With much of public discourse today moving online, democracies that aim at a degree of civility in their internal and international politics face a major challenge: how to maintain the standards and norms of public discourse that have developed over the course of many centuries. Although the discourse of the marketplace, or of government, or of the mass media generally bears little resemblance to conversations in university seminars or at scholarly meetings, book readings, or exhibition openings, intellectuals—defined by Russell Jacoby (1987, 5) as “writers and thinkers who address a general and educated audience”—have played an important role in setting the standards for public discourse. Foremost among these are the need to rely on statements supported by factual evidence and the willingness to listen to others. Intellectuals introduced a degree of structure, style, and self-reflection into public discourse—three qualities seen since the time of Socrates as functional to the quest of truth in intellectual life and justice in public life (Shils 1973).

Democratic political regimes place restraints on excessive power and abusive language. Intellectuals have contributed to restraining both by setting the boundaries of truth and justice and by occasional interventions in the public sphere when these boundaries are breached. While intellectuals rarely have more than a limited impact on politics—which, even in a democracy, is more inspired by practical considerations than by intellectual discourse—interventions by intellectuals, such as Émile Zola’s cry “J’accuse!” during the Dreyfus affair, have served as important reminders of the distinction between good and evil, even when evil abounded.
This is not to say that intellectuals necessarily have a better sense of good and evil than do political representatives. However, ongoing intellectual discourse within a society and practices of public discourse that are inspired by the rules of restraint and inhibition developed in scholarly and other intellectual enterprises help to prevent the association of political might with right. In societies in which intellectual discourse has been muted and the practice of speaking truth to power banned, political leaders can more easily exceed the boundaries of truth and justice. It is therefore worthwhile to explore the effects of online public discourse—in which some of the restraints and inhibitions associated with traditional intellectual discourse are dismissed—on democracy.

Public Thinkers and “Putative Revolutionaries”

Let me begin by adding to Russell Jacoby’s definition of public intellectuals as writers and thinkers who address a general and educated audience an idea proposed by Václav Havel. Havel argued that intellectuals do not merely devote themselves to thinking in general terms about the affairs of the world and the broader context of things but “do it professionally” (quoted in Jennings and Kemp-Welch 1997, 13). I thus abandon the tradition associated with Karl Mannheim’s Ideology and Utopia ([1936] 1968), in which intellectuals were treated as a free-floating stratum, and focus instead on the professional base that grants them the authority to comment on public affairs. As Jennings and Kemp-Welch (1997, 14) point out, intellectuals have never lived what literary scholar Bruce Robbins called a “gloriously independent life” but have had to devise a variety of strategies in order to speak and engage with a wider public.

Pointing at one’s vocational credentials is a major component of these strategies. These credentials may include academic research, published novels, or acclaimed artwork, accomplishments that may or may not be relevant to the public discourse at hand but help to establish public authority and recognition. As Elshtain (2001) notes, political theorists have often expressed widespread discontent over such issues as the disaffection of American citizens from the work of civil society, but it was not until the publication of Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam’s empirical work on the subject, that these concerns won a broad public hearing.
Once public intellectuals are no longer treated as a free-floating stratum, we may consider them as actors in a public arena who compete for scarce resources, including access to the mass media, public recognition and the symbolic rewards associated with it, money, social and political ties, and sometimes power. Magali Sarfatti Larson, a sociologist who writes on professionalism, narrows down the public arena to what she calls “discursive fields” (1990, 35), defined as battlefields in which professionals fight with non-professionals for pre-eminence. And although the “public intellectual” category differs from that of the “professional” in its emphasis on the concern with ideas that extend beyond one’s vocation, public intellectuals can also be conceptualized as participants in the battles over pre-eminence in the discursive fields in which issues of public interest are debated. This is especially evident at times in which a new breed of public intellectuals, with new claims to authority, comes on stage.

This theoretical base is consistent with the market model advanced by Richard Posner in *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline* (2001). Posner calls for an investigation of the factors that create a demand on the part of the general public for access to the ideas and opinions of public intellectuals on issues of general interest, as well as of the factors that determine the supply in response to this demand. The market for public intellectuals, he writes, is highly competitive because many consumers and suppliers exist, both actual and potential, and because entry into the public sphere is not restricted by such requirements as obtaining a licence. Posner’s market model is useful because it directs us to look at the public intellectual not only as a person who speaks truth to power but also as a player in a competitive arena and this model can be applied to the study of online discursive fields because, in spite of claims that the Internet provides “a democratic distribution of access” (Hurwitz 2003, 101), the Internet is indeed a competitive arena. As David Park (2006, 12) writes, “The Internet may support different public intellectuals, and may also support a different kind of interaction between public intellectuals and their audiences.”

