"I don't speak on behalf of…"
Agile Movements, Fluid Politics and the new Democratic Bargain

Abstract

The internet has brought about a radical shift in politics through three As: Amplification, Association and Agency. The combination of these factors is leaving traditional politics in its wake, yet power is still largely controlled through established institutional structures. This widening gap is problematic for everyone.

Online politics is the flowing, ever-shifting practice of micro-political decisions and stances, which might be termed "Liquid Politics". The powerful currents of these Liquid Politics tend to go unnoticed until they come together in one of the many "Agile Movements" that emerge from time-to-time. Movement such as Anonymous and the Tea Party are not political organisations as traditionally understood. They are generally leaderless and coalesce around a vague yet simply stated ideology. But if we look inside these movements we see complexity, and we can detect a core of deeply rooted pre-industrial human behaviours mediated through a digitally interconnected global society. This combination of ancient practices and new technology means that Agile Movements, or something like them, are unlikely to be a fad.

The result of this widening gap between the powerful flow of Liquid Politics and the static institutions of traditional politics is hard to predict. However we can speculate about the spectrum of outcomes that may lie before us. At one end we may see very little change as the power of institutions withstands these social forces. At the other end we may see collapse in party politics and asynchronous processes of representative democracy, as we know it. What seems likely is a mid-point where traditional institutions and structures become more open, participative and malleable recognising that a connected society needs a new dynamic democratic bargain.

Political beings

To be human in any society is to be political – we do politics all time. Almost every choice we make can be seen in a political light. Yet 'politics' at the individual level has often been used to denote a small set of our actions, typically things like voting or making overtly public stances on certain issues. Politics on the grand scale has been seen as the business of governing nation states and the relationships between states. The interface between these two types of politics has been confined to discrete acts of voting or interacting directly with

representatives e.g. writing to them. Institutional politics has been presented to the citizens through traditional broadcast outlets such as newspapers and television that construct it as political universe for citizens to observe.

Politics framed in this way is a system of two worlds that meet occasionally on distinct terms. This system of politics is entirely reasonable in an age when humans are confined to physical meetings and postal systems, and the average person can only expect to gather an audience for their messages composted of those geographically close who shared enough interest or at least curiosity to listen. That is, this is reasonable when physical constraints limited the scope of action that could practically be called politics in any effective sense.

We do not live in such an age - but our political system still does.

In this paper we will look at how a new politics termed Liquid Politics has emerged from the affordances of the internet, and how Agile Movements are continually emerging from the underlying flow of micro-political acts. We will examine some of these movements in detail to understand how both they and the underlying politics that generate them result in a combination of ancient human practices sited in a new technological atmosphere.

To understand the new role of the individual in a networked society we shall review three key changes that the internet has brought in the relationship of the individual to the whole. These we shall term: Amplification, Association and Agency.

Amplification
The utterances of ordinary people now have a much wider active and potential audience. Blogging is a widely popular way for individuals to publish their views on all matter of subjects. It is not known how many blogs there are; Neilson Media currently track about 177 million blogs but there are most likely many more[1]. According to Technorati's annual State of the Blogosphere report, bloggers represent all ages and income brackets and the topics covered are as wide and diverse as the bloggers themselves[2]. What's more, while many blogs are inactive and have very few readers, there is a substantial percentage of blogs that are regularly updated and have audiences that certainly extend beyond friends and family.

Through these mechanisms the reach of any connected individual that has the requisite literacies may be amplified, such that more people can see what they say than only a few years ago an average individual might have expected to meet in a lifetime.

Association
Amplification as characterised above is a largely one-way process of publishing and consumption. A tightly related phenomena is *Association*, i.e. the ability for people to have on-going relationships with individuals and groups. Just looking at Twitter and Facebook, currently there are over 75 million Twitter users who have an average of 27 followers each, and 800 million Facebook users with an average

---

[1] http://www.blogpulse.com
[2] http://technorati.com/state-of-the-blogosphere/

of 130 friends[3,4]. Now these are far from evenly distributed but these *Associations* still form a global network of rolling conversations that give people a day-to-day insight into each other's lives and spread endlessly around the globe as new associations are formed from old ones[5].

Some suggest that technology has served to isolate us (Putnam 2001), however other studies show that many people use technology to establish genuine trust relationships (De Laat 2005). This will be seen more clearly when we look at how effective social media are at motivating physical action.

In addition to the overt acts that occur online such as conversations and link sharing there are more subtle effects that we need to be cognisant of to understanding the nature of the underlying flow of political sentiment online. The work of Christakis and Fowler for example demonstrates, that social networks can have unconscious impacts on our choices. For example in studies of smoking they found that if people in a smoker's social network (both physical and virtual) stop smoking, then the smokers are more likely to stop smoking themselves, similar effect have been found with many other factor such as obesity (Christakis & Fowler 2010), it thus seems natural to surmise that the same subtle effects occur in the political sphere.

