought I was wonderful. Messy, maybe. Prone to leaving towels on the bed, yes. Bad with money, absolutely. But wonderful.

A text finally arrives, dispelling in a flash her self-generated anxieties and worries about the status of their relationship. Simply due to the fact that the typical quick back-and-forth of texting was interrupted, Fields couldn't help but read more into the situation than it merited. At a moment when we have ever-greater opportunities of connection to one another, missed connections generate their own set of experiences—ones that we are still in the early stages of navigating psychologically and emotionally. (So why hadn't her boyfriend texted her earlier? Fields doesn't tell us.)

This is just one small example of the kind of missed connections that happen online with increasing frequency. Despite what we might imagine, such gaps and misunderstandings in communication might have become characteristic of life online. Google might be the main site to which you turn to hunt down the forgotten name of an actor in a film you and friends were just discussing (and for other, more important info, too). When it comes to communicating this info to your buddies across the country, things become more difficult—surprisingly so. One of the promises of life online is that we are all now connected in ways that until now we haven't been. (Why, through apps connected to the alarm and heating systems of some homes, we can even check in with our houses to make sure everything is A-okay!) As is ever the case, the reality turns out to be much different than the promise.

There is a profusion of apps to communicate with one another—an ever-evolving network of different programs used by different people for different reasons:

On my phone right now, I have at least a dozen apps that allow me to get in touch with people. There's standard text messaging; video messaging apps like Snapchat and FaceTime; work-related channels (Outlook, LinkedIn); dating apps (Tinder, OKCupid); and social networks (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter)—and that's before you get into the niche and even absurd, like GroupMe (messaging for groups) and Venmo (which is for paying people, but requires you to add a message with your payment). And, of course, there are dozens (hundreds!) more that I don't use at all. (Slaughter)

In our analysis of Google earlier in this chapter, we highlighted the very real problems that come about when we rely on and accept the window on the world presented by a single search engine. So aren't more choices—all the choices listed above and many more besides—better for communicating? The range of available apps has generated a nuanced series of communicative practices, especially among younger users of social media. Instagram might be used for sharing things with friends, Snapchat for messages that leave no trace, and the new program Slack only for communications related to work. In this way, individual users can manage and feel some control over the increasingly complex and sometimes confusing landscape of e-communication. The availability of the range of online communication apps can also, however, produce divisions between users. In his article, "Communication on the Internet Is Broken," blogger Jason Cranford Teague recounts his own experience with communication confusion. Teague uses a huge range of social media apps, probably more than most of us: Slack, HipChat, Lync, and GroupMe for work; Google Hangouts, iMessage, Facebook Messenger, AIM, and SMS for personal communiqués. He checks some of them all the time, and others barely at all, which has consequences regarding whom he manages to stay in touch with. "To be social with my friends, I have to choose the service that most of them use," he writes. "And if one of my friends isn't on my social-media service of choice? Generally, I have less and less contact with that person depending on how often I use that social-media service."

There are other gaps and limits produced by social media that are connected to the range of communication apps. One of the biggest is the generational divide that exists in social media use. “Kids use a combination of Tumblr, SMS, MMS, iMessage, KIK, Google Hangouts, Facebook Messenger, Snapchat, Slack, Skype, FaceTime, and dozens of other instant messaging, audio, and video systems, few of which, if any, can talk to each other,” Teague notes. What they tend not to use is email. A generation ago, professors could count on getting information across to university and college students quickly by firing off emails with information about course readings or assignments. Today, higher educators have learned to adopt and adapt to the shifting landscapes of apps that students are more likely to use. Today’s students’ telling professors that they didn’t read an email sent around about a class assignment can be an index of a social media landscape in flux (rather than a sign of student laziness!).

These problems and limits in communicating via social media are just the tip of the iceberg. There’s no question that social media has enabled all kinds of new forms of sociality. Not all forms of sociality are, however, pleasant or productive. The physical distance and relative anonymity of social media has led to individuals’ engaging in cruel behaviour and acting out their worst tendencies. **Cyberbullying**, for instance, has become so widespread a phenomenon that in 2012 the United Nations declared May 4, 2012, to be anti-bullying day—a day intended to draw attention to all victims of bullying but prompted by the explosion of its many online forms. Cyberbullying names a range of actions, from the spread of hurtful rumours and gossip to the use of social media to defame and humiliate. Up to one in five children aged 10 to 12 has been a victim of cyberbullying; in the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published a report in 2013 showing that 22.8% of Grade 9 and 21.9% of Grade 10 girls had been victims of online bullies (Barra, Diener-West, and Leaf). The consequences of cyberbullying are serious. In British Columbia in 2012, in a widely reported case, 15-year-old Amanda Todd committed suicide as a result of cyberbullying; a number of other cases of suicide have been reported around the world. The use of social media to harm others is not limited to children and teens. In 2015 thirteen male dentistry students at Dalhousie University were disciplined for the misogynistic and sexually violent posts in their Facebook Group—posts about their female classmates that become public.

