CHOICE, ETHICS, SELF-IMAGES: A STUDY OF MOBILE NEWS CONSUMPTION AMONG CANADIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Sociology
In conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
(February, 2015)

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Abstract

Recently gathered statistics on Internet usage indicate that news consumption occurs mostly online, and that youth in particular are more likely to get news and information from mobile devices. Such statistics tend to reflect what has been widely held as a positive link between technology and communication in an increasingly interconnected world. In short, advances in the ways people gather information about the world around them will unlock greater democratic potential. However, statistics on the pervasiveness and increased usage mobile phones amongst youth does not demonstrate the degree to which mobile news consumption influences youth engagement in civic or political activities, meaningful daily practices, and life in contemporary Canadian society. In order to better understand the reality of this link one must look beneath the surface of news consumption and examine the many ways in which youth negotiate their relationships to the social world. Interviews based on the daily habits and practices of students mobile news consumption, framed in terms of choice, ethics, and identity, revealed a more precise understanding of these relations. Based on this new information, the thesis concludes that pervasiveness of student mobile phone use is more than the overwhelming success of marketization. Instead, their use of these devices helps them to negotiate the rhythms of everyday student life. Not only do the students form intimate relationships with their mobile phones, they also utilize them to direct their energies toward a variety of civic and political issues through the frequent and unbroken exchange of information.
Acknowledgements

The depth and character of this thesis would not have been possible without the care and support of a number of individuals. I would like to take this opportunity to thank a few of them in particular. First and foremost, my supervisor Dr. Martin Hand, whose interest in this particular study and knowledgeable counsel has broadened my expertise in new media studies and instilled a new appreciation for the field of consumer culture. Dr. Rob Beamish for his extensive and detailed edits which helped improve the flow of this thesis, and for his cheerful character, accessibility, and genuine commitment to the field of sociology. I would also like to recognize Michelle Ellis for both her professional dedication and the sincere encouragement she extends to all of the students in the department; we deeply appreciate it. Last but not least, my fellow students, Greg Cullen, Natalie Kisielewicz, James Lant, William Lockrey, Mark Mansour, Alexander Mara, and Alana Saulnier, whose support and entertainment helped ease my long distance transition and make my experience at Queen’s a memorable one.
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List of Abbreviations

BBS – Bulletin Board Systems

CBC – Canadian Broadcasting Corporation

CIHI – Canadian Institute for Health Information

CMC – Computer Media Communication

CRTC – Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission

CTV – CTV Television Network

EFF – Electronic Frontier Foundation

GMO – Genetically Modified Organism

MSNBC – Microsoft and the National Broadcasting Company

NSA – National Security Agency

OMMA – Online Media, Marketing and Advertising

PETA – People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

WELL – Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link
Chapter 1

Introduction

According to a study produced by the Pew Research Center, sixty-one percent of Americans get their news online, and that the Internet has surpassed newspaper and radio as a newsgathering platform (Purcell et al. 2010:3). Furthermore, well-educated and high-income youth generally frequent these sites on a daily basis and are more inclined to consume news on the go through mobile devices (Purcell et al. 2010:22-31). At times, the Internet, mobile technology, and social media have wide-ranging effects on how “people get, share, and create news…the nature of their political activity; their interactions with government; the style and scope of their communications with friends and family; and the way they organize in communities” (Fox and Rainie 2014:4). Conversely, a Pew study of the Edward Snowden-NSA classified information leaks suggests “social media did not provide new forums for those who might otherwise remain silent to express their opinions and debate issues” (Hampton et al. 2014:4).

While the above findings are empirically sound, they tell us little of how youth are negotiating the social world through various media and what meaningful relations this may be creating. In order to gain insight into how mobile news consumption might be influencing youth this study explores the daily habits and practices of students in the context of a contemporary Canadian university. The goal here is to provide a better understanding of the intersection of politics, technology, and journalism vis-à-vis student mobile news consumption and the role of these connections in daily life. The following situates my approach to this study by outlining the theoretical framework, the central research question, and the breakdown of the chapters.

Drawing from theories of digital consumption (Lury 2011, Sassatelli 2007) and a socio-
philosophical analysis of the historical relations between political and civic thought and the self in Western society (i.e. Foucault 1990a, 1990b, 1988, 2005), the theoretical framework seeks to address how mobile news consumption relates to student choices, ethics, and self-images. By choice is meant, “a very particular set of material circumstances in which individuals come to acquire a reflexive relation to identity” (Lury 2011:29), and the ways in which it creates “subtle networks of discourse, knowledge, pleasures, and powers” (Foucault 1990:72). In the present-day setting, Celia Lury (2011:28-29) states consumer choice “is not necessarily a straightforward process, but, rather, involves coming up against unintended effects, and confronting the limits of agency”. In other words, decision-making resonates profoundly with how people see themselves as individuals acting in the world. Though some (c.f. Adorno 1941, Galbraith 1958; 71) have argued consumption is bound to commodity fetishism wherein “social relations represented in an object come to appear absolutely fixed or given, beyond human control” (Lury 2011:38), current theories allow consumer choices to play an important role in creating social worlds.

The central research question of the thesis, then, is whether, and in what ways, mobile phones and the habits and practices of student newsgathering inspire a sense of civic duty and the ability to engage in life-style or “small p” politics? To better explore this question the study addresses three central components – technology, politics, and journalism – while exploring how the daily choices made by students help them to negotiate their role(s) in present-day society. However, Lury notes, “the elevation of choice as a positive value, including whether and how responsibility for the effects of the individual act of choosing one rather than another possible thing should be acknowledged” (2011:28). This concern is shared by Roberta Sassatelli, who states “consumer choice is not universally good and it certainly is not a private issue (2007:188). Since daily choices can have a profound effect on social discourse, this study will broaden our
knowledge of the ways in which the habits and practices of student mobile news consumption might be impacting their understanding of and link to societal affairs; specifically, how they frame civic and political participation as well as their role in contemporary Canadian society.

Chapter Two provides an overview of the uses and effects of distinctive media (e.g. print, radio, television) and the socio-cultural effects of technology on information, networked publics, social direction, and the quality of human life. Changes in media and communications techniques often fall into three broad outlooks: hype, withdrawal, and empirical criticism. Hype suggests that new technologies are “expect[ed] to change everything, typically for the better” (Flew and Smith 2011:52). For example, in the early years of the Internet, its decentralized was expected to create a more democratic society through the free and open exchange of information. Oppositely, withdrawal rejects such a progressive outlook (Flew and Smith 2011:52-53), and believes instead that technology is detrimental to social development. Lastly, a third outlook attempts to move beyond polarity, toward “more empirically grounded research” (Flew and Smith 2011:53); a position that is held by many contemporary theorists (Castells 2010, Deuze 2007, Silver 2000).

Reviewing this material will provide a more empirically grounded understanding of the interviews and the ways in which students conceptualize mediated communication in everyday practices. This study seeks to provide an accurate representation of the students understanding and expectations of the ways technological devices foster social relationships in the present day. This will help to avoid making needless claims and allow for a comparison of student activities to existing literature – in “echo-chambers”, for instance, where people tend follow like-minded individuals or as a disinterested social body impaired by increased levels of news fragmentation (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski 2010:1090). This will enable us to question whether technology shapes youth politics and who or what determines its form and implementation (Street 1992:1-2).
The influence of technology on politics and journalism is the central focus of Chapter Three. The chapter begins by exploring how and to what degree technology influences politics through the types of state involvement, political structures of control, and the limits of control. The discussion then turns to address how journalism acts as a mechanism that allows the public to be aware of and take part in social decision-making (Putnam 2001, Schudson 2011), and the influence technological advances have had on the profession. For instance, although ever-changing institutions control and distribute the news (Allan 2006, Deuze 2007), the decentralized sharing of news by non-professionalized individuals continues to climb (Atton and Hamilton 2008, Lievrouw 2011). Changes in technology and journalism may have reduced the control of news by institutions, but that does not mean that these changes automatically create a more democratic society. However, “informed citizens”, aided by the increased availability and use of technology, have placed rights-centered movements at the apex of political concerns (Schudson 2003). A shift that has caused youth to move away from party-politics and focus more on individual concerns in the negotiation of multiple self-images (Kotilainen and Rantala 2009) by means of life-style politics (Gil de Zuniga et al. 2013).

The reasons for using interviews as the instrument of social inquiry for analyzing student mobile news consumption is the central focus of Chapter Four. The interview method and analysis will follow the concerns of several notable authors, including: Johnnie Daniel (2012), Kristine Luker (2008), Steiner Kvale (2007), and others. In terms of the data analysis, the methods employed will focus on teasing out themes of choice, ethics, and self-images. By doing so, the chapter explains how a more holistic view of the consumption habits and practices of Canadian university students will be obtained through interviews rather than a questionnaire, for example, which may fail to address these complexities. Utilizing the core empirical questions,
the interviews provide a coherent understanding of mobile news consumption among students immersed in a media rich environment.

Chapter Five explores the process of student mobile phone selection and the daily practices these devices are meant to fulfill. It surveys the central reasons for device adoption, its role in daily life, and the students’ understanding of how mobile phones may be influencing them and wider society. Both choice in mobile phone adoption and the role of mobile phones and other devices in daily life will involve the students’ understanding of how they feel mobile phones are affecting society. The millions of mobile subscriptions in Canada have implications for daily life, mainly because these devices have been folded into Michel Foucault’s practices of the self with regard to the bonds students form with others, their exchanges and communications, and in some cases interactions with social institutions (1986:45). The goal is to explore how the connections the students form with these devices are based on a reflexive relationship to identity (Lury 2003) as well as social and technological appraisal (Rogers 2003).

Chapter Six will further explore the role of mobile phones in connection to the students’ daily lives, paying particular attention to their awareness of civic and political affairs while also probing the habits and practices of newsgathering and how this affects student self-images and societal participation. The chapter works though the students’ conceptions of and involvement in institutionalized politics, the role of news in social decision-making, and the effectiveness of mobile phones to act as a tool for civic and political participation. This analysis illustrates not only, as John Street suggests, that the “link between politics and technology are in constant flux” (1992:41), but also that the habits and practices of student newsgathering allows them to employ a particular type of ethical political action based on consumer choice and the practices of the self in large and diverse social spheres.
Chapter Seven presents a concise summary and a number of concluding remarks on the judiciousness behind student mobile phone selection and its role in daily life. It thoughtfully situates contemporary students’ use of mobile phones amongst existing scholarly literature and attempts to refine the central ethic of mobile phone adoption and use in the everyday lives of contemporary students. It then speaks directly to how their habits and practices on social media collide with today’s social and political institutions. This is followed by a brief discussion of the studies limitations, its applications, and further inquiries.
Chapter 2

Technology and Society

2.1 Introduction

The introduction sketched the orientation to and overall structure of the study, while the focus of this chapter is to explore the adoption of innovations and the ways technology is believed to be impacting Western society. This review is crucial to goal of this thesis since the abundance of technology is a fundamental feature of the learning environment and a means for students to negotiate social relationships (Courtois et al. 2012). First, is an exploration of how the diffusion of innovations takes place among individuals and wider society, as told though the adoption of several key pieces of communications technologies and the technical and social barriers that each encountered. Second, is a review of the theoretical camps of the effects that technology has on society, beginning with the polarized accounts of positive and negative conclusions and moving into more critical schools of thought. Lastly, the third section argues against the sweeping conclusions attributed to mobile phone adoption in favor of exploring how, and for what reasons, students choose to involve them in daily life.

2.2 The Adoption of Innovations

As it stands today it would be hard to imagine a life without the ubiquitous presence of mobile phones, and yet with relative frequency critics make broad and resounding claims on the impact of these devices. For instance, several articles paint mobile phones or their applications as a technology that will inevitably improve human health and happiness (Gerlin and Kitamura 2013) and the efficacy of daily life (Ram 2013, Tossell 2014), or infer disastrous consequences for human development and social relations (CBC News 2013, Rezaiean 2013). Embedded in these writings is the notion that a new device or feature will straightway gain a pervasive role in
society. However, this is not the case. In fact, the adoption of a new technology is the result of irregular historical processes that distinctive societies regularly negotiate. Furthermore, Everett Rogers notes regardless of an innovations obvious benefits they often “require a lengthy period of many years from the time when they become available to the time when they are widely adopted” (2003:1). Rogers discussed diffusion around four key elements - the innovation, communication channels, time, and social systems – but he emphases it “is a kind of social change, defined as the process by which alteration occurs in the structure and function of a social system” (2003:6; original italics). In order to see the beginning of social change at work it will be useful to review the adoption of a few prominent communication technologies and the ensuing effects.

Patented in 1876, Alexander Gram Bell fashioned the household innovation known as the telephone. In truth, Bell merely produced the next step in distanced communications that others had started long before him. For instance, Claude Chappe replaced simple visual telegraphs (i.e. smoke signals) with his semaphore relay system in 1794, which used visual markers to transmit messages over great lengths (Quan-Haase 2013:171). Then, the telegraph enabled the relaying of messages from coast-to-coast in the 1840’s (Croteau and Hoynes 2002:10). Then, adding to these innovations Bell created the telephone and sent the first voice-over-wire communication in 1876 (Abramson 1998:10). Each development also impacts the perceived attributes of an innovation – including its relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, triability, and observability - which Rogers says helps explain different rates of adoption (2003:15-16). For example, the telephone gave its users the relative advantage of quickened interpersonal exchanges. Soon after, print media picked up the telephone to expedite the work of its reporters since it provided a convenient means of sending information across great distances (Croteau and Hoynes 2002). Though the absorption of the telephone into the practice of newsgathering is just one example, it illustrates
how the devices adoption was not just a matter of introduction but a conscientious social process based on its utility in daily life.