The Internet is particularly challenging to “traditional” public intellectuals, that is, those who established their public authority prior to the late 1990s. The Internet has given rise to bloggers who claim authority on an alternative basis, one that does not always put professionalism on center stage. As Park (2009, 267) points out, “They play their cards as putative revolutionaries who represent the true voice of the people.” Indeed,
bloggers often argue that they are now fulfilling the role of public intellectuals, a claim not without merit if we consider Etzioni’s portrayal of public intellectuals as persons who “opine on a wide array of issues, are generalists rather than specialists, concern themselves with matters of interest to the public at large, and do not keep their views to themselves” (2006, 1).

The claim of bloggers to the public intellectual’s role is based on the expansion of “public” to incorporate private concerns that were formerly excluded from the public sphere but are acceptable topics of discussion in blogs, while it also reflects the opportunity now given to many more people than before to comment on public affairs. Daniel Drezner argues that the growth of online venues has in fact stimulated the quality and diversity of public intellectuals. “The Internet,” he writes (2009, 49), “is viewed as a vital aid for the renaissance of public intellectuals. The explosion of online publications, podcasts, dialogs, and especially weblogs has enabled public intellectuals to express their ideas beyond the narrow confines of elite op-ed pages and network television.” Annabelle Sreberny and Gholam Khiabany, studying the blogosphere’s contribution to a realignment of public debate in Iran, make a similar claim. Noting that the social production of intellectuals and, more importantly, of intellectual debate requires public space sufficient to permit debate to emerge, they argue (2007, 272) that the Internet provides such a space, allowing for a “far greater range of voices speaking ‘intellectually’ than ever before.”

In the competitive market of intellectual life, the emergence of new suppliers who have a broader class, gender, and ethnic composition warrants careful attention. In what follows, I offer a case study drawn from my own experience. Although quite limited in scope, it allows for some preliminary observations on this process.

“To the Crowd in its Nakedness Everything Seems a Bastille”

At the end of January 2007, comments I made at the University of Calgary in connection with my recently released book, Blogosphere: The New Political Arena (Keren 2006), were picked up by the Canadian media, which resulted in hundreds of responses in the blogosphere. It appears that my comments on blogs as reflecting an existential state of loneliness in contemporary life had hit a nerve. While of course I stopped short of providing a full account of the book’s theory about the relation between the emancipatory and the
melancholic dimensions of cyberspace, my comments challenged bloggers to think about ways to overcome the constraints on their newly acquired emancipation posed by political parties and marketing agencies, as well as about the difficulty of translating their self-expression in virtual reality into actual political power. The comment that provoked the greatest response was: “Bloggers think of themselves as rebels against mainstream society, but that rebellion is mostly confined to cyberspace, which makes blogging as melancholic and illusionary as Don Quixote tilting at windmills” (quoted in Graveland 2007).

Here are two examples of bloggers’ responses. “Bea,” who describes herself as a young mother and university instructor in Ontario interested in theology, Victorian literature, children’s books, autism, the Turin shroud, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, used the above comment to reflect on the contributions that blogging made to her life and the support she received online. Her reflections inspired other introspective posts and sparked a civil and thoughtful deliberation (“Bea” 2007). On the other hand, “CK”—an American blogger who, according to her profile, is passionate about ideas, programs, and people, focuses on creating value for the companies she works for, and excels at developing clever ideas and programs that engage people around businesses, brands, or causes—took a different line. Readers who approached her blog on 5 February were met with an illustration of a finger pointed at them with the word “LOSER” printed in large type on top of the page. This illustration was accompanied by an open letter, “Dear Dr. Michael Keren,” in which the blogger made harsh comments about Blogosphere: The New Political Arena, a book she admittedly had not read and had no clue about its content or methodology, which did not prevent her from “quoting” from it or implying that the nine case studies analyzed in it were intended as a representative sample of the blogosphere. In no time, the mob was enthused:

Bloggers Swarm Against This Jerk!

*Posted by: vaspers the grate | Monday, February 05, 2007 at 09:18 AM*

Let ‘em have it, CK! That will teach him to generalize too hastily. :)

*Posted by: Cam Beck | Monday, February 05, 2007 at 09:37 AM*

Yeah Cam, go buddy!

*Posted by: vaspers the grate | Monday, February 05, 2007 at 10:51 AM*
There are good reasons for these schmucks to fear us bloggers. Let’s “geet er dunn.”