Agency
Amplification and *Association* are two components of a general sense of *Agency* that online users have. People have always had power at the micro-level of their every day lives e.g. to decide whether to walk or stop to persuade another person of something. Social power is not evenly distributed, a head of household has more power than a child, someone in an institution may have more power than an ordinary institution etc. The internet can disrupt this by, at the very least, making people feel like they have agency. At the simplest level many that have access to technology for over, say, a year can probably do a lot more than they could last year through a combination of technological change (tools get better) and their own literacy. What's more the *Amplification* and *Association* effects noted above mean that people can feel themselves having a greater impact – by someone on the other side of the world reading and commenting on one's blog for example.

To take a specific example, some studies of the attitudes of players of online games have shown effects such as a positive impact on civic participation (Williams 2006) – which is not surprising if people spend time in environments and with groups where they are empowered at least within that context (Castronova 2007)[6].

Agile Politics
The combination of *Amplification*, *Association,* and *Agency* factors means the digitally included 'do' politics in a different way than previously less connected

---

[3] http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/12234/10-Essential-Twitter-Stats-Data.aspx
[4] http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics
[5] http://www.deviantbits.com/blog/social-graphs-vs-interest-graphs.html
[6] These are studies of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Play Games (MMORPGs) that are online environments where players tend to take on a hero role and interact with each other to solve sometimes highly complex challenges that require group coordination.

generations. Online people debate, influence peer groups, and publish to potentially millions – all from their home, office or mobile phone. People have always acted like this, but now factors of scale, connection and immediate feedback loops change the nature of these acts. In a sense, it changes the nature of us as a social being.

People are immersed in a world that is both saturated with politics yet often not overtly political. An individual's internet journey in any given day may flow from shopping for shoes, to encountering a debate about eco-fashion, to who is wearing what this season. It is also easier to be overtly political as an individual and as a group. Individual acts can be as simple as re-tweeting a political message, or donating to a crowd-sourced social fund.

What's more the internet is full of tools that enable people to collaborate. Groups can be created on Facebook, events organised on Upcoming and manifestos created by thousands using a wiki. These tools enable political sentiment and action to coalesce around a node – which may be a person or more likely a site, or even a hash tag that spans multiple platforms. The simple overt acts noted above are given greater resonance in these group contexts that, on the whole, ebb and flow through people's internet lives.

Agile Movements tend to start online or at least use online tools as their organisational scaffolding. Multi-modal existence is intrinsic to Agile Movements; online and offline are simply different aspects of these movements, which continually combine and re-combine Tweeting from a live event. This can be contrasted with traditional groups that give primacy to physical events and meetings, and use online tools as a support for the 'real' group. This means that Agile Movements in all their instantiations tend to have less demarcated boarders than traditional organisations, with transition in and out of the group being much freer.

For example, one can be a part of an Occupy movement by tweeting about it, by donating online or leaving a book for the library, being physically present at a camp and uploading a smartphone video, or by staying and being a part of the camp. To use the Burning Man phrase this 'Radical Inclusion' is both physical and virtual and is at the heart of the organisational structure (or lack there of) of the groups we will look at.

This Radical Inclusion enables a flow into and out of groups. This allows political movements (both virtual and physical) to form seemingly in an instant and dissipate just as quickly. This is the nature of Agile Politics and it is not confined to a specific set of movements we see at the moment. These individual movements are simply the visible signs of a larger underlying trend of old sensibilities combined with new tools.

To understand how Agile Politics operates it is best to start at the movements that are its visible form. A number of movements typify the practice of Agile Politics. These include: Occupy, Anonymous, The Tea Party, and to some extent The Pirate Party and Al-Qaeda. It is worth noting that while some movements share elements of political sensibility, others do not, as the form and practice of Agile Politics have little to no relationship with the cause that individuals believe in.

An Agile Movement will have all or most of the following characteristics:
1. An ideology that is simple to state
2. Individuals are free to interpret the ideology and give primacy to different aspects of it
3. Individuals self-organise and act in the way they determine
4. A culture of not identifying a leader / actively rejecting any one individual that claims to lead
5. Individuals in the movements change over time, this can include the notional leadership
6. Membership is not exclusive – individuals may identify as part of multiple movements at the same time

These movements are proving difficult for the media, politics and states to deal with. They tend to be mischaracterised. The media in particular tend to identify individuals as leading, speaking for, or being a member of a given movement. Whereas in interviews a typical response from someone who self-identifies with an Agile Movement will be: "I don't speak on behalf of….. but what I think is…"

While the points above characterise Agile Movements, the details of how any given movement is structured, how the underlying flow of politics operates, and how these are related, is subtle and complex. In the following section these will be illuminated first through looking at the complexity of a number of specific Agile Movements then by employing a range of theories and metaphors from pre-industrial culture, social sciences and philosophy.

