

Politics and the Internet: A Phenomenological Critique

Gregory Cameron
Wilfrid Laurier University

Abstract

“Politics and the Internet”¹ is a critique of the political potential of the internet from the perspective of Husserl’s discussion of intersubjectivity and objectivity in *Cartesian Meditations* and *Origins of Geometry*. Unlike other critiques of the internet from a phenomenological perspective, this paper does not consider the limitations of internet communication from the perspective of the body. Here, rather, the prime concern is with the constitution of objectivity and the ways in which the internet limits this constitution. The paper builds towards a consideration of the essential role of objectivity as a condition of possibility for politics and community. Implicit in the argument is a defence of print and broadcast media.

Keywords: Politics, Phenomenology, Internet, Objectivity, Intersubjectivity

According to a complaint that has haunted broadcast media more or less from their inception users have no immediate means by which to reply to the messages transmitted and by extension no direct means to control the kind of information broadcast. Internet based communication technologies – computers, laptops, smart phones, cell phones, etc., henceforth referred to simply as the internet – resolve this issue by giving every user the immediate capacity to respond to messages received or to create their own messages, while undesirable messages can be blocked or filtered. The basic argument suggests that whereas broadcast media are hierarchical, the internet is democratic (Poster 1995; cf. Holmes 2005). As an extension of its being democratic, many have argued that the internet also has the potential to recreate the political dimension of democratic communication (Poster 2000). The

internet and in particular so-called “social media”, it is said, are recreating both a sense of community and revivifying the democratic public sphere.

After almost twenty years of the internet, as a common communication device, it is worth reflecting on the basis for these arguments. On one level, the arguments appear self-evident. Most of us will never make TV shows or respond to TV shows on TV shows. The internet does change this. I can respond to anything I read or watch or hear on the internet through the internet. I can join discussion groups, engage in social media or e-mail friends; I can set up a blog, which, at least in principle, everyone with a computer can have access to; the internet gives me more or less unlimited access to information and a more or less unlimited ability to respond. Nonetheless, the positive responses to the introduction of the internet are also somewhat surprising. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries left-wing and socialist political movements have almost invariably adopted a positive attitude towards the development of new technologies and have equally invariably been disappointed. The three stages of alarm, resistance, exhaustion mentioned by McLuhan as responses to new stresses on life, seem to produce quite different reactions in those committed to socialist struggles, but the end results have been the same (McLuhan 1994, 26). It is as if it were being claimed that while the new developments in communication technologies have each individually failed to produce the desired results, their integration will be different. Such a situation would appear to demand caution and at least some degree of scepticism and perhaps a gesture to those thinkers who have engaged in a critique of modern social and technological developments.

In the following, I intend to re-engage the basic argument concerning the distinction between broadcast technologies and internet based technologies and their respective political significance from a phenomenological perspective. In particular, I will consider the nature of internet communication from the perspective of Husserl’s theory of intersubjectivity. By and large, when phenomenologists have come to consider the internet they have proceeded from arguments generated by

Merleau-Ponty (Dreyfus 2001; Nagel 1998) and in particular arguments concerning the embodied nature of subjectivity. While some indication of this argument can already be found in Husserl's *Ideas II* and *Cartesian Meditations*, my intention is to focus more specifically on Husserl's notion of the intersubjective constitution of objectivity (Husserl 1999). The reason for this focus, it will be argued, is that it is through the constitution of objectivity that communication takes on a political dimension. The term objectivity here is not understood as a correlate for truth, but rather as the constitution of an object about which truth could in principle be achieved. Objectivity is not what actually exists in distinction from the subject, but the infinite task of an intersubjectively constituted community. Implicit in the notion of objectivity is the alter ego, others for whom the object is given whose experience of the object is at least potentially significantly different from my own. The object that is given need not be a physical object, it may also be an event, an idea, a theory or even a task. Moreover, the others who constitute the community are always necessarily others whose experiences can never become my experiences. This basic distinction – that the other's experiences are inaccessible to me – is the transcendental condition of possibility for both community and objectivity. There exists a necessary difference at the heart of any and all community and any and all object constitution. Moreover, the object is as much constituted through disagreement as it is through agreement. The object constitutes a tension at the heart of any and all "community development" and this precisely because the community only comes into being through the alterity of the other, a point that refers both to the other of the community and others within the community.

Many of the existing critiques of internet based communication are predicated on problems that can be encountered with more than one medium. This is especially true of the argument based on the disembodied nature of internet communication. Disembodied subjectivity is also a condition with print based communication and radio. The body of the person I read is also clearly absent. Moreover, since Derrida's deconstruction of the privileging of speech over

writing, we have known to be suspicious of the metaphysical implications of the idea of presence (Derrida 1973). And indeed, Husserl's analyses of intersubjectivity reveal a fundamental non-presence of the other ego. This fundamental non-presence of the other renders any discussion about the presence of the embodied other as constitutive of intersubjectivity problematic. The other is always already mediated. The presence of the other's body is not the presence of the other. We speak after all of the body of writing and textual embodiedness is just as much embodiedness as embodiedness thought in more biological ways. The other is only present in her absence, and this is the case whether we are speaking of the other beside me or the other that I read who has been dead for the past two thousand years. Which of course does not mean that there is not a difference. The fact of being disembodied in the normal sense is not an argument against intersubjectivity on the internet. The non-presence of the other is constitutive of the very condition of intersubjectivity and thus of the possibility of objectivity.²

According to the argument of the *Cartesian Meditations*, intersubjectivity is the condition of possibility for objectivity for the simple reason that without intersubjectivity determination of the object could only ever be subjective. But this also means that the other's experiences, as condition of possibility for objectivity, cannot be accessible to me in the original. If the other's experiences were accessible to me in the original, then they would be my experiences and the experience of the object would remain subjective. This would seem to suggest that the other, in order to indicate his or her intentions, would of necessity need to communicate with me. This however would be an oversimplification of the argument. Intersubjectivity is the condition of possibility for communication and not the other way around. Implicit in the very idea of communication is the experience of the otherness of the one with whom I communicate. This experience of otherness however itself implies that I have previously experienced the other as another ego, as someone or something that shares this (the ego) fundamental similarity with me. According to Husserl, this fundamental similarity is not something that needs to be deduced from experience, but is rather something experienced.