*Posted by: vaspers the grate | Monday, February 05, 2007 at 10:52 AM (*“CK” 2007).*

Such online talk can be dismissed as esoteric, but not so its exploitation by “CK,” the marketing blogger, who works the mob up, addressing many of them directly:

Hey all you lonely-loser-terrorists: Thank you for voicing-in . . . my jaw just dropped when I read his quotes. So many great points above.

Vespers: Indeed we are more informed than most, great point. I like your note to the “Doctor of Deception” . . . I’d love to see him go a few rounds with you.

Gay: Yep, we have made change and with more consumers coming online co’s are having to let go of more control—that’s change. . . .

Cam: People just need to generalize I guess; such a shame as this guy is clearly missing out and out-of touch as a result (*“CK” 2007).*

In *Crowds and Power*, Elias Canetti ([1962] 1991, 20) wrote that “to the crowd in its nakedness everything seems a Bastille.” Although the crowd forming on CK’s blog does not necessarily resemble the historical crowds Canetti had in mind (and no analogy is attempted here), one cannot avoid thinking that online discourse is also not immune from opinion leaders who stir mass behaviour in order to fulfill political, promotional, or personal goals. The tendency of human groups to turn into mobs under certain conditions has not diminished with the advent of the Internet; if anything, it may even be encouraged by clever political and marketing forces that have learned how to manipulate the free expression it allows.

Bloggers and other Internet users have often emphasized the democratic nature of the new medium, claiming that it provides an open arena for public deliberation similar to the ancient Greek agora, gives public voice to private issues excluded from the formal public sphere, and encourages a politically engaged citizenry. As one blogger writes, “The Internet is the best thing to happen to free choice since Erasmus, the best thing to happen to democracy since John Locke, and the best thing to happen to commerce
since Adam Smith. The Internet is the new Agora, a new market for ideas” (Donovan 2012).

Such references to the agora analogy have been supported by communication researchers such as Vincent Price, in his study of citizens deliberating online. Price (2011, 233) admits that public discussion online differs in fundamental ways from that carried out face to face but argues that its distinctive features “may well prove to help rather than hinder the core attributes of deliberation.” He goes on to emphasize three such features of online discussions: the reduction in social cues, which limits the scope for the projection of social status and may thus encourage less deferential behaviour, thereby undermining status hierarchies; the fact that multiple statements can be input simultaneously, which may promote the sharing of ideas; and the anonymity, which can work to reduce inhibitions and anxieties about expressing one’s honest views, including potentially unpopular ones.

Price’s three features of Internet deliberation stand in contrast to some of the familiar characteristics of intellectual discourse, such as the emphasis on status hierarchies stemming from the need to establish one’s credibility before speaking, the expectation that statements will be made in a linear order rather than simultaneously, and, most notably, the adherence to certain procedures guiding scholarly inquiry, literary work, and other intellectual endeavours, which force a degree of inhibition in the form of structural, stylistic, and other constraints expected to be maintained even in conversations on issues, such as politics, that involve high emotions. Traditional intellectual discourse is thus replaced in online environments by a different mode of deliberation, and the question then arises: what are the political consequences of this transformation?

**Online Commentators**

In pursuit of an answer to this question, I studied the responses to the Globe and Mail’s online article of 31 January 2007 in which my “Don Quixote” comment appeared (Graveland 2007). The article was open to comments from 31 January to 5 February. I tried to place these comments in a typology I developed (Keren 2010) which classifies online statements by their structure, their style, and the degree of self-reflection found in their content. Before showing how the above comments fall into the different cells of the typology, let me go over its main features.
In terms of structure, the typology guides one to ask whether online comments involve a discursive structure, that is, whether the online commentator proceeds by some form of deductive reasoning, mainly by the use of syllogisms or enthymemes (syllogisms lacking one or more components, which can however be inferred), or rather by an intuitive structure in which truisms replace reasoning. In terms of style, it asks whether the writing is generally restrained, temperate, and prudent or instead tends to be aggressive, uncompromising, and bigoted, labelling the former “moderate” and the latter “rabid.” In terms of content, the typology distinguishes between introspective comments, which involve an element of self-reflection and vacuous ones, which lack such an element.

The three variables—structure, style and content—each with two variants yield a total of eight ideal types of online commentators, which can now be applied to the present case.