Anonymous
The quintessential example of this form of movement is Anonymous. Anonymous is about as close to leaderless, directionless and formlessness that one can get while still being identifiable as something. What's more, most public identifications of what Anonymous is are largely or wholly incorrect.

This is not to say that Anonymous does not have structure or indeed hierarchy – but that it is nuanced, often tacit and always fluid. What binds Anonymous is a vague sensibility, a range of practices, and a set of tropes both visual and linguistic. The closest thing to an ideology that Anonymous has is summed up as follows (Crenshaw 2011):

1. Do it for the lulz.
2. Internet censorship is bad.
3. Don't hurt cats.

These essentially come from the web site 4Chan and the /b/ image board which can be considered as the one thing that binds Anonymous. However everything to do with 4Chan and this simple ideology is difficult to explain because of the dense semiotic layering. That is, few things literally mean what they appear to mean nor do they mean the opposite – most are signs to yet more signs.

At first sight /b/ looks chaotic and offensive. It is. And in a sense it isn't. In Turner's anthropological terms, /b/ can be seen as a liminoid space (Turner 1982) that acts as an on going ever-evolving initiation ritual. That is, a necessary but not sufficient condition for being considered by others as Anonymous is

commutative competence indicated by, among other things, the appropriate use of in-group markers. Like many in-group markers, those outside the group often mistake these competences as incompetence – in this way they act as a purposeful cultural barrier, a linguistic and discursive boundary maker, between those in the know and those outside.

For example the phrase "i can haz lulz" may look incorrect as it contains seeming misspellings, grammatical and temporal errors. In fact it follows a highly formalised code typically of the normative nature of many subcultures.

Two key tropes that are often repeated on /b/ because of their symbolic power are:

- "Rule 34"
- "Not your private army"

Rule 34 refers to the so-called Rules of the Internet[7]. Rule 34 states: "There is porn of it, no exceptions". This is a humorous, accurate and powerful statement. It is a declaration of the power of the community to transform the meaning of anything. The notion of pornography is being used for a number of reasons. Many of the users of /b/ like and consume pornography. Also pornography denotes the opposite of the sacred or cherished. Hence whatever you hold dear (including the community itself) can transforme into something that you are supposed to hold in the opposite regard. Though given the community's practices of consumption and self-production of pornography, this inversion of value is itself inverted. The statement is also a playful challenge – if anything can be turned in to pornography then what about a chair, or a bishop, or the number seven, or last Tuesday. Lastly - it is funny. There is also a deeper cultural argument for use of the fetishisation of the banal that stems from writers such as J G Ballard (Ballard 1990).

While "Rule 34" is a statement of the power of the community, "not your private army" is a seeming refutation of that power. The phrase denotes that the community knows it has power but that the power cannot be used or targeted by any member of the community. This speaks to an anti-leader notion that we will see recurring in all Agile Movements.

These are just two of the tropes on /b/. There are hundreds of similar symbolic phrases and images, and many variations on each theme. These are constantly combining and recombining to make new meanings. Attaining and maintaining communicative competence in the symbolic meanings that flow through /b/ requires participation in online fora in which this competences is continually developed and changed.

/b/ acts as an on-going membership rite, as it contains many of the elements identified and outlined by Tuner referencing Van Gennep's 1908 *Rites de Passage*. Specifically 4Chan and /b/ are separate spaces that require the individual to find, enter and understanding them (as the rules there are different). The sense of time in 4Chan may be altered, messages move at an unbelievable pace that can lead participants to a type of flow state; also many who post there do so in the

---

[7] http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/rules-of-the-internet

middle of the night. The language is highly symbolic – what words there are seem meaningless or have little relation to the meaning one might suppose; much of the communication is in the form of images rather than words (a 4Chan post must contain an image). Lastly there are, at least superficially, simple symbolic inversions of meaning – bad taste is good.

At this level /b/ can be seen as layers of challenge to both the newcomer and the participant. Indeed, many posts are explicitly written as challenges, the underlying layers of which are:

- Don't be offended
- Offend us
- Keep up

To use Van Gennep's terms, after setting up the *separated* ritual space participants that enter it are in a state of *transition*. With /b/ this state is constantly challenged. Those that do gain an expertise of the cultural markers gain status in the hierarchy of /b/ for a time but will most likely be left behind as new, unexpected markers come and go. Also /b/ is completely anonymous in the literal sense (hence the name 'Anonymous'[8]). So generally no one knows who the individuals that attain status are anyway. Events occur on /b/ that few witness; these sometimes become an essential part of the lore of /b/. Those that were not there are no longer part of the new in-crowd, whatever their previous status was. For example, at the time of writing, liking My Little Pony is important to people on /b/; however this may have changed by the time you read this. Those that pass through this into Van Gennep's final state of *incorporation* do so by either exiting /b/ (possibly to return), or becoming part (for a time) of one of the many movements, both political and humorous, that emerge out of /b/.