Life online can be confusing; love and sex, which can be confusing at the best of times, has perhaps become even more confusing. Once again, apps designed to make connections and communications between people easier can get in the way of what they actually want. “Hookup” apps—most famously, Tinder—are intended to make sexual relations freer and more available for consenting adults with no interest in long-term relationships or for those who want to bypass the awkwardness of dating in order to, well, get right down to action. Tinder can give some users exactly what they want; for others, it can result in emotional and even physical hurt. Several dating apps have delivered (sometimes) on their promise of matching up singles who are exactly right for one another, by using matchmaking algorithms based on the data entered into the system. Of course, whether such apps manage to assemble couples who really are right for one another depends on

the information that each reveals to the system in the first place (*caveat dater!*). The new landscape of love and sex created by social media has necessitated the production of intriguing guidebooks to help map the terrain, as such *Modern Romance* (2015), written by the bizarre research duo of comedian Aziz Ansari and sociologist Eric Klinenberg.

One last point to end this section: we are only beginning to grapple with all of the intricacies of what it means to live life online. The Employers' Council has recently cautioned members of the public to be careful about what they post on the Web or circulate via social media. A representative of the Council pointed out that info circulating electronically is "not private, it is public and everybody in your circle of friends can share that, can pass it along to others and before you know it ... it goes viral and people's lives are impacted by your comments" (CBC News). Today, a teenager posting crazy photos of a house party that took place when his parents were away doesn't only have to fear the wrath of Mom and Dad. He also has to worry about what a prospective employer down the road might think of his youthful shenanigans. However careful we might be, our lives are rapidly being archived on the Web. Even Edward Snowden has been caught out as a result of the trail of info he has left behind. In the biographical snapshot of Snowden in *The New York Times*, writers John Broder and Shane Scott note that Snowden once described himself on the website *Ars Technica* as a "computer wizard." This innocent little bit of prideful self-promotion has very little to do with the meaning of Snowden's whistleblowing. It can't help, however, but inflect and shape our sense of him, and of his actions, whether justly or unjustly.

The Real-World Costs of E-Life

There's no doubt new technologies, especially the widespread global use of computing and communications technologies, have resulted in a huge range of social, cultural, and political changes; we have been able to touch on only a few of these here. Though we've already addressed some of the downsides to the undeniable opportunities and new possibilities that have emerged as a result of these technologies, we would be remiss in not pointing, by way of concluding this section, to a few more ways in which the real world and e-life can be out of sync in ways that shape what is and isn't possible for people around the world.

While ever-increasing numbers of people have access to new communications and computing technologies, it is important to remember that in much of the world a digital divide still exists—that is, a divide between those who work in and live comfortably with e-life and those who don't. The long-standing attempt to create a cheap laptop (as supported, for instance, by the One Laptop per Child project chaired by Professor Nicholas Negroponte) is intended to make the services of and information on the Internet available to as many people in the world as possible. The aim is to make a fully functioning laptop that costs less than US\$100. While this would certainly help many more people access the Internet, it would still remain inaccessible to huge swaths of the globe's population, most notably the up to 2.7 billion people around the world estimated by the World Bank to live on less than US\$2 a day. Despite a rapid expansion of ownership of cellphones and

computers, access to the physical devices required to visit the virtual landscape of the Web is still more limited than we might believe. While the creation of more and more devices, such as Datawind's Aakash UbiSlate, an inexpensive (US\$30), Canadian-designed tablet intended for use in India, will continue to pull some people into the Internet era, the digital divide is likely to continue for some time to come.

Indeed, the continual expansion of technological offerings has had real-world costs that are becoming increasingly evident to the publics that use them. At roughly the same time as Apple's stock price was pushing the total value of the company into uncharted territories (in May 2016, the company was worth more than US\$500 billion), increasing attention was being drawn to the working conditions endured by many of those engaged in the manufacturing of Apple products. In a series of reports, journalists Charles Duhigg and David Barboza documented a range of labour abuses in high-tech factories based in China:

Employees work excessive overtime, in some cases seven days a week, and live in crowded dorms. Some say they stand so long that their legs swell until they can hardly walk. Under-age workers have helped build Apple's products, and the company's suppliers have improperly disposed of hazardous waste and falsified records, according to company reports and advocacy groups that, within China, are often considered reliable, independent monitors.

In addition to harsh working conditions, the push to create cheap, shiny products to satisfy the high-tech desires of Western consumers—all while making a tidy profit (\$11.1 billion in the final quarter of 2015 alone)—has repeatedly endangered workers' lives. In 2010, 137 workers were injured while using a poisonous chemical to clean iPad screens; in 2011, two separate explosions at iPad factories injured 77 people and killed four; and hazardous working conditions have been reported for years at factories that supply Apple. Apple is hardly alone in this regard: dangerous working conditions and labour abuses have been reported in factories involved in the production of devices for Hewlett-Packard, IBM, Lenovo, Dell, Sony, Motorola, Nokia, Toshiba, and other companies. Many of the shiny devices on which we play games, watch films, send Snapchat messages to our friends, and check our email have their origin in the kinds of sweatshops that one would expect to find in the 19th rather than the 21st century.

In February 2012, one of Apple's main suppliers, Foxconn Technology, announced that it would reduce overtime and raise employees' salaries by



Associated Press.

"An explosion last May [2011] at a Foxconn factory in Chengdu, China, killed four people and injured 18. It built iPads." —*New York Times*

25 percent (Barboza). It's clear that the criticisms levelled at Apple and other companies—which have been quick to spread via the very same devices made by Foxconn employees!—is having an impact.

LOST GENERATION?