The television (TV) is one of the most recognizable devices of our era. Using existing wire and radio technology refined in the Great War, Philo Farnsworth constructed the first TV set capable of picking up and displaying images in 1927 (Abramson 1998). While Albert Abramson suggests the TV is yet another means for humans to communicate with “neighbors beyond the horizon”, as public interest in the device grew so too did commercial interests seeking standards and licensing control (1998:18-22). The telephone represented a communication channel for individuals, but the TV – like radio and tabloids – is a mass media channel capable of sending messages from a single point of origin to an audience of many (Rogers 2003:18). The TV became a device of great concern to social theorists who believed its mass nature allowed commercial interests to instill false interests and obfuscate civil concern (c.f. Baudrillard 1995, Herman and Chomsky 2002, Marcuse 1991). A point worth considering if, as Rogers notes, “people depend mainly upon a subjective evaluation of an innovation that is conveyed to them from other individuals like themselves who had already adopted the innovation” (2003:18-19). However, despite the potential for skewed, widespread messages broadcasting remains the dominant communication tool for public service systems in many parts of the world (Croteau and Hoynes 2006, Turner 2011).

Presently, however, changes in digital devices tend to occur so rapidly that it feels as though there is barely the opportunity to determine their impacts on our habits and practices before new methods and usages take hold in daily life (c.f. Deuze 2012, Gane and Beer 2008). Still, the length of time required for society to adopt an innovation is a traceable occurrence. A realization highlighted by Lelia Green, who notes:
[I]n the early years of domestic computers, there were reports of computers languishing in boxes, under the stairs or on top of the wardrobe, as it became clear just how complex they were to operate, and how many skills were required to use them…over and above its purchase.  

[2002:26; my italics]

However, as a host of alterations in decision-making practices and technical resources occurs alongside the degree of an innovations adoption – which includes expense and the way we learn about, perceive, choose, use, and reinforce our innovation choices – this can impact the rate of its adoption in a social system (Rogers 2003:20-23). Decision-making and rates of adoptions are also conditional to the conduct of adopter categories, which Rogers ranks both in name and spirit: innovators as venturesome, early adaptors as respectful, early majority as deliberate, late majority as skeptical, and laggards as traditionalists (2003:282-284). Here, innovators push for the use of new goods, with the laggards being the final group to adopt, if at all, an innovation.  

While computers were not highly adopted in its early years (circa 1990’s), their now ubiquitous presence in Western society indicates that in just over 20 years, cultural norms, conditions, and decision-making had changed enough to permit the mass adoption of personal computers. Time, then, including innovation-decision processes, innovativeness, and innovation adoption rates, is therefore helpful for studying an innovation works its way into everyday social settings.

What the above innovations have in common is that they were forced to enter into negotiation with complex, preexisting, social systems. Before a particular social system decides to adopt an innovation, it must first reach a certain level of consensus among “individuals, informal groups, organizations, and/or subsystems” (Rogers 2003:23). In addition, tension among formal and informal structures of information flows can either impede or facilitate the rate of diffusion in a social system. The former being a generally accepted social hierarchy which “gives regularity and stability to human behavior in a system”, while the latter stresses
interpersonal connections as “homophilous sets of individuals are grouped together in cliques” (24). Norms are a critical part of diffusion since they inform standards and tolerable behaviors within systems, which can act as barriers to change (Rogers 2003:26). In addition, change agents and opinion leaders, the former professional and the latter proving competency, attempt to sway social systems toward a desired outcome by speaking for or against or alterations based on their preferences (2003:27-28). Realizing the potentially overwhelming influence of such individuals, Baudrillard (1995) and others heavily criticized mass media for its pervasiveness and cunning ability to dictate what social concerns ought to be rather than what they actually are. Lastly, types of innovation-decisions can have an impact on social systems. More specifically, the decision to adopt or reject an innovation is optional, collective, or authority, and ranges respectively from singular choice, social consensus, and persons in power (Rogers 2003:28).

Integrating the elements involved in the adoption of an innovation allows us to further explore the devices introduced in the above. For example, though the presses quickly picked up the telephone, on a public level Anabel Quan-Haase notes initial anxieties toward its diffusion. However, she states, as the telephone’s handiness began to outweigh its newness existing norms and practices changed (Quan-Haase 2012:172; my italics). Pulling from Raymond Williams, Celia Lury details how the post-WWII middle class reorganization of domestic life occurred via the TV to instill a form of education that guided them toward meaning making based on lifestyle and tastes, and helped to facilitate the shift to a post-Fordist society (2011:97-98). Lastly, while adoption rates for the computer were initially low, their elevated presence in the entertainment industry, the household, the workplace, and in education (notably computer sciences, an arena women held a stronghold in until it became a gendered area) allowed them to become a part of
daily life (Green 2002:184-199). In short, all of these innovations had to negotiate the elements of diffusion, in dissimilar social settings, before they were able to become a part of everyday life.

2.3 Technologically Infused Realities

The point of the above argument is simply this: any serious inquiry into the pervasiveness of an innovation within society ought to consider, at some level, how individuals negotiate the elements of diffusion before beginning to make claims on how an innovation can influence daily life. A consideration many have upheld (c.f. Eisenstein 2005, Ohashi 2003). Still, some critics forgo how a given society negotiates the elements of diffusion and how this might change social norms and relations, and instead make claims about the sudden ubiquity of mobile phones while injecting the notion that these devices are or will change the nature of existing social relationships with little resistance. These individuals frequently point to the device or its features as having a fundamentally negative (CBC News 2013, Rezaiean 2013) or positive outcome (Gerlin and Kitamura 2013, Ram 2013, Tossell 2014). Even though positioning an innovation as having an inherently positively or negatively influence society “as a whole” is a questionable claim, it does have some utility. That is to say, they demonstrate that certain ideologies on the effects of technology on society are present in their analysis, regardless of the complexities of diffusion. Therefore, it is necessary to review the roots of these depictions in order to make way for a more appropriate analysis on how the students feel mobile phones might influence their everyday lives.

2.3.1 Science, Technology, and the Future

Light, in its electric form, is a technology harvested by humankind that has become a normative part of daily life. It illuminates enclosures and paths, extends the workday, and feeds hours of leisure. Today, the scientific community, and to a lesser extent the public, has a firm grasp of its workings. But this was not always so, a fact Thomas Kuhn carefully sketches:
No period between remote antiquity and the end of the seventeenth century exhibited a single generally accepted view about the nature of light. Instead there were a number of competing schools and sub-schools...One group took light to be particles emanating from material bodies; for another it was a modification of the medium that intervened between the body and the eye; still another explained light in terms of an interaction of the medium with an emanation from the eye; and there were other combinations and modifications besides.

Kuhn reports that research in the 18th and 19th centuries can be seen as the pursuit of a universally accepted paradigm of electricity and, importantly, a normative and progressive understanding of science (1996). Also involved in this search was the scientific world’s application of technology, and the way “it often played a vital role in the emergence of new sciences” (1996:15-16). As the bonds between science and technology strengthened throughout decades of collaboration, a new cultural theme began to emerge: science, aided by cutting-edge machinery, vowed to produce a safer and easier tomorrow. In fact, the tremendous resonance of this notion in the West lead to the belief that technology, unconstrained by science, can create a better future. An outlook Quan-Haase draws attention to: “technology allows us to dominate and manage nature, making our lives easier...reducing costs and increasing efficiency” (2013:42, c.f. Street 1992). This language of technical efficiency is noticeable in Popular Science; a century old gadget-steeped periodical dedicated to exploring how new technologies will greatly improve the quality of human life.

At the end of the 20th century, the notion of achieving social progress through technical advancement experienced a convincing revival. For example, Howard Rheingold’s The Virtual Community (1993) anticipated social progress through technological expansion and posited that through CMCs, in virtual communities, everyday citizens would gain the ability to enrich key aspects of their world, including: individualities (based on our usage and its use of us), person-to-person interaction, and the nature of politics (1993:12-13). Though Rheingold (1993) addresses some of the criticisms presented to him at the time, any serious inquiry on these issues remains
muted in favor of his optimistic predisposition (c.f. Shenk 1997, Winner 1996). For instance, his inherently upbeat appraisals of the ways BBS, the WELL, and the EFF are crafting new, global enclaves and subcultures built on mutual respect, exclusive identities and self-governance that, if done properly, guarantees the democratic potential of CMCs and shared technology. While this is a well-intentioned stance, the text holds onto the notion of a naturally progressive connection for technology and society as it believes that a collective good will eventually triumph; a theme that reappears in the next chapter of this thesis. To Martin Lister and colleagues, this position the Internet as a place for “forward-thinking people” to be, and “[n]ew media appear, as they have before, with claims and hopes attached; they will deliver increased productivity and educational opportunity and open up new creative and communicative horizons (2009:11). From the stringent social arrangements Plato’s suggests will bring about the perfect city in The Republic to Arthur C. Clarke’s controlling Overlords in Childhood’s End, technological utopianism is an iconic part of popular culture. The stories change, but the central premise remains intact; technical innovation will increase humanity’s control over nature and realize its role in a just and fair society.

2.3.2 Technological Overload and the Disappearance of Meaning

Contrary to the optimism expressed by Rheingold, dystopian theorists hold technology to be a potentially controlling and negative force and believe the continued use of these devices will inevitably lead society to ruin. According to Street (Street 1992:20-21), this group of thinkers reasons that an attachment to technology as diminishing the quality of human life by limiting freedom and happiness while implanting subjugation and reducing social diversity. In the course of the Industrial Revolution, the Luddites destroyed the machinery they saw as responsible for decreasing wages and work, empowering a people who felt otherwise defeated (Quan-Haase 2013:106). Losing hours and wages to machinery was an intolerable situation that demanded
rectification. Still, the Luddite rejection of technology was less a show of force than a symbolic act that held great meaning to the values of their community; a point Rogers similarly makes of Lancaster County’s Amish families (2003:285-287). Elsewhere, however, autarchic Kirkpatrick Sale employed this symbolism for a more dramatic effect as he smashed computers on stage in an effort to promote his new book (Silver 2000:20). Sale’s response is a rather theatrical one, still it must have been necessary for him to emphasize the rejection of technology in favor of a simpler existence; or to sell more books. Importantly, these examples signify the enduring nature of the belief that technology will be responsible for destroying the substance of human relationships.

The physical demolition of machinery employed by the Luddites and Sale is not the only expression of dystopianism as refined arguments for technological regression have also appeared. In a frank admission of this polished rebuke Kevin Robins and Frank Webster refer to their work in *Times of the Technoculture* as “pessimism as a form of social analysis and societal valuation, grounded in historical experience, and that there is very substantial empirical evidence for its skeptical conclusions” (1999:6). Furthermore, growing technological prevalence caused Neil Postman to argue that “[i]nformation has become a form of garbage, not only incapable of answering the most fundamental human questions but barely useful in providing coherent direction to the solution of even mundane problems” (1992:69-70). Though Postman is talking about the general link between technology and society, even the smallest of devices were not immune to such criticism. Some felt the Walkman, for example, was “cutting people off” from one another (Street 1992:21). Similar to utopian imagery, these dogmatic insights have become a part of popular culture. Fears of high-tech oppression (seen in George Orwell’s *1984*; a fictional work who’s fears often appear in modern day surveillance studies) and distraction from the “real”
as in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*) have became somber and terrifying motifs that society regularly examines.

### 2.3.3 The Expansion of Technological Allegory

Claiming that technology is a naturally progressive or regressive force is an ambiguous outlook that contributes to what Steve Woolgar calls “a polarization between narrow suspicion and uncritical enthusiasm” (2002:3-4). For Quan-Haase, presenting technology in these terms locks society in a rather precarious position: on one hand, people are actively thinking about their relationship with technology, on the other hand, the polarized nature of the argument offers little more than a rudimentary grasp of how technology relates to the social (2013:43). In *Questioning Technology*, Andrew Feenberg (2001) exposes the often-subtle problems with the lenses through which society has attempted to explain the role of technology, and pushes for an understanding beyond these narrow frameworks. However, it is essential to explore these theoretical rifts before looking at Feenberg’s key argument of the widened extent of technology’s influence on society.

Briefly, the “neutral” argument sees technology as complete separation of means and ends, the “value-laden” argument sees the societal use of technology as linked together to create a specific way of life, while “autonomy” posits no control over technology, and lastly the “humanly controlled” position deems technology as subject to our activities (Feenberg 2001:9). In addition, the convergence of these two pathways creates four formal camps: determinism, substantivism, instrumentalism, and critical theory (Feenberg 2001). Often compared to a doubled-edged sword, determinism has both a technical and social platform (Quan-Haase 2013). For the former, “it was the features of the technology that determined its use, and the role of a progressive society was to adapt to (and benefit from) technological change” (Green 2002:2). Moreover, when attempting to place someone in the realm of technological determinism many immediately look to Marshal
McLuhan (c.f. Croteau and Hoynes 2003, Flichy 2007, Lister et al. 2009) and the nature of the link he posited between technology and society. However, I feel this ignores the subtly of his argument: “This power of technology to create its own world of demand is not independent of technology being first an extension of our own bodies and senses” (McLuhan 1994:67-68). Here, McLuhan falls more in line with social determinism, which holds “that society is responsible for the development and deployment of particular technologies” (Green 2002:2). In this case, as Quan-Haase (2013) advises, only under the direct influence of existing norms, attitudes, cultural practices or religious beliefs can technology impact society.