(I see someone or something engaged in an activity that I might at another time be engaged in.) Nonetheless, this fundamental similarity of having an ego is not something that I have direct access to, I do not directly experience the ego of the other, rather the ego is mediated by the “body” of the other. This body, however, need not be the body of another human being, it may be the cry of the other heard from a distance, or it may be another animal, or even perhaps a robot.³

The intersubjective character of the experience is the response to the experience that we make, a response that is always mediated, but is never necessarily mediated by another human being, nor by language. There is always a “body” involved in intersubjectivity, but this body is never necessarily the body of another human being.

The problem of the body, however, is not the whole story in considering the problem of intersubjectivity. We need to reintroduce the issue of objectivity before we can begin to re-engage with the question of intersubjectivity. According to Husserl, the very possibility of objectivity requires the sense “other ego”. Objectivity requires that the object I consider be capable of being considered by others. This idea of other egos is already contained in the notion of transcendent object. One of the characteristics of transcendent objects is that their experience is adumbrated. What this means is that subjectively I only ever perceive objects from a particular perspective. I never see the front back and sides of an object at the same time, but I do nonetheless experience the object and not merely one of its sides. The other sides are appresented. This idea of other sides appresented in my experience of objects already indicates the role played by other egos. The appresented backside of the building I am looking at contains an implicit appresented consciousness of that backside.

The appresentation of the other consciousness leads Husserl to remark that “even if a universal plague had left only me”, “such aloneness in no respect alters the natural world-sense, ‘experienceable by everyone’, which attaches to the naturally understood ego” (Husserl 1999, 93). Even in the absence of any other human being or even any other animate being whatsoever, in the natural attitude, the sense of the object as

that which can be experienced by anyone is not lost and remains a potential aspect of any consideration of the object. The same point as a corollary applies to internet communication concerning objects or even internet communications themselves. Even in the absence of the other we can always ask what an other would think of a given object or event. The objects that are constituted on the internet also have the sense “experienceable by everyone”. Objectivity is not predicated on the presence of any empirically determinable embodied being and definitely not on any empirically determined human being.

It would appear, then, that Husserl has already addressed the problem of intersubjectivity on the internet. It is true that intersubjectivity is constituted originally through embodied beings, but the absence of other embodied beings (in the normal sense of embodied, if there is a normal sense of embodied) at any given time does not preclude the possibility of objectivity (Husserl 1989, 333). This point was again stressed by Husserl in one of his later writings on the intersubjective character of knowledge and objectivity. In the “Origins of Geometry”, Husserl indicates the essential role played by writing in the constitution of ideality (Husserl 1970, 360 ff).

Given time, it would be necessary to work through Husserl’s “Origins of Geometry” in detail. The discussions of language and ideality, of the communal character of language, of the remarks on language and horizon, are each significant in the context of a fully worked out theory of communication on the internet. Here, remarks will have to be limited to the explicit discussion of writing. Husserl’s attention is turned to writing at the moment the intersubjective possibility of actively understanding the communication of objective ideal structures reaches the threshold of this community or this life. The ideal constructs of geometry are limited by the possible death of the individual geometer or by the disappearance of the community of geometers. Writing overcomes this empirical limitation and thus extends the ideality of sense beyond the limits of any empirically and naturally determined consciousness. Husserl writes:

The important function of written, documenting linguistic expression is that it makes communication possible without immediate or mediate personal address, it is, so to speak, communication become virtual. Through this, the communalization of man is lifted to a new level. Written signs are, when considered from a purely corporeal point of view, straightforwardly, sensibly experienceable; and it is always possible that they be intersubjectively experienceable in common. But as linguistic signs they awaken, as do linguistic sounds, their familiar significations. The awakening is something passive; the awakened signification is thus given passively, similarly to the way in which any other activity which has sunk into obscurity, once associatively awakened, emerges at first passively as a more or less clear memory. In the passivity in question here, as in the case of memory, what is passively awakened can be transformed back, so to speak, into the corresponding activity: this is the capacity for reactivation that belongs originally to every human being as speaking being. Accordingly, then, the writing-down effects a transformation of the original mode of being of the meaning-structure... It becomes sedimented, so to speak. But the reader can make it self-evident again, can reactivate the self-evidence. (Husserl 1970, 361).

One of the most striking things about this passage is that Husserl already indicates that the “communalization of man is lifted to a new level” in communication becoming virtual. It is as if Husserl is already indicating the revitalization of the public sphere that many have associated with the new internet based technologies. Moreover, since Husserl is speaking of writing and not the internet, the becoming virtual can indeed be understood as shifting in yet another way in the move from written or print documents to internet based communication. Despite its tone, and despite the general image that has been generated of Husserl, one can hear in this notion of “becoming virtual” indications of more recent discussions of media effects. Indeed, Husserl’s argument is not unlike that of McLuhan (Skocz 2009). To see this however we need to work through Husserl’s argument carefully.