As Coleman and others have documented (Coleman 2011; Crenshaw 2011) the movements that emerge from 4Chan have more of a structure than 4Chan generally, and /b/ in particular. This is because they need at least a minimal form of leadership and direction. Leadership in these movements tends to be pseudonymous, and power is either tacit (through displays of expertise and communicative competence) or through some direct power such as having privileges on a chat board or IRC channel.[9]

The movements, especially their online forms, tend to be a mixture of management and chaos. The agency of the individual to act remains a core principle of anonymous Agile Movements. After all with Radical Inclusion and anonymity or at least pseudonymity it would be difficult for the movements to be otherwise. However there can also be structured decision making grounded in the collective. Coleman quotes a self-identified participant in Anonymous as describing this as "*ultra-coordinated motherfuckary*" and notes that in the case of the 2010 DDoS[10] attacks in the wake of the Wikileaks funding controversy IRC

---

[8] See also online forums such as Slashdot (http://slashdot.org/) where the default name given on a forum post used to be "Anonymous Coward".

[9] IRC is Internet Relay Chat, a text based group chat system that is still used by many for reasons including the ability to retain anonymity.

[10] DDoS is a Distributed Denial of Service attack where web sites are bombarded with request causing them to slow down or perhaps become un-responsive. This might sound complex but tools such as Low Orbit Ion Cannon make is possible for people with little to no technical skill to be part of a DDoS attack.

was used for vast and highly complex debate over what websites should be targeted.

Key movements that in large part emerged from 4Chan's /b/ message board include:

- 2008 Project Chanology – A protest against Scientology that has including leaking documents and other online activities and protesting Scientology offices around the world.
- 2010 Operation Payback – Protest against the United States' film industry
- Dec 2010 OpLibya, OpEgypt, OpTunisia - support for the Arab Spring uprisings, one of a number of revolutionary support movements that have stemmed from Anonymous[11].

Here 'emerge' is used to denote that as soon as any of these movements starts to form as a movement, it ceases to be part of the undercurrent and takes on a life of its own. What's more, while each movement may share some individuals, they are likely to be organised by different people each time and those that are acting as a centre of gravity are likely to change over time. Often very few individuals will know who anyone is other than a screen name. Some of these movements take on even more form such as the Project Chanology which now sees protesters around the world wearing V for Vendetta masks and other Anonymous tropes picketing Scientology offices. Coleman quotes another self-identified Anonymous participant saying "I came for the lulz but stayed for the outrage".

This extended examination of one movement is intended to illustrate the complexity of Agile Movements and how the particular nature of the nuances of the community are difficult to understand from the outside. That is, the particularities of Anonymous are not important, but the fact that they exist is. The other Agile Movements discussed here are different from Anonymous as it is on the extreme edge of formlessness, however the underlying processes that Anonymous uses to self-define and manage membership are found in some form in the types of movements that we now see occurring globally.

Occupy
There is an overlap between the Occupy movement and Anonymous. Some Occupy protestors self-identify as Anonymous (through the iconic 'Anon Suit' signs and V for Vendetta masks), however as noted above those that identify with one Agile Movement may well identify with others. Accordingly, Occupy is made up of people that collectively identify with a wide range of other movements, ranging from other Agile Movements such as Anonymous to more traditional ones such as Greenpeace.

Like the other Agile Movements described here Occupy is an emergent set of practices with their roots in cultures mediated by the internet. Of the Agile Movements covered here, Occupy is the only one that is centred on physical presence. While Chanology has protest events and the Tea Party has rallies and conventions, Occupy has on-going occupation.

---

[11] See: http://telecomix.org/

The central ideology of Occupy is 'the injustice of wealth inequality and the negative role of the banking system'. Hence the focus is on financial institutions whose staff are paid high sums, and which are seen as both the cause of the global financial crisis and, if anything, having profited from it.

As Occupy is occurring at the time of writing there is little critical academic coverage of it. Thus this report relies on media coverage and the author's personal observations of Occupy London and the online global Occupy presence.

With this in mind, it appears that each of the Occupy camps is self organised and collectively managed by the individuals that make up the group. There is knowledge sharing both over the internet, and through some people physically traveling between camps (Captain 2011) for the purpose of knowledge sharing. The fluidity of form and hierarchy maintained by Anonymous is more difficult to sustain in an on-going physical encampment, but there are models of self organisation that Occupy seems inspired by, such as the ten principles of Burning Man[12].