**Civilized**
The civilized commentator is characterized by a discursive, moderate, and introspective style. He or she uses some form of deductive reasoning, avoids highly charged, tendentious language, and exhibits the capacity for self-reflection, corresponding to Aristotle’s observation in Book III of the *Rhetoric* that “it is not enough to know what to say; we must also say it in the right way.” Here is a representative statement by one commentator:

> Perhaps that is a downside to the growth of the Internet. A technology that is doing so much to bring people together—breaking down barriers across national and cultural boundaries—is also able to separate us physically from . . . fellow human beings. This conversation is a good example of my point. I can share my thoughts about common issues with other readers from across Canada, and even around the world. Yet I could bump into anybody commenting here on a street corner, and never know who they are. I don’t know what they look like. I don’t know what they sound like. I don’t know how they dress or style their hair. All I see is their ideas.

**Egghead**
The egghead maintains the deductive structure of argument and the moderate style associated with the civilized commentator; however, the element
of introspection is missing. I have characterized this style as “vacuous” because it relies on abstract observations that, in the absence of the evaluative dimension associated with the process of self-reflection, easily become airy assertions offered without benefit of critical scrutiny. For example:

Blogs aren’t literature but they provide a good forum for free speech. With objectivity in journalism an oxymoron, blogs provide people the opportunity to present balanced views of the world. If [we] rely on authors and journalists to direct societies, we can end up with the biased and misinformed views that are a detriment to society. Blogs also provide important information such as the “whistle blowing” we were able to see in the corporate scandals in the US.

Contentious
Some online commentators, while adopting a discursive mode of argument and demonstrating a degree of introspection, choose to abandon the temperate, detached style that characterizes civilized discourse. Their statements tend to be opinionated and not necessarily very polite, as in the following case:

Pure rubbish, and I second Mr. Cyr’s statement that the Lonely Blogger is a meaningless characterization. It certainly depends on the blog community. I wouldn’t know about myspace, but blogger and vancouverbloggers organize and encourage social events and meetups. I think most bloggers are just venting about aspects of their lives, or societies and gain a sense of empowerment through their writing. Speaking for myself, it’s cathartic. I don’t really care about my visitor count. I just like the fact that I can speak my mind without any politically correct restrictions. Talk hard.

Pretentious
Sometimes the rabid style illustrated just above accompanies not introspection but vacuous assertions, such as these: “What’s a book if it’s not the original form of blogging? Michael Keren should get a life, maybe.” The above statement could be seen, with some effort, as containing an enthymeme, but the other two characteristics of civilized discourse—moderation and self-reflection—are clearly missing.
**Pristine**

The four ideal-types discussed thus far follow the classical Aristotelian emphasis on reasoned argument—on what I have described as a “discursive” structure. A discourse can, however, adopt a more intuitive approach, abandoning deductive structures of argumentation in favour of appeals to personal experience and statements grounded in standard assumptions and truisms—that is, in “gut sense.” The category in the typology labelled “pristine” refers to those whose writing lacks the discursive structure traditionally associated with intellectual activity and yet remains temperate and introspective. For example:

I tend to agree with Michael Keren on a few points. I tried blogging once, and found it to be fruitless. Nobody pays attention to it unless you have some sort of celebrity or purpose. Incidentally, those who did pay attention were friends of mine that I communicated with regularly outside the internet.

**Noble Savage**

Intuition can be an important source for introspection, but this is not always so. The intuitive thinker, no less than the egghead, may make assertions that involve no element of self-reflection. While the egghead is often ridiculed because we expect that someone who is otherwise immersed in the structure of civilized discourse would be adept at self-reflection, this expectation does not apply to the intuitive thinker. A commentator who maintains a moderate style but lacks the two other qualities of civilized intellectual discourse—namely, reasoned argument and the ability to engage in introspection—is called in the typology a “noble savage.” The following example comes close to this type:

The good and bad thing about blogs is that, being as diverse and populous as the people who surf the web, you can find ample evidence for any pre-conceived notion you may have about them. I think Michael Keren is looking at the phenomena with too narrow and prejudiced an agenda (though admittedly it will sell books to those who are too lazy to question this belief). It’s obvious this is an academic exercise for someone not very acquainted with blogging; it’s not difficult to refute his points by even a cursory glance at what’s out there.
Adolescent
The intuitive form of introspection characteristic of the pristine type may be expressed in a rabid style, rather than in civil, temperate language. This combination yields a method of argument we often witness among self-reflective adolescents, as demonstrated in our case by the following comment:

Excuse me? An academic is pointing fingers and saying that others are lonely and pathetic? How much social time and development did the Professor sacrifice so he could get his PhD? Most Profs I know are pretty anti-social. I understand if he can’t survive by just selling his books to his students as part of the course curriculae he felt he should pick a different topic to publish on. But “bloggers are losers”? Why didn’t he just write a book on how to get rich quick like every other wannabe who wants to boost their sales? It’d be less embarrassing for him. As for examples to the contrary, I know professional business people who link their blogs to assist their clientelle, support groups for parenting, soldiers in Iraq, Doctors serving up north, space tourists, you name it, they’ve blogged it. And we’re supposed to see these people as social misfits? This guy’s on crack! If this is what counts for research from a Prof at U of C I really feel for the students.