On first read, it may appear that in the text just cited Husserl is making a distinction between writing and speech, and indeed, in a way he is. The more important distinction, however, is one to which both speech and writing are subject. The whole paragraph is highly ambiguous. Distinctions appear to be made and withdrawn in the same breath: at one moment speech and writing are distinguished and at another they are

equated, leaving the reader unclear what the distinction is. It seems to me, however, that Husserl is working with two distinctions, despite only making one explicit. The explicit distinction between speech and writing is that written documents allow for communication without “immediate or mediate personal address”. This distinction rests on the possible absence of the sender to the receiver and the possible continuation of communication in the absence of any determinate sender or receiver. This is what he means by communication becoming virtual. This absence is not just convenient it is essential. Without writing, geometry or science in general would run up against the limits of memory and mortality and against the limits of the mind’s reasoning capacities. Without writing, science would never be capable of advancing beyond the most rudimentary discoveries. In being written down, the individual or community’s thoughts, ideas and traditions can be preserved through the generations and beyond any determinate life. In being written down they can be added to and developed. But they also run the risk of sedimentation, preventing access to the original motivation behind the thoughts.

Nonetheless, Husserl does not say that the possibility of sedimentation is absent in the case of speaking or thinking. The second distinction Husserl makes is between communication in general and the “original mode of being of the meaning structure”. Contained in this idea is the entire phenomenological project and it will be necessary to limit comments to those which bear directly on considerations of internet communication. The original mode of being of the meaning structure refers us to the intersubjectively constituted objectivities that emerge through meditations on the problems inherent in the initial development of that about which meaning is sought. That the working through of these initial problems is intersubjective does not mean that the original working through involved specific communications, rather it points to the fact that the constitution of any ideal objectivity is already intersubjective. The working through of the problems of the development of the science necessitates the constitution of ideal objectivities which will become the source for further

development. But the further development requires that the ideal objectivities be communicated, which means that they themselves become objects about which others can reason. The reception of these communications, whether in speech or in writing, occurs passively and not actively as the original constitution occurred. It is necessary for the recipient of the communication to re-activate the original sense of what is passively received. This reactivation of sense allows for the possibility of the process being reversed. What emerges in such contexts is akin to an intersubjective activation of sense despite the fact that there is a necessary level of passivity involved in the back and forth of communication. This passivity is not absent in the case of the original sense constitution and Husserl is not suggesting that it is. Husserl's point is that in the original constitution of sense there is a component of activity in the unmediated constitution of the objectivity of the object that, while predicated on various passively accepted modes of givenness or sedimentation, does not passively receive the actively produced results, consciousness does not passively receive the results of its own constituting (Zahavi 2006). As interlocutors or correspondents come to both be in a state of active constitution the communication context comes to correspond to a state of intersubjective communication, but an actual state of intersubjective communication is impossible, communication is always mediated and as such always involves a level of passivity and of further object constitution. Put in other words, so as to develop Husserl's point about writing, with reference to the non-presence of the other ego, intersubjective communication is only ever virtual, an ideal limit that is never in fact achieved. This impossible possibility is part of the meaning of the alterity of the other, and thus part of the condition of the constitution of objectivity.

Nonetheless, the original motivations and meaning structures behind a science are only rarely reflected on as such, rather they come with time to be taken for granted and assumed. Meanings are only rarely returned to the life world out of which they emerge. In the case of face to face communication this presents relatively few problems. Difficulties emerge when our speech becomes abstracted from

the life world. Not surprisingly, in face to face contexts we tend to avoid encounters in which activation of meaning demands a great deal of preliminary work. We come to know with whom we are speaking, and avoid those whose sedimented meaning structures differ significantly from our own. This happens more or less without our thinking about it. Moreover, in face to face contexts certain clues are already provided by the embodied nature of the other. These clues work to determine in advance, as it were, whether or not and how we will engage with the other. All of this leads to some highly problematic social conditions, but the internet is not immune to these kinds of problems! Nonetheless, in face to face contexts it is difficult to avoid all alien sedimented meaning structures. Other people have a tendency to interfere with our own habitual modes of going on and our own pre-constituted and naturalized meaning structures. Indeed, one could say that a very high percentage of non-internet based communication is the equivalent of spam, without however the internet's sophisticated filtering systems. Moreover, it is not entirely clear that avoidance of this condition would be desirable, even if a great many people do in fact attempt, to the extent this is possible, to limit such encounters. World horizons are constantly being transformed by encounters with others and with objects that one has no conscious desire to encounter. These encounters disturb sedimented communities of sense making, opening them onto the other in a manner that can never be predetermined with respect to consequences and as such opening the social world onto other possibilities of communal being. (This is not to say that these other possibilities are always or even generally positive...)