On February 28, 2012, the magazine *Adbusters* posted a blog titled “Tactical Briefing #26.” The brief outlines the next step in the Occupy movement, whose origins lie in an earlier call to action posted on *Adbusters*' blog on July 13, 2011. The impulse to Occupy Wall Street—the origin point of what became a worldwide movement, with sites in more than 80 countries and 600 towns and cities in the United States—came from the successful people's revolution in Egypt a few months earlier. Citing the peaceful occupation of Tahrir Square as evidence of “a worldwide shift in revolutionary tactics,” the blog suggests that “redeemers, rebels and radicals” get together in a symbolically important square where they would collectively reiterate a single demand until it was met. In the case of Tahrir, this demand was that President Mubarak step down from power; in the case of Wall Street, *the* space on the globe identified with the power of finance, *Adbusters* suggested that protesters “demand that Barack Obama ordain a Presidential Commission tasked with ending the influence money has over our representatives in Washington. It's time for DEMOCRACY NOT CORPORATOCRACY, we're doomed without it.”

The different stakes of political struggle in Egypt and the United States could not be made any clearer than by the terms of this demand. In the first instance, protestors risked their lives to upend a three-decade-long dictatorship operating under a 45-year-old emergency law that suspended constitutional rights, legalized censorship, and allowed the police to do virtually whatever they wanted without repercussions. In the second, those assembled on Wall Street were supposed to ask the president to form a commission to study a problem—an important problem, without question, but one with a solution imagined as being found *within* the existing system, as opposed to through this system's negation or elimination. As it moved around the world, the Occupy movement quickly took on a different form from the one initially imagined for it by *Adbusters*. Instead of asking for governmental bodies to study the influence of money on politics in their own countries—a worldwide phenomenon, to be sure—the common global message of the Occupy movement became something quite different. The powerful and now famous slogan “We are the 99%!” drew attention to the alarming divisions of wealth experienced in every country in the world. Spurred on by a definitive report issued in October 2011 by the U.S. Congressional Budget Office that showed huge and growing disparities in wealth between the top 1 percent of U.S. income earners and everyone else, the Occupy movement challenged a system that works only for the very few at the expense of everyone else.

The statistics are genuinely alarming. In the U.S., from 1979 to 2007, after-tax income for the top 1 percent of the population grew 275 percent; for the poorest quintile, it grew only 18 percent (Pear). The disparity in income growth wasn't the only cause for concern. As might be expected from these growth figures, there was also an increasing

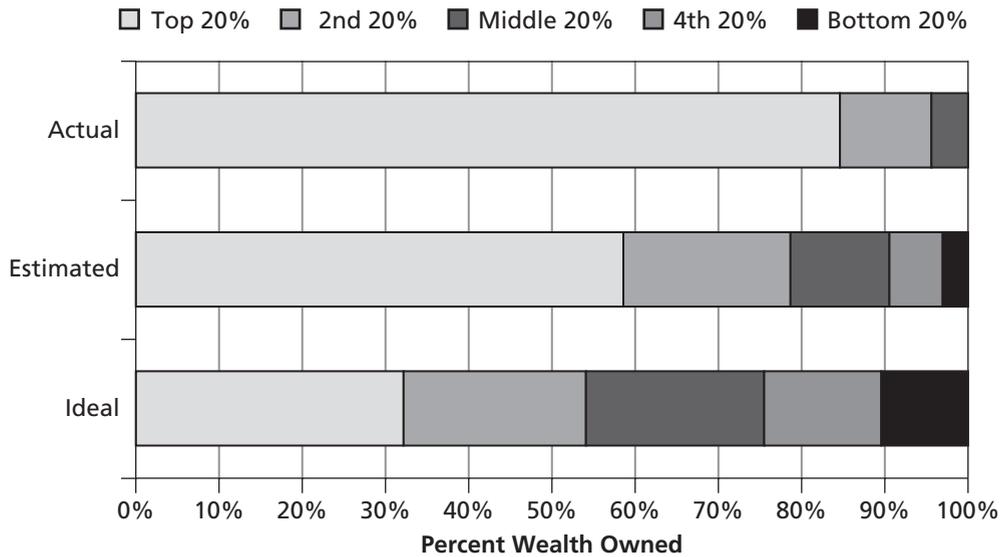
disequilibrium in income distribution: in 2007, the household income of the top 1 percent was 17 percent of the total (up from 8 percent in 1979), while the top 20 percent of households received 53 percent of income—more than the combined incomes of the other 80 percent of their fellow citizens. While the situation is perhaps most extreme in the U.S., similar patterns of income disparity exist around the globe—including in Canada. In the decade between 1997 and 2007, the richest 1 percent of Canadians (those whose average income is \$405,000) received a third of all income growth and held 13.8 percent of all income; the top 10 percent of income earners received 42.5 percent of national income (Yalnizyan). “Like the Gilded Age a century ago, Canada is awash in money generated by an emerging new global economy,” writes economist Armine Yalnizyan. “But during both slow and rapid periods of growth, incomes have increasingly become concentrated in the hands of the elite few rather than creating greater prosperity for all” (4).