According to Feenberg (2001:9), the “substantivists” typically embrace a determinists’ skepticism on human agency but deny it neutral impression. Put differently, they argue human agency has little effect on technical development, but new technologies can create new social and cultural structures based on a systems internal logic. Exploring the substantivist line, Albert Borgmann underscores the work of French philosopher Jacques Ellul:

He paints the most comprehensive and somber picture of the omnipotence of what he calls the technical phenomena which establishes itself through various techniques. But his terminology is tellingly shifting. Though the technical phenomenon is initially described as something very close to the essence of modern technology and a technique is defined merely as any methodological procedure to achieve an end, technique, nevertheless, comes to carry the entire explanatory burden. ‘technique’ (sometimes qualified as ‘modern’) is invoked as the autonomous and irresistible power that enslaves everything from science to art, from labor to leisure, from economics to politics.

[Borgmann 1984:9]

The likely outcome is that a technological system will encode its use and the impact on society. The work of Orwell once again becomes a point of interest, given the cultural tendency to pair technology with social domination (Feenberg 2001:3). A point David Lyon concedes has played a role in shaping modern Surveillance Studies; its origins developing in part from Ellul’s certainty that “[f]a technique in police work steadily puts all under subtle surveillance” (in Lyon 2012:52).
By contrast, “instrumentalism” takes a neutral position when probing technology's role in society. Occasionally called the “anthropological approach”, notes Borgmann, “the focus is not on the development of humans and their tools but on the methodology that modern technology embodies as a way of taking up with reality, particularly in distinction to scientific procedure” (1984:10). With technology freed from moral and ethical anxieties it cannot possess an intrinsic nature. Instead, these implications fall solely in the hands of its user(s). Armaments are certainly destructive, but Eugenia Siapera muses “[i]f technology is made to serve bad ends, then it is not technology that should be blamed but those who use it in these ways” (2012:106). An aura that continues to cloak the use of the atomic bomb and Robert Oppenheimer reflections; a fact laid bare in The Decision to Drop the Bomb (Freed and Giovannitti 1965).

Returning from the required detour on the expansion of technological thought, the focus of Feenberg’s central argument – as well as the efforts of Critical Theory – is to link technology's development more tightly with the social. This tradition notes “technology is the product of both technical and social factors…not simply a means of satisfying goals, but a process that directs a specific mode of living and understanding” (Quan-Haase 2013:49). In other words, technological development is not the result of autonomous, natural progressions. Instead, technology permeates a variety of social practices and is susceptible to shifts in politics and daily use (Feenberg 1999). Echoing Feenberg’s positioning of technology, David Scholle explains that the use of a computer in any organization – political, commercial, social, to name a few – is bound to a particular set of experiences from the very beginning (2002:7). In short, woven into the use and development of any device are social incentives and daily processes. Positioning technology this way makes clinging to tropes of autonomy and instrumentalism quite difficult and exposes how inappropriate these are for explaining existing social circumstances.
Examining the intricate relationship between technology and society may be a relatively new initiative, but history has shown that on a number of occasions Western society has carefully examined the deployment of a techno-progressive rationale by certain groups. Perhaps the most recent example of this is the student protests of May 1968, in France. Here, the government had planned to increase the technocratic integration of the university with society. As a student leaflet exclaimed, this would lead to the “intensification of the repressive reality of the University, its increasing role in in the process of social reproduction, its active participation in maintaining the established order” (in Feenberg 2001:24). Allowing this meant sponsoring a system of trained and untrained citizens and, subsequently, of informed and ill-informed citizens guided by huge corporations and state agencies that would inevitably invade previously safeguarded footings (Feenberg 2001). While the strength of the student protests did not overthrow the state, Feenberg suggests “they accomplished something else of importance, an anti-technocratic redefinition of the idea of progress that continues to live in a variety of forms to this day” (Feenberg 2001:43).

What the student protests demonstrate is that cultural movements have, at times, caused society to rethink its view on the role of technology to direct social change, for what reasons, and under whose guidance. While the positive and negative views of technology’s impact on society have helped pave the way for the field of study know as New Media, these earlier studies usually represent an incomplete analysis and in this study should be thought of as “warnings…directed against those consciously formulated ideologies that appeal to the worst tendencies of human nature” (Postman 2005:157). Instead, taking a critical approach to technology’s various roles in and impact on the processes and understanding of daily life will produce a more complete picture of how mobile phones may be influencing the students. Next, then, is a review of the more recent work on the impacts of mobile phones in contemporary social settings.
2.4 Toward an Analysis of the Adoption and Role of Mobile Phones in Student Life

With technology continuing to settle around new social nodes, via diffusion and social perception, it is important to carefully study how mobile phones become part of the students’ daily lives. By now it should be clear that a new mobile phone or its features do not simply appear, achieve pervasiveness, and have an inherently negative or positive influence on society. What conduits, then, are best suited to grasp why students choose to adopt and employ mobile phones? In addition, though the applicability of mobile phones is certainly extensive, what barriers have they overcome in order to find a concrete role in a student’s life? Does such a role exist? By paying attention to how mobile phones are used, the contexts of their use, and the significance derived from their usage will provide a better understanding of their role as a key piece of technology utilized by students in everyday life.

Academic researchers today are generally suspicious of appraisals that posit technology’s influence as a universalizing force. This suspicion is visible in Science and Technology Studies, Social Construction of Technology, Actor Network Theory, and Social Informatics. Though each framework has its advantages and disadvantages (cf. Quan-Haase 2013), the idea that technology and society influence each other to a similar extent is a unifying factor. The increased interest and prevalence of technology in everyday life eventually produced a new field of analysis, aptly titled New Media. While its initial concern was to identify what, from a practical perspective, makes new media different from old media (c.f. Palvik 1991), this approach was replaced with two main focal points: what new social contexts do new media create (Lievrouw and Livingstone 2006) and asking how technology can inspire change being so deeply set in society (Cowan 1997).

Though the impact of devices such as TV and radio remains a subject of analysis by modern scholars, mobile phones represent the most recent outlet of social analysis and receive
extensive criticism from scholars and social critics alike. While some suggest there may be an isolating nature to the use the Internet on mobile device (Oppmann 2010), these views are often more critical than canonical; similar to what Woolgar (2002) terms “cyberbole” – the blatantly optimistic or pessimistic arguments that plagued early reflections of new media. In addition, the CRTC (2013a;b) produces an abundance of data on the ever-rising number of mobile phones, yet provide no explanation as to why this is happening; evidence that is in turn used by critics that turn the phones impact into a game of numbers and snap judgments. Instead, the questions raised Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) and Cowen (1997) should remain open to analysis in order to construct a more appropriate understanding of impact of mobile phones. A conceptual approach will prove beneficial in this effort because “concepts are the basic tools of thought that enable us to study digital technologies as media, alongside the complex social and cultural transformations they either drive, are tied to or result from” (Gane and Beer 2008:4). Here, the conceptual effort is identifying whether the mobile phone has become a centerpiece of student life.

A number of studies have begun to focus their attention on understanding how mobile devices have created social networks in specific contexts. Based on information consumption, usage patterns, and their impact on social relations, these studies attempt to place mobile use in daily, meaningful contexts; the results of which vary greatly. Janey Gordon (2007) indicates that the prevalence and near-synchronicity of mobile phones have the capacity to create strong public spheres, even amidst information repression and regime blackouts. Cara Wallis (2012) notes that certain Beijing proprietors are now surveilling their workers via cellphone, which tends to reduce the more positive benefits of mobile ownership. Antony Palackal and colleagues (2011) note that there may be an increase in mobile prescience and availability, but there is also a decrease in social linkages outside of close friends and family. Elsewhere, Scott Campbell and Nojin Kwak
(2012) state there has been a collapse of dialogue in small and like-minded groups, but also a noticeable expansion of mobile-mediated discussion in large like-minded groups. Evidently, there is no single, comprehensive explanation for mobile phone usage or its adoption.

Recently, Paul Mihailidis (2014a) put forward the claim that while youth recognize the participatory nature of mobile phones, they are skeptical of its ability to create networks with dynamic communications and diverse information consumption. Though the findings appear to position the central role of mobile phones as undetermined, the study nevertheless probes the habits and practices of mobile phone use in daily life, in a specific context (a contemporary university), and seeks reasons to explain its presence before attempting to lay claims to its utility in social and civil life (Mihailidis 2014a). Moreover, the study notes mobile phones permeate all parts of the daily lives of students. Therefore, in order to see if the students in this study exhibit these indicators, I employ the notion of choice to explore both their perceptions of technology and the roles they ascribe to mobile phones. More precisely, choice represents the outcome of decision-making processes and plainly marks a transition from one specific condition to another. Stressing the gravity of consumer choice, Roberta Sassatelli notes, “objects serve as a material support for interaction as well as symbolic indicators in making the world intelligible…social actors learn to prefer certain objects according to their particular socio-cultural location and, through their choices, testify to and reproduce their socio-cultural location” (2007:91). Choice, then, is more than the sterile act of material acquisition, and it is the reflexive nature of choice that plays a significant role in daily processes and meaning making. In view of the above, a framework of reflexive consumer choice will explore how mobile phones, a material object, relates to the world via its adoption and the students understanding of use in their worlds.

While early theories of consumerism claimed it induced commodity fetishism and set it
beyond human control as it exacerbating unequal social relations (c.f. Adorno 1941, Galbraith 1958), the field of consumer culture has undergone several transformations. As Sassatelli points out, the first leap allowed room for polarization: *apocalyptic views* criticized the social impact of consumption, while *apologetic views* ignored the social limits of consumption and the failure of higher spending to generate well-being and happiness (2007:136; original italics). The next big transition abandoned deterministic portrayals of consumption, focusing instead on consumer logic to “identify a coherence or consistency in the values and practices of contemporary consumption” (Lury 2011:24-25). From this point onwards, an item was not limited to its advertised intention. Moreover, material choices could now lend a hand in creating “*meaningful and legitimate social activity*” (Sassatelli 2007:134). Although choice as a positive value is provisional and must be constantly questioned, greater insight into the role of mobile phones in organizing and connecting students with everyday life will be achieved through an analysis of the relations between cultural and technical histories (Lury 2011:212).

In addition to daily choices helping to create meaningful social activity, there is an exploration of how or why it is believed that these choices will produce such an outcome and what outcome the students in fact expect. More specifically, do new mobile phones merely take over for preexisting daily practices? Alternatively, are students concerned with using mobile phones to take care of themselves and negotiate life in contemporary society? Altogether, does mobile phone choice enable students to transform or alter their mode of being or understanding of their place in society? If so, then mobile phones may well represent what Foucault refers to “an effective and efficient component in the subject's transformation of himself” (2005:243) since it provides the students with access to certain kinds of knowledge about the world around them.
2.5 Summary

The widespread presence of mobile phones is a phenomenon in need of careful study, particularly, as Green and Haddon (2009) indicate, among today’s youth. Though contemporary critics suggest new mobile phones or applications will either benefit or harm society, their claims imply across-the-board uptake and consequences. Moreover, their views of technology tend to be highly polarized and position its adoption and direction and usage outside of human control. This thinking is similar to earlier theories of technology such as determinism or autonomy, which fails to take social aspects into account. However, as Rogers (2003) informs us, the process of the diffusion of innovations contains several uniquely social elements that have a significant impact on the adoption of an innovation. These include, but are not limited to, the palpable benefits for its adopters, how messages about the innovation permeate society, the innovation-decision processes, and how innovations enter into negotiation with complex social systems. Following the critical approach of Feenberg (1999), who recognizes the fact that technology has spread into every aspect of social life, this study situates how mobile phones impact student life within a complex field of technology development and human uses, allows for the production of an accurate and meaningful account. Lastly, by integrating critical theories of New Media with consumer culture and the reflexive selection of material goods, the study will improve our understanding of how and why mobile phones are acquired and utilized in the context of today’s modern university. It should also be stated, however, that the notion of choice is not an even enterprise and is an act that occurs at a variety of levels in society. While individuals are capable of making their own technological choices, the following chapter explores how political bodies, and economic interests can, at times, displace the weight of individual’s agency. The next chapter will explore the connections between technology and society by focusing on technology’s
pairing with politics and journalism. More specifically, the chapter will document the practices and principles that these institutions have developed in their long history, the impact of technology on these institutions and their principles, as well as indicating why these relationships matter in a digital age.
Chapter 3

The Unsettled State of Political Discourse and News Media

3.1 Introduction

The last chapter established that while communications technologies are deeply embedded in Western society, the innovations themselves are not the sole cause for shifts in social direction. Cultural ideals and institutions also have a considerable amount of influence on changes in social direction. For instance, in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Michel Foucault expounded upon how the adoption of new technologies, both mechanical and cognitive, intensified the remedial power of Western institutions seeking to normalize social infractions and neutralize visible disorders. Broadly speaking, Foucault’s work demonstrates the value of probing the form and character of official bodies and their impact on social affairs. Taking a similar position, this chapter focuses on historical changes in politics and journalism in order to better understand how students may be conceptualizing and negotiating complex social relations. First, I explore the various state-technology power relations. Second, is a review of journalism’s link to strong public deliberations. Third, an analysis of the shifts that have taken place within institutionalized journalism. Fourth, and finally, the discussion then turns to addresses the existing political climate and the ability of participatory networks to act as the basis for student lifestyle politics.