In the case of writing, of communication become virtual, the potential absence of both immediate and mediate address distanciates the communication event from any determinate lifeworld giving the communication event a certain autonomy with respect to the meaning structures it elicits. Put another way, the writing itself becomes objective insofar as it can now be experienced by anyone and subject to analysis as an object in its own right. In becoming objective, however, the written document increases the potential for merely passive reception and for

sedimentation of its content. The autonomy of the newly created objectivity brings about conditions in which the written document rather than the meaning structures it conveys can become the focus of communal attention. The written document, in other words, is simultaneously the condition of possibility for and a threat to scientific inquiry. This radical ambivalence between condition of possibility and threat is equally present in the realm of politics. Political institutions, not to mention political texts, always run the risk of generating sedimented meaning structures to such an extent that the object of politics relinquishes some of its recalcitrance, ceasing to be the infinite task of the community, becoming the sedimented condition of future meaning structures and future institutional possibilities. The task of both politics and science is to remain constantly resistant to this process of sedimentation, but this vigilance is itself an infinite task and as such despite best intentions can never be thought of as having been successful. Indeed, what emerges here is one of the most profound paradoxes of Husserl's sedimentation thesis; success at eliminating sedimented meaning structures, if it were possible, would itself be the threat of a new process of sedimentation. Nonetheless, the fact of the objectivity of the written document means that it is always at least in principle accessible by anyone and this means that it perpetually remains open to the possibility of reactivation even after generations of sedimented and passively accepted interpretations.

One of the most significant problems with the de-sedimentation or reactivation thesis today is that Husserl assumes that it is in fact possible. Its impossibility seems more likely, and its impossibility seems most likely in consideration of social and political issues. Sedimentation seems more like an essential feature of object constitution than something that can be subordinated to the "original mode of being of the meaning structure". Indeed, the very idea of an original mode of being of the meaning structure remains highly enigmatic. Both its reactivation and its maintenance constitute or so it seems infinite tasks and infinite tasks precisely of the already intersubjectively constituted community. This in turn appears to render problematic the very idea of an infinite task. If the "original" is already a product of sedimentation, then the infinite task would

appear to be a product of illusion or wishful thinking. Moreover, the sedimentation thesis appears to preclude the possibility of radical originality in its very formulation. Existing meaning structures are themselves a product of sedimentation and cannot be understood as original; all meaning structures refer us back to an original that it is the task of the philosopher to reactivate and forward to an ideal that it is the responsibility of the community to preserve in its openness as an ideal. But both of these ideals insofar as they become sedimented or are the product of sedimentation run the risk of closing us off to unforeseen possibilities of meaning constitution. This would seem to begin to suggest another argument in favour of the internet. The internet opens us onto possibilities of meaning constitution that were previously impossible. Just as writing renders science possible, making possible what would have been previously inconceivable, so too does the internet. Problems clearly emerge here. While the argument seems to make a great deal of sense, it also leaves those who would like to understand the transition mute. If the new technological conditions are radically transforming the mode of being of the meaning structure then one clearly cannot resort to previously constituted meaning structures in order to understand the effects.

In making this argument however we appear to be moving in circles. Either we relinquish the desire to comprehend the meaning structures that are coming into being or we work continuously to reactivate the sense of what is in the process of being lost to potentially new processes of sense making. The paradox is that it is the latter that most attempts to understand the effects of new communications technologies are attempting to do. The discussion of the communal and political potentials of the internet are perhaps as much attempts to preserve previously sedimented meaning structures as they are attempts to understand the internet. The problem however is that the previously sedimented meaning structures may prevent us from understanding the meaning structures that are emerging in and through the new technologies. The phenomenological version of this paradox indicates that even if sedimentation of previous acquired meaning structures is an essential condition, de-sedimentation also remains an essential

feature of all meaning constitution. Moreover, this relation between sedimentation and de-sedimentation or reactivation works in two ways at once. On the one hand, there must be a continuous reactivation of the original meaning structure of that which may be in the process of becoming de-sedimented in order that this process be noted; on the other hand, there must be a continuous de-sedimentation of precisely those sedimented meaning structures that need to be reactivated in order that one remains open to the possibilities inherent in the transforming conditions. The point, of course, is that even if the very idea of an original mode of being of the meaning structure is relinquished this does not preclude either the possibility or necessity of processes of reactivation and de-sedimentation even though we now have to accept the fact of the object as both an infinite task and fundamentally recalcitrant to any process of absolute sense-making.

Moreover, it should also be noted that the object itself, and here the object is at least at a minimum the internet, is not a passive recipient of senses, but an active element in generating processes of sedimentation which can radically contradict previous processes of sedimentation. Nonetheless, the fact of previous processes of sedimentation can make us radically incapable of experiencing processes of sedimentation which are nonetheless underway. Here, it seems to me, Husserl's notion of protention in his analysis of internal time consciousness is extremely powerful. Protention indicates a level of inertia in the very condition of experience. Insofar as the now of experience is extended in the structure Retention-Protention, Husserl indicates the possibility of the future orientation of experience being overdetermined by elements retained from previous experiences. Indeed, the very structure of time consciousness makes processes of sedimentation possible, if not necessary. The relation between retention and protention as a condition of possibility of sedimentation, gives to the process of sedimentation something of the character of resistance in Freudian psychoanalysis. The inertia of protention covers over the recalcitrance of the object in its emerging processes of sense-making, generating a fundamental tension between

sedimentation and the possibility of emerging original meaning structures.

The possibility of a fundamental tension between sedimentation and activation allows us to consider yet another sense in which writing renders communication virtual for Husserl. Moreover, this further sense of virtual indicates yet another problem with claims concerning the political potential of the internet. The second sense of virtual indicates that despite being written down the words may never in fact be received either actively or passively or may suffer the same fate as spoken words, becoming the victims of time and circumstance. This is clearly a problem with internet communications. As the proliferation of messages on the net approximates infinity, there is an increasing possibility that a posted message will never be received. This is one of Herbert Dreyfus's main criticisms of internet research (Dreyfus 2001). While search engines differ in the way they organize relevance of information, it is essential that the search make selections based on information input by the user and categorize the selection in terms of some predetermined criteria. As the quantity of information on the internet increases, it becomes more and more likely that information retrieved will not be relevant to the user based on her initial inquiry even with more and more powerful algorithms. Moreover, much of what is relevant will not appear in the initial pages of the search results and thus may be ignored altogether. For Dreyfus, the problem here is that the internet (indeed, he suggests, all data search engines) has no means by which to ascertain specific intentions behind a given search entry. Where classification of search results occurs by frequency of "hits" this can mean that the most relevant search results are never even considered and that information relevance comes to be based on a kind of opinion poll or popularity contest.