“Mass Man”
This brings us to the ideal type I called “mass man” (Keren 2010, 117), a term coined by José Ortega y Gasset in The Revolt of the Masses (La rebelión de las masas, 1930). Ortega’s “hombre-masa” was someone who expresses ideas without accepting the standards one needs to appeal to in a civilized discussion. Indeed, the mass man represents the very antithesis of the civilized commentator. Statements made by this type lack discursive structure, moderate style, and evidence of introspection, as in this example:

Stereotypes are fun, let me give it a try. I see a photo of Phd with what appears to be a bowl cut, and a laptop in the foreground not exactly the archetypal extrovert, is he? This is just such a joke. He’s basing his observations on a whole nine instances, and doubtless, handpicked. If he were doing his Masters he wouldn’t get this past the proposal stage, let alone have the media cover his “research.” It makes me wonder if he isn’t trying to compensate for his own life, or lack their of.
Disinhibition and the Totalitarian Spirit

In an article published in *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, John Suler (2004) analyzed the psychological effects of online discourse, focusing on the loss of inhibitions behind a veil of anonymity. Because anonymity allows online actors to sever the link between their actions and their real-world identity, they tend to be more comfortable about opening up, but they are also more likely to act out. A process of dissociation occurs, whereby “the online self becomes a compartmentalized self” (2004, 322), disconnected from the offline self. This “toxic” form of disinhibition encourages an attitude of irresponsibility toward others, inasmuch as the real person cannot be held accountable for his or her actions online. The ability to avoid the immediate consequences of one’s words and actions may prompt the online actor to express hostilities more freely and to engage in behaviour that is rude, cruel, or otherwise socially unacceptable. As Suler points out, it is “almost as if superego restrictions and moral cognitive processes have been temporarily suspended from the online psyche” (2004, 322).

The responses to the *Globe and Mail* article were varied. Although all eight ideal types could more or less be identified, special attention must be paid to the “mass man” category, which was represented in a high number of responses. What makes the mass man’s disinhibited behaviour important is its rejection of anything associated with intellectualism in the past: the inhibitions stemming from the traditional need to adhere to rules of structure, style, and self-reflection are abandoned. Public discourse requires rules and procedures—a condition that has not been sufficiently stressed by Internet theorists. Such theorists often compare online discourse to the deliberative public sphere described by Jürgen Habermas in relation to Europe of the modern era. However, Habermas did not ignore the importance of the laws and procedures that guide public deliberations. According to Habermas, “Discourse theory has the success of deliberative politics depend not on a collectively acting citizenry but on the institutionalization of the corresponding procedures and conditions of communication” (1994, 7).

Public discourse that lacks rules and procedures and is conducted within a setting that allows human inhibitions to be abandoned may in fact be more consistent with totalitarianism than with deliberative democracy. The warnings issued by Jacob Talmon to this effect are worth recalling. In *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952), Talmon was concerned with the
emergence, in the eighteenth century, of a totalitarian form of democracy concurrently with the liberal variety. These two currents have continued to exist side by side, and Talmon regards the tension between them as the most vital issue in modern history. Although his analysis deals with eighteenth-century political philosophy, some of the origins of totalitarian democracy resemble the features attributed, often in tones of praise, to online discourse. Talmon ([1952] 1970, 5) points to the “decline of the idea of status consequent on the rise of individualism,” which “spelt the doom of privilege”; the view of human beings as an “abstraction,” independent of the historical groups to which they belong; the blurring of the distinction “between the sphere of personal self-expression and that of social action”; and the rise of a “vanguard of the enlightened.” These trends are associated with democratic ideals but are also powerful vehicles of totalitarianism, the use of extreme compulsory measures by, or in the name of, an enthused mob.