3.2 Fluctuations in State-Technology Relations and their Impact on Politics

Running alongside transitions in political form and leadership are changes in the use of technology by political bodies. While the protest of 1968 is not to be discounted, it is equally important that it not be reduced to a narrow account of how a partnership between technology and politics as inherently negative. Instead, a more appropriate course of action is to probe how
society conceives of the relationship between these two components by focusing on its use, form, and justification. This is a sentiment that resonates with John Street, who asks:

Does the use of technology actually shape the kind of political arrangements we have? Can, for instance, democracy only operate in societies which have developed forms of information or communications technology? Is such technology used to thwart or to serve certain political interests? And if technology does play a direct role in politics, who or what determines its form and implementation?

[1992:1-2]

Following the concerns laid out by Street will generate an integrated and complex understanding of politics and technology, including organizational and administrative concerns, as well as a stronger understanding of the role and impact of modern technologies in the political process. While more recent works on relationships between technology and politics have emerged (c.f. Morozov 2013, Sovacool and Cooper 2013), they are purposefully imbued with a particular agenda while Street offers a line of questioning that avoids “blind faith in, and prejudices against, technology which characterizes the other arguments” (1992:7).

According to Street, no single approach provides a sufficient account of the interaction of politics and technology and, therefore, “we need to retain a spirit of eclecticism in which we recognize differences in both technical and political form, and where the relationship we identify will depend on each” (1992:45). He reasons, then, there is a multitude of ways in which state-technology relationships coalesce, and the best way to assess how one affects the other is to begin by investigating what sort of relationships may be in play. Undertaking this effort, Street (1992) identifies three central dimensions: the types of involvement, the political structures of control, and the limits of control. Starting with the types of involvement, three links arise: the state as regulator, customer, and underwriter. Firstly, as a regulator, the state can influence both the commercial success and operational boundaries of a given technology (Street 1992:51-52). This
subsequently structures and limits its use by the public. This is a well-known role which can be seen in the level of input that the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) had in forming and upholding the regulatory practices of its communication technologies (Armstrong 2010); less so in the U.S. which took a commercial market stance (Croteau and Hoynes 2006). Nevertheless, new regulations may have serious effects on today’s Internet, and possibly impede democratic deliberations.

Secondly, the state can assume the role of the customer. It is here where the state may attempt to utilize technology to simplify its duties. However, the state is not a normal customer since it possesses the ability to affect the character and introduction of available technologies (Street 1992:53). As underwriter, the state can influence the direction of technology by choosing to fund, or not, specific areas of research toward a given end that individuals or corporations would not have to resources to undertake (1992:54). This is not an uncommon, as Street notes “we need merely to observe that state sponsorship of science and technology breeds a series of potentially charged political issues, the outcome of which will depend upon how the relationship between the state and technology policy is organized” (1992:55). Put differently, though project funding occurs for a specific reason, the results are subject to changes in policy; an issue which happens frequently in the neo-pluralist mindset and can take place at any point in time.

While these relationships help with an initial placement of various technological roles in society, an examination of the political structures of control is equally beneficial. In this regard, Street (1992) speaks first on the state as customer, noting that the Soviet Union’s strategic rocket forces were making Biryuza refrigerators. This techno-political structuring impeded development due to the severe presence of a military industrial complex, and “only when fear of falling behind the West became most acute, in the late 1960’s, did the Soviet authorities change the organization
of technology policy” (Street 1992:56). If a state runs free of economic or political competition and its policies are directed by specific interests, social conditions can become disorderly and even dehumanizing (Street 1992:58); which may be partly responsible for the modern desire to keep politics highly competitive, regardless of poor technical development.

State regulators play a weighty role in the development and execution of a technology, but they are also in the position to speak to its levels of control. This is where the discourse on public versus private is most visible. In Canada, healthcare is largely a public enterprise, while the U.S. appears split on the issue (Jost 2012). As a mostly public system, Canadian citizens sacrifice control over management and codes of practice (Street 1992:59) for 65% coverage of expenses by the government (CIHI 2013); unlike the U.S.’s private system which, despite the country’s strong belief in competitive markets, faces strong criticism for a lack of regulation and overly high costs (Hixon 2012). Relatedly, the U.S. system illustrates how regulators also face pressure from vested interests. That is to say, “[a]ll technologies generate a body of expertise around them. This expertise may itself lead to the creation of powerful vested interests” (Street 1992:61). Public deliberations often demand greater access and more affordable healthcare, but the interests who create and govern U.S. healthcare, especially the pharmaceutical industry, seem to have other concerns. As a result, only essential social services (such as the smallpox vaccine) become openly available. Leaving Street to remark, “the political character of regulation policy is a mix both of political structures and the particular features of the technology” (1992:62).

The limits of control attributed to the state as underwriter are quite similar to its types of involvement in that control of priorities is wholly dependent on the state’s approach to technology and those generated by the technology itself (1992:64). Because of this complexity, democracy has a strained relationship with technology. For example, when facing public concerns, “limits
are placed on the power and scope of the state…for the importance of consent, it also means that the state has no clear and incontrovertible concept of the public good by which it can overrule dissenting voices” (Street 1992:64; my italics). The public and the state can also differ on what the public good is. When attempting to speak to the public good, political authority must weigh the relevant criteria (costs, savings, and other judgments) in its assessment. A public and political perception of a technology’s significance becomes clouded when experts with vested interests alter language to better suit their goals (Street 1992:65). While not always apparent, many struggle to bring these instances before the public; as seen in weapons developers and network news stations carefully choosing the words “tactical missile strikes” during Gulf War broadcasts as opposed to “killing civilians and Iraqi soldiers” (cf. Jaramillo 2009, Lewis 2005),

Political deliberation on technology become problematic due to “[t]he relatively short cycle to which democracy is required to work may clash with the longer time scale required for technology” (Street 1992:67). Meaning, while the goals of a particular party may wish to achieve its ends quickly, the timespan required to form a coherent technological policy often clashes with these short-term solutions. As a result, a non-technical fix such as employing a combination of social/political reorganization outstrips technical policy; which is important given the effects of social influence of participatory journalism and a call for new politics discussed below. Still, Street makes two final remarks on techno-political relations. First, he reiterates how timeframe, expertise, and vested interests collide to make total control nearly impossible. Then concludes, “[i]nsofar as political structures are confined to national boundaries, there are real limits to the possible extent of democratic control” (Street 1992:68). Which begs the question: can societies create a holistic common good without face-to-face interaction? What would it look like and what are its motivating factors? How can the current political structure recognize and integrate
this conception? Would it? Chapter Six will address these questions in detail, while the section below communicates how political information spreads throughout the *demos*, its significance for the democratic deliberations, and how this might be affecting the contemporary political climate.

### 3.3 Subjecting Political Affairs to the Public Gaze

An informed versus uninformed public can have a dramatic effect on the direction a democratic society progresses. But what is an informed public? What bits of information should it have? It could be inferred, or has until now been assumed, that citizens ought to have access to information on state affairs, but where does this information come from? Reexamining the arrangement of a political system, its citizens, and how decision-making and new policies are determined can satisfy all of these inquiries. In Held’s (2006) Athenian model, that citizens lived honorably in the *polis* by demonstrating a commitment to *civic virtue* (favoring public affairs and the *common good*) and participate *directly* in state affairs. Essentially, face-to-face deliberations in public assemblies and daily activities were the delivery systems used to distribute information relevant to state affairs. This enabled citizen to meaningfully impact state policy. The logic of this arrangement is sound but, as Held (2006) notes, its success is dependent on a relatively small state. With the advent of industrialization and larger states, the stability of this cornerstone was upset and a new means of spreading information was required.

Though face-to-face debates were possible to some degree in instrumental republicanism, it became a daunting task under the swelling size of liberal democracies. Participating directly with political affairs may have diminished, but the written word stepped in as a way of keeping up-to-date on state politics. Coinciding with cultural and intellectual shifts already underway in the Renaissance, Elizabeth Eisenstein acknowledges the auxiliary impact of movable type and its ability to replicate existing script; therefore placing more information in circulation (2005:164-
The distribution of information pressed into parchment became a widespread occurrence, making room for what Mitchell Stephens refers to as “the climate for the development of written news” (2006:62). A review of the journalistic tradition occurs below, but its import to politics is visible in its usual definition: “the business or practice of regularly producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of public interest and importance” (Schudson 2011:3, c.f. Stephens 2006, Williams and Delli Carpini 2011). Since newspapers keep the demos up-to-date on political affairs, they allow public deliberation to remain a centerpiece of daily life.

The idea that news functions as a repository of politic affairs which citizens can extract information from in support of public deliberations is a familiar tradition. As political scientist Robert Putnam maintains, “only a newspaper can put the same thought at the same time before a thousand readers…the evidence makes quite clear that newspaper reading and good citizenship go together” (2001:218). A democracy can only exist in places that have free and open access to and journalists have been a key source of such information. Referred to as the public-service model (also transference model or deliberative democratic), its infers news should assist the public in reaching informed judgments, in an accumulative fashion, to ensure the public has a role in steering the direction of society (Curran 2011, Couldry et al. 2007, Street 2001, Schudson 2011). The link between news and citizens helps to ensure the proper function of government by monitoring the activities of elected representatives in terms of policy decisions, moral character, and other social concerns.

In addition, while the linking of news and informed citizenship has been around for some time, social and technological transformations often question the legitimacy of this link. Profuse analysis of this relationship followed news as it moved from the printed word to the vocalized broadcasts of radio and then again in its journey to TV (c.f. Bird 1997, Stephens 1998, Schudson
2011). More recently, the debate focuses on the increasingly digital nature of journalism brought about by its move to the Internet. Couldry and colleagues note questions have been raised about the ability of youth, as avid users of digital devices, to seek out, compare, and evaluate news online without traditional gatekeepers or filters (2007:34). Which begs the question: is the link between news and informed citizenship visible in the daily life of students? Does this create an atmosphere of public deliberations that they can use to steer the current and/or future direction of contemporary society? In order to address these questions it is vital examine the forms, guiding principles, and present-day operation of journalism in detail.

3.4 Journalism: Political Ideology or Professional Practice?

Journalism is a longstanding profession that holds a rather familiar relation to the public as it often used to facilitate democratic deliberations via the widespread dispersal of information, though how it achieves this is important and warrants clarification. Tellingly, the premise is that journalism gives onlookers a common platform, which covers a variety of topics, for use in public deliberation (cf. Stephens 2006, Schudson 2011, Williams and Delli Carpini 2011). In addition, it is frequently suggested that changes in the technical means of information distribution have made it possible for humanity to make great strides of progress. Eisenstein (2005), however, contends that the Renaissance was more than a case of technology driving social change, but the result of a host of cultural and intellectual conversions already in play. Nevertheless, it would be erroneous to altogether degrade the impact of technical transformations. As Mitchel Stephens reports, the written word was a technological shift that not only freed the mind from memorization, it also enabled society to collect the knowledge of earlier generations and create a sense of continuity in terms of human existence (Stephens 2006:43-44). Therefore, a review of technological changes
and the ways journalism supplies information to the public will help underscore the complex relationship between politics and technology.

While there are many forms of journalism (c.f. Atton and Hamilton 2008, Fenton 2010, Lievrouw 2011), the focus here will be on mass or mainstream channels imparted by Rogers in the Chapter Two, wherein a singular source broadly distributes readily available information to the public. This critique of mainstream journalism will cover changes in the shape of journalism, its technical features, and the link that society has formed with the profession in each case. With this in mind, we will look at the three periods of journalism as set out by James Curran and James Seaton (2010): the presses, broadcasting, and the rise of new media. In doing so, the tendency to move toward a professionalized, and therefore exclusive, journalistic tradition becomes clear; and subject to reevaluation later on. But instead of opening with the generally understood features of news – a factual and objective profession actively involved in gathering and distributing worldly information – a more fruitful course of action will be to explore how changes in the field of journalism brought about the creation of these ideals, as they were was not always the case.

3.4.1 Controlling the Presses, Controlling Social Order

The earliest newspapers were significantly different from their modern day counterpart, both visually and contextually, but their foremost distinction was their ownership and purpose. Initially, newspapers were utilized as a point of power. For example, Charles II of England exploited his “personal rule to stamp out the Whig newspapers” (Black 2011:4); after which he created and controlled his own version of the presses, one better suited to his tastes (Stephens 2006:152). However, at the beginning of the 19th century, growing dissention toward political authority lead to the rise of radical presses. These presses were meet with intense opposition from the establishment because they posed a long-term threat to the existing social order by
encouraging people to question its legitimacy, and helped to expose the falsehood of a divinely ordered society pivoting on the disenfranchisement of the poor (Curran 2011:141). In an attempt to curb the radicalized presses, governmental bodies attempted to control, or at least limit, the potential damage of the presses through taxation (cf. Allan 2004, Curran 2011, Stephens 2006); an effort that ultimately failed.

As the size of the presses grew with industrialization, anybody with the most modest of resources could invest in a printing press and launch a new paper that came at little cost to the public; so named penny presses (Curran 2011). Low costs and high yields meant newspapers were widely circulated, enabling strong public deliberation due to so many people having access to the same information. At that time, newspapers defined themselves as neutral in politics and generally indifferent toward elite political events (Allan 2004:14). As a result, people in positions of authority could no longer control or distort the information being distributed to suit their own interests. Removed from elite control, newspapers spoke to issues of genuine public concern and acted as a sort of unofficial public record, relaying and storing information on day-to-day events and topics. However, two trends soon appeared; sensationalism and, in response, editors and journalists realized the public wanted facts not fiction (Allan 2004:15). Both technical and social changes led to a public demand for a neutral and factual periodical to keep citizens informed.