Dreyfus is concerned to indicate that data search engines make inevitable the fact that relevant information will be overlooked; the trajectory of the argument being developed here is far more concerned with information being overlooked because of previously established meaning structures. For Dreyfus the problem of overlooked material is a problem intrinsic to the search engine, for us the problem is also with

the protentional character of experience, the predetermined meaning structures of the potential user. The continuity with the argument made above should be self-evident. There the issue was with experience itself and here the issue is with the content of that experience, though the two cannot be rigorously separated. There the analysis was noetic, here we turn to the noematic. For Dreyfus the issue is relevance of information, for us it is irrelevance of information according to previously established meaning structures. The significance of this shift can perhaps best be indicated by a consideration of face to face contexts. In face to face contexts it is enormously difficult, if not impossible, to avoid alien processes of sense making. Different people react to this in different ways: for some it is highly disturbing, for others exhilarating, for others still a fact to be ignored to the extent this is possible. Nonetheless, the possibility of a disruption of established possibilities of sense making is a constitutive possibility of the life world.

In face to face contexts the issue is not what is overlooked, but the unanticipated that cannot be overlooked. The unanticipated that cannot be overlooked has the potential to reactivate sedimented or naturalized meaning structures, opening consciousness onto a wider world or generating conditions of apprehension. Importantly, the subject within conditions of face to face encounter has few means by which to prevent disruptive encounters and often very few means by which to respond. My intentions, in fact, are forever being thwarted by unanticipated objective conditions. These conditions resist my previously established processes of sense making, de-sedimenting previously acquired meaning structures. Meaning structures, in face to face contexts, are more or less at the whim of objective conditions. The object itself poses a challenge to processes of sedimentation. This does not mean that within such contexts new forms of sedimentation do not occur or that there is not a continuous process of re-sedimentation, but that these are themselves constantly subject to challenges from objective conditions. In face to face contexts there is no means by which to eliminate completely the unanticipated or recalcitrant object.

The distinction I am making can be easily understood by considering the difference between the internet and a library.

Initially, internet and library work in similar ways, both begin with search engines. The user enters the library or internet search engine with some predetermined question or some predetermined object in mind. Entering the question into the search engine, whether it be electronic or card based matters little, the user generates a list of possible responses. Some of these responses will be of little interest, some will be related to the initial search merely accidentally (two people with the same name), some will be related but not quite what one is looking for, some will be not quite what one was looking for, but nonetheless contribute a mode of proceeding given the initial question, and sometimes one will find what one is looking for. Strikingly the same situation occurs here as occurs with card catalogues, the difference is not a difference of possibility but a difference of speed, ease and possible responses. On the internet, a failed search is easily rectified, a new search takes seconds to conduct, possible responses can be easily saved and new questions asked based on insights derived from initial search, and all more or less instantaneously. The problem lies not in the possibilities of questions that can be asked or the speed with which responses occur, the difficulty lies with the fact that every search is based entirely on user input. The object that emerges as a consequence of user input is an object to some extent determined by user input. It is the subjects predetermined meaning structures that determine which objects will emerge. And indeed part of the problem here is that as users become more sophisticated in their search techniques, the object that emerges is more and more likely to correspond with intentions, i.e. more and more likely to correspond with predetermined meaning structures. Again all of this applies to the library user or the bookstore user up to a point. As soon however as the library user leaves the catalogue, the object comes to intrude on users intentions. The catalogue, of course, directed me to a particular place in the library, but to get to this place I pass hundreds if not thousands of books that have nothing to do with the book I am seeking, a leisurely stroll brings me into contact with subject matters that I never would have dreamt of entering into a search engine, and probably never would have occurred in the context of my search and

probably would have ignored if they did. When I reach the place where the book I am seeking is supposed to be, it is surrounded by potentially hundreds of books by the same or different authors on the same or more or less the same subject⁴ which I have no choice but to scan if I am to find the book I am looking for and this especially if the book has been mis-shelved. These books are themselves surrounded by groups of books on what someone else – the librarian, the Library of Congress, etc. – has decided are related subjects, quite possibly a connection I would not have made left to my own predetermined meaning structures and as such never would have encountered by means of an internet search. What I encounter in the shelves are a group of objects which quite possibly never would have been the object of a search that I intentionally conducted and quite possibly never would have emerged as the result of an accidental (that is if accidental is even possible here) association of terms I entered into the search engine. What I encounter, as in the case of face to face encounters, is an object or group of objects that have the potential to expand or even disrupt my previously established habits of meaning making.

Of course, it is not the case that when I go to the library, I always encounter objects I would never have dreamt of seeking out, it is at least in principle possible to go directly to the book being sought and not notice any others, and it is the case that in performing internet searches I do sometimes discover things I would never have consciously sought, but the difference is not merely a matter of degree. In scanning the shelves at the library, I am necessarily the passive recipient of another's decisions even if I know exactly what I am looking for. In opening a link on an internet search, in moving from page to page of possible links or in seeking beyond exactly what I am looking for, I am always and necessarily actively engaged in my choices, unless of course I accidentally click a link, but even this accident cannot be traced back to objective meaning structures.

