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gatekeepers of traditional or mainstream media by allowing leaders and parties to get across their messages online, and enabling their supporters to access and share these messages, but in quite different and nationally specific ways. Big data also intensifies this caging, but as before, this is both a general process and depends on the setting: in India and China, smartphones are becoming the dominant way to access the internet, which means that different services are enabled by big data approaches. Or again, smartphones increasingly tether people to information and to each other, but technology matters, and in the case of smartphones, it can also limit engagement in comparison with access via computers (Napoli and Obar 2015). For online markets, where the targeting of populations relies on people's increasingly online activities, there is also competition for attention, but without a zero-sum limit.

The arguments presented here depart from the main alternative theories of media and the internet: the public sphere is not becoming more commodified but it is also not just a space for potential rational consensus or agreement (Habermas 1982); indeed, to avoid this normative view I shall refer to a public arena, which is contested because there are counterpublics that challenge the status quo (Fraser 1990) – again, in a limited attention space. Nor does increasing online content production lead to greater political liberalism or pluralism (Benkler 2006), as we shall see; and the internet does not generate more resistance in an increasingly globalized network society that is becoming borderless (Castells 2009). However, the internet does cause structural changes beyond those suggested by empirical studies of individual topics, as with much of American social science, which restricts itself to theories of the middle range, such as opportunities for collective action or gatekeeping and agenda-setting in particular media. Unlike European 'critical' social theory, however, which takes the position that theory comes before or outweighs evidence, the argument here is that theories must be open to evidence. And theory is needed. Research claiming to do without theory inevitably relies on an implicit theory of society; better to foreground it than to be subliminally guided and perhaps misled by it.

So far, I have presented a sketch of the argument, and several theoretical arguments have already been mentioned that will be used throughout the book. It will be useful to elaborate four key issues in more detail in advance to specify where I depart from existing theories. These are: how the media are autonomous but only a subsystem; how the role of the media is separate in the three social orders or powers; how there is a limited attention space for media; and technological determinism or shaping.



1.3 The autonomy of the media (sub)system

I have argued that there is increasing mediatization, but I have mentioned (and I will elaborate on this shortly) how media operate differently in three social orders or spheres of power. This leads to the question: are media yet another, separate social order or power? I will argue that media are autonomous – that there is an autonomy of the media system – but media are only a subsystem. This may seem a highly theoretical point, but much will hang on it, so it is worth spelling out. We can start by contrasting it with other theories. The lack of autonomy of the media system is particularly evident in Marxist theory (McChesney 2013), where the media are the glue that keeps capitalism intact and capitalist control of the media determines their political content or how the media shape politics. This idea is misleading, as some of the *prima facie* evidence that has already been mentioned from the four cases to be considered suggests (this will be elaborated on in later chapters): Sweden, and in a different way India, have public-service media, and in China, the state, not the market, most strongly controls the media. In China, journalists have also, though not without tensions, imbibed the ethos of American journalistic impartiality (Zhu 2012), which is key to autonomous media, and in America, this ethos and the watchdog function of media, as elsewhere, play a large role (Schudson 2011). Still, the alternative to the Marxist view must be theoretically anchored.

One reason that the media are autonomous, as Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue, is that they have institutions such as the journalistic profession with its own norms of impartiality and objectivity, furthered, for example, through professional education and associations. But more than these separate norms, autonomy is also ‘vertical’, from political elites above and from people below, including how they are represented within the political system, and from the economic and cultural systems ‘horizontally’, for example, being independent via regulation about media ownership (or, in the case of public service, regulation about media functions). This will be detailed further below, but there are different types of autonomy of media systems in different regions of the world, even if it is also the case that market forces have deepened everywhere in recent decades and thus weakened this autonomy. Comparisons, as we shall see, can help to establish how the role of the media varies between societies, for example, how media institutions have more or less independence in the context of different political and economic systems. Many accounts of media do not address this systemic nature of media, or they overlook or take as given their autonomy. In American social science in particular,



there are theories of the middle range (agenda-setting, gatekeeping, uses and gratifications, framing), but they do not explain the macro-dynamics (or larger structural changes) of media and the variation in autonomy as between different systems, or the varying strength of media over time within a system or country.

To complicate matters further, and against the idea of autonomy, there are also, as we shall see, examples of some media losing autonomy, as when digital media bypass the gatekeeping mechanisms of traditional media. This means that traditional media partly lose autonomy; for example, when the media's ability to input the interests of civil society or of elites in an impartial way is diminished at the expense of the greater agenda-setting power of those using digital media. Another example is if data analytics for online audiences push journalists to be led by what audiences want rather than representing the interests of society beyond these audiences. Losing autonomy thus entails de-differentiation – though the process can be even more complex, as when there is further differentiation: digital media can also act as watchdogs on those new media that bypass traditional gatekeepers; new watchdogs then play a role as a 'fifth estate' (Dutton 2009; Graves 2016).

So the media system is autonomous in the sense that it has its own institutions and acts as a watchdog in politics, attempting to be a transmission belt between governing elites and people or civil society, and a mirror of social concerns.⁴ Yet it is only a subsystem because, except insofar as it translates into political – or cultural or economic – change (put differently, in that it makes political, cultural and economic changes in these three systems), it does nothing on its own, except to grow and become more differentiated. In other words, the subsystem connects, for the political system, the people (or civil society) to the political elite, but it does not connect political elites or people to social development as a whole: the political system does that. Similarly, as we shall see, information ties people to the social environment, so media are a kind of (non-political) subsystem connecting people to their everyday social or cultural tasks. However, people's relation via information is to their immediate social environments, and again, this mediation is not related to social development as such. This is similar to how markets relate to consumers. In short, social development is driven by the three main systems, not by media per se.

This subsystemic nature of the media and their autonomy can be considered together, via the notion of differentiation: how can the media be both autonomous and 'only' a subsystem? The reason is because they are independent of parts of these systems that they connect, and which



together make for larger changes. Media have thus become differentiated so they are an autonomous subsystem. Yet sometimes new media can circumvent the existing subsystem of traditional media and foment changes propelled by connecting elites and people in new ways. However, this only ‘reinserts’ the autonomy of media (even while it takes away the autonomy of traditional media) in furthering change in a new way; it does not alter the nature of media as a subsystem.

This leaves one question: the media subsystem translates between people and elites in politics, and between market producers or services and consumers or audiences in the economy. What about media in the sphere of culture? But technoscience is part of culture, and so it is also a subsystem between (non-commercial and non-political) cultural content (such as information) and everyday users of information. This question can be resolved when we recognize that technoscience produces and advances the tools or technologies of mediation as part of technoscientific advance, and so it affects the political and economic media subsystems, as just discussed. Yet when these tools of mediation are introduced within the cultural order, they also add complexity (or differentiate and de-differentiate) to mediatization, translating cultural content of *all* types, including scientific and non-scientific parts of culture (the latter include practical information and other non-commercial and non-political symbolic exchanges, such as the arts). There is therefore a general effect of new technology on the media subsystem in all three orders or powers, and a specific one that pushes new technology into the other two orders but also into the cultural sphere itself, adding to how cultural content (including scientific communication) is mediated, which includes the growing place of scientific knowledge in society and the increasing everyday uses of media technology in everyday cultural life as part of an overall cultural development.