In addition to popularization and subsequent mass distribution, the filling of early 20th century newspapers with advertisements noticeably altered their form. In an effort to develop the industry, “the new commercial press sought to sell papers to a broad public and turn that large circulation into revenue by selling space in the newspaper to advertisers wanting to reach a mass audience” (Croteau and Hoynes 2006: 51). At this time, Press Barons increased the profitability of newspapers and worked furiously to maintain the status quo by slandering opponents (Croteau
and Hoynes 2006, Curran and Seaton 2010). Under the barons, controlling information became a highly lucrative business and means of social leveraging, but the increased levels of advertising had the latent effect of further removing political influence from newspapers. In effect, the barons created a powerful, highly centralized product with a one-to-many delivery system; a practice widely embraced in the broadcasting era (Chadwick 2006, Croteau and Hoynes 2003, Deuze 2007). Because of this, Curran and Seaton (2010) note newspapers and journalists now represented a *fourth estate*: an unofficial yet tremendously influential governing body.

Bruce Williams and Michael Delli Carpini note the most important shift to come out of this Progressive Era, despite the control of the barons, was “‘truth’ as an inherently contested concept containing both *ethical and descriptive elements* dropped out of journalistic theory and practice, to be replaced with ‘*just the facts*’” (2011:36; my italics). Over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, everyday citizens were involved with the progression of newspapers, albeit indirectly, since the presses were attempting to please both readers and the growing power of commercial interests. Though the profession had made great strides, it was still changing. Stuart Allan notes that: “In the years immediately following the close of the First World War in Europe, the necessary conditions were in place for a general affirmation of the tenets of ‘*objectivity*’ among both journalists and their critics” (Allan 2004:22). High levels of wartime propaganda coming from both axis and allied powers set in motion the disenchantment of news, and the public zealously questioned its bond with the state and the validity of its claims (Allan 2004, Messinger 1992, Paddock 2004). Accordingly, an exhausted yet information hungry public demanded objectivity and non-biased reporting from Western journalists (Allan 2004:23). If the profession was going to survive, it had to maintain credibility under large-scale public scrutiny.
3.4.2 Broadcasting and the Unrequited Audience(s)

Newspapers were the staple product of journalism until the commercialization of new technologies took hold. The invention of the radio forever changed the way the public received its news. As Roger Bird notes, the “printing press had about 300 years to do its work before the next communications media arrived” (1997:22). For many years, then, newspapers had been the convention for speaking and distributing positions and viewpoints (Foucault 2010:299). Vincent Campbell notes that radio flourished because of its ability to provide live broadcasts and the immediacy it achieved (2004:5). Here immediacy means the ability of these devices to dispense information without drawing attention to the medium as it was doing so (Bolter and Grusin 1999:11). Simply put, the reception of a message no longer required its physical handling. Having transcended the point-to-point nature of existing technologies, radio’s audiences were large and mobile, capable of accessing news with the turn of a dial. Importantly, this was a time in North American history when social links with emerging technologies was hotly debated; sadly, some say, commercial interests appear to have been the clear victors (Croteau and Hoynes 2003). Radio increased the range and speed of information, and when it evolved – CB radio or walkie-talkies, for example – it may have “lost its centrality but it won in pervasiveness and flexibility, adapting modes and themes to the rhythms of people’s everyday lives (Castells 2010:358; my italics).

In spite of a relatively slow start, TV news flourished after the Second World War (Bird 1997:8-9), and the immediacy of the camera found its way into the living room. While pictures were hitherto seen in newsprint, these new images possessed a sense of liveliness, and enabled journalists to “re-create the sights and sounds of events that went well beyond anything even the most verbally skilled of their predecessors might have achieved (Stephens 2007:274). In 1941
CBS ran two 15-minute broadcasts a day, but in the 1980’s Ted Turner recognized the medium’s potential and launched CNN, the world’s first 24-hour satellite news station (Stephens 2006:274-296). The TV gave viewers a shared, optical, and immediate experience. For example, Walter Cronkite of CBS Evening News reported on what many considered “the most traumatic and triumphant moments of American life in the 1960’s, the assassination of U.S. Pres. John F. Kennedy in 1963 and the Apollo 11 Moon landing in 1969” (Cronkite 2012).

Scrutinizing the medium for its homogeneity, Markus Prior (2007:35) advocates that news programming in the 1950’s and 1960’s was leading less concerned citizens astray due to its simplification of both presentation and intake. Though studies evenly ranked TV and the presses in 1963, the TV became the staple source of news in 1967, which constructed a more centralized and nationalized milieu than ever before (Williams and Delli Carpini 2011:61). Televised news took the pieces of newspapers that readers found enticing – facts, details, settings, and images – and put them into a program that audiences would flock to. Nevertheless, TV represented more than just the favoring of a new technology, it also put into place a new way of speaking to the public; and like the radio, it too is subject to political and economic apparatuses producing and transmitting specific discourses (Foucault 2010:73).

Broadcast TV news gained prominence from 1967 onward, but in the late 1990’s it reached a level of critical mass as a cynical public began to heavily scrutinize the principles and practices that professionalized journalism had established. Social critics found that particular media regimes were too commercially invested, which then altered the presentation and content of their broadcasts (Baudrillard 1995, Jaramillo 2009, Lewis 2005, Robinson 2002). Once again, communities were losing faith in the ability of centralized news sources to speak to the common good, and the public desire for an informative and applicable body of knowledge became a
significant social issue. This happens because, as Henry Jenkins puts it, high levels of media concentration can severely lower the diversity of important cultural information in the realm of news, and when this becomes too extreme and news attentiveness declines, popular culture often does a better job at educating the public on important social issues (2006). Clearly, in order for news to speak to the public good it must maintain a sufficient distancing from the effects of economic or political influence in its reporting.

3.4.3 The Online Press: Revitalizing or Debilitating Contemporary Political Reflections?

The advent of the Internet enabled faster communications over greater distances for the public, but it is still argued that professionalized journalism is a necessary stronghold for ensuring strong democratic deliberations in this new environment (Singer 1997, 2003). Traditional news networks were slow to grow their online presence due to the unceasing profitability of existing platforms, and used the web as a reservoir until a profitable model came along (Allan 2006, Garrison 2005). However, the broadened availability of the Internet and digital devices forced stations to commit more capital and technical staff to refining their online product (Allan 2006, Campbell 2004, Atton and Hamilton 2008). While earlier forms of news were analogue in nature (i.e. film and newspapers), new media enabled online news to congregate preexisting forms of news into digital data (Lister et al. 2009:442); which simplified the working and reworking of news stories. By the mid 1990’s, after the shocking coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing, broadcasters were actively engaged in gaining a larger online membership (Allan 2006). Tallying 23 million-plus visitors a month in 2006, MSNBC.com reasoned “[w]e are the leader in online news because in the last ten years, we have focused only on being the best online”, and OMMA magazine contended “online journalism doesn’t get much better or more real-time than here” (in
Allan 2006:141-144). In this case, real-time broadcasts represented another leap in the *immediacy* of news.

Like its communicative predecessors the Internet delivered a host of new features that society promptly familiarized itself with. A one-to-many distribution method limits print, radio, and TV, but the Internet fostered a model of distribution that enabled many-to-many and two-way communications previously only available to broadcasters. E-mails, blogs, forums, and an array of webpages became a normative means of sharing information with other members of society (Green 2002, Palvik 1996, Tremayne 2007). This led to the growth of what Manuel Castells refers to as a network society:

What characterizes the new system of communication, based in the digital, networked integration of multiple communications modes, is its inclusiveness and comprehensiveness of all cultural expressions. Because of its existence, all kinds of messages in the new type of society work in a binary mode: presence/absence in the multimedia communication system. Only presence in this integrated system permits communicability and socialization of the message. All other messages are reduced to individual imagination or to increasingly marginalized face-to-face subcultures. From society’s perspective, *electronic based communications (typographic, audiovisual, or computer-mediated) is communication.*

Communication in the digital realm became such a normative part of daily life that it was viewed as abnormal not to do so, which was accelerated by the fact that analog media were becoming less central to everyday life. What enables digital media to flourish is its withering of time and space (Bolter and Grusin 1999, Lister et al. 2009, Jenkins 2006, Papacharissi 2010), and its “always-on nature” (Baron 2008, Castells et al. 2007, Turkle 2008, Green and Haddon 2009); features that, by their nature, enable news seekers to access information at any time with the right device.

The networks created by communications technologies also create a social platform for exploring and commenting on news. Because of this, they provided *citizen journalists* with much
greater opportunity to present their account of worldly events. Still, the recent burst of citizen reporting should not be attributed to technological features or an increase in the Internet’s purview, rather it was a societal reformation that arose as a result of a public grown weary of the politico-economic biases of the late broadcast era. A transformation that Chris Atton and James Hamilton discuss in terms of both its structure and tenets:

Alternative journalism proceeds from dissatisfaction not only with the mainstream coverage of certain issues and topics, but also with the epistemology of news. Its critique emphasizes alternatives to, inter alia, conventions of new sources and representation; the inverted pyramid of news texts; the hierarchical and capitalized economy of commercial journalism; the professional, elite basis of journalism as a practice; the professional norm of objectivity; and the subordinate role of audience as receiver.

[2008:1; my italics]

Flipped on its end, news is no longer projected top-down to inactive news consumers, amateurs can just as easily produce it in a participatory and contextually relevant manner. The public has effectively tapped into the proficiency and pervasiveness that the network society offers in an attempt to create a nondiscriminatory news source and, ideally, a more democratic one. For example, the Internet’s liquidity – its fluid and interactive nature – can help to facilitate better dialogue since it provides amateur journalists with more opportunity to participate and, moreover, allowing professional journalists and laymen to check the validity and accuracy of the information in circulation (Deuze 2007, Singer 2008, Matheson 2004).

Due to its widespread availability and the ease of access to information, the Internet has lent itself to a growing call for public transparency. That is, making the real facts on social and political affairs openly available for public deliberation. Commercial and legislative bodies are regularly scrutinized for their secrecy by a contemporary society that wishes to have access to the most intricate details of their operations in order to make sure these enterprises are operating ethically and morally in accordance with social norms (Cardoso 2006, Couldry et al. 2007, Lury
2011, Sassatelli 2007, Turkle 1996). Immediacy, liquidity, and transparency ostensibly converge in favor of the general publics attempt to articulate a more appropriate common good relative to information distribution, political representation, and social order. Still others, like Zygmunt Bauman, remain apprehensive, and reason that these features and the increased speed of today’s liquid life does not allow the formation of stable positions, and the rapid consumption of information in order to remain up-to-date allows important issues to fall out of sight (2005).

Moreover, the reabsorption of new and unique talents into mainstream channels often limits the impact of citizen journalists (Allan 2006, Curran and Witschge 2011, Deuze 2007), while the accuracy and legitimacy of their reports faces mixed reviews (Atton and Hamilton 2008, Couldry 2010, Kaid and Postelnicu 2007). In light of the above, it is more likely that the pervasiveness of technological devices and their ability to connect to online environments is creating an increased opportunity for democratic communications and the sharing of genuinely important information.

Due to the highly participatory nature of the Internet, journalism enters into an extensive discussion with users able to review its policies and practices whenever suspicions of political or economic impetus are aroused. A number of studies note that mobile devices and the Internet are creating a democratic revival via increasingly available social networks (Dimmick et al. 2010, Kotilainen and Rantala 2009, Loader and Mercea 2011), while others state the implication of technology as a democratic primer needs to be more thoroughly examined (Street 2001, Jenkins and Thorburn 2003, Curran 2011, Deuze 2012). Others still comment that mobile phones and the Internet have a limited potential to inspire collective action as repertoires are developed and consumed according to interest levels and the rhythm of people’s lives (Taneja et al. 2012, Vaccari 2011, Yuan 2011), with some cases noting that this has built leverageable audiences due to the top-down power structures (Vaccari 2011).
While newsgathering remains the dominant means of getting information about current events, how this is happening and what impact it is having often revolves around two particular camps. One submits that the private use of Internet technologies for newsgathering displaces the use of older devices (Gunter et al. 2003, Kayany and Yelsma 2000, Lin et al. 2005). While the other suggests that new media merely supplement old media in processes such as newsgathering rather than outright displacement, and ascribes different levels of this relationship to differences in lifestyles (Althaus and Tewksbury 2000, Chan and Leung 2005). Elsewhere, however, other studies show unchanging patterns of news consumption when comparing new media to traditional media, which often has more to do with social systems than the chance provided by technological capacity, but they still suggest that the Internet and mobile devices have a positive effect on civic and political participation (Hujanen and Pietikäinen 2004, Kavanaugh et al. 2008). Given that students in this study are immersed in technologically rich environment, it seems more likely that their newsgathering practices are dependent upon the social systems they come in contact with, as Hujanen and Pietikäinen (2004) and Kavanaugh and colleagues (2008) suggest.

Now, the discussion turns to address the state of political affairs in contemporary Canada to see whether the features and resources provided by the Internet and citizen journalism have had a positive impact on political debate. To begin with, a number of claims place civil attentiveness in a state of steady decline, which some link it to declining participation rates in elections. What might account for this marked decline? Equally, what creates interest in the first place? Many cultural factors, notably higher education and informative environments, often denote greater rates of public participation in politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, Zukin et al. 2006). And yet the latest figures from the Parliament of Canada indicate falling rates among youth age 18-24 and 25-30, with a meager 9% increase in the likelihood of voter turnout by students of those ages.
In fact, Western youth are singled out as having the lowest levels of both interest and turnout rates in voting (Barnes and Virgint 2013, Horvath and Paolini 2013, Pew 2012). Though this may suggest the current climate is rife with politically inattentive youth whose concerns must lie elsewhere, is this the case? Might there be some other explanation more concurrent with the lifestyles of contemporary youth? Before addressing such questions, a review of the state of Canadian politics and the nature of youth political discourse is necessary.