The point here is not that there are too many possibilities available on the internet, as the sheer volume of internet traffic might make one assume; the problem is that the objects encountered are too determined by the subject. The excess of the internet is almost never encountered as excess, whereas the

much smaller excess of the library is instantly encountered as such. The excess of the library is the excess of a world that exceeds the very possibility of my consciousness of it. Recent studies of the internet have suggested that as much as 95% of messages sent are in fact spam, we fail to realize this because most spam is today blocked by filters. The internet is the equivalent of a bookstore or a library that had a device to prevent me from seeing any book that I had not at least to some extent previously intended. The internet is a device that restricts, to the extent this is possible, the objective character of information, the object pole of consciousness, to a mere correlate of a previously established meaning structure. The “real world” opens up, whereas the virtual world closes down, especially as search algorithms become more sophisticated, not because I become a disembodied subject, but because the world ceases to be objective, ceases to be an object potentially recalcitrant to my intentions.

It has been suggested however that, while this may have once been the case, these kinds of limitations of internet communication have been overcome as a consequence of so-called social media. Moreover, the political significance of social media has been manifest in what has come to be known as the “Arab Spring” – the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, and the uprisings in Bahrain and Syria, etc. Two points need to be made, the first philosophical following the above discussion, the second empirical of which I will only say a few words in the context of the discussion of politics below.

The argument above suggests, in part, that one of the consequences of internet based communication is that in order to receive information I have to actively seek it out. Even when receiving e-mail, I have the capacity to filter unwanted messages either manually through deletion or by adjusting the settings on my spam filter. This ability to filter is impossible in face to face interactions. I cannot choose what I want to see or hear because the objective world precisely resists my intentions. Social media, such as facebook, twitter, myspace or academia.edu, etc., are said to be an attempt to return some of this objectivity to internet communication. This argument, however, fails to take into account the structural issues raised

above. While it is not the case that social media precludes my being a passive recipient of messages from others, it is still the case that the levels of active choice far exceed that of face to face contexts. Indeed, what is most striking about social media is that I actually chose precisely those people from whom I will receive information. An internet search in general does not preclude me from acquiring information from people I do not know, people from whom I have not and would not chose to receive information, but social media are actually predicated on this initial choice. In the example of the library above we are confronted by objects for which we would never have deliberately sought, in no way have we restricted the egos that will enter into our fields of consciousness. Social media may not limit the information we may receive, but it has rendered the “egos” from whom we will receive information a determination of my own choices. In the context of social media, I actually have the power to delete not information, but precisely subjects, something that has been attempted in the world of face to face communications, but is increasingly today frowned upon. In the context of normal internet searches it is the object that is a determination of my subjectivity, in social media the subject him or herself is a product of my decisions, a reflection of my own ego. The preconstituted meaning structures then have the potential to not only determine what information I will receive, but even those from whom I will receive it. It is as if, as an ideal, the internet would only provide me with information I had already intended from people with whom I already know and already agree. Not only is the recalcitrance of the object threatened, so too is the alterity of the other ego.

It should not be assumed that the constant references to face to face communication above indicate a reference to some primordial state of communication. This primordial state is already precluded by Husserl’s reference to the essential passivity underlying all communicative acts. The reference to face to face communication has been elicited by the tradition in communication theory which suggests that with the new electronic and more importantly digital modes of communication we are entering a new age of orality. This new age of orality is evidenced in the increasing significance of the

aural over the visual and the increasing potentials of instantaneous communication. The difference between the new and the old lies in the proximity of the other with whom one communicates. Within oral societies, the dominant mode of communication demands the physical proximity of the body of the one with whom I communicate. We have already considered the ways in which this presentation of the difference is riddled with idealist abstractions, but this does not mean that there is not still a difference.

Communication theorists have tended to understand communication epochs solely through the mode of communication and not through the equally significant possibilities of experience and world constitution. As already suggested, within contexts of face to face communication the subject has very little control over the kinds of messages it will receive. The subject, in other words, is an opening onto the world which confronts it with its infinite variety of recalcitrant phenomena. Sedimented meaning structures, with their necessary reference to the intersubjective community, must remain open to and capable of incorporating both the unanticipated and the incomprehensible – unanticipated and incomprehensible at least from the perspective of the previously constituted meaning structure. Meaning structures must remain open to adjustment and reconstitution in their confrontation with the object and thus remain perpetually open to the intersubjective constitution of radically new objectivities. That these objectivities tend to be constituted from within previously sanctioned modes of making sense should not detract us from the perpetual processes of reconstitution necessitated by the inevitability of otherwise recalcitrant objects.

Within this context of face to face communication the other ego is of necessity both a condition of possibility for and a threat to communally sanctioned modes of making a sense. The other ego is the indeterminate other of previously constituted objectivities, precisely that which threatens perpetually to thwart my previously constituted habitualities of making sense. The other ego and the unanticipated or unanticipatable object are the indeterminate horizon of all sense making and as such open the possibilities of making sense onto the infinite and as such open the world onto the possibility of not making sense at all. Strikingly,

perhaps, it is this condition of the possibility of the world not corresponding to my intentions, and thus the possibility of not making sense, that we encounter through the various mass media and in particular through broadcast media. The book I am reading may disturb me, upset my preconceptions, force me to think of things I would rather ignore. Unless the TV program has been seen before, we cannot know in advance, beyond certain basic formal elements, the kinds of images or subject matters it will contain. The broadcast constitutes a kind of radical otherness to our intentions. We can change the channel, but while the TV is on we are subject to the decisions of another and generally another who remains almost completely unknown to us or even anonymous, and this condition is precisely the nature of the technological limitation of the medium itself. And while TV does have the potential to bring about sedimented process of sense making, especially those that correspond to the corporate and political conditions of TV programming, it also has the potential to reveal, by rendering objective, unpleasant or disturbing previously constituted processes of sense making in ways that normal face to face and internet communication do not. Moreover, unlike social media in which we only engage with those with whom we already agree or with those we chose to disagree, TV has the potential to present positions and perspectives from people with whom we would never chose to associate and with whom we may disagree in ways that preclude either face to face or facebook associations.⁵