1. Radical Inclusion
2. Gifting
3. De-Commodification
4. Radical Self-Reliance
5. Radical Self-Expression
6. Communal Effort
7. Civic Responsibility
8. Leaving No Trace
9. Participation
10. Immediacy

The camps appear to be falling into similar structures around things such as collective decision-making, media hubs, food gifting systems, and libraries. The Occupy London camp (alternatively Occupy LSX[13]) has 'General Council' meetings held twice a day that are live-streamed and recorded; the meetings are open to anyone who can attend or watch. Occupy Wall Street (alternatively OWS) has a library that has its own web site, catalogue and lending rules[14]. In these ways Occupy maintains its status as both an online and offline movement.

Occupy's relationship with institutional structures and its stance are summed up well by C Einstein who states, "Demands have to be specific. Anything that people can articulate can only be articulated within the language of the current political discourse … making explicit demands reduces the movement" [15].

The Tea Party
The American movement know as the Tea Party is on the political right and thus may seem poles apart from Anonymous and Occupy, which are seen as being on the political left. However Anonymous and the Tea Party share at least two key

---

[12] http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/principles.html
[13] http://occupylsx.org/
[14] http://peopleslibrary.wordpress.com/
[15] "Occupy Wall St - The Revolution Is Love", Directed by Ian MacKenzie, Co-produced with Velcrow Ripper http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRtc-k6dhgs

distinguishing features. First, both movements share elements of a libertarian sensibility. Second, they are both Agile Movements in the term defined here.

The Tea Party has a simple central overt ideology coupled with a philosophy of leaderless (or at least small group) self-organisation powered by the internet (Branson 2011) and is characterised by in-group language markers (Livne et al. 2011) and symbols.

The binding ideology of the Tea Party is 'smaller government', but within that there are a wide set of, sometimes contradictory, goals and techniques. These assertions appear to be contradicted by the existence of national Tea Party groups and events; however closer examination reveals that there is a separation and tension between those national groups that have sought to capitalise on the movement and the thousands of individuals and groups across America. As the recent report from the Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights points out, the six national Tea Party 'organisational networks' (FreedomWorks Tea Party, 1776 Tea Party, Tea Party Nation, Tea Party Patriots, ResistNet, and Tea Party Express); have social and political agendas that are distinct from each other and the Tea Party as a whole (Burghart et al. 2010).

The difficulty that conventional US politics has with the Tea Party is illustrative of the general relationship with the types of Agile Movement being described here. First, politicians such as Sarah Palin and Michele Bachmann operate within structures that centre on notions of leadership and, increasingly, personality. Ordinarily they would work with a movement such as the Tea Party to subsume it within their campaign or claim some form or notional ownership of it or its ideals. However nether claimed to be the leader of the Tea Party, as they understood that as with Anonymous, this would mean instant rejection from the movement.

Second, some (Bond et al. 2011) argue that the Tea Party has had no impact on electoral politics in the US, as overall results were not changed from what was expected. Hence the difficulty of defining a stance in respect of the movement is compounded by an uncertainty about whether the effort is worth it.

Lastly, while the previous point may be true about overall politics in the US, if we look at the actions of so-called 'Tea Party' candidates, they have, to a noticeable degree, not conformed to conventional political norms in that they have not engaged in the types of discussion and compromise upon which the US's form of representative democracy is predicated (there is an argument that at least some of the Founders of the United States were opposed to a party based political system, however this does not mean they were opposed to compromise).

Al-Qaeda
Perhaps most controversially the arguments presented here lead to the conclusion that Al-Qaeda is an Agile Movement. This is not a wholly novel claim. Powell and Hutchison have studied Al-Qaeda as an 'adaptive organization' (Powell & Hutchison 2010). Al-Qaeda's ideology is summarised by the UK intelligence service MI5 as "The West represents a threat to Islam" where the exact interpretation of 'Islam' varies but is widely considered as radical[16].

---

[16] https://www.mi5.gov.uk/output/al-qaidas-ideology.html

Al-Qaeda operates using a loosely connected cell structure. To use Taylor's rather ironically Western term this can be seen as a 'McDonaldization' of the terrorism movement (Taylor 2009). Jenkins from RAND shares the sentiment employing the phrase 'do-it-yourself terrorism'(Jenkins 2011). Al-Qaeda may appear very different from the Agile Movements described above because it had a distinct leader, Osama bin Laden, a central command and control structure, and takes direct aggressive action. However as with other Agile Movements this description of Al-Qaeda is a mischaracterisation. In this case it could be argued that the mischaracterisation is more purposeful than mistaken, as propaganda tends to rely on simple binary opposites and a particular construction of the 'Other'.

The example of Al-Qaeda is illustrative of conventional politics' difficulty in dealing with Agile Movements. The US has operated what has been described as a 'decapitation', i.e. killing the leadership, which has culminated in the killing of Osama bin Laden himself. A simple search on Google reveals a repetition of the narrative 'Al-Qaeda commander killed'. However with Al-Qaeda's increasingly de-centralised structure this strategy seems only to continually affirm the group's central ideology.