What is as alarming as these income disparities is the degree to which they seem not to have generated any significant response on the part of citizens—those 99 percent of us who are on the outside looking in. Indeed, perhaps until the Occupy movement, Westerners seemed to have little understanding of their true economic and social circumstances, even though the facts about growing economic inequalities have been articulated in numerous places for more than a decade, including in mass-market books by figures such as former U.S. secretary of labor Robert B. Reich (in *Aftershock: The Next Economy and America's Future*) and Nobel Prize-winning economist Paul Krugman (in *The Conscience of a Liberal* and other books). The reasons for this lack of understanding of or interest in income disparity are complex, but the fact that there is a general incomprehension of levels of social and economic equality is clear. In a 2011 study by Michael I. Norton and Dan Ariely, Americans were asked to estimate the current level of income distribution in the U.S. and to offer their opinion of ideal income distribution. The study revealed that citizens massively underestimated the degree of income inequality: the estimate offered of the percentage of wealth owned by the top 20 percent (a different measure than income distribution) was *under* 60 percent when it is in fact well *over* 80 percent. For those who participated in the survey, the ideal distribution, on the other hand, “resembled Sweden,” with the top 20 percent owning 30 percent of the wealth and the next two quintiles having roughly 20 percent each (10) (see Figure 10.2).

The energy of the Occupy movement, as well as the considerable support it received (polls across the world indicated that the majority of the planet's inhabitants agreed with the protesters), came from the force with which its slogan captured a problem that has been denied for too long. Publics long accustomed to thinking about social and political developments through narratives of progress that suggested that life could only ever become more just, equitable, and democratic were confronted with the realization that this was no longer the case: history had taken a turn for the worse. “Tactical Briefing #26,” *Adbusters'* call to occupy the streets of Chicago on May 1, 2012, during the overlapping meetings of the G8 and NATO, places the problems of the current economic system front and centre:

The crisis of capitalism is deepening. Youth unemployment has reached 50% in Spain and Greece ... 30% in Portugal and Italy ... 22% in the UK ... almost 20% in

Figure 10.2 U.S. Income Distribution



The actual distribution of wealth in the U.S. plotted against the estimated and ideal distribution across all respondents. Because of their small percentage of total wealth, neither the “4th 20%” value (0.2 percent) nor the “bottom 20%” value (0.1 percent) are visible in the “Actual” distribution.

Source: Michael I. Norton & Dan Ariely, “Building a Better America, One Wealth Quintile at a Time,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, Jan. 2011, Vol. 6, No. 1, Pg. 11.

the US. Hundreds of millions of people around the world are waking up to the fact that their future does not compute ... that their lives will be a never ending series of ecological, financial, political and personal crises ... and that if we don't rise up and start fighting for a different kind of future, we won't have a future.

Though the current inequities we are experiencing have affected most people on the globe, it is youth who were disproportionately affected by the 2008 economic crash and the reshaping of societies by the forces that created—and legitimated—the unprecedented concentration of wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer people. So it is hardly surprising that young people around the globe are challenging the system that has produced a world that seems to hold little promise for them. What differentiates the Occupy movement from earlier cultures of protest in North America—particularly the 1960s and '70s counter-culture—is the way it unites youth with other disenfranchised groups. In the Woodstock era, Roger Lowenstein notes, “Radical students preached an affinity with the ‘working class,’ but it was rare that the students and any members of the working

class actually joined arms.” The target of American students’ protests back then was not the world of business and finance (which many of them would end up joining) but the government and the military, which were conducting an imperialistic war in Vietnam. Workers did not necessarily share—in fact, they generally opposed—the views of the student movement; in one instance, a group of about 200 construction workers clashed violently with students demonstrating against a police shooting of anti-war protesters at Kent State University, the result being that 70 students ended up in hospital (Lowenstein). The tensions couldn’t be explained simply in terms of different politics (conservative workers versus progressive students) but were located in different horizons of possibility, rooted in different class positions. For the mostly middle-class and affluent students, as Lowenstein notes, “Upward mobility was a birthright. People feared the cops, the draft, authority figures in general—we didn’t fear unemployment.”

Times have changed. The myth, shared in various forms to at least some degree by people in different classes, that hard work would lead to success has been definitively shattered: students, workers, unemployed people, even members of the once secure middle class are united now in the feeling that the future is precarious (we expand on this below) and in the struggle to figure out why and what can be done (see Close-Up 10.3).

Close-Up 10.3

A Brief History of the 2008 Economic Crash

The crash of the stock markets in fall 2008 and the resulting global economic recession were the result of a burst financial bubble. In the decade leading up to the crash, real-estate prices around the world had become massively inflated; in many cases, increasingly expensive properties were being purchased by individuals and corporations with the aid of large loans and mortgages that were not properly secured by significant down payments, equities, or other assets. In an effort to expand the market for mortgages—and thus to generate more profits—some banks and finance companies created *sub-prime* mortgages (i.e., with interest rates set below the established prime lending rate) that allowed low-income earners to enter the housing market and others to purchase larger properties than they otherwise might have. Over time, the size of monthly payments would increase, as would the interest on the mortgages, making it difficult for many to manage the size of the debt they had taken on, especially given the fact that the annual income of most people on the planet has remained relatively flat for three decades. The expanded ability of individuals to borrow additional funds against the value of their houses (home equity loans) also generated a huge expansion in consumer indebtedness.