As a constitutional monarchy, Canada selects leadership through representative elections. In essence, each Canadian citizen eligible to vote casts their ballot in public elections, after which “the party with the largest number of elected representatives will normally form the Government” (Elections Canada 2012:7). According to Elections Canada, an organization meant to uphold the ideals of democracy, “[o]ver time, Canadians have come to trust the outcome of elections as truly reflecting their collective will without political interference” (2012:11). Still, declining rates of political participation by today’s youth might seem to suggest otherwise. Between 1965 and 2008, new Canadian cohort turnouts in public elections – those who were eligible to vote for the first time – had dropped from an average of 60 percent to an average of 30 percent (Blais and Loewen 2011). Attempting to explain low turnout rates among youth, Elections Canada issued the following statement, “existing research does not allow us to provide clear answers to this question” (Blais and Loewen 2011:17). While a report from the Parliament of Canada also failed to demonstrate any firm conclusions on why this was happening, it does note two foreseeable issues in upcoming elections: the “life cycle effect” and “generational replacement” (Barnes and Virgint 2013). Based on conventional wisdom, the former hold that as generations grow older they will take the place of earlier generations responsibilities, while the latter employs tracking and comparing respective age groups. In any case, the predicted outcome is the same: continued
decline in youth interest says there will be no future voters to replace the earlier generation (Barnes and Virgint 2013).

At this point, several inferences can be made when comparing the low participation rates recorded by the Government of Canada and the structure of the country’s electoral system. First, youth entitled to vote are politically withdrawn and have little to no involvement in decision-making processes. Secondly, youth participation in political affairs is voluntary in nature and not necessary for the functioning of the state. Lastly, since there is little tension between cultivating an autonomous versus state-dependent identity, youth have opted to pursue their aims and interests to the fullest permissible extent. If this were so, these relations of power would grant the Government of Canada unrestricted authority. What model of democracy, then, might these relationships resemble? Reflecting on the key characteristics proposed by Held (2006), two probabilities emerge. Arguably, one implies a competitive elitism, which splits its populace into politically active or passive citizens and places decision making in the hands of a few elected official. In this case, a small number of politically active youth are visible, while larger groups of uninformed or uninterested youth have granted elected officials the authority to make important decisions on behalf of their generation.

From a different angle, the contemporary venue might also be classified as a mixture of pluralism and neo-pluralism, wherein competing minority groups seek to “expand (enhance) the state itself and/or to secure particular electoral outcomes” (Held 1996:216). Here, a vastly disproportionate electoral outcome allows a discreet government to operate free of constraint while the sovereignty of Canadian youth is undermined by political and economic elites. Given the current political milieu, it may not be difficult to find additional evidential support for either of these models. However, is this really the state of deliberative democracy in Canada? Are
declining rates of participation among youth allowing elite interest groups to make widespread decisions? Whether or not this is the case, the youth vote remains at the center of this issue and a number of justifications have arisen for declining rates of voter turnout. Some studies state youth are less informed or interested in politics (Wattenberg 2002; Fieldhouse et al. 2007), possess a low sense of civic-mindedness (Clarke et al. 2004; Livingstone et al. 2005), or they are generally disengaged from existing political systems (Gidengil et al. 2003). Still, others refute these claims, indicating that youth have begun to be politically active in a variety of ways using new media (Loader 2007, Loader et al. 2014, Lievrouw 2011) or through a broadened sense of moral awareness (Morris et al. 2003). Elsewhere, some wonder what types of democracy Western societies are seeking (Barber 2003, Papacharissi 2010), while others look to set a new framework for the linking technology and democracy (Cardoso 2006, Magaziner 2003).

3.5 Toward an Analysis of Mobile Phones in the Lifestyle Politics of Students

Based on the evidence forwarded by the studies in the above sections on the role of online news in present-day political discourse remains, at best, a clouded affair, as the marked decline of political vigor among Canadian youth eludes explication and shows no signs of improvement. For Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2010), an analysis of this situation needs an atypical framework that resists traditional assumptions of news consumption (i.e. displacement or dichotomies of print vs. new media), focusing on its features and social practices separately, and divides extraordinary from ordinary patterns. It is crucial, then, that the means by which youth enter into political discourse, incorporating how they explore and employ these notions in daily life, be approached in a holistic manner. Aspiring to erect this new framework, scholars advocate a revision of social and political participation among youth based on lifestyles and their use of new media in an age of digital cultures (Deuze 2006, Silverstone 2007, Bengtsson and
Christensen 2012, Papacharissi 2010). Importantly, studies in this field have shown that the role of mobile news consumption has a significant impact on the lives of contemporary youth in terms of both civic and political participation (Campbell and Kwak 2012, Gordon 2007). In fact, an additional piece by Mihailidis (2014b) notes that social media spaces are increasingly the primary social outlet for students to inform themselves and communicate with others, and places the blame for these spaces meager impact in civic and political affairs on the institutional rejection of its potential value.

In an effort to reevaluate levels of social and political participation among students, the notion of choice will again be employed to analyze how a proliferation of news sources in digital networks/spaces, consumed through mobile devices, may be impacting daily life. However, while the notion of choice described so far helps to reveal how mobile phone become a tool utilized in meaningful contexts, the framework must be expanded to incorporate ethical reflections and its connections to the development of an individual’s self-image in order to explore the mobile phones effects on particular social relationships and processes like newsgathering and public deliberations. As Lury and others in the field of consumer culture suggest, these elaborations are possible because the customer emerges as an identity that enlists consumption as a means of appropriation and transformation (2011:9). These feats ensue because consumption also applies to the immaterial: “objects whose characteristics are the outcome of intellectual – or immaterial – labour” (Lury 2011:10). With the assimilation of an object’s intellectual labour, customers can subsequently influence social relations by way of generating information and cultural content that become tangled in ongoing social process (Lury 2011:104). Put simply, the habits and practices of consumers, shaped by individual and social reflections and choices, can meaningfully and effectively direct social change.
The ability of consumers to drive social change may seem like it requires an amazing shift in social thought, but since choice acts in relation to ongoing social processes it is not the result of an abrupt change but often a subtle shift or progression toward a new condition. For instance, Lury portrays the power of individual choice on changing social direction by drawing on Gay Hawkins (2009) notion that plastic bags, as a material object, were seen as damaging to the environment and therefore began impacting moral codes and realities:

What is being pointed to here is a consumer ethics – perhaps a politics – in which the socio-technical networks that form around commodities variously enable consumers to address matters of concern (Latour and Weibel, 2005) and to constitute themselves as publics. As Robert Foster (2007) notes, such publics often emerge around ‘corporate externalities’ – that is, the costs and unwanted consequences of a corporation’s doing business, including, in the case of plastic bags, environmental issues.

[Lury 2011:182; my italics]

Plastic bags were once a normative part of daily life, but their continued use is now a social and ethical quandary, the ambition of which is to find a better alternative. It is possible, then, that the habits and practices of mobile consumption among students are creating the very same socio-technical networks in an effort to mobilize against the worrisome or unwanted drawbacks of recent political or journalistic trends and practices. In addition, consumption is not a matter of “using up” materials or information in the course of daily activities, but that it instead represents “a culture of exchange, mobility and circulation, of transnational movement and transformation of ideas, people and things” (Lury 2011:192). Therefore, the notion of choice emerges as a means to establish a reflexive nexus concerning self-identity and group membership by different societies (Lury 2011:215). With this in mind, choice is useful for gauging student level of involvement in and comprehension of contemporary politics and journalism.

Unlike the emancipatory choices made in terms of early political models and journalistic traditions – where civil oppression or jeopardy were turned over by wider society – the choices of
present-day students are more in line with life politics. A politics of self-determination, creating “a reflexive relation to the self in which the individual is less concerned with protesting about the actions of the others than with taking control […] of the shape of his or her own life through the negotiation of self-identity” (Lury 2011:198; original italics). Cases of life politics are prominent in recent Western history – the “green” movement, vegetarianism, “local” food stuffs, non-GMO, and “Fair Trade” to name a few – but what many of them have in common is a set of principled considerations which feed their desire for a new way of life. In such instances, the public draws attention to practices of ethical consumption as a means to exert their influence in a global and networked society (Lury 2011:212-213). A need for emancipatory movements may yet remain in Western society, but the virtue of prior accounts has paved the way for life politics to become practically applicable in the contemporary setting; which Feenberg observed regarding of the student protests in 1968.

With issues of identity and ethics playing a prominent role in choice and life politics it is important to explore these in greater detail since, and although they may well change, they will nevertheless continue to be used to negotiate current and future decisions. As noted in the Chapter’s introduction, Foucault was a fundamental figure in addressing how changes in Western institutions transformed social thought. In his earlier works, Foucault discloses the way in which morality was bound together with social codes, influences, representations, and relations in such a way that enabled organizations to systematically sanitize society of aggressive or unwelcome disorders and diseases (1963; 1975). Though morality and ethics remained a large part of his later works, his focus shifted from the institutional regulation of society toward the multitude to discourses that filled individuals and “came to signify someone’s acknowledgment of his own actions and thoughts” (Foucault 1990:58). In this way, the state did not dematerialize although it
did bring about the reduction of its regulatory powers. A shift that is visible, to some extent, in the ascent of self-interests in Held’s (2006) models of democracy.

Even more critical is the way in which these new moral and ethical arrangements function in daily life. Once more, the case of the plastic bag can illustrate how society engages in these activities. Hawkins notes societal reflection and the call to action of campaigns such as “Say No!” ought to occur along a different line:

One that begins from the modest recognition of plastic bags not as phobic objects ruining nature but as things we are caught up with: things that are materialized or dematerialized through diverse habits and associations. By refusing to situate plastic bags in a moral framework, as always already bad, their materiality becomes more contingent and more active. Bags cease to be only ever passive and polluting and become, instead, active participants in various everyday practices in which the materiality and meaning of both bodies and bags are fashioned.

[2009:45-46]

If society avoids framing plastic bags as inherently bad, then a wider discussion of how they are and how they might be suitable for everyday life can take place; akin to the efforts of new media studies to avoid polarizing the effects of technology on society. In essence, examining the use of material objects in every day life, whether it is a plastic bag or a mobile phone, should be thought of not in terms of negative exclusion but its functioning in “subtle networks of discourse, knowledge, pleasures, and powers” (Foucault 1990:72). It is within these diverse socio-technical networks that individuals form their identities as well as their relation to objects and others.

While state power may have weakened to some degree in a network society, with the mode of power distributed throughout its mechanisms, how people evaluate outcomes and make choices needs consideration. In terms of adopting a new technology, advantages or just being compatible with daily processes often provide sufficient reason for their implementation in daily life. But in terms of arranging bits of information in relation to choices in political affairs that are
likely to have a direct impact on society, the rationalization ought to be closely bound to the reflexive formation of identity and an individual’s habits and practices in daily life. Many fields have attempted to do this – notably the behavioral sciences – but taking a more philosophical approach here builds on the case being made here and also brings us full circle to the model of politics that this chapter began with. I am speaking here of the moral basis of liberty, the very foundation of classical democracy and key to its operation in daily life. Within today’s society, as Feenberg illustrated, technology permeates many aspects of daily life. Because of this infusion of technology into social dialog and patterns of use in networks populated by moral and ethical subjects, Roger Silverstone remarks upon the existence of “a space that is increasingly mutually referential and reinforcive, and increasingly integrated into the fabric of everyday life” (2007:5). It is in these spaces, in the morality of networks, where we can further explore the creation of an individual’s identity and their habits and practices of everyday life.

Nevertheless, a certain level of caution needs to be employed with any exploration of morality. Noting the regular ambiguity of morality and its effect on one’s actions, Foucault refines its characterizations for his treatise The Use of Pleasure:

In short, for an action to be ‘moral’, it must not be reducible to an act or a series of acts conforming to a rule, a law, or a value. Of course all moral action involves a relationship with the reality in which it is carried out, and a relationship with the self. The latter is not simply a ‘self-awareness’ but self-formation as an ‘ethical subject,’ a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself.

[1990b:28]

This account advises that ethical subjects play a significant role in the negotiation of social settings, which allows choice to emerge as a way of relating to self and others through practical aims that solidify or rearrange an individual’s identity through “self-reflection, self-knowledge,
self-examination...for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object” (Foucault 1990b:29). Foucault may be talking here about the sexuality of ancient Greeks, but parallels can be draw in terms of today’s social and political deliberations – as Hawkins did in the case of the plastic bag – to exemplify how, in a network society, these discussions represent “a domain of moral valuation and choice” (1990b:32). In effect, consumer choice in “green”, “Fair Trade”, and social movements of recent kind shows that ethical subjects, in technologically driven networks, have concerned themselves with the practices of performing, monitoring, testing, improving, and transforming who they are in response to social and political conditions. Taking a careful look at the habits and practices of mobile news consumption among students entangled within an array of networks will provide a more accurate account of the logic behind these practices of the self and how they pertain to student levels of civic and political participation in contemporary society.