This section (and especially the preceding paragraph) has made a complex argument; again, it is crucial to what follows, and also to the overall aim of offering a comprehensive theory of the role of the internet (including traditional media) in society and which also overcomes disciplinary specialization. Luckily, the complexity can be reduced by means of figure 1.1, which also serves as a bridge to the next sections. What figure 1.1 illustrates is how media are both autonomous and only a subsystem: media have a dashed line around them (indicating a ‘sub’ system rather than a ‘system’ with solid lines), but they are also expanding with mediatization, and changes take place ‘through’ them. Figure 1.1 also shows how the role of media technology is both part of culture but also – as technoscience – drives change within culture and the other two



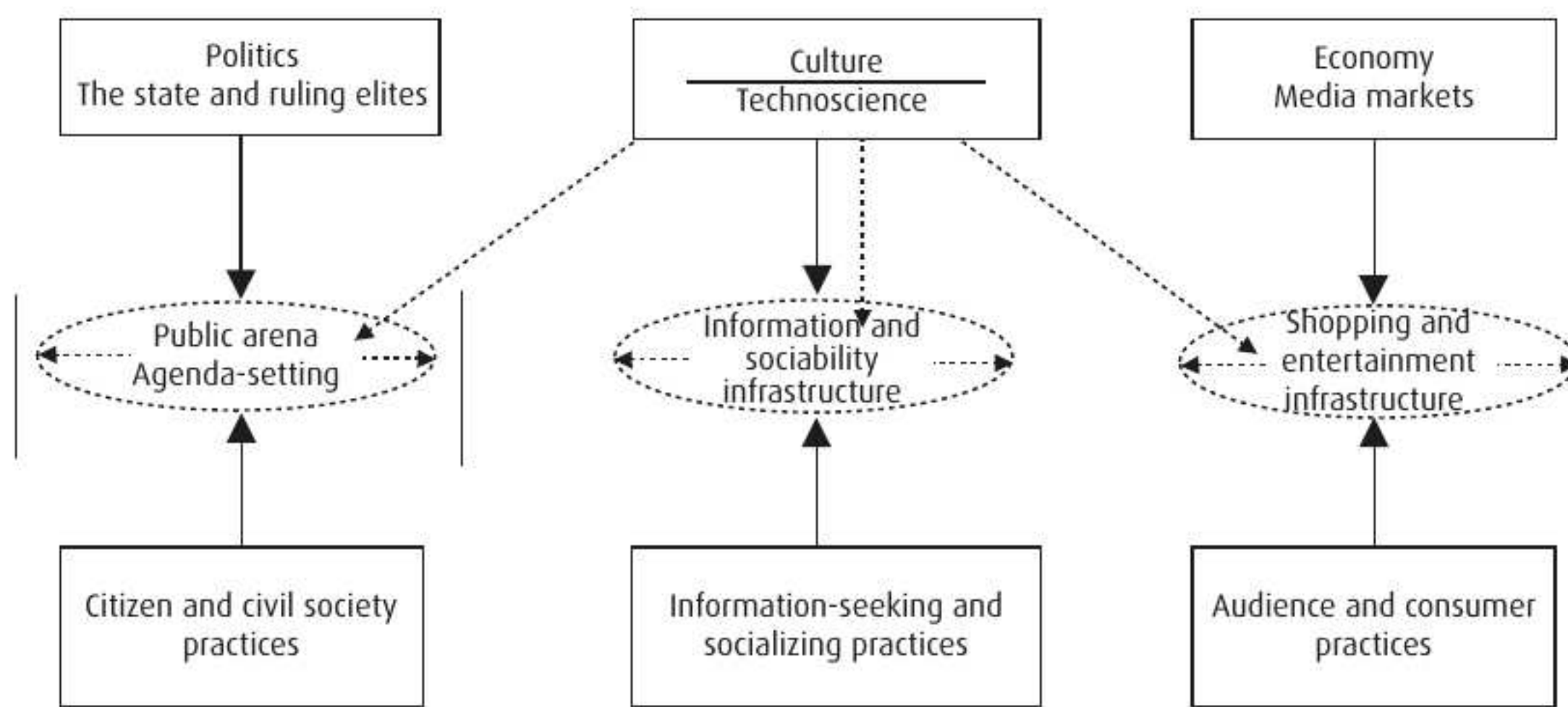


Fig. 1.1 Three spheres or powers (politics, culture, economy) and the increasing mediation between dominant institutions and people's everyday practices (dashed arrows).

spheres, via dashed arrows: technology (or technoscience) is a separate force. Further, it shows how media operate differently within the three spheres: within politics, the arrows that expand come up against the zero-sum limited attention space of agenda-setting. (As we will see in figure 7.1 in chapter 7, the differences between these realms also mean that changes in digital media work in different ways in and through them.) What figure 1.1 illustrates is how the subsystem of media connects politics, culture and the economy to changes in people's lives. This leads to a final point, which is what I have labelled in the bottom row in figure 1.1 (and 7.1) as 'practices', but I could equally have talked of the people's social role as citizens or members of civil society, or as socializers and information seekers, or as consumers and audiences: nothing in the argument hangs on the difference between two ways of labelling the bottom row.

1.4 The role of the media in politics, culture and the economy: separate and different

A key argument is that the political, cultural and economic implications of media are separate: for politics, there are macro-changes, changes in how the media system translates between political elites and civil society. For culture, the main change is at the micro level, changes embedded in everyday routines or ways of life, and for the most part without macro-repercussions. In the economy, a major change is how markets tailor media content to consumers and how consumers, in turn, need to manage their media consumption. The theory proposed here divides



media – including digital media – uses into three realms: politics (defined broadly, as issues related to the state); culture, which includes socializing and information seeking (or the everyday realm of sociability and practical tasks); and consumerism, including entertainment, with this third realm again dealt with from the point of view of audiences and online markets (the economics of production, and also work, will be dealt with only in passing, or insofar as they relate to the main focus here; one theory and book can cover only so much).⁵

A simple and overlooked difference can be illustrated by reference to the first two. This is that political communication is zero sum and culture is not (or at least not in the same way). For media in politics, gatekeepers dictate what publics or citizens focus on, and the agenda is set by ruling elites and by the public's input as mediated by media elites. For mediated culture too, there is competition for attention, and there are gatekeepers shaping the content produced and received. However, this is not zero sum in the sense that information seekers, for example, access different types of content, sometimes overlapping, without the further ramification that this content sets the agenda for societal change (as with politics). Further, they can spend more time with more information sources, adding new digital ones, whereas in the political realm, there are no signs of an overall expansion of attention. Gans (1999) has argued that popular culture is plural, and where it is not, it should be more so, so that diversity and non-zero-sum openness matter. There can of course be overlaps between politics and culture, as when culture is politicized to include or exclude certain groups. But this then is a question of openness and diversity within a zero-sum space and a political rather than a cultural issue.