The internet allows us to transmit messages and generate critique at a rate and in a quantity unprecedented in human history. But it allows sense making to be determined by the subject more profoundly than ever before in the history of humanity. The object which has the potential to disrupt processes of sense making recedes into the background and the world ceases to have the potential to collapse into a state of senselessness. Making sense is an activity that emerges as a consequence of a perpetual confrontation, a confrontation that has the potential to become political as it becomes communal. The object always constitutes a potential threat to previously constituted conditions of sense-making, the subject is of necessity resistant to this threat. The internet runs the risk of eliminating this threat all together. If the internet were the

only means by which we received information, then the possibilities of making sense and even of making sense of the internet would vanish. Making sense only occurs against the threat of no longer making sense and it is this threat of no longer making sense from the perspective of the community that constitutes the space of politics.

At the centre of any political engagement is an object that is the object of potential disagreement; the infinite task of the political community – and here we can think object either as that about which we agree or disagree or as that towards which we are heading, or indeed as the community itself. It is the recalcitrance of these objects with respect to the community that constitutes the space of politics. It is the recalcitrance of the object, the fact that it forces us onto processes of de-sedimentation and re-sedimentation, that constitutes the political community as political. Insofar as internet communication is self-selected communication, the internet decreases the recalcitrance of the object, profoundly restricting the conditions for the constitution of objectivity, completing the potential to fulfill every desire denied to broadcast media, and perhaps in the long run eliminating the very possibility of politics and community.

Although initially the mainstream news media, and again TV in particular, presented the recent revolutions and uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East as though social media played a significant if not decisive role, the same news media have subsequently suggested that the role played may have been overstated.⁶ This fact is not really surprising. A quick glance at the World Bank's Development Indicators (2010), easily available on-line, suggests that in 2009 only 33.5% of the Tunisians, 20% of Egyptians, 18.7% of Syrians and 5.5% of Libyans were internet users. The notion of "internet user" does not imply ownership of the means of access; it includes those who access the internet through cafes and libraries and on university campuses or at work. These numbers should be compared to the more than 75% in the UK and the US. More importantly, the governments of these countries have at one point or another all shut down internet access, and yet events continued to unfold. As such, while it is clear that "social media", where and when they have been

available, have been essential to the dissemination of information to the outside world, their roles in the uprisings themselves – with the possible exception of Tunisia – must have been extremely limited. Of significantly more importance was the information disseminated by Al Jazeera, but even here we are failing to think the uprisings from the perspective of what is essential to the possibility of political action.

Following Husserl, it would be wrong to understand posts on social media as if they were not objects with possible effects. Despite being objects, however, these were not the objects at the heart of the uprisings. At the heart of the uprisings were social and institutional conditions which demanded a communal response or to be more precise constituted a community where previously there was only an aggregate. What occurred was not merely a result of the production and receipt of information, however objective that information was, it has just as significantly been a case of being caught up in conditions as they unfolded without anyone having a clear sense of what was unfolding. Subjectivities are caught up in the radical recalcitrance of the object, they become subject to that object and act in accordance. Thus while North Africa and the Middle East have erupted in demands for fundamental social and political change, in North America and Europe what demonstrations there have been have been motivated by single issues – tuition increases, for example – or have been random and seemingly unmotivated, without even vague underlying objectives.⁷

Despite massive inequalities of wealth, economic conditions that have not been experienced since the thirties, global warming, unjust wars and global insecurity, bankrupt or simply barbaric medical systems, etc. in those places with greatest access to information serious political unrest seems less likely than at any other time in the modern period. In radical distinction from the more affluent periods following WWII, and especially the 1960s and 70s, not accidentally the heyday of television, serious social unrest in the age of the internet appears highly improbable. It appears that the claims concerning social media, rather than giving us insight into

social, political and cultural conditions fulfil a purely ideological function.

The object is the centre about which politics is possible: without this object there is no politics, no community, no subject. The internet does not eliminate otherness; it is always possible that I will stumble unexpectedly across a website that disturbs my expectations. But unlike TV or newspaper articles, communication on the internet is to a much greater extent determined and controlled by the user. The user inputs information and selects what she feels will be relevant topics, she may even select those from whom she will receive information. E-mail can be controlled by spam filters and address blocking, or by deletion. Even what is called web surfing is controlled to a much greater extent by the surfer than channel surfing or the more oceanic variety. This ability for the user to control the kinds of information he/she/it receives is simply not present to the same degree in any other mode of communication. This does not eliminate the fact of intersubjectivity, but it does seriously transform the conditions of object constitution and the objectivity of that about which we communicate. This transformation rather than opening the user onto the world of infinite possibility has the potential to merely sediment, to an unprecedented level, previous acquired meaning structures. Moreover, while the otherness of the other is still a fact to be taken into consideration, this otherness can, at least to a certain extent, be controlled by the user and this seriously transforms the conditions of community constitution. That it is the user who controls the conditions of constitution of both community and objectivity seriously compromises the possibility of anything like a politics or a public sphere from emerging. Much like suburban car culture, the internet user controls and perhaps even eliminates his or her encounters with those who may have the potential to upset processes of sedimentation, and as a result seriously jeopardizes the possibility of the emergence of objective meaning structures. The internet has the potential to work towards the subjectivization of all meaning and community, eliminating the necessary otherness of the other, be it object or ego.