3.6 Summary

Though declining political interest and participation rates may be statistically true, there has been a failure by record keepers to provide an adequate account as to why this has occurred or to consider alternatives realities that may be in operation. While a number of state-technology relations were discussed (e.g. the state as regular, customer, and underwriter), Street (1992) notes that timeframe, expertise, and vested interests can heavily influence the implementation of a new technology. In addition, Street (1992) notes that the democratic control of any technology within national boundaries has real life limits. Similar to politics and technology, the connection between politics and journalism has a significant impact on public deliberations, which increases the importance of understanding how people access and share information. In a network society,
the role of institutionalized journalism has come into question, with hands-on newsgathering making great strides and having profound effects on socio-political affairs.

In sum, the radical shifts in social and technological though that have swept through journalism from the 17th century to the present, are likely to have had a profound effect on how present-day students view and participate in civic and political dealings. While the contributions of contemporary youth may not be visible at the polls, recent studies in the field of mobile news consumption suggests a sense of societal responsibility is developing among youth in new and underappreciated forms through their use of diverse and digital social networks. Exploring the habits and practices of student mobile news consumption will provide a more accurate account of civic and political participation in the contemporary setting.
Chapter 4

Methodology

4.1 Introduction

The notion of proliferating choices, backed by a theoretical framework of ethics and identity serves as the principle line of investigation for this thesis and provides an effective means of analyzing the habits and practices of students throughout their daily use of mobile phones. This chapter will clarify why interviews, a qualitative method, were chosen as the instrument of social inquiry, detail the roles and importance of the research and the respondent, as well as provide an overview of the sampling techniques employed throughout the study. In addition, this chapter reviews the importance of the interview style and location, and the fundamental steps of the interview process. The final sections will outline of the sample’s characteristics, the duties and obligations of the researcher, and potential issues researchers ought to be aware of regarding interview analysis.

4.2 Why Use Qualitative Interviews?

Within the social sciences, quantitative and qualitative probes are well-established methods utilized by researchers to explore social phenomena. A quantitative lens tends to focus on surveys, secondary data analysis, and/or experimentation; a method that is most beneficial for researchers tasked with collecting and analyzing numerical elements of large populations (Daniel 2012). Intended to yield an explanation for group or categorical differences by framing specific traits or characteristics according to certain attributes, the quantitative method employs “preset, fixed designs in order to test clearly formulated hypotheses” (Emerson 2001:295-296). However, what this method tends to overlook is the organization of “social life holistically and in context” (Emerson 2001:295). Subtle or discrete variables of human relations (e.g. with whom? why? then
what?) are not typically incorporated into quantitative data analysis; though such studies are still capable of offering noteworthy results and conceivable generalities if one can find a good way to study a “good” problem (Becker 2001:330).

A qualitative lens employs focus groups, ethnography, and interviews to more deeply investigate these relations and the nature of these elements by immersing researchers into particular social settings (Daniel 2012). While qualitative researchers also aim to produce defensible work, their methodological orientation is significantly different. The matter of accuracy is based on the careful observation of respondent dialogue; the issue of precision is concerned with maintaining a closeness to the dialogue and an aptitude for taking into account unanticipated results; and an analysis is considered “full” when it incorporates a wide range of matters likely to impact the question the researcher has raised (Becker 2001:328).

Given the interests of this study and the small sample size, a robust analysis will emerge by taking the latter route and exploring student mobile news consumption by way of in-depth, qualitative interviews. Furthermore, while the study presented here may not have the immediate applicability that quantitative research methods are associated with, due to its smaller scale, this in no way suggests that its findings are less significant. Qualitative interviews took precedence due to their ability to deeply probe the often-unknown aspects of the everyday lives of individuals and provide context and meaning for a variety of trends that the research uncoveres. In this way, it allows examiners to provide “a richness of concrete detail that undercuts excessive stereotyping and generalization because these experiences include concrete historical detail about the habitus of the individual. Interviews and life histories are the fullest source of such data” (Scollon 2001: 154). In this case, the rich level of detail produced by the students will allow for a more thorough examination of the degree to which the habits and practices of mobile news consumption foster a
sense of civic participation and act as an enabler of life-style politics. This places the routine aspects of social life at the center of social research, exposing what are under other conditions unseen intricacies. As Kristin Luker suggests, “we are not much interested in the veracity of the interviews, in some cosmic sense of the word, as we are in the deep truth of them” (2008:167). The details gained from interviewing individuals can be extraordinary, but more than that they allows us to identify “accurate accounts that people carry around inside their heads” (Luker 2008:167). This will help to illuminate representations of modern day life and how respondents feel they relate to it.

While the sheer volume of information an interview can draw-out from individuals can be quite extensive, which can pose great difficulty when trying to balance detail and significance, it nevertheless opens up a number of research routes. For example, an expanse of material may be grounds to change the direction or focus of a study, from looking at a particular event to examining the historical context of a country, for example (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994:27). However, even the greatest highest amount of detail can provide only a mere glimpse into an individual’s entire existence – as seen in biographies which, while eye opening, are merely a shadow compared to an individual’s lifetime accomplishments. For Luker, by exploring the thoughts and considerations of what is going on inside “lots” of peoples heads, social research gains a certain level of assurance that it is “reliably social” and not simply individual musings (2008:167). This enables researches to turn what appears to be an otherwise overwhelming amount of information into a genuine and vibrant account. Conducting multiple interviews is more than a means to a valid end, it is also a way to seek out and identify recognizable patterns (See Denzin and Lincoln 2003, Luker 2008). An effort that demands caution, as Gary King and colleagues note, “[m]ost of us even see patterns in ink blots!”(1994:76). Still, the importance
here is the realization that with multiple in-depth, qualitative interviews social truths will emerge to form patterns that are recognizable and will hold great significance to the ways that students negotiate their relationship to reality.

4.3 Researcher-Respondent Dynamics

As the principle investigator, the impacts a researcher can have on a given project are issues of definite concern. A researcher is more than a figurehead or part of a binary coupling, and must employ a certain level of careful reflection regarding their influence and the objectives of their study. The presence of the researcher is increasingly becoming a part of social inquiry – excluding telephone, computer-assisted personal interviewing, and computer-assisted web interviews (cf. Fielding, Lee, and Blank 2008) – but their presence in the field is not always given the care or heavy-handed anxiety found amongst ethnographers (cf. Chatterjee 2001, Gilmore 1990). As Luker notes, even minute details matter:

How you look, how you do your hair, what kind of shoes you have on, what bumper stickers are on your car – all these things lead the person you are interviewing to decide who and what you are…it behooves us to be as conscious as we can about what image we project, and to make sure that it fits into whatever it is we hope to accomplish in the interview.

[2008:178]

For many years, scholars strove to ensure the accuracy and validity of social research methods (cf. King et al. 1994, Weiss 1994), while works that are more recent highlight the likeness and presence of the researcher (cf. Alford 1998, Luker 2008). The argument being made here, however, is not that the interviews will be used as a space for self-exploration, but that ample consideration has been given to such concerns in an effort to avoid hampering the study.

The role of the respondent in social inquiry is highly significant, and yet there are times when researchers forget exactly who and what they are. They are not just numbers, an $N$ value in a statistical equation representing a variable of some value. They are people, just like everyone
else, with the obvious exception that the participants have different life stories and perspectives – which is why we interview them in an attempt to “get at” social “facts” and “truths”. Beyond this arrangement, the wellbeing of the respondent requires consideration. I am not referring to the ethics of interpretive research, which Denzin notes, “has been reembedded in the practices, politics, and presentation of research results. The relationships between researchers and respondents have come under a new – and entirely voluntary – scrutiny by the community of social science researchers themselves” (Denzin and Lincoln 2003:5). What I mean to suggest is that, as Luker states, the researcher should “listen intently to the person you are interviewing with respect and deep attention…you take special pains to make sure that people are not forced to admit to social undesirable behavior” (2008:177-178). While it is doubtful that socially undesirable behavior will surface in research on mobile news consumption, the concern here is the recognition that any patterns that emerge from the interviews ought to arise naturally, regardless of the goals of the research or researcher.

Treated with professionalism and respect, respondents can expose unknown realities and the internal logic of its operation to the researcher. In fact, the type of story that interview data creates has its own unique character because of the reflexivity it involves. Interviews are a co-production effort, made by both the interviewer and the interviewees, forcing the researcher to reconsider the research question whenever new data are received, which can then cause them to rethink their theoretical view of what is going on (Luker 2008:174-175). Though the co-authored nature of the interview transcripts are designed to satisfy the researcher’s theoretical aims, Luker says it must do so by getting at the categories that make sense to those being interviewed; if the expected results are not forthcoming the research may need to change the questions being asked (2008:175-176).
4.4 Sampling Techniques

A necessary part of sociological research is contemplating who and how many to study, and where and in what way to conduct the interviews. The first step in this process is to select a sample of the population for study, which Thomas Lindlof and Bryan Taylor concede is typically more “intuitive” than “mindful” but are nevertheless a part of sampling decisions (2002:120).

The students were *purposively sampled* because they were embedded in media rich environments and they owned a mobile phone, which “fit with the purposes of the study and specific inclusion and exclusion criteria” (Daniel 2012:87). More exactly, the inclusive criteria are that students must utilize a mobile phone for communication amongst peers, which will allow us to see what counts as news consumption among these individuals. At the same time, the exclusive criteria would then identify and remove from the study students who do not possess a mobile device, or use it for information gathering, and individuals who are non-students. This sampling technique creates the conditions for respondents to appropriately report on the research question, while also lessening bias caused by over or under-representation and the chance that consecutive sampling will suffer from intentional or unintentional data manipulation (Daniel 2012:92).

Purpose sampling, however, is not a mechanism that will create a representative sample of an entire population which is not problematic for that is not the goal or purpose of this study. We cannot infer from the findings of this study that the rest of society acts in the same manner. Instead, the goal here is to consider the “nuanced accounts of different aspects of the interviewee’s life world…to arrive at meanings on a concrete level, instead of general opinions” (Kvale 2007:11-12). The issue of whom to study might come easy to some researchers, but substantial trepidation often surrounds the query “how many subjects/observations should there be?” Yet, the trouble with this question is that there is no clear answer. While statistical studies...
possess many equations that can show the validity of characteristics derived the numerical values of certain elements, qualitative interviews are different. For King and colleagues, there are negatives and there are positives:

Unfortunately, qualitative research is by definition almost never precise, and so we cannot always narrow this to a single answer. Fortunately, it is often possible to avoid these problems by increasing the number of observations. Sometimes this increase involves collecting more data, but…a qualitative research design can frequently be reconceptualized to extract many more observations from it and thus produce a far more powerful design.

[1994:660-661]

It is possible, then, to overturn any shortcomings with regard to respondent quantities to produce quality research by rethinking the study’s design. Still, Steinar Kvale takes a precise approach by noting if there are too few participants it will be difficult to generalize and test hypotheses in differentiated groups, while too many in a study increases the difficulty of make a piercing analyses into the data (2009:43). With a careful review of the research design the issue of how many respondents becomes a workable condition.

In the case of exploring the nuanced accounts of life worlds and their meanings, a small number of in-depth interviews will offer plenty of rich data for analysis (c.f. Daniel 2012, Kvale 2007). How to obtain a sample is also an important consideration for social research, an area in which the human sciences have developed several successful techniques. The recruitment phase of a purposive sampling is a non-probability method that typically begins with direct approaches such as the canvassing of specific locations and posting detailed flyers (Daniel 2012:83). In this stage, “recruitment of study participants continues until the targeted sample size is satisfied or the resources necessary to continue sampling are exhausted” (Daniel 2012:83). In addition to these methods, should the need for more respondents arise, research can also employ a range of sub-types available to respondent-assisted techniques – snowball or network sampling, for instance –
as a means of reaching out to unaware or hidden populations potentially interested in taking part in such studies (Daniel 2012:111). There are occasional concerns with using these methods, notably that names and information are being given to the researcher without the prior consent of those involved (Daniel 2012:111), but this was avoided by handing out the letter of interest so that potential respondents could then decide if they wished to take part in the project.

4.5 The Locale and Setting the Stage for Interviewing

Once the researcher has determined the group to be studied, the number of participants required, how to recruit them, and balancing researcher-respondent relations, the researcher must address issues related to the general setting, the location of the interview, and outline the style of the dialogue. The study presented here took place at a mid-sized university in Eastern Ontario. The reason being, modern universities are an *initiatively generalizable* setting in which one could expect to find similar conditions from institution to institution, in North America at least, thus permitting a healthy exploration of the *theoretical case* being made (Luker 2008:107-109). On the basis of the material presented in the preceding chapters, the theoretical concerns of this study are the adoption and use of mobile phones by students, the role mobile phones play in processes of newsgathering, and finally their effectiveness in encouraging or facilitating civic and political attentiveness, deliberations, and participation. The modern university is a supportive setting for this study due to the prevalence of technology, various disciplines of study, economic backgrounds, and motives for attending, as well as the aura of concern for the future that these institutions typify.

More than simply an ideal setting, the modern university allows for exploration of the inclusive elements of the study, grounded by its theoretical framework. Because of this process, the chosen setting is indicative of what Luker refers to as a *venue* in which the phenomena being
studied are likely to be found within a *bounded group*, possessing both a specific range of *subjects* and *practices*, in order to free the study as much as possible from bias or idiosyncratic selection (2008:140; 161). A second consideration in terms of the setting is that of time and space. These issues are important because a study ought to be inclusive of all the times and places that the social practices under analysis, again based on the theoretical framework, will likely occur (Luker 2008:162). As the aim of this study is to be inclusive of the daily habits and practices of students, it incorporates many aspects of their lives in order to provide a broad spectrum of occurrences related to the framework.

Where and how to conduct the interview itself are also circumstances that, like sample choice, requires a certain level of both judgment and professionalism. There are several reasons why this is so. Firstly, while the “interview stage should encourage the interviewees to describe their lives and worlds” (2007:58), it is, Kvale notes, in effect a one-way, instrument dialogue, that tends to follow the agenda of the interviewer, and so it is important to consider these asymmetries of power when arranging the stage and progression of the dialogue (15-17). In order to maintain this supportive environment, the interviews took place in a seminar room in a central building on campus grounds. This a familiar setting for many students, due to widespread use of such rooms for classes, student council and club meetings, afterhours study rooms, conferences, and etcetera.

Keeping in mind the power relations broached by Luker (2008) and others, aside from alertness to interviewee responses, a non-specific seating arrangement helped to minimize the overwhelming presence or authority of the researcher. Specifically, to avoid the sensation of meeting with an administrator, or the like, who typically sits behind a large and imposing desk, the interviewees were welcomed to sit per their liking in any of the similar bound leather desk chairs surrounding the conference table that within the room.

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Despite its one-way nature, the dialogue of this study allowed participants to respond freely and openly to any inquiries. The semi-structured interview schedule, based on the core empirical questions of the project revealed in Chapter 1, was broken down into four key themes: non-descriptive, technology, politics and journalism, and habits and practices. Each interview began with several non-personal questions, while the latter half probed a number of explicit and conscientiously demanding lifestyle-centered tasks. The semi-structured design of the interview schedule permitted alterations to the line of inquiry following answers or stories that I found needed further exploration; and indeed offered more insight and provided a better interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena (Kvale 2007:51-57). In addition, the interviews began with a short, formal briefing or “hook” to instill what the study is about, while a debriefing or “cool down” acknowledged the respondents’ participation and ask if they had any questions or concerns, as well as to help transition participants back into normative daily life (Luker 2008: 171, c.f. Kvale 2007). While the issues covered in the interviews were not intended to probe into deeply personal or troubling events, and were considered to be low-risk, the one-way interrogative and sometimes private and revealing nature of “telling stories” can place a strain on some individuals, which is the reason that briefing and debriefing strategies were used. The interviews lasted between 40-150 minutes depending on the level of detail offered, the responses to probes, and the enthusiasm of certain respondents.

4.6 Sample Characteristics

Following the sampling techniques detailed above, this study gathered participants by a number of means, including: canvassing classrooms, posting flyers, and snowball sampling. The initial recruitment phase consisted of canvassing classes and posting flyers asking volunteers to contact me via email. To help spread word of a study I canvassed four classrooms in the
disciplines of sociology, business, political science, and electrical engineering. This method yielded a sizable level of interest and produced seven volunteers: five from the departments of sociology, and two from political science. Posters were placed within faculties outside of those already canvassed in an attempt to broaden the mixture of contributors; yielding two volunteers from psychology. Finally, the respondent-assisted technique of snowball sampling helped to broaden the scope of respondents. This method yielded two more volunteers, one from the department of sociology and one from biology. In sum, these sampling techniques yielded eleven participants, generating a sample that is comparable to the gender breakdown of the universities 2013-2014 undergraduate enrolment of roughly 40% male and 60% female; there were five male and six female respondents between the ages of 18 and 25.

4.7 Data analysis

The data analysis focused on teasing out themes of choice, ethics, and identity according to work in the field of digital consumption (Lury 2011, Sassatelli 2007) and a socio-philosophical analysis of the relations between political and civic thought and the self in the West (Foucault 1990a, 1990b, 2004). Theory has always had implications for data collection and analysis in terms of the observations being made, the questions being asked, and the provisional nature of its truth or falsity, which researchers must focus in order to do “real work” that is thought to be reliable in the social sciences (King et al. 1994:28-29). Separating description from descriptive inferences helps to achieve a level of assurance in this process. The former is a collected set of facts, while the latter is a mode of interpretation analogous to scientific inference: applied to “explain the reasons for intentional action in relation to the whole set of concepts and practices in which it is embedded” (King et al. 1994:37). Overall, this process uses “the facts we do know to learn about the facts we do not know” (King et al. 1994:46). Here, students provide the
researcher with data (the known) in order to answer the following; how might mobile news consumption amongst university students create a sense of civic duty and the ability to engage in life-style or “small p” politics (the unknown)?

With the interview data acquired, the next step was to reduce the considerable amount of information obtained into workable dimensions for exploring meaningful relations. Luker offers a few general strategies in this effort, beginning with pattern recognition; hearing the same things throughout a number of interviews, at which point it is time to begin reducing or coding the data (2008: 200). Sifting through the data, the repetition of a number of major themes (or codes) will emerge, and any variation in a particular theme is often grounds to create a few sub-codes (Luker 2008:201). Finally, Luker advocates the coding of themes be presented in a clear and discernable arrangement for two main returns; to preserve the honesty of the researchers work, or keep it free from unconscious slips, and to allow those without the same knowledge of the project as the researcher to trace and or recreate its theory for reliabilities (2008:202-203). Luker also notes that it is important to consider how aspects in and through the data analysis can negatively influence the results. Though there are many, two stood out in this instance. First, there are concerns of improper measurements, which relates to the nature of the social science researcher, thought of as imprecise but necessary mode of observation, and the need for a careful representation of data. That is, instead of making a singular, universal claim, the researcher can avoid this position and the critical scrutiny that is given to these types of claims by using words such as “more” or “less”, “strong” or “weak” in qualitative studies (King et al. 1994: 151-152). A common practice in this task is to make carefully worded, non-universalized statements in terms of the observations, but a more practical measurement ought to be appropriate for the theoretical purposes of the study. This is because problems in measurement most often occur when explicit
reference to theoretical material is absent (King et al. 1994:153). Frequently referencing the work of Lury and Foucault will help to avoid this issue.

The next concern relates to investigating the place and impacts of leading questions in social research. As Kvale asks: “Might not the interview results be due to leading questions, and thus unreliable” (2007:87; original italics)? Even the slightest rewording of a question is capable of influencing an interviewee’s answer. Still, the valid inclusion of such an approach depends on the purpose of the investigation; such was the case of Pierre Bourdieu’s (1999) investigation of the downtrodden in France (in Kvale 2007:76). There is also the chance that leading questions will receive great attention due to the relative stability attributed to empiricist and positivist forms of knowledge. However, interviews generate co-authored knowledge through interpersonal conversation, and in this way, the concern shifts from whether or not to lead, to whether or not the questions will lead to the creation of reliable and meaningful knowledge (Kvale 2007:89). In fact, Luker views these questions in the same light as Bourdieu; an opportunity to “irritate the interviewee so much that he or she will painstakingly outline for you everything you have been longing to hear in your interviews” (2008:177). Here, however, the use of leading questions was not appropriate as the semi-structured interview schedule allowed respondents to give free and open answers that should speak directly to the study’s theoretical concerns. Although the study avoided leading questions, the data analysis nevertheless entertained the possibility that this may have happened and it will receive ample reflection at that time.

4.8 Summary

Qualitative and quantitative research methods are well-established practices in the social sciences. The former employs a more open approach and focuses on gaining an understanding of the deeper relations, while the latter tends to focus on preset values. Because this study drew
upon a small sample size, it was more fruitful to use a qualitative approach. Qualitative, in-depth interviews produced better results in terms of the students’ mobile phone use in their life worlds. The interviews provide a richness of concrete detail about the students’ everyday lives that a survey would otherwise omit. The wealth of data collected allowed social patterns to be recognized, as well as make connections about how students relate to themselves, their phones, and the wider world around them. In other words, social truths will naturally emerged from the interview data.

Due to the nature of interviewing, it is important to consider how researcher-respondent relations could potentially influence the study. To avoid any unwanted effects, a researcher must carefully attend to their appearance, the power relations at play, and their behavior. Purposive sampling techniques and snowball sampling to gain extra participations were used to collect respondents. This study took place at a mid-sized university in Eastern Ontario, in a setting that encouraged students to reveal their experiences; which also helped to displace some of the unequal nature of the mostly one-way dialogue. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed respondents to answer freely and openly. In total, eleven respondents helped explore the life worlds of students’ mobile phone use on a concrete level. Finally, an analysis of the data will carefully follow the methodological work of King, Kvale, Luker, while also keeping in mind the theoretical framework centered on the work of Lury and Foucault.
Chapter 5

Mobile Phones: The Cornerstone of Student Life

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters have sketched how interconnected politics, technology, and journalism are in contemporary society and set out the theoretical framework necessary for the completion of this study. This chapter takes the first step toward answering the central research question – whether, and in what ways, mobile phones and the habits and practices of student newsgathering inspire a sense of civic duty and the ability to engage in life-style or “small p” politics. It will do so by exploring how the students feel mobile phones impact both self and society. The first section outlines the degree to which primary and secondary influences affect the students’ choice of mobile phone. Then, the second and final section focuses on analyzing the more important matter of how students use their mobile phones to create and maintain meaningful relationships on a daily basis.

5.2 The Fine Print of Mobile Phone Adoption

The evidence presented by CRTC and Pew make it clear that the mobile phones are, largely, commonplace in contemporary society. There are over 27 million active mobile phone subscriptions in Canada that generate over 18$ billion in revenue (CRTC 2013), while American adult cell phone ownership jumping from 53% in 2000 to 90% in 2014 and 98% of those between 18-29 own a cell phone (Fox and Rainie 2014). Clearly, North America is rapidly acquiring mobile phones. However, these reports often overlook the matter of why people are choosing to procure mobile phones. Rather than asking why or how mobile phones take on a number of roles in daily life, the general tendency is to reduce the adoption of these devices to task-orientated usage, its primacy as a marketable object, and technology as an agent of positive social progress.
In fact, this sort of reduced analysis is so culturally prevalent it is frequently visible in the daily reports of contemporary commentators. The *National Post* published a ‘Rise of the Mobile’ graphic, illustrating how 40 years’ worth of technological developments enabled mobile phones to become sleeker, longer lasting, and faster (Faille and Morrison 2013). In the *Post’s* financial section, it states that Canadians are electing to “hang-up” landlines because the cost of wireless plans seem to be in a steady state of decline (Greenwood 2014). Meanwhile, *Canadian Business* attributes the increased value and utility of wireless networks to emerging “smart cities” (Tossell 2014). While there are a number of believable views expressed in these reports, to accept them as sufficient reason for why mobile phones are being adopted by Canadians would be like adopting the naturally progressive views of technological utopians or early media theorists; which chapter 2 showed to be a dated and insufficient explanation.

In place of these partial descriptions, this portion of the thesis will provide a more refined explanation for why students choose to adopt mobile phones for use in what many term cyber societies or mobilities (c.f. Deuze 2012, Gordon 2007, Elliot and Urry 2010). Along the way, it zigzags about the students’ interpretations of how mobile phones are likely to influence their lives, their observations of its technical features and intended functionality, and ultimately the rationality behind its acquisition. When analyzing the students’ choice of a certain mobile phone, two levels of reasoning were noticeably at work: an overarching drive and an array of auxiliary factors that, while alluded to, were not considered crucial to device selection. The three primary factors affecting the students’ choices were: communications channels, life course transitions, and brand loyalty. While secondary concerns were: advertisements, brand loyalty, connectivity, financial, available applications, and reliability. Importantly, I feel the way in which students
straightaway downgraded such elements to a level of secondary concern speaks to the often-lacking rationality of the critics above.

Beginning with the sole case of brand loyalty as the primary influence behind mobile phone selection, the weight of its pull on Jean is remarkable. While influences commonly cited amongst other participants as auxiliary motives behind mobile phone choice appear throughout her admission – it enables her to be “always connected” and “find different apps” – these remarks are made rather “in-passing” and with little emphasis; effectively downplaying their importance. Jean then reveals that her family is from Poland, which provides a small but noteworthy cross-cultural contrast of mobile ownership. As she tells it, all of her grade two classmates in Poland had cellphones, but this was not the case in Canada:

Nobody had a cellphone, (whispers) ‘I was like whaaaa?’ And because nobody had a cellphone I was just like, well I don’t really need it I guess, and I got my second cellphone when I was in grade five.

In this case, a series of cultural norms is essential to mobile phone ownership and its adoption in Canada and Poland (Rogers 2003). Furthermore, while Jean notes that “Apple is just so good at returns and helping me…even if I have water damage”, she also claims, “I get really anxious if things don’t load”, and when her last phone broke she could not wait for the new model to be released since, she says, “I couldn’t really wait for the new to come out…I had to get a new one …because I would go crazy”. In other words, these responses indicate that Jean’s device choice is not based on logo popularity, but more so on its role as an emotional and interpretive structure essential to negotiating her daily life (Sassatelli 2007, Lury 2011).

A life course transition is the second most influential factor in mobile adoption with four of the participants employing this rationality. Though the naming of this caption might invoke a sense of biological evolution, and thus of a passing from an inferior to superior condition, here I
mean to say that it denotes the careful assessment of mobile phone selection based on a reflexive consideration of past impressions in an attempt to meet the needs of the present-day environment or future objectives. While each student had a different need or goal, each clearly communicated the balancing of this concept:

Robert: Blackberry was falling apart, and I said I wanted the IOS because what I, the job I want to get into, is like, digital marketing, stuff like that, and I have to be an early adopter, um and blackberry just wasn’t helping me at all.

Robert’s account reveals the presence of multiple secondary influences