Talmon saw the origins of totalitarian democracy in Rousseau’s appeal, in The Social Contract (1762), that the people as a whole, not just a small representative body, should take part in the political process. For Talmon, Rousseau demonstrated the close relation between popular sovereignty, taken to an extreme, and totalitarianism. “It is commonly held that dictatorship comes into existence and is maintained by the indifference of the people and the lack of democratic vigilance,” writes Talmon, and “there is nothing that Rousseau insists on more than the active and ceaseless participation of the people and of every citizen in the affairs of the State” ([1952] 1970, 47). But this is where Rousseau abandons the democratic practices developed by the ancient Greeks and unwittingly provides the ideational base of modern totalitarian dictatorships:

Saturated with antiquity, Rousseau intuitively experiences the thrill of the people assembled to legislate and shape the common weal. The Republic is in a continuous state of being born. In the pre-democratic age Rousseau could not realize that the originally deliberate creation of men could become transformed into a Leviathan, which might crush its own makers. He was unaware that total and highly emotional absorption in the collective political endeavor is calculated to kill all privacy, that the excitement of the assembled crowd may exercise a most tyrannical pressure, and that the extension of the scope of politics to all spheres of human interest and endeavor, without leaving any room
for the process of casual and empirical activity, was the shortest way to totalitarianism. (Talmon [1952] 1970, 47)

The participants in online discourses of the twenty-first century differ in many ways from the excited crowds associated with totalitarian democracy. The breakdown of status hierarchies in cyberspace generally does not involve the guillotine, and political activism often consists of no more than pressing a “Like” button on Facebook. But the seeds of totalitarian democracy that Talmon detected in the context of the Enlightenment may be found in any political process marked by disinhibition.

Let me stress again that no analogy between the participants in online discourse and the frenzied mobs of the French revolution or the interwar era is intended here, nor am I trying to apply a unified behavioural model to the varied individuals in cyberspace. My argument is rather that the new media cannot simply be equated with the agora without considering warnings, such as those issued by Ortega, on the political consequences of public discourse that lacks inner inhibitions or constitutional constraints. Political discourse that does not respect norms and standards, Ortega argued, does not allow a civil society to emerge: “Niceties, norms, courtesy, mediation, justice, reason . . . What was the original point of such inventions, of creating all these subtle complications? They are all summed up in the word ‘civilization,’ which in its root, *civis*, ‘citizen,’ discloses its authentic origin. It is this concept which strives to make possible the city, the community, life in common (1985, 64).” Indeed, civil life is hard to imagine when intellectual discourse turns into mob rule.

**Righteous Mobs and Civil Society**

Internet researchers have often adopted an optimistic view of the potential contribution of online discourse to the renewal of a sense of citizenship and the revitalization of civil society. As a medium that encourages both chaos and consensus—in that it lacks order and authority but allows thousands of individuals to form affective bonds—the Internet has seemed to many to hold political promise. In his *Spirit of the Web*, published in 1999, Wade Rowland expressed his hope that the age of information, blossoming at the end of the bloodiest century in history, would help to usher in an era of greater humanity:
The world suggested by digital networks . . . finds beauty, meaning, order and life in chaos. It suggests a civilization that promotes and values diversity, even anarchy. It suggests a politics that organizes from the bottom up, valuing nimbleness above persistence, honor above duty, freedom above security, cooperation above competition, consensus above authority, and [an] approach to communication that is bilateral rather than unilateral, valuing the informal conversation over the formal address. (1999, 377)

Internet theorists have been particularly enthusiastic about the advent of blogs, with their blurring of the divide between the private and public spheres. In A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age, Zizi Papacharissi argues that, by providing citizens with a space within which to express private concerns and give voice to marginalized interests, blogs offer a means to revive a civic arena. “Blogs,” writes Papacharissi (2010, 148), “present the contemporary terrain where ascetic practices of narcissism untangle the complex relation of the self to its own self, and, by extension, to the democratic environments that it inhabits” (148). Acknowledging that participation in civil society requires a consideration of the public good, she correctly raises the question of how it is that “the private sphere can sustain a new civic vernacular through which individual citizens may connect back to publics, counter-publics, and hybrid spheres as they choose” (132). Her response:

The unique contribution of blogs lies not in enabling the public good, but rather in challenging the premises upon which it rests. Their function is expressive first and deliberative only by accident. . . . Thus blogs and similar media are best understood in terms of their potential for debasing the stability of political environments, including democracies and non-democracies, rather than revitalizing the structures within which they come to be. (149)

This response points at a new conception of civil society, one that shifts away from the citizen as a participant in public deliberations that produce compromise and duty-based action toward the construction of a pluralistic community engaged in the collective expression of affect-laden opinion, reminiscent of Rousseau’s “general will,” a process in which thousands of
individuals form consensus on their digital devices about the social structures to be destroyed and the sinners to be shamed.

This may be an extreme interpretation of Papacharissi’s dismissal of the public good, but the view of the blogosphere as a new political arena based on affective bonds rather than on deliberation is not hard to find in works by early promoters of digital media. Consider Hugh Hewitt’s *Blog: Understanding the Information Reformation That’s Changing Your World*, in which he compares the swarming of bloggers against well-known American political and media figures to the “great mounted armies” of seventh-century Muslims and thirteenth-century Mongols (2005, 4). “Swarming,” writes Hewitt, “is a seemingly amorphous but carefully structured, coordinated way to strike from all directions at a particular point or points, by means of a sustainable ‘pulsing’ of force and/or fire” (4). To him, success in achieving ascendancy, whether “of a brand, a candidate, or a cult,” depends in part on the destruction of the opposition (6). Although Hewitt expects blogging to demonstrate its constructive potential in the future, he emphasizes its power in mocking and shaming people who say or do the wrong things—in beating them, to borrow one of his metaphors, “like a bongo drum” (26).

A more balanced approach to the burgeoning of new media can be found in Howard Rheingold’s *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, in which he analyzes the convergence of wireless technology and social communication in mobile devices, which allow people who do not know each other to act in concert and cooperate in ways never before possible. The author is aware that, while some of the ensuing changes will benefit the public good, others will erode it. “As indicated by their name,” writes Rheingold (2002, xviii), “smart mobs are not always beneficial. Lynch mobs and mobocracies continue to engender atrocities. The same convergence of technologies that open new vistas of cooperation also makes possible a universal surveillance economy and empowers the bloodthirsty as well as the altruistic.” In particular, he expresses concern over the misuse of the new media by malicious governments and groups: “Cooperative effort sounds nice, and at its best, it is the foundation of the finest creations of human civilizations, but it can also be nasty if the people who cooperate share pernicious goals. Terrorists and organized criminals have been malevolently successful in their use of smart mob tactics” (xxi). This insightful prediction ignores, however, the
potential of smart mobs to disrupt civil society even when their intentions are not malicious but righteous.

Some scholars have pointed at that potential. In *Speaking into the Air*, John Durham Peters (1999, 1) warned of the human tendency to replace imperfect down-to-earth deliberations by the “dream of communication as the mutual communion of souls.” In *Critique of Information*, Scott Lash (2002, 37) criticized political movements based on affective bonding, which “have more in common with the sect than the church, with Gemeinschaft than Gesellschaft.” And among the insights that emerged from a brainstorming session on governance and social media held in 2012 was the idea that the present crisis of governance in democracies results from a lack of deliberation—that “deliberation is necessary so that democracy produces collectively-intelligent decisions instead of dumb politics”:

> Without deliberative mechanisms for making decisions that weigh consequences and balance trade-offs, social networks that only enhance unmediated participation and information also just enhance the “dumb mob.” Turning the “dumb mob” into the “smart mob” is one of the key challenges for the immense participatory power of social media. As it is now, social media like Twitter or Facebook are good for simple minded mobilization of those prepared to act, but not for the processes of negotiation and consensus building required for intelligent decision making. (Gardels 2012, 14)

The dangers posed to civil society by “righteous mobs” have become more apparent with the growing phenomenon of online swarming against individuals who make what others consider racist, sexist, or otherwise misguided statements, prompting Tarun Wadhwa (2013) to comment that “the severity of collective punishment is taking a disturbing direction.” One such incident occurred in 2013 when a racist comment tweeted by the director of communications for InterActiveCorp, Justine Sacco, led to tens of thousands of responses, including rape and murder threats against her and her family and friends, as well as to her immediate firing from her job. The *New York Times* titled its report on the incident, “Is the Internet a Mob Without Consequences?” Nick Bilton (2013), who wrote the *New York Times* piece, noted that “in the eyes of the mob,” justice had been done, and yet those who engaged in issuing murderous threats suffered no consequences themselves.
As he pointed out, although mobs that begin with a small spark and then erupt into chaos are nothing new, in the past it was generally the poor who rose up against the rich and powerful. Today, however, “it is the powerful, specifically those with the largest followings online, that could help quell these eruptions, yet instead douse them with more anger and hate.”

Bilton’s comment reminds us that online mobs cannot be equated with the uneducated masses of Marx’s *lumpenproletariat*. On the contrary, online swarming may often be induced, inspired, and manipulated by well-educated people who take part in the action in order to advance certain commercial, political, or other agendas, or simply to have some fun. As Wadhwa (2013) commented regarding the Justine Sacco case, “It was unsettling for me to watch my Twitter feed full of professionals I admire and respect join in on the fun. Their actions were largely harmless, but we’re all setting the standard for how people will be treated when we don’t like something they’ve said online.”

Or, as the case may be, when we don’t like something that we’ve heard they said. As Dominic Sandbrook (2009) points out in a *New Statesman* article titled “Trial by Fury,” written in the wake of online shaming incidents in Great Britain, many of those who join in righteous mobs are reacting secondhand. They may not actually have read the comments deemed offensive: it is enough that others have pronounced them offensive. As Sandbrook (2009, 34) warns, we are closer today than we might think to ancient Roman crowds, whose blind hatred symbolized “all that is worst in human nature.” In contrast to Hewitt, who celebrates the power of the mob to chastise those who voice unpopular positions, Sandbrook considers the swarming of online mobs a danger to freedom of speech, asking whether we now prefer to live “by the will of Twitter’s loudest minority.” As she puts it, “we tell ourselves that in a democratic society, the will of the people is what matters—except when the people have the wrong idea” (36).

In “Cyber Civil Rights,” law professor Danielle Keats Citron (2009) goes a step further, claiming that the harm inflicted by online mobs ought to be regarded as civil rights violations and addressed in the same way that similar violations by offline thugs, bullies, and supremacists are handled by the legal system. “Because destructive online mobs are unlikely to correct themselves,” she writes, “a comprehensive legal response is essential to deter and redress the harm they cause” (84). Citron reviews four dangers that social scientists associate with group behaviour: the tendency of groups united by
homogeneous views to become more extreme when members of the group deliberate among themselves; the loss of a sense of personal responsibility on the part of individuals acting in groups; the tendency of groups to dehumanize their victims, thereby eliminating feelings of remorse; and the increase in aggressiveness when group members sense that authority figures support their efforts (81–82). She goes on to argue that “the Internet magnifies the dangerousness of group behavior in each of these respects”:

Web 2.0 platforms create a feeling of closeness among like-minded individuals. Online groups affirm each other’s negative views, which become more extreme and destructive. Individuals say and do things online they would never consider saying or doing offline because they feel anonymous, even if they write under their real names. Because group members often shroud themselves in pseudonyms, they have little fear that victims will retaliate against them or that they will suffer social stigma for their abusive conduct. Online groups also perceive their victims as “images” and thus feel free to do anything they want to them.

In short, Rowland’s hopes for “a civilization that promotes and values diversity” may have been premature. However self-righteous, online mobs that organize around affect feed on themselves, in an environment that promotes disinhibition and a sense of freedom from moral responsibility.

**Conclusion: The Virtues of Restriction**

It is perhaps impossible to predict whether the new global environment, in which much public discourse takes place online, will tend, in the main, to lead to extreme and destructive behaviour or rather will encourage constructive civil deliberations. The limited case study discussed here cannot provide an answer to this question, but it serves to highlight some of the challenges posed to democracy by disinhibition. Today’s online discourse engages more individuals in group conversations than ever before, and personal concerns formerly banished from the public sphere now have an opportunity to be considered. However, all too frequently, the disinhibition associated with online behaviour leads to anything but meaningful civil discourse, a crucial precondition of democracy.
Judging by the hundreds of comments posted in January 2007 regarding my book—a book that few people had yet had a chance to read—the online discourse has in this case been, on the whole, dull, shallow, and repetitive, reminiscent of newspapers in totalitarian regimes or of lengthy speeches by leaders in those regimes, where many words are spilled over thin substance. I found very little contemplation in these texts, and few signs of intellectual exchange: once expressed, an opinion was rarely subjected to contradictory arguments. It is as if every commentator is entitled only to one view, which is to be asserted in full confidence, and then it is someone else’s turn to speak. And, of course, some of the comments were simply abusive. As one commentator on the *Globe* article usefully observed: “I just don’t understand why so many people champion the blogging community as some sort of noble undertaking when in most cases all they really accomplish is to provide an anonymous forum for abusive behaviour.”

Among its many contributions, the Internet has provided an outlet for much of the shallow and vulgar behaviour that exists in any society. This, in itself, would be of no importance were it not for the fact that disinhibited discourse is spilling over into traditional intellectual enterprises. Today, many writers, journalists, scholars, and other persons of letters seem to feel that in order to compete in the market of ideas, they need to abandon the inhibitions that established that market in the first place. May the above case study, despite its limited scope, serve as a reminder of the need to maintain the time-honoured restraints on intellectual conduct, without which society may sacrifice its barriers against tyranny.

**Notes**

1 The comments I quote were originally posted at http://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/author-laments-lonely-life-of-bloggers/article1069859/. Aside from the occasional bracketed emendation, I have reproduced these comments exactly as they appeared. All errors (spelling, punctuation, and so on) are therefore in the originals.

**References**