It can be argued that for the last several years, bin Laden's primary role in Al-Qaeda has been a symbolic one. Taken in this way the structure and methods of Al-Qaeda are strikingly similar to those of the other Agile Movements outlined here. There are core tropes such as the concept of 'bin Laden' as an icon, and the home-made videos created by groups and disseminated to peer organisations. These videos act in complex ways including the assertion of the individual cell's identity. Often the videos are of ritualised executions. The fact and nature of the ritual is important, as is the fact and nature of its communication to other groups. In this latter respect Al Qaeda is again very similar to other Agile Movements described here. Very similar media tactics are being deployed, so from a purely structural point of view, to use McLuhan classic phrase, 'the medium is the message' (McLuhan 2001).

The power of the undercurrent
As touched upon above, these Agile Movements are an emergent property of the underlying politics that people transact online. Agile Movements are identifiable things, hence they tend to interface with political establishments and states either in the form of a self-identifying individual and / or as groups. The structural similarity of Agile Movements coupled with their diversity of purpose and that they emerge all over the world seemingly all of the time are clues to them being an indication of a larger shift in politics, rather than the shift itself.

Underneath these Agile Movements is a set of day-to-day micro-political acts that we might term 'Liquid Politics'. The nature of Liquid Politics is difficult to grasp and even more difficult to explain, as it embodies and expresses deep human behaviours being transacted through systems that are themselves emerging and changing. A reductive analysis of this Liquid Politics is likely to mischaracterise it hence; it is better to look to a number of metaphors and social theories to understand its nature.

A return to the village

The first useful metaphor to consider is the notion of a return to village based practices and sensibilities. In pre-industrial life our behaviour was governed, in part, by assumptions about the number of people that we had social connections with and the physical limitations of things like privacy (e.g. families sharing single room dwellings). On the internet we create similar social ties but ones that are based on factors such as professional and interest groups rather than facts about geography – though some aspects of this, such as the Dunbar Number, are common[17]. We negotiate these ties using nuanced practices i.e. people don't think everyone online is their 'friend', and teens do have a complex notion of privacy and tactics to maintain it (Boyd & Marwick 2011).

One key difference between village life and now is that there are aspects of ourselves that in pre-industrial cultures we might have supposed to be unique. Indeed people might have though them of as odd as no one else shared them – enjoying the scent of a particular leaf, for example. With the internet though, however obscure a partial interest, love, fetish or vice we have, there are likely to be millions of other people we might virtually meet that share the same proclivity. This is all due to the factors of *Amplification* and *Association* noted above.

In the political sphere this means that however specific a political interest, we are likely to find a community of like-minded people – if you are interested in 'industrial chemicals and the hoof health of elks', there is probably a community for it somewhere.

As touched on above in the analysis of Anonymous, certain elements of this online thematic village life hark back to pre-industrial societies through the rituals and social structures that are established. However, the online is very unlike
pre-industrial villages in that just so long as we do not stay too long, they can be easy to move in and out of. Hence when certain events happen, an Agile Movement may see a flood of incomers and gain substance and power, only later to find that many have moved on leaving only a few behind. In the case of Anonymous anyone can download a tool such as *Low Orbit Ion Cannon* and be part of a DDoS attack, but very few remain as part of the Chanology groups that protest outside Scientology offices each Saturday.

If On A Winter's Night a Trickster

The second illustrative concept is that of the Trickster recently investigated in great detail by Lewis Hyde in his work *Trickster Makes This World* (Hyde 2008). The idea of the Trickster may be unfamiliar to some readers of this paper as it is a concept that tends to have been marginalised and often misunderstood in modern Western culture, yet it has been a key metaphor for many societies over the ages. One reason the Trickster proves a difficult concept for many Western sensibilities is because it is not about binary opposites or end points but rather is about process and change.

---

[17] The number of people we can have active social ties with. Based, among other things, on studies of pre-industrial societies; generally put at 150. Other research puts the number at up to 290. See here for interview with Dunbar: http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/mar/14/my-bright-idea-robin-dunbar

As Hyde states "[the Trickster is the] *spirit of the road at dusk, the one that leads from one town to another and belongs to neither*" (p6). This captures the spirit of Liquid Politics we observe on the internet where power moves from one moment of engagement to another. When the flow slows, it becomes an Agile Movement. These movements still change and adapt but are will be left behind by majority of the flow – the movement has started to become a destination, not a road.

The idea of the Trickster is also one of adaptation. Again Hyde says, "*Sometime it happens that the road between heaven and earth is not open. Whereupon trickster travels not as a messenger but as a thief, the one who steal from the gods and the good things that humans need if they are to survive in this world*" (p6). If we replace the spiritual for the political, this stands as a good metaphor for how these Liquid Politics adapts to the contexts in which they are found, be it the affordances of particular technical systems such as forums or wiki's, or the traditional institutions of power that the Liquid Politics may come into contact with. The identifiable political movements we see, the Agile Movements, are Liquid Politics' malleable tactics of intervention.