Put differently, culture can be skewed towards certain groups, but with respect to everyday life or culture (or also to markets and consumers or audiences), it is also diffuse and unbounded, while political communication is authoritative and largely bounded. Furthermore, news and political participation are focused within the nation-state. For socializing, the question of dominance within a bounded territory does not arise: everyday routines and rituals are at the micro level of interaction. There are wider macro-patterns of changes in everyday life, such as the strengthening of rituals of everyday sociability. But their significance for societal development is a matter of analysing different ways of life, which are partly converging globally with increasing mediatization. The implications for the role of media in politics, on the other hand, is that this (sub)system has a limited attention space that mediates between the state and people where this mediation is zero sum (except at the



margins, with new technologies). The role of the media in culture, on the other hand, is more open-ended, even if there may be political attempts to control it. And the same kind of open-endedness applies to online markets and consuming audiences.

1.5 A limited attention space

The argument will be made that there is a limited attention space dominated by a few actors (the ‘law of small numbers’) across all media, online and offline. Unlike theories of the middle range (agenda-setting and gatekeeping), this idea provides a theory of the role of media because it can account for the *range* of media, old and new. It also posits (as already discussed) a different kind of limited attention space for mediated politics and for the mediated cultural and economic orders. The point in all cases is to examine all media, old and new, together, distinguishing their effects but also identifying the interplay between them – without evading the question of the strength of the combination of media in the (sub) system as a whole.

The idea of a limited attention space in politics is akin to Gans’ idea of a ‘national newshole’ (2004, 319) or Carey’s point that ‘reality is... a scarce resource’ (1989, 87), though these ideas were never developed as part of a systematic media theory or social theory. It can be likened to agenda-setting and gatekeeping – as long as the media agenda that passes through the gate, as a whole, translates into changes in social development. Gatekeeping and agenda-setting have been a part of different research paradigms, but they overlap: the ‘gate’ constrains the agenda, and the agenda is the content that gets past the gate, to which could be added the media theory whereby the media ‘frame’ different agendas. But again, there is a dominant frame – at least in the political system. The dominant frame consists of prevailing political ideologies, including those of the counterpublics that challenge it, and these shape politics, which is nowadays almost entirely mediated.⁶ What both theories leave out is the overall structure of the gate or the agenda or the frame – or, whether these mechanisms have changed over time, also in terms of the structure of how new inputs shape politics; for example, via new media or with new forces such as populism, and how these are translated into (or not) – and so provide a direction-giving impetus to – the state and ultimately social development. Put differently, there are media agendas that dominate, pushed by elites or people, at least in politics. The idea of the newshole captures this, allowing the newshole to constrain the limited



attention space and thus shape new ideologies. But a limited attention space, via a newshole or other media inputs, can also include content that, for example, circumvents traditional gatekeepers and so sets a new news agenda or ideological course.

Unlike mediated culture or markets, political communication is zero sum. Put differently, there is a sense in which limited media attention space is important only in the political realm. The idea of limited attention space in relation to media has also been put forward by Neuman (2016), drawing on Collins (1999), and it will be useful to contrast Neuman's ideas with those presented here. Neuman argues that, as long as there is a well-functioning marketplace of ideas (or competition for attention), political communication functions as well as it might. This is an America-centric view, based on the dangers that American communication and political science scholars have fretted over, such as that this marketplace is distorted by polarization or echo chambers or skewed by unequal political participation or a declining interest in politics or the pressures of media ownership. These concerns may be important, but they overlook the fact that the American media system is unique: first, because the American polity is uniquely fragmented or logjammed by many interests without a strong state, and its media system reflects this fragmentation.⁷ The second is that, in comparison with other media systems, America's is more market-oriented. This has implications for a limited attention space, which is more commercially competitive in America, unlike media systems where, for example, public broadcasting plays a major role. However, in terms of political ideologies, for instance, a multi-party system effectively also has a 'market' of the ideologies of several parties. In any event, a limited attention space here will mean that there is not an open (non-zero-sum) market, at least for politics: instead, there is competition for ideologies to dominate in the media.

Neuman's book details how American communication research has struggled over the course of its development to pin down the effects of media empirically. It explains how it has yo-yoed back and forth between finding major effects of media on what people think – for example, in the era of propaganda in the wake of the totalitarian regimes of the mid-twentieth century – as against showing minimal or no effects in a pluralistic America where ideas compete freely in the media and media reflect a healthy competition in the marketplace of ideas (even if this healthiness may need improvement, which is Neuman's view). This state of communications research – and communications and media research is dominated by the United



States – I argue, is itself not healthy: it bases our ideas of how media work on agonizing among American academics about what is wrong with American media, for example, bias in this marketplace.⁸ The same America-centric nature of media debates is evident outside of politics too; for example, with Turkle's (2012) ideas about the loss of togetherness, which will be discussed in chapter 4. But again, American media are unique among media systems, and this uniqueness can be highlighted by comparison.

Neuman's solution is to plead for engagement with European traditions of 'critical studies'; but this idea, too, is problematic, since, as mentioned, European theories, including media theories, often reject objectivity, or fail to engage with evidence, and remain diffuse without cumulation. The idea of a limited attention space that is not based on an open-ended market, but posits a public arena in which ideologies compete to dominate, can cope better with the fact that politics is about legitimation across media. This makes it possible to take a 'critical' stance without losing sight of objectivity or evidence, and with the limitations of what social science can achieve via 'critical' knowledge, as will be detailed in the final chapter. In mediated culture and online markets, too, the attention is limited but not zero sum: there is competition among many different types of content, and although there are winners and losers, no coercion follows.

An example of competition for attention without zero-sum competition in online markets will be useful: advertising has recently shifted online, with Google and Facebook taking a large share of this market (outside China). But they compete for a limited though not zero-sum share of attention. While Facebook has been obtaining a growing share of advertising revenue because more of its users have been getting their news through their Facebook feeds (with content based partly, as will be discussed in chapter 6, on their Facebook friends), Google has started to have a news feed based on its users' search history and their location (thus, with more individually based content). This competition is simply the latest example of competition for limited attention, which has shifted to digital media where advertising revenue is increasingly concentrated and where media companies are forced into ever-fiercer attempts to capture users' eyeballs. However, competition is for a limited but not zero-sum attention space: digital media take away from traditional media advertising revenue, but consumers can also expand (within constraints) the attention devoted across both, in time and resources devoted via both.



1.6 Who's afraid of technological determinism?

There have been many breathless accounts of how the internet has changed society, not least in the use of labels such as the 'network society' or the 'information society'. Here the argument will be more modest: for example, the internet has changed politics, bypassing traditional gatekeepers and weakening the autonomy of media. This change is bounded by the nation-state, with similar but also specific implications in the four countries examined here. Apart from this political effect, which takes different forms but also has similarities across countries or media systems, there is a more general global effect of new media technology whereby it tethers people more to information and to each other. This is a change in terms of culture rather than politics, without larger macro-social implications, though there are some aspects of cultural change – how information needs to be open and diverse and reliable, and connect those that are isolated – with wider and important implications. And digital media have also tied consumers more closely via media to online markets, with content targeted at populations and consumers (or audiences) having to manage a high-choice environment. So social theory needs to take the internet into account, in understanding how politics and ways of life and markets have changed. New media have transformed society, but only within certain bounds, even if some of the changes have also been globalizing. This is a complicated picture, but also one that identifies major changes and remains based on evidence while avoiding exaggeration.

Thus there are global changes inflected by the systems in different countries and by the different orders or powers, all attributable to new digital media technology as opposed to traditional media technology. This implies a technological determinist view, which is mostly invoked in the social sciences only to be dismissed out of hand. But the terminology in the debate about 'technological determinism versus social shaping' is also misleading: first, it should be about technological shaping versus social shaping, since the debate is about which shapes which. Indeed, it could be called technological shaping versus social determinism. This immediately points to the fact that what is not liked is 'determinism', since it implies inescapable forces. But social forces shape or determine. And shaping – or determining – entails not just constraining but also enabling certain actors, always within structures and often but not always at the expense of other actors. As we shall see, this enabling includes, for example, populists that gain more visibility, or commercial actors that use analytics to target audiences, or people who orient themselves with new information sources. This book will argue for a technological



The internet in theory

1.1 Theories of media, new and old

Digital media have been responsible for some of the most wide-ranging changes in society over the past quarter-century. At the same time, there is little agreement in the social sciences about how these changes should be understood. One reason is increasing disciplinary specialization. For example, media and communication studies concentrates on specific areas such as the news or influencers on social media – without a broader analysis of what people do online. Other disciplines such as sociology have, with few exceptions, left the study of new media to the discipline of media and communications. Or again, political science has tended to concentrate on specific questions, such as the role of media in election campaigns or for social movements. The sociology of science and technology, meanwhile, has adopted a stance whereby generalizations across particular contexts of uses of technology are deemed impossible. The same applies to anthropology. And there is a further problem that cuts across disciplines: that theories which were suited to mass media and interpersonal communication are no longer suited to digital media – since new media often have elements of both.

A few brief examples about how the use of ‘mass’ versus ‘interpersonal’ is misleading for digital media can suffice at this point.¹ First, there is the growth of user-generated content, which goes beyond passive ‘audiences’ and ‘senders versus receivers’. Second, news and other content is often shared among groups on social media rather than being accessed by individuals or broadcast one-to-many. Third, the way in which we seek much online information, for instance, via Wikipedia, is subject to new gatekeeping mechanisms such as search engines. A search via Google that leads to a Wikipedia entry, for example, means that the gatekeeping mechanism works differently from traditional gatekeepers,



determinist perspective on the internet, but I will not spend much time on this debate since I have argued for this perspective in relation to science and technology generally elsewhere (see Schroeder 2007; 2013). Instead, this book will concentrate on how the internet has changed society, though we will come back to these debates in the conclusion.

Although a full account of technology (or science and technology – technoscience) and social change is beyond the scope of this book, the argument here is that new media technology shapes society – or rather, shapes the three social orders or powers. It is worth briefly elaborating this argument. In my account of technology and social change (2007; 2013), I build on the work of Ian Hacking (1983), a realist in the philosophy of science, and Randall Collins' (1994) idea of how technologies migrate out of the laboratory and into the everyday world and become consumer devices. These ideas are also based on Weber's idea of rationalization, or the translation of technoscience into social change, 'disenchanted the world' and creating an 'iron cage' (or, to put it not only on the side of constraining but of enabling, an 'exoskeleton'). Gellner argued that this is too pessimistic; in a consumer society, there is a 'rubber cage' of user-friendly technologies (1987, 152–65). These elements make for a general account of technoscience and social change. As applied to digital media, what these ideas entail is that digital technologies, compared with traditional media, tether us more to each other and to information; they target us more powerfully and engage us more closely with tailored messages; and they enable new political actors to bypass gatekeepers – a cage and an exoskeleton alike.

All of this can be put differently: technoscience leads to increased power over – or more control or greater effectiveness in mastering – the social environment; again these are the characteristics of technoscientific advance or rationalization in all three realms. More specifically, political leaders and parties and social movements have a new power outside established media, but so, too, do publics, which are represented more outside of established media. Companies can target people more effectively, but consumers are also closer to more information, and can, for example, challenge services with negative publicity. And people have stronger mediated relations to each other, but they are also more bound to or surveilled by others.

In all of these cases, caging and a more powerful exoskeleton are easy to recognize, as is the fact that caging and an exoskeleton go hand in hand; the uses of online media technology enable and constrain. There is new and more diverse economic activity that changes consumption activity towards being driven by online attention. Everyday life is occupied more



by online socializing and information seeking. And there is more online engagement between populist leadership and their publics or supporters. Equally easy to recognize then is that this account of technoscience and social change is neither utopian nor dystopian, as are so many accounts of the internet or media and social change. And it is also worth stressing that this account focuses on technology in use, never technology on its own. Furthermore, technological shaping or determinism does not rule out and can go hand-in-hand with social shaping: I shall argue, for example, that in all four country cases, populist forces circumvent traditional media by means of new technology (determinism), but they also do so in quite different ways, depending on the four political systems (social shaping).

The conclusion about technoscientific advance in the form of mediatization – which of course remains to be shown in the chapters to come – can therefore be summarized as follows: First, it is an extension of an existing process of mediating politics, but, combined with new political forces, it has transformed politics in a populist direction, and harnessed politics more to elites' and people's agendas via online media. Second, it has yoked media content more closely to audience attention based on their online behaviour. Third, it has tethered people more closely to each other and to information. These all depend on an underlying process that combines them (or a fourth one, represented by the downward arrows in figure 1.1 emanating from 'technoscience') as already alluded to earlier. This is how technoscience extends mediatization in all three realms, which is also an independent shift whereby technology increasingly suffuses social life built upon previous media and extends them. The causal arrow therefore goes from more technology to the developments in markets and politics and culture, but not the other way round.

The change brought about by technology is conceptually difficult because in all three domains, only a subsystem (media) is affected, including culture with its increasing mediation of everyday life. But the part of culture that is science or technoscience also technologizes the other two domains, and so imposes a more mediatized 'culture' (or rather technoscience) upon them. So the domain of culture is both affected subsystemically as one part of culture, but, as technoscience, it also affects politics and markets. All three domains are therefore more technologically mediated, but the political and economic subsystems have become more 'cultural' via their subsystems (insofar as mediatization imposes a technoscientific culture), and the cultural subsystem is also more mediated. Technoscientific advance is thus the ultimate cause of change towards greater mediatization, and in this book we will focus on how this happens with the uses of new media technologies.



It is worth previewing one other related debate about the role of science, which has re-emerged with ‘big data’, and which will be discussed in chapter 6. There, it will be argued that scientism (or positivism) and the ‘realist’ view of science that goes with it raises anew a key question about how big data contributes to scientific advance (or not). In chapter 6 it will be argued that big data does indeed contribute to technoscientific advance (‘advance’ should be regarded here neutrally, in the sense of ‘moving forward’). Yet this view goes together with technological determinism or shaping, and a view that can nowadays be associated with a right-wing or conservative stance (leaving no room for ‘agency’ – although agency is always shaped by or takes place within structures). Yet this alignment is quite recent: there have been periods when a scientific social science was on the side of progressive politics and, with big data, the role of social science is sure to be rethought along these lines again. Here, I will take the position that advancing valid or objective or value-free social scientific knowledge is needed regardless of politics or norms or ideologies; this is a position shared by many social theorists and also consistent with a realist and technological determinist account of science.⁹

1.7 Chapter overview

At this point, an overview of the book will be useful. One point to note before proceeding is that the three main topics covered: politics (chapters 2 and 3), everyday life (4 and 5) and big data (6) can be read independently. They concern how digital media relate to existing media systems (2), enable right-wing populism (3), connect to others (4) and to information (5) and the implications of big data (6). They can also be read, depending on the reader’s interest, independently of the introduction and conclusion. But the argument – briefly, again, that digital technology causes change in the political directions in the four countries, in people’s social and ‘informational’ lives, and in knowledge based on digital media data and how it is used – is also greater than the sum of its parts; there is an overall argument about technology and social change. That argument has already been sketched, and its implications will be drawn out, having put flesh on the bones at that point, in the conclusion.

One task of chapter 2 is to compare the media systems in the four countries. This contextualization, as already argued, is necessary for understanding the implications of digital media for political communication in advanced democracies (the United States and Sweden) and in



developing countries (China and India). Are there also commonalities between traditional and digital media? Some studies have found that new digital media set different agendas from traditional media. For example, blogs and microblogs (Twitter), according to Neuman (2016), shift the political agenda away from the priorities of elites in traditional media such as economic and foreign policy – and towards issues that are closer to people’s concerns such as crime and abortion. At the same time, since people’s activity on digital media can be captured, political election campaigns (among other forms of political communication) can use these digital data traces to measure and predict the public’s views, and hence target voters in a more fine-grained way and make politicians more responsive to online sources.

Many other revealing comparisons can be made, including among countries where public broadcasting has played a major role (all countries except the United States), or looking at how elites exercise control over media – the party in China, corrupt politicians colluding with media tycoons in India – which is where the bulk of citizens get their news. Some other differences, such as which media are most common, will be dealt with in later chapters, but it is clear that the difference between, for example, newspaper-centric (India, Sweden) and TV-centric (America and China) countries is rapidly being eclipsed by the difference between younger and older people, or the difference between those who are likely to access news via smartphones as opposed to via TV or in print. Finally, of course, the political systems matter, and China’s isolation from the digital media used elsewhere stands out in particular.

One example of how new media bypass traditional media in all four countries are right-wing populist movements – the subject of chapter 3. But in Sweden and America, despite some similarities, circumventing gatekeepers is also shaped by the two historically different media systems: populists such as the anti-immigration Sweden Democrat party go up against the strong tradition of public-service broadcasting in Sweden, whereas Donald Trump’s anti-immigrant tweets were readily picked up during the election campaign by mainstream American commercial media competing for audiences. Research also shows that the Swedish public broadcasting system has consequences for how politics is presented and for the levels of knowledge about political affairs compared with the American system. At the same time, in both countries, as in India and China, the growing role of markets is attenuating the distinctiveness of the two media systems.

In India and China, new digital media are also enabling right-wing populism, as with Indian prime minister Narendra Modi’s use of



Twitter and Chinese nationalists' use of social media to mobilize support on behalf of ethnic and civilizational assertiveness. In these two countries, the two populations have rapidly come online via smartphones rather than computer-based uses of the internet. In India, there are also important examples of political mobilization by means of non-smart mobile phones; for example, during state elections in Uttar Pradesh, when Dalits (untouchables) coordinated their voting and this contributed decisively to the victory of their party (Doron and Jeffrey 2013). And mainstream Indian media are still controlled by (often) corrupt elites, whereas in China, media control is exercised by the party state – again, two quite different media systems. And in China, again uniquely, digital media are widely used as an alternative to the much more state-controlled traditional media. In this case, there is a growing tension between authoritarian control and bottom-up pressure.

Chapter 4 moves from the public arena to personal uses of information and communication technologies (ICTs). As already mentioned, an understanding of media that goes beyond studying them in isolation or within a disciplinary specialism must be grounded in changing patterns of everyday life. And, in keeping with the argument about media technology here, technology never has an impact per se, but rather impacts in terms of how people use it. Everyday practices are captured best by the 'domestication' approach, which has been applied to television and mobile phones, but rarely to new digital media (de Reuver, Nikou and Bouwman 2016 is an exception). Taking this approach further, Ling (2012), for example, has discussed mobiles in terms of 'interaction rituals' and 'taken-for-grantedness'. To this must be added what has become 'taken-for-granted' – that is, the constant 'tetheredness' to others and to information. This chapter applies these arguments to the four countries that are compared throughout – the United States, Sweden, China and India. It also addresses a problem that has not (to my knowledge) been foregrounded in social science: why are these changes in everyday technology uses important? I will argue that the vast bulk of these everyday changes do not have wider societal repercussions; put briefly, cultural relativism rules. Our changing ways of life can thus be treated much like changes in fashions in clothes or tastes in music – they need to be documented, but they do not create social problems, and nor do they have further implications for macro-developments. Only a small subset of these changes do matter, and it is important to identify them.

Chapters 4 and 5 also deal with two quite different everyday practices: socializing and information seeking. For both, new



technological – media – infrastructures have come to play a central role in everyday life on a mass scale and over the course of more than a century, but they have also recently been extended with digital technologies. If we are interested in the types of information people seek, for example, then search engines have become such an infrastructure. Yet studies suggest that the vast bulk of Google searches are for consumption, with only a tiny proportion (1–2 per cent) devoted to political information and other ‘serious’ types of information. Even more surprisingly, what people search for is very similar across the world, and cuts across how populations are stratified in terms of economic and status groups (Waller 2011a). The implication is that it is important to focus on the small proportion of information for political, health, education and research – or what I will single out as ‘serious’ – uses.

These two chapters will provide an account of how digital media are used for various everyday purposes such as searching for information online and using digital media for sociability. Everyday life is becoming thoroughly mediatized. At the same time, the vast bulk of media and new media uses are for entertainment and for the maintenance of interpersonal relations. These two uses have led to an important cultural shift – Baron (2008) calls it ‘always on’, but it is more accurately captured with ‘tetheredness’. At the same time, again, only a small subset of this new – increasingly mediated – way of life is important. This includes unequal access to – especially reliable – information and possibilities to shape an open and diverse cultural agenda, and social support. New social divides are thus emerging, but it is important to pinpoint where they play an outsize role, as with an urban–rural divide in India and China, or the divide between smartphone-only internet users and those who have access via a range of devices.

New ICT infrastructures work partly (for social network sites) by means of lock-ins or network effects that translate into a few companies dominating the share of attention. But there are also examples of other sources that dominate the attention space, as with Wikipedia, mainly via Google searches. Yet again, it is essential to put these infrastructures into a broader perspective, charting the differences between the ‘media systems’ of the four countries considered here. Facebook, for example, within a very short period displaced Lunarstorm, a social network once dominant in Sweden (and pre-dating Facebook). And again, several non-Western social network sites dominate China, and India’s infrastructure centres on the mobile phone market. Globalization has limits, but these chapters also show that there are certain commonalities across the four countries examined here, including the increasing importance of everyday access to information and the use of social media.



Apart from socializing in chapter 4, chapter 5 focuses on information behaviour and how it fits into everyday life. Information seeking, by many accounts, makes up half of our uses of the internet. ‘Information’ has been researched in library and information science, but this research is of limited use if we are interested not in library users or researchers and students but in the broader population-at-large. The chapter provides a definition of information from a broader social science perspective, as a ‘difference that makes a difference’, and applies this to how, in everyday life, people cope with their physical and social environment. It also argues that a distinction must be made in terms of information for needs (serious information) and information for wants (everything else, and mainly consumption and entertainment). Search engines, and above all Google, have taken on a gatekeeping function in this regard, and the chapter discusses how search engines, along with the Web, have become major infrastructures.

Wikipedia is a good example of how a small proportion of information can be critical for the purpose of being an informed citizen or coping with essential everyday needs. It is also the single most popular (non-commercial) online information source. We know about how, for certain areas such as health, people access Wikipedia pages compared to other online sources. We also know in some cases who produces Wikipedia entries (for health, it is often medical professionals) and about its reliability. And Wikipedia is prominent around the world, though China is an exception because there, Baidu Baike, a rival, is dominant (again, media systems matter here too). And Baidu Baike has been developed under the auspices of the dominant search engine in China, Baidu, which is close to the government (Liao 2009). The difference between open and restricted or controlled infrastructures of information – as in China – mostly accessed via search engines, also illustrates (again) how gatekeepers to information play a new role in everyday life.

Google (or search engines) is not the only infrastructure that has become important as a gatekeeper. So, too, have a number of other infrastructures such as Facebook, Twitter and Amazon. They are also not just (public) infrastructures as such, since they are commercial, so they can additionally be labelled large technological systems. Both terms are preferable to ‘platforms’, which, among other things, fails to capture their similarity to other large technological systems. But one new feature of these systems is that they collect ‘big data’ about users, and that is the subject of chapter 6. The ‘newness’ of big data has itself been the subject of debate, but I argue that newness can be defined in relation to the type of knowledge that is created. At this point a distinction will be necessary



between scientific or reliable knowledge, which has been made possible due to the availability of new sources of data, as against knowledge in the private sector and other applied contexts, where these new sources are also available but where knowledge is (mostly) not scientific and subject to practical limits. Yet practical applications of big data are nevertheless increasingly used to target and tailor information to specific populations, and in this way have an effect on everyday life, mostly via advertising but also through political campaigns.

Big data is at the leading edge of the rapidly advancing research front in the social sciences, and especially in communication research. But this research is partly limited by the sources of data, which often, though not always, come from commercial media platforms. Another impediment is that this research is pushing in many directions, based on data sources but without integrating the new-found knowledge into overall accounts of the role of media in social change. And most of this knowledge is not being produced within the social sciences at all, but rather in the private sector and to a lesser extent in policy settings. This knowledge can be yoked to aims such as marketing, targeting populations and tailoring messages to individuals with greater accuracy. More powerful knowledge thus plays a role in everyday life, but it remains largely invisible, as when digital media users are unaware of how information is filtered for them. Big data raises certain issues in new guises, such as privacy, but the public is also adapting to the ways in which media uses are being harnessed for advertising and marketing.

The conclusion (chapter 7) draws these chapters together and also returns to the theoretical debates that have been introduced in this introductory chapter. Exaggerated hopes and fears about new media are in large part due to the ‘sociology of the last five minutes’ (a phrase coined by Michael Mann), whereby recent technological trends are seen as beckoning huge transformations. A longer-term comparative perspective shows how limited – but also how in specific ways significant – new media and the internet are, in everyday use and also in contrast with mass and interpersonal media. One feature that is common throughout the four countries discussed – and beyond – and that is overlooked in existing media theories, is the role of elites and their gatekeeping and agenda-setting power. Neither the capitalist concentration of media power nor idealism about bottom-up forces captures how the content produced for new media remains the preserve of political elites and media professionals. Second, Twitter, Facebook, Google and other infrastructures play a gatekeeping role since they are dominant around the globe – though in China a separate set of infrastructures is dominant (Tencent, Alibaba and Baidu).



The concluding chapter retraces the argument about the nature of media, technology and globalization, and also the arguments about the different roles of media in different societal domains, the autonomy of media, and the implications of a limited attention space across media. Apart from how these fit together, the theory presented in this book has stayed clear of norms and values. Are there implications for the options ahead? To start with, in developing societies such as India and China, it is necessary to foster a diversified and free and widely accessible set of old and new media to counteract the imbalance of power between political and economic elites on one side and publics or civil society on the other. This argument applies to many developing societies and especially to certain divides within them, such as urban–rural divides. The outlook here also cannot be divorced from the larger questions of the democratizing and globalizing influence of new media in these two countries. In Western democracies, too, the ability of new media to shift the agenda more closely to people’s concerns has been a shift away from the autonomy of traditional media, here (among other things) giving more weight to forces from below, with some negative consequences (right-wing populism). Still, the dominance of traditional media, and the ability of elites to use digital media to gauge and shape the agenda in new media, should not be underestimated.

Apart from urging a more plural and open media system that enables greater scope in the realm of politics for bottom-up input, a similar case can be made in media theory for cultural change, promoting more diversity and inclusiveness and access to information. Here one obstacle – and this is also where the implications of the internet in the economic and cultural realms partially overlap – is an increasingly market-driven (and data-driven) consumerism. In both realms, digital media are subject to competition for attention and make certain types of content – including cultural content – more prominent. This is similar to social networks that lock users in. An increasingly tight feedback loop exists now between how user data is harnessed and how people’s information and communication needs can be targeted. This targeting presents challenges for citizens and pluralist societies. New technologies-in-use have made a difference to social development, and for this reason the internet and how it has displaced traditional media cannot be dealt with within the silos of disciplinary specialization or empirically investigated with theories of the middle range. Instead, it also requires a theory of increasing media-tization, and its separate effects in the political, everyday and economic realms – including the limits of these effects.



such as professional journalistic fact-checking norms or control by publishers of encyclopaedia volumes. One of the aims of this book is to provide a theory of the internet and social change that goes beyond ‘mass’ and ‘interpersonal’ – and which at the same time overcomes disciplinary divides by arguing that a single theory can be applied throughout the social sciences.

There is another problem that the book must address: research about the internet tends to focus on what is new, without recognizing that traditional media still often dominate,² for example, during election campaigns. Yet it is also true, among younger people and in some countries such as Sweden and America at least, that digital media have largely displaced – even if they also complement – traditional media for news. One proposal for coping with this simultaneity of ‘old’ and ‘new’ is to talk of ‘hybrid’ media (Chadwick 2013), which postulates the side-by-side existence of both, in this case for the political realm. But this sweeps under the rug the very problem that needs to be solved: unless there is a clear sense of how old and new relate to one another, ‘hybridity’ does not overcome the need for a theory of digital media since it leaves open the balance between the two and the differences in how they work.

The few theories that have tackled the changing media landscape all have shortcomings. Castells’ theory of network power (2009) has two main elements: an ontology whereby all media are best understood as working via networks, and a theory of power whereby power is increasingly concentrated in a few global transnational media conglomerates but which at the same time always generates resistance. Both ideas are flawed since there are countries in which the capitalist imperatives of media conglomerates play a far lesser role, such as in China, where the party-state exercises much control over media, or Sweden, where public-service media continue to be dominant. Put differently, national ‘media systems’ (Hallin and Mancini 2004), which can be grouped into regional types, still outweigh the dynamics of global capitalist concentration, and nation-states also place strong boundaries around how media operate, as well as the bounds within which popular political inputs – public opinion and civil society organizations (or ‘resistance’, if we want to use Castells’ term) – shape the political agenda via media, as we shall see.

The second major theory, mediatization theory (Hjarvard 2008), takes these national differences into account and proposes that people’s relationship to society is increasingly mediated. This is a theory that, suitably modified, I will build on here. Yet as it stands, the theory lacks



analytical precision about which particular areas of social life are being mediatized: mediatization is defined as ‘the process whereby society to an increasing degree is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media and their logic’; media become ‘integrated into the operations of other social institutions’ and are also ‘social institutions in their own right’, and ‘as a consequence, social interaction – within the institutions, between institutions, and in society at large – take place via the media’ (Hjarvard 2008, 113). However, as we shall see, it is important to distinguish between cultural, economic and political power, or their respective spheres, and to understand how media or mediatization operate quite differently within them. We can think here of the difference between the scarce attention for which political leaders and parties compete (in a zero-sum game) – as against how cultural products compete for consumer attention (in a more open-ended market). Further, while new media add to the mediatization of social life, it is also possible to argue that disintermediation takes place, as when people produce and consume content directly, outside of institutions.

Actor–network theory is yet another theory that has been applied to the internet. Although it is more about new technologies than about media specifically, it has had a wide influence in media studies (for example, Chadwick 2013; Couldry 2012). This theory puts the emphasis either on the agency of individuals or of non-humans (in the latter case, there is a kind of back-door technological determinism, which the theory otherwise rejects). Yet individual ‘agency’ cannot account for structures, and the non-human physical environment does not engage in volitional acts. Actor–network theory has also, like other theories of science, technology and society (STS), been dominated by the idea that science and technology are constructed or shaped by specific local social contexts, thus making it impossible to generalize about the role of media or technology beyond individual contexts of constructedness or shaping. Yet general patterns are essential if theory is to guide research, and structures are essential to uncovering asymmetries of power.

There are other media theories, but these three strands currently dominate. There is also research in subfields such as political communication, where particular theoretical concepts, for instance, the ‘public sphere’, are used (which will be discussed later). It is also important to add that much empirical media or communications research operates below the level of the general theories mentioned so far, with theories of the ‘middle range’. These include agenda-setting, gatekeeping, framing, uses and gratifications, and rational choice or collective action. These theories all presuppose that research can take place



without an overall or macro theory of social change – except perhaps insofar as they implicitly take the stance that the main aim of research should be to counteract excessive control or bias by some groups at the expense of others. In doing so, they presume – again, implicitly – a pluralist view or a theory of ideologies that compete in the marketplace of ideas (Neuman 2016).

The notion that ideas or ideologies compete in the media is an important one, as we shall see. However, with few exceptions (some key examples will be discussed), this research programme focuses on individual media, making it impossible to understand, for example, how agenda-setting works across traditional and new digital media. Moreover, this type of research typically focuses on media at the national level and for particular domains and periods. Yet there may be important lessons from comparisons (Esser and Pfetsch 2004), from longer-term trajectories, and again, from analysing the range of media. And it will be argued that it is necessary to identify structural constraints to the competition of ideas or ideologies instead of an open-ended market – at least in the political realm. Finally, yes, research should counteract asymmetries of power or control, but to do so it is also necessary to start from the top down: where do these asymmetries originate – at the global level, the national level or somewhere else?

The alternative put forward here rests on three starting points: first, national differences matter for the implications of digital media just as they did for traditional media. This entails that ‘media systems’ theory (Hallin and Mancini 2004) is an essential starting point, although there are also globalizing patterns that cut across nationally bounded media systems. Second, while new digital media add to and complement traditional media, old and new media must be encompassed within a single framework that enables an understanding of how, for example, the political agenda is shaped across both. As we shall see, it is useful to posit a limited attention space or a dominant agenda across different types of media. Third, this limited attention space – as well as the limits on individuals’ connectedness to each other and to information – operates differently in relation to political communication, popular culture and online markets. For politics, the agenda that dominates the limited attention space has consequences. For culture, as long as there is diversity and reliability in certain types of information, there is also scope for taking the approach that ‘anything goes’ – that the description of different ways of life can suffice for social science. And online markets are open-ended, but data-driven targeting of consumers, among other forces, also shapes the growing diversity (or otherwise) of entertainment and other content.



Apart from these three points, another more general one is that the validity of theories of media rests on evidence about how new technologies are integrated into everyday life. This ‘bottom-up’ approach to analysing the role of the media is the strength of domestication theory (Haddon 2004; 2011; Silverstone and Hirsch 1992). Media should be gauged by how they are used, and with what effect in terms of social change, which overcomes the disciplinary divides mentioned earlier. Understanding everyday life must not exclude macro-dynamics, however, and particularly politics and wider longer-term and cumulative changes and discontinuities. These macro-changes also include divergences between and convergences across societies. Asymmetries of power or control can be unearthed by making comparisons, both on the levels of everyday life and how they fit into macro-changes, and contrasting what has changed between traditional and new digital media. This will be done here for four countries – Sweden, America, India and China – in order to (again) ground the argument in specific evidence. As will become evident, however, the argument may apply beyond these four.

Ultimately, the question that this book seeks to answer is this: at what point must a contemporary theory of society take into account that the internet plays a significant role in social change? The answer can be briefly previewed: in politics, certain new forces, here mainly exemplified by right-wing populists and nationalists but also by other new groups from below, are enabled by circumventing traditional gatekeepers. However, they also struggle against established media and rival elites or ideologies to dominate the attention space. Second, digital media tether us more closely to each other and to information. Within the realm of culture, a more mediated way of life creates new digital divides, and these are particularly important where reliable information, cultural diversity and social isolation are at stake. Third, big data is at the leading edge of a new research front based mostly on digital media. Apart from generating new academic knowledge, a major consequence is that private-sector media companies, and to some extent political and policy campaigns, have more powerful tools to target and manipulate publics. But big data analytics mainly pertain to consumers, so the implications are primarily in the economic realm.

As we shall see, these three changes – in politics, in culture and everyday life, and in the media economy – follow their own logics and interconnect only partially. But each entails a significant change attributable to the internet. A common thread among all three is that they are part of a larger process whereby technology penetrates more deeply into social life. Yet in contrast with other theories that speak of revolutions caused



by the internet and the like, this increased mediatization must be put in its place: the internet is not responsible for a wholesale change in society, as Castells and others claim. There are other, deeper and more long-term transformations that confront society and which affect the political, economic and cultural systems. These include limits to expanding citizenship rights, climate change and financialization, and they have little or nothing to do with the internet.³ The internet has brought about more specific changes in politics, culture and markets that are at best indirectly connected to these transformations. Still, social theory must take specific internet-related changes into account since together they amount to new and lasting ways in which we have become subject to more targeted political messages and ways to engage with them (politics), more tethered to each other and to information (culture) and to more online consumption (economy). In short, the internet has caged us and provides us with a more powerful exoskeleton, a mainly Weberian understanding of technology that will be elaborated further. These are profound ways in which digital technology has shaped our life – more specific than, but on a par with, the broader changes that were just mentioned. This brief hint at some of the main arguments and the overall conclusion of the book can now be expanded in more detail before we begin with an overview of the chapters to come.

1.2 Summary of the argument

As already mentioned, there is currently a gap in theories of the role of the internet, and I am not the first or only one to point this out (see, for example, Neuman 2016). Digital technologies – as already mentioned – do not fit into theories of either mass (or broadcast) or interpersonal media. However, rather than explain the role of the internet or media in society as such, it is necessary to separate out its role in three different parts of society – or, if the reader prefers, types of power (Mann 2013) or social orders (Schroeder 2013). In the end, of course, the relation between them must also be explained. But to understand the role of the internet (and social change generally), it is simply the case that different parts of society work differently: politics, where legitimacy and inputs are bounded and authoritative; markets, where sellers and buyers are connected via diffuse and extensive exchanges; and culture, with its plural worlds of symbols and sources of information (but also with one unified or cohesive part – science). These differences are one part of the argument; another is that technology shapes society – or technological



determinism. This theory entails that the effects of new technologies should be the same across societies. I shall argue that this is indeed the case; the internet extends the reach and intensifies the penetration of media into society, but in doing so it shapes these orders or powers and is shaped by them. It can be added that the distinction between these orders or powers is not just analytical, but also applies to how media, including the internet, work – in practice.

This book will tackle global processes; however, partly because the evidence is most powerful at the level of different countries and partly because media systems are different, it will examine four countries: the United States, Sweden, India and China. I have chosen these four because they are useful cases from the point of view of the comparative method: the first two are at opposite ends of the spectrum among advanced democracies, the latter two provide alternative models of developing countries. The cases also represent a very wide range since they have quite different political systems (liberal democracy, social democracy, elite-skewed democracy and authoritarian). Still, across all four, the internet and media are becoming more market-oriented, although again, the internet remains shaped by different types of media systems (Hallin and Mancini 2004; 2012). This shaping matters above all for the role of media in politics, and especially for the autonomy of media – or the lack thereof. The internet extends the mediation of politics, from above, such that political elites can target and respond more directly to their publics, and from below, such that people or citizens (or civil society) can engage in more diverse ways with politics. From above and below, there are also possibilities to circumvent traditional gatekeepers, as with Donald Trump's tweets in America, as well as with populists in the other three countries. But the internet – and especially social media – also plays a greater role in India and China (as we might expect from rising powers) because in these two countries, traditional media are more skewed towards maintaining the hold of powerful elites while the internet is newer and less gatekept. The political impact of the internet, or of smartphones, is also greater in these two countries because it is closing the urban–rural divide more quickly. Finally, the impact is different for China and India: there are more possibilities for state control but also for resistance to authoritarianism in China (Yang 2014), whereas in India there is greater scope for civil society activism but also more manipulation by elites.

The argument thus extends mediatization theory (Couldry 2012, building on Meyrowitz 1985), whereby social life is increasingly mediated, and this process is intensified by the internet in all four countries.



More extensive political mediation is shaped by media systems, but mediatization also applies to markets and to culture: entertainment services and more diverse sources of information are driven by media competition and consumer (or audience) demands. Greater mediatization of markets and culture entails convergence, but this does not imply a homogenization of societies: in terms of content, digital media may often operate on a near-global scale ('global' always, for our four cases, with qualifications for China), but there is no zero-sum loss of diversity if content flows across borders. Instead, societies become more homogeneous inasmuch as media become more diverse. The increasing mediatization by means of the internet also allows more powerful targeting and reach into society, as with analytics that can tailor content to specific audiences. But this increasing mediatization is constrained by the limits of attention, with media experiencing ever more competition as the online realm expands into consumer markets and into culture or everyday life.

Culture is shaped by the internet mainly in terms of the micro level of everyday routines. Here the internet (and especially social media) makes for more dense and frequent relations of connectedness – or rather tetheredness, in keeping with the caging/exoskeleton idea already mentioned – to people and to information. The most widely experienced changes stemming from the internet, at least from the perspective of people's everyday lives, are that it provides more mediated engagement with others and with information. These changes, however, have no dramatic repercussions at the macro level; they are changes in people's way of life, their rituals and routines. There are exceptions to the absence of significant repercussions: there is a subset of online material that provides more and less reliable information and is important for everyday practical purposes. The main access to this information is via search engines, and the Web is the main source of these materials. This new digital infrastructure extends and displaces traditional media and information sources, and it is vital to provide enhanced access to this infrastructure and ensure its reliability and non-skewedness towards limited sources (or diversity) for a well-functioning society. Similar arguments apply to those for whom online access to others is an important lifeline.

From the perspective of long-term social change, the most important consequences of the internet are in relation to politics. The internet pushes media towards greater differentiation, caging people in mediated relations from above, including more targeting and greater responsiveness from elites, and from below, enabling more input and engagement. Again, increasing mediation faces the constraint of limits of attention, as with gatekeepers setting agendas. Populists, as we shall see, circumvent