NOTES

¹ I would like to thank the editors and reviewers of Philosophy Study for their insightful comments and suggestions. I would also like to thank members of the Society for Phenomenology and Media and the Society for Existential and Phenomenological Research and Culture for their constructive critique of various versions of the arguments presented here. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Deidre Rose for her constant engagement with and observations on various stages of the production of this paper.

² This argument should not suggest a disagreement concerning the significance of the lived body; the point in this context merely concerns the significance of the body in communication, and indicates that I have no desire to privilege face to face communication as a means by which to argue against the internet. This basic point indicates that this paper will not be concerned with arguments based on the importance of the internet for those incapable, for whatever reason, of engaging in face to face communication. Valery's arguments concerning the radio continue to apply (Valery 1964).

³ A common theme in science fiction. These fictional representations work precisely because the ego is not accessible to the other. What is perceived is the fundamental similarity, and this produces, regardless of technological mediation the experience of other ego. It takes an act of will to not see the android as an other ego and precisely for this reason often stands as a powerful metaphor for racism.

⁴ "Same subject" is also far more complex than it might seem. What the library determines as belonging to the same subject may have no relation to what I might have thought was the subject matter of the book I sought.

⁵ In presenting aspects of the argument here at various academic conferences this particular argument has been the most misunderstood and the most criticized. The reason for this misunderstanding and criticism reveals the extent to which the internet has performed its ideological work. One assumes that information provided by TV will be both already of interest to the viewer and be presented from perspectives with which the viewer already agrees. That this has not always been the case can be ascertained by consideration of images of the Vietnam War during the heyday of TV broadcasting. TV here precisely resulted in massive protests and demonstrations against the existing social and political conditions. One can easily add further examples from the Civil Rights Movement or the Women's Movement. Nothing even remotely comparable has occurred since the introduction of the internet and even less so since the introduction of social media in those places where it is most prevalent.

⁶ See, in particular, Frank Rich's excellent op-ed from February 5, 2011 in *The New York Times* (Rich 2011). Clearly, however, once the cat has been let out of the bag even insightful pieces like Rich's cannot put it back in. No doubt, as Rich explains, part of the reason for the claims made on behalf of facebook and twitter is that news agencies want to appear "hip", but it also gives to the rest of us a sense that we are nonetheless participating in our own small way

simply by signing up. The fact that it is likely that a revolution of the kind seen in Tunisia or Egypt would not have happened if “social media” were more widespread rarely even enters the equation. The question of ideology and the internet requires far more serious consideration. And this is also to say nothing of the enhanced possibilities for surveillance brought about by widespread internet use – an extremely important point in recent events in London and Vancouver which never took on a political dimension

⁷ This observation would seem to be contradicted by the case of Greece, but then one would need to take into consideration that Greece has the smallest number of internet users in the EU at a mere 44%.

REFERENCES

Derrida, Jacques. 1973. *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Translated by David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Dreyfus, Hubert L. 2001. *On the Internet*. London: Routledge.

Holmes, David. 2005. *Communication Theory: Media, Technology and Society*. London: Sage Publications.

Husserl, Edmund. 1970. “Origins of Geometry”. Translated by David Carr. In *The Crisis of European Phenomenology and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Husserl, Edmund. 1989. *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to Phenomenological Philosophy: Second Book*. Translated by Richard Rojcewicz and Andre Schuwer. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Husserl, Edmund. 1999. *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*. Translated by Dorion Cairns. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishing.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1994. *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Nagel, Chris. 1998. “Intersubjectivity and the Internet”. In *Phenomenology of Life and the Human Creative Condition*. Book 3: Ontopoietic Expansion in Human Self-Interpretation-in-Existence. Vol. 54 of *Analecta Husserliana*, edited by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, 179-200. Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Poster, Mark. 1995. *The Second Media Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Poster, Mark. 2000. *What's the Matter with the Internet?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rich, Frank. 2011. "Wallflowers and the Revolution". *The New York Times*, February 5. Accessed August 21, 2011.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/06/opinion/06rich.html>

Skocz, Dennis E. 2009. "Understanding Understanding Media Phenomenologically." In *Glimpse: Phenomenology and Media*. Volume 9 and 10. La Jolla: The Society for Phenomenology and Media.

Valery, Paul. 1964. "The Conquest of Ubiquity". In *Aesthetics*, translated by Ralph Mannheim, with an introduction by Herbert Read. Vol. 13 of *Collected Works of Paul Valery*, edited by Jackson Mathews, 225-6. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

World Bank Development Indicators. 2010. "Internet Users per 100 People". Accessed 21/08/2011.

<http://data.worldbank.org/indicators/IT.NET.USER.P2>

Zahavi, Dan. 2006. *Subjectivity and Selfhood: Investigating the First Person Perspective*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Gregory Cameron is a sessional lecturer in Cultural Studies and Communication Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario. He received his PhD from York University's Social and Political Thought Program.

Address:

Gregory CAMERON

Wilfrid Laurier University

Department of Cultural Studies

Faculty of Arts

75 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario

Canada N2L 3C5

Phone: 519-884-0710, ext.: 3755

Email: grcameron@wlu.ca