Lastly, Hyde posits the idea that "*...there are no modern tricksters because trickster only comes to life in the complex terrain of polytheism. If the spiritual world is dominated by a single high god opposed by a single embodiment of evil, then the ancient trickster disappears*" (pp9-10). Again casting this in a political frame the lived experience of politics on the internet has not disappeared but is widely misunderstood and demonised through direct opposition[18], mischaracterisation or dismissal.

The idea of the Trickster sounds like one that characterises humorous interventions so is only suited to movements such as Anonymous who explicitly are in it "for the lulz". This would be to misunderstand the metaphor. The Trickster embodies concepts of change and adaptation; it is the power and spirit of agility that within the Agile Movements described here.

Rhizome in the digital underground
Rhizome (Deluze & Guattari 2004) is a metaphor that is being adopted by some in the social sciences to embody the kinds of practices that first emerged due to the hyper-linked nature of the internet. Rhizome and the associated concept of the Assemblage are dense theoretical ideas by Deluze and Guattari that cannot be unpacked here other than to note some of their salient features. Ostensibly Rhizome is a biological metaphor that references a type of living root system made up of nodes and connections. It is held in comparison with the more structured idea of a tree (reminiscent of organisational structure diagrams).

Deluze and Guattari state variously that "*A rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power, and circumstances relative to the art oppositions, sciences, and social struggles*" (p8) and that the Rhizome "*is map not a tracing, the idea of a map being oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real*" (p13). They also bring into the concept the important facet of 'multiplicity') saying "[it is] *when the multiple is effectively*

---

[18] As I write this in November 2011, students self identifying as being part of the Occupy movement are being pepper sprayed at the University of California Davis in the United States.

treated as substantive…"(p8) reminding us that with a Rhizome (and more particularly an Assemblage) we should not look at the parts but the whole.

Taken together, this set of overlapping and intertwining concepts gives us an impression of a living, interconnected world that must be taken in all its complexity and not as any single thing idea or object. A look at any visual representation of the structure of the internet or a map of a social network shows why this is such an attractive set of concepts for the social sciences. Deluze and Guattari's concepts are not merely about the social relations between nodes but are deeply about what things are, and what they mean, i.e. the whole and the dynamics of the whole are a thing that, for some purposes, we should not try to decompose into individual items or, as earlier social theories may have it, a set of binary power relations.

Liquid Politics

None of the above theories are Liquid Politics. What exactly constitutes Liquid Politics at any given instant it is too complex, massive, and dynamic to be known. To dissect and examine Liquid Politics we would have to stop the internet and analyse every possible political vector to understand what exactly was occurring. This is impossible. It would probably much of what was important, and the exercise is likely beyond any individuals comprehension. Hence to gain some understanding of what Liquid Politics means and what its implications are we have to rely on the kinds of metaphors and theories presented above. With these in mind we can turn to what the practical implications of these changes are.

Riding the waves

Liquid Politics and the emergent Agile Movements appear to be wholly incompatible with conventional politics and institutions of power. Any alliance that is formed between an Agile Movement and any other structure is by definition weak as it requires the Agile Movement to crystallise into a static form, meaning that most of its motivating power will simply flow past.

Moreover, conventional politics looks increasingly outmoded from a Liquid Politics point of view. Liquid Politics is based on the culture of now and empowerment. Governments are opening up far more data to the public, and through cloud computing individuals have access to more computing power at a lower cost than was imaginable just a few years ago. This changes the dynamics of policy making and analysis as now it is likely that an individual or group could conduct far more detailed data analysis on a subject than a government – while this may have once been a situation restricted to the policy community of think tanks and education establishments, now it is available to many.

Conventional politics clings to its own structures and promotes them as if these particular structures represent an end-point in political evolution. Yet the political systems of today such as voting occasionally, congregating only in a physical place to debate, taking very little input from outside the process, are a product of the past.

Business and many social structures have used the internet to innovate and evolve. For many it seems as if conventional politics has not changed perceptively, and this is to the detriment of all. Voting figures demonstrate there is a gradual disengagement with certain political processes – politicians often

characterise this as a lack of interest in politics. If we understand politics in the way outlined here, it is quite the opposite: it is politicians that have disengaged, not citizens.

For those engaged in conventional politics and policy making this analysis culminates in the question: what does the future hold for traditional politics? As with any futurology, predication is most likely wrong, however we might speculate about a range of possible changes:

1. *Triumph of institutional power i.e. nothing happens* – institutional power means that Liquid Politics and Agile Movements simply operate in-between and around it. There will be instances where given Agile Movements gain enough traction for politicians to have to take notice - if only to retain popularity with their voters and so as not to seem out of touch.