Real-estate value is to a large degree a form of collective fiction: the price of a piece of land and the object on it depends on what individuals are willing—or able—to pay for it. Housing prices can shift enormously along with changes in the economy; in Detroit, an area hit especially hard over the past several decades as a result of the shift of industrial production to countries outside of the U.S., houses that once sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars now sell for tens of thousands or sit empty and abandoned, unwanted by anyone. When individuals were no longer able to pay mortgages on their properties, they defaulted, leaving banks and credit companies with an ever-increasing stock of homes for which there was no market, thereby deflating the value of the existing stock of homes. The result was that many families had mortgages whose value far exceeded that of the market price of their homes; in extreme cases, people simply left their keys and walked away from their homes, unwilling to pay an inflated mortgage for an asset now worth much, much less. Overleveraged and no longer able to access easy credit, consumers en masse started spending less, with immediate economic consequences, given the fact that companies, too, were in debt and had failing real-estate investments.

The speed and the severity of the crash was connected to one further factor. As one of the few areas of what seemed like real growth in the economy at the time, the real-estate market became attractive to institutional and individual investors who purchased various securities related to the value of mortgages, with riskier mortgages promising greater returns on investments. In addition, a complex investment vehicle called *credit default swaps* was created so purchasers would receive a payout if a loan defaulted. When the price of real estate began to crash and mortgage holders defaulted in larger numbers on their loans, major banks and investment companies around the world did not have adequate funds to cover their losses, resulting in the collapse of several major companies (e.g., Northern Rock in the U.K. and Countrywide Financial and Lehman Brothers in the U.S.); a precipitous decline in stock markets; a liquidity crisis (i.e., it was difficult for companies—and governments, too!—to get the loans needed to continue doing business); and massive increases in government debt, as nations had to intervene in markets to prevent the situation from becoming even worse.

The U.S. was far from the only place in which a real-estate bubble burst. Excessive borrowing by individuals, corporations, and governments, made possible by cheap loans, generated even worse problems in Iceland, Ireland, Greece, Portugal, and Spain and, as a consequence of a shared currency (the euro), major economic problems for Europe as a whole.

The immediate context for the current economic and social problems faced by the world's youth is the fall 2008 financial crisis. Besides the creation of high levels of youth unemployment discussed above, there are two other things to note about the crash in relation to today's youth. First, it has resulted in the disappearance of a huge amount of wealth from economies and so, too, from the operating budgets of governments, with implications for unemployment programs and for funding of all manner of social programs. Second, rather than being challenged and widely questioned, the ideological imperatives that produced the crash continue to be the ones that, for the most part, are guiding how governments are responding to the situation and trying to get their economies back on track. The ideology of **neoliberalism**, which emphasizes the reduction of the size of government (and thus of the level of taxation needed to keep government programs operating) and the elimination of rules on the operation of the private sector, continues to be the dominant one guiding state decision making. Despite the fact that this ideology was in many ways the cause of the crash, governments around the world continue to imagine it as the solution. The austerity measures proposed by many governments—cuts in programming so they can pay down government debt—is deemed necessary to keep economies running. As often as not, however, these cuts are paired with tax cuts to the richest members of society, which means that programs that protect the poor and working classes are slashed for the sake of the 1 percent whose financial speculations generated the market crash. The persistence of neoliberalism means that the primary aim of societies around the world is to secure the ability of companies to make profits, rather than to work for the benefit of all of their citizens to live safe, healthy, and meaningful lives.

Entrepreneurship and Subjectivity

One might have expected that the 2008 crash and the shaky economies that have existed ever since would have caused publics to question prevailing ideas about the good life. Interest in relatively extreme candidates for the 2016 U.S. presidential election—“socialist” Bernie Sanders for the Democrats and the crazed billionaire Donald Trump for the Republicans—points to publics no longer satisfied with business as usual, as do the surprise election results in 2015 of an NDP majority in Alberta and a Liberal majority in the Canadian federal election. It might well appear that the story that everyone can achieve the good life through hard work in capitalist economies is now close to being exposed as a fiction and that what might define the 21st century is the hard work of coming up with other narratives of social being and belonging.

If there are some rumblings of big changes in how we might do things, other developments point to a new-found faith in keeping things the way they are. Since governments aren't working and big business cares only about making money for itself, it seems that those who want to live happy and successful lives today will just have to ... do it for themselves! “The promise of professionalized entrepreneurship has had a particular allure in recent years,” writes author Gideon Lewis-Kraus in a feature article in *Wired*. “Starting a company has become the way for ambitious young people to do something that seems



To Come

Books about branding and entrepreneurship now have a worldwide readership—even in “communist” China (Chinese Foreign Language Bookstore, Dongcheng, Beijing).

simultaneously careerist and heroic” (111). In the early years of this century, the social value and legitimacy of entrepreneurship has come to permeate our cultural imagination and our political vocabulary, and has come to shape not just discussions of economic futures but also how we might generate innovative social and public policy. The global success of the reality TV show *Dragons’ Den*, which has franchises in 26 countries, is just one sign of this development. Governments now expend billions of dollars to support programs of entrepreneurship, and there has been an explosion of start-up incubators and accelerators, spaces designed to speed up the development of business ideas and to connect entrepreneurs to investors and potential clients. Even fields commonly thought to exist outside of the world of business and labour, such as artistic and cultural production, have been reimagined as spaces of entrepreneurship. The city of Toronto alone houses two centres for entrepreneurial artists: Artscape, which offers a “Creative Entrepreneurship Program” (<http://torontoartscape.org>), and the Toronto Centre for Entrepreneurial Art and Design (<http://www.tcead.com/>).

The concept of entrepreneurship extends back to the 18th century, when French economist Richard Cantillon famously described the term *entrepreneur* as a “bearer of risk.” Since then, entrepreneurship has been understood as an important if minor element of capitalism—the site at which individuals and small groups would take chances on hitting the economic jackpot through the invention of new products, services, and means of distribution. Narratives of self-starters who managed to become rich through their inventiveness and risk-taking have long been a favourite subject for authors, including Budd Schulberg (*What Makes Sammy Run?*, 1941), Mordecai Richler (*The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, 1959), and William Gaddis (*J R*, 1975). These books examined critically their protagonists’ strong belief in striking it rich through their smarts and the tattered reality of the “rags to riches” story—a gap between belief and reality that has played a fundamental role in the **ideology** of capitalism.

The old school entrepreneur navigated capitalism as an individual trying to make his or her way in impossible circumstances. The entrepreneur today plays a similar role, hoping to experience success even in a world defined by precarity and social instability. There are, however, some key differences between the risk takers of old and those who inhabit today’s neoliberal landscape. If entrepreneurs once had to sacrifice their individual development in order to expand their capacity for accumulation, entrepreneurship in this new century combines the pursuit of money with self-discovery and personal growth. An entrepreneurial life, as Canadian entrepreneur and *Dragon’s Den* investor Arlene Dickinson proudly describes it, must be lived “all in,” with an enterprising spirit brought to bear on every aspect of existence, from education to enterprise, from marriage to friendships, and from health to entertainment and play. Living “all in” as an entrepreneur offers a way in which one can exist authentically, passionately, and nobly by “doing what you love” in every aspect of life. It is an entrancing prospect: to be growing and developing as an individual at the very same time as adding money to one’s pocketbook. Who *wouldn’t* want to be an entrepreneur?

The idea that all of us can achieve economic success and personal growth by becoming entrepreneurs might seem like a case of wishful thinking or misguided fantasy. If it is just that, it is a fantasy that governments and universities have happily adopted as reality. In Canada, for instance, supposedly cash-strapped governments have committed millions of dollars to programs to support entrepreneurial endeavours, with the majority of programs targeted at youth. One of the key elements of contemporary ideas of entrepreneurship, Lewis-Kraus points out, is the “fantasy that entrepreneurship—and, more broadly, creativity—can be systematized ... that success in the startup game can be not only taught but rationalized, made predictable” (110). This is certainly evident in the degree to which colleges and universities have adopted entrepreneurship as a practice they teach and research, and to an ever-increasing degree. An October 2013 report by the Council of Ontario Universities put it bluntly: “Entrepreneurship, upon which economists say economic growth depends, has moved from the margins to the mainstream of university education.” In the United States, courses of study in entrepreneurship are among the fastest growing programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels (in 2011–12, the program offered by the University of Houston had 2000 registered students), and universities have already come to be ranked according to number of entrepreneurs and companies produced and levels of capital raised by their students. In entrepreneurial studies programs one doesn’t dryly study the phenomenon of entrepreneurship—track its history, understand its function and role in contemporary capitalism, and figure out what entrepreneurs do. Rather, as the description of Northern Michigan University’s (NMU) “Entrepreneurship Major” makes clear, these programs are explicitly designed to create new forms and modes of subjectivity:

At NMU, we believe entrepreneurship is a mindset ... a way of thinking, of acting, of engaging the world in a pursuit of new opportunities in the face of risk and uncertainty. Entrepreneurs are both dreamers and doers, market leaders, as well as market finders. For us, entrepreneurship is a full contact extreme sport. Our program is geared for you to learn a skill set that will increase your likelihood of success in an entrepreneurial setting or even a corporate setting in need of entrepreneurial thinking. In our program, you will learn by doing not just by reading from a book.

It is not only today’s university students who are being encouraged to become entrepreneurs. The world’s poor are also being told that their way out of destitution is via business creativity and innovation. From the 1970s to the present, the term *underclass*, “a concept covering up the old idea of the ‘undeserving poor’ with a veneer of social science,” gave way to a celebration of “the entrepreneurial energy and talent latent within poor people who were waiting for a spark of opportunity to transform their lives” (Katz 101). An important step in this shift in the U.S. was the insistence in a series of articles by Harvard business professor Michael E. Porter about the entrepreneurial energies in inner-city communities—energies that simply needed the right kind of business-friendly programs to enable them to flourish, thereby producing the black and Hispanic middle

classes that generations of government programs had failed to do. The expansion of programs designed to encourage poor entrepreneurs in the U.S. was mirrored by similar poverty-reduction strategies around the world, most notably by Nobel Prize-winning economist Muhammad Yunus, who had helped found Grameen Bank, an organization designed to give loans to poor entrepreneurs. In the words of C.K. Prahad, another business professor intent on saving the poor by including them in the world of profits: “If we stop thinking of the poor as victims or as a burden and start recognizing them as resilient and creative entrepreneurs and value-conscious consumers, a whole new world of opportunity will open up” (1).

Why are entrepreneurial subjects needed today? The language of risk and uncertainty that has always accompanied entrepreneurial activity has today become something that everyone is experiencing. Everyone has to become an entrepreneur because in the absence of society—of the guarantees of formal and informal security and welfare once provided by community and state policies and programs—risk is a universal condition of existence. The reassessment of even those at the bottom of the social pyramid as potential entrepreneurs has produced two important changes that have had an impact on the whole of society. First, it has helped to legitimate the rollback or elimination of government social programs of all kinds, reinforcing neoliberal government policies. The best way to help people today, governments believe, is to help them develop their own small businesses or their own social media apps. Second, and perhaps even more significantly, the designation of entrepreneur as a new ideal of contemporary subjectivity has produced a change in how people—and perhaps especially the poor—understand themselves. Many now feel that they have no option other than to become entrepreneurs to escape poverty, especially given the extremely limited options otherwise available to them. Since the discourse of entrepreneurship insists that self-volition is all that is needed to generate results in our flattened post-society landscape, the outcome is that poverty can now only be a personal failing as opposed to the consequence of social divisions, history, and the organization of power. The erasure of any gap between entrepreneurial success and personal effort and morality, and the devolution of social, political, and economic issues onto individuals has powerful effects; in the case of the poor, it has instituted what Lamia Karim calls a “political economy of shame,” wherein economic success or failure translates into a discourse of honour so that “honor and shame codes act as the collateral” (10) for entrepreneurial microloans.

The political theorist Jodi Dean has argued that if there is a single fantasy propping up neoliberalism, despite all of the violence and injustice it has inflicted, it is that everyone can be and indeed is a winner in today’s world (5). Describing the vision of the world outlined by neoliberalism, one could say that it is now the market that supplies the state with its purpose and principles, rather than the state guiding, shaping, and supervising the market on behalf of those subjects—its citizens!—who (at least in theory) collectively legitimate the state’s actions and practices. The multiple claims and demands entrepreneurship makes on us constitute an incredibly powerful and appealing common sense, and one surprisingly difficult to challenge or criticize; in a world of risk and uncertainty,

entrepreneurship not only offers possibilities of order and control but makes claims on human flourishing and self-fashioning. Entrepreneurship today is always about doing something in the world that simultaneously allows one to develop and grow as a person (there's nothing that entrepreneurs do that is boring or tedious, it seems). We need to be careful about being tricked into accepting and even loving neoliberalism by believing in such ideas. After all, no amount of entrepreneurship will be able to address the ills of global capitalism, no matter how many new apps or services vie for the support of the investors on *Dragons' Den*.

The Future of Higher Education

One of the programs that governments claim they can no longer afford to support at the same levels they once did is higher education. Cuts have been made to the budgets of universities and colleges around the world, and tuitions have risen—sometimes dramatically—at both public and private institutions. The most dramatic increases have taken place in California and the United Kingdom, in both cases due to lack of government funding. To address a \$500-million funding gap, the California State University system—where tuitions have doubled since the 2007–08 academic year—announced in March 2012 that it would accept no new admissions in spring 2013 and would cut admissions by 20,000 to 25,000 students in 2013–14 (Asimov). Tuition rates in the University of California system (the research wing of the Cal State system) have climbed to historically high levels, with in-state students paying (in 2012) \$14,460 a year and out-of-state students paying \$37,338. In the United Kingdom, the government of David Cameron lifted the pre-2012 cap on tuition fees (£3,290), leading to a tripling in the tuition rates at most universities. Once again, as part of the government's austerity measures, cuts of more than £4 billion to university funding mean that students have to pay more for their educations while receiving less. Throughout the world, students are enduring larger and larger class sizes and poorer service in every aspect of university life as administrators make cuts to the number of faculty members and support staff.

Canada has hardly been immune to such developments. Tuition rates have increased across the country while government funding has, for the most part, remained flat or even decreased (especially when measured in relation to inflation), even while the expense of providing university education has increased considerably. Over the past 20 years, education in professional schools (such as medicine and business) is no longer subsidized, meaning the full cost has been passed along to students. The current generation of students seems to be getting pressed from all sides. Increases in the cost of living (especially of housing in all Canadian cities) combined with stagnant wages mean that families can't help young people with their educational costs to the degree that they once did, even while everything costs more for the students themselves. The way the majority of Canadian students now manage is by taking on ever-increasing levels of student debt. A report by the Canadian Council on Learning found that the average debt for university graduates in Canada more than doubled between 1990 and 2009, from \$12,271 to \$26,680. The Canadian Federation of Students puts the current figure close to this latter



THE CANADIAN PRESS/Ryan Remiorz.

An estimated 200,000 people attended a march in Montreal on March 22, 2012—one of the largest demonstrations in the province’s history—to highlight student indebtedness and protest the Québec government’s decision to increase tuition fees \$1,625 over five years.

amount—around \$28,000. The vast majority of young people today enter the workforce in an economically compromised position—that is, when they can find work at all—which means their capacity to make choices about the kind of work they do (just to begin with) is also compromised: they have to give themselves over to a system that is doing less and less to help most of us live meaningful lives.

One might ask: What does all this have to do with popular culture? Though to a lesser degree than one might have expected, given its impact on people around the world, the market crash has become a theme explored within popular culture. Beneath the humour of the popular 2011 film *Bridesmaids* was a more serious message about the impact the financial crisis could have on an individual life. Because Annie Walker (Kristen Wiig) has had to close her bakery due to the economic downturn, she has to work in a low-paying retail job at a jewellery store; when she loses this job, too, she has to move out of the apartment she shares and back into her childhood home with her mother. The competition she engages in with Helen (Rose Byrne) over the planning of their friend Lillian’s (Maya Rudolph) wedding is as much about class as it is about personal jealousy. Helen is wealthy and uses her riches to create lavish wedding events for Lillian, who will be entering the 1 percent through her marriage to a Chicago-based financier. As with many films, the

life crisis that Annie endures has what one presumes is a happy ending (she finds a new boyfriend, one with a presumably secure working-class job as a police officer), and the glamorous parties and wedding that audiences witness are the typical stuff of pop culture fantasy. Annie's relegation to the sidelines of that world is represented as an instance of personal bad luck, rather than an indictment of the systematic inequality that sustains its excess. Yet economic struggle is a part of her story as it is not in romantic comedies of the 1990s and early 2000s. Other popular films that feature the recent financial crisis as a theme also tend to use it to create a narrative arc in which, in the end, the ability to endure uncertainty results in individual growth and maturity, with things on the upswing in the closing frames. In *The Company Men*, downsized corporate executive Bobby Walker (Ben Affleck) is forced to join his brother-in-law's home renovation company, itself struggling with the effects of the downturn. After Bobby has learned the value of "real" work, the film ends with his move to a new company, one in which he has a more prominent executive role to play and one that promises (under the leadership of Tommy Lee Jones's character, Gene McClary) to engage in the capitalist game in a more fair and ethical fashion.

There are, of course, more critical narratives of life in the early 21st century, including ones that take a hard look at the consequences of neoliberalism. The bleakness of the contemporary economic environment is the subject of black comedy in the television series *Breaking Bad*, in which high-school chemistry teacher Walter White (Bryan Cranston), recently diagnosed with lung cancer, sets up a methamphetamine lab to support his family. The 2011 film *Warrior* offers an only slightly less extreme take on contemporary working life through the stories of two brothers competing (unbeknownst to each other) in a high-stakes mixed martial arts tournament. One, an ex-marine, is trying to earn money to support the widow of a fellow soldier who died in combat; the other is a high-school physics teacher facing the threat of mortgage foreclosure. For both, ultimate fighting presents itself as the only viable means to make a living. Even though there have been an increasing number of pop culture narratives like these that address the realities of life in the wake of the financial crisis, it is telling that very few of them deal with the impact of neoliberalism on minorities—even though the latter were disproportionately impacted by the crash.

Both *Breaking Bad* and *Warrior* caricature the myth of the resourceful entrepreneur, taking chances, getting his hands dirty (and in the myth it's generally a "he," though Nancy Botwin [Mary Louise Parker] in *Weeds* offers a suburban feminine counterpart to Walter White) to keep his family housed and fed. The reality, however, is not that different from the satire, as we see in Werner Herzog's documentary *Into the Abyss* (2011), which investigates the lives of two accused murderers on death row in Texas. As one might expect, the film questions the ethics of the death penalty and probes the U.S. penal system. In his complex and multifaceted exploration of the social context that produced the murderers and their victims, Herzog portrays a community that has largely been abandoned by mainstream America. The majority of the characters have been involved with the criminal justice system at some point, and there is widespread un- or underemployment. The violent displays of masculinity and fetishism for status objects like cars (the theft of

a car is what led to the murders the film investigates) are just some of the outcomes of a society in which accumulation is valued above all else but available to the degree suggested by images in popular culture only to a very few.

We all know that real life does not match up to film and television; our expectations and understanding of the good life are nevertheless shaped by the panoply of images and sounds we consume on a daily basis, and these are more likely to be filled with the fantasy of possibility than with a blunt assessment of the character of the reality we collectively inhabit. A few exceptions, some of which we've noted above, prove the rule of a commercial media landscape that is dominated by images of exceptional wealth and success (*Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, *The Real Housewives*, most sitcoms, and, in a different vein, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*), which we might sometimes mock but which also offer fodder for fantasy.

More than a half-century after Horkheimer and Adorno's comments on the culture industry (see Chapter 4), we need to ask ourselves once again: Do the images and symbols circulated in popular culture act as a salve for the wounds of the social and economic decisions we are living with today? Does it prevent even more of us from taking to the streets and questioning why we continue to accept as normal a society in which many are fated to live in debt, with poor work opportunities and without the objects and experiences that popular culture so freely promises?

Suggested Activity 10.3

How have the effects of economic crisis been represented in popular culture? Is there a difference across genres or forms of popular culture (e.g., music, film, television, YouTube videos)? What kinds of issues or themes are prominent in these representations? And what kinds of things tend to be overlooked or occluded?

WHAT'S NEXT?

One of the major political mysteries that we collectively face today is how a neoliberal rationality—"a new and virulent form of capitalism ... with an even more disastrous impact on the fabric of a common life than its predecessors" (Budgen 150)—has in the space of two decades become accepted as the new normal around the world. Jean and John Comaroff point to the extremity and depth of its effects:

Neoliberalism aspires, in its ideology and practice, to intensify the abstractions inherent in capitalism itself: to separate labor power from its human context, to replace society with the market, to build a universe out of aggregated transactions. ... Formative experiences—like the nature of work and the reproduction of self, culture, and community—have shifted. Once-legible processes—the

workings of power, the distribution of wealth, the meaning of politics and national belonging—have become opaque, even spectral. The contours of “society” blur, its organic solidarity disperses. (305)

We face a huge array of challenges in the new century. What we need perhaps most of all to navigate these—and the ones still to come—are new narratives of social being and belonging. The emerging technologies we discuss in this chapter may help to organize, synthesize, and share these narratives, but it is popular culture’s makers and “users”—including the readers of this book—who will create and, ultimately, enact them.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING AND VIEWING

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