2. *Reconfiguration of democracy and an end of the party system* – this scenario sees a gradual erosion of the legitimacy of the system of representative democracy in place today where voters only get a single chance to vote every few years and representatives are formed around party systems that are an accumulation of political ideologies.

   What form the reconfiguration will take is impossible to predict and will most likely differ on a state-by-state basis, but it is likely to take the form of a much more direct form of democracy, either through representatives that take direction from voters and / or a system that allows electronic voting on an issue by issue basis.

3. *Listening, reacting, representatives* – a mid-point view is that while the ostensible political and party systems remain there are more 'independent' representatives and single-issue parties (such as the Pirate Party), what's more representatives in general become more in touch with and responsive to Agile Movements and views expression in online forums.

   Governments open up ever more data and reconfigure themselves in a more Open Government / Gov2.0 state through the adoption of interactive tools and a degree of Agile Governance (O'Reilly 2010; Noveck 2010).

Conclusion

Politics occurs everywhere all the time. It always has. However through the Amplification, Association and Agency effects of the internet this practice of politics has become a much more powerful force than it was in a less connected world. Political practices are now far more fluid and their flows cover the globe every instant of every day. This Liquid Politics takes shape in Agile Movements which accumulate and attract power.

Conventional politics is slowly reconfiguring itself to be more accommodating of these technology enabled forces – various politicians and states are developing more interactive and inclusive modes of engagement.

It remains an open question where these changes will lead. Certainly some new form of democratic bargain seems necessary to avoid the majority of citizens losing ever more in the public process of politics.

References

Ballard, J.G., 1990. *The Atrocity Exhibition* Rev., Expanded, Annotated, Illustrated Ed., V/Search Publications,U.S.

Bond, J.R., Fleisher, R. & Ilderton, N., 2011. Was the Tea Party Responsible for the Republican Victory in the 2010 House Elections? Available at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1912707 [Accessed November 20, 2011].

Boyd, D. & Marwick, A., 2011. Social Privacy in Networked Publics: Teens' Attitudes, Practices, and Strategies.

Branson, T.S., 2011. *Steeped in Rhetoric: Digital Populism and the Tea Party Movement*. University of Kansas. Available at: http://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/dspace/handle/1808/8041.

Burghart, D., Zeskind, L. & Institute for Research and Education on Human Rights (Kansas City, M.), 2010. *Tea Party Nationalism: A Critical Examination of the Tea Party Movement and the Size, Scope, and Focus of Its National Factions*, Institute for Research & Education on Human Rights.

Captain, S., 2011. Inside Occupy Wall Street's (Kinda) Secret Media HQ | Threat Level | Wired.com. *Wired.com*. Available at: http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2011/11/inside-ows-media-hq/ [Accessed November 20, 2011].

Castronova, E., 2007. *Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun Is Changing Reality*, New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Christakis, N. & Fowler, J., 2010. *Connected: the amazing power of social networks and how they shape our lives*, HarperPress–E-books–General.

Coleman, G., 2011. Gabriella Coleman: Anonymous — From the Lulz to Collective Action | The New Significance. *The New Significance*. Available at: http://www.thenewsignificance.com/2011/05/09/gabriella-coleman-anonymous-from-the-lulz-to-collective-action/ [Accessed November 20, 2011].

Crenshaw, A., 2011. Crude, Inconsistent Threat: Understanding Anonymous. Available at: http://www.irongeek.com/i.php?page=security/understanding-anonymous [Accessed November 19, 2011].

Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F., 2004. *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, Continuum International Publishing Group.

Hyde, L., 2008. *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture*, Canongate Books Ltd.

Jenkins, B.M., 2011. Al Qaeda After Bin Laden.

De Laat, P.B., 2005. Trusting virtual trust. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 7(3), pp.167-180.

Livne, A. et al., 2011. The Party is Over Here: Structure and Content in the 2010 Election. In *Fifth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media*.

McLuhan, M., 2001. *Understanding Media* 2nd ed., Routledge.

Noveck, B.S., 2010. *Wiki Government: How Technology Can Make Government Better, Democracy Stronger, and Citizens More Powerful* Reprint., Brookings Institution.

O'Reilly, T., 2010. Government As a Platform. In D. Lathrop & L. Ruma, eds. *Open Government: Collaboration, Transparency, and Participation in Practice*. O'Reilly Media, pp. 11-39.

Powell, T. & Hutchison, N., 2010. al-Qaeda as an Adaptive Organization: a Case Study.

Putnam, R., 2001. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* New edition., Simon & Schuster Ltd.

Taylor, M., 2009. The—McDonaldization‖ of Jihad: A Strategy for Combating the Franchise Operations of Global Corporate al Qaeda.

Turner, P.V., 1982. *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, PAJ Publications.

Williams, D., 2006. Groups and Goblins: The Social and Civic Impact of an Online Game. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 50(4), pp.651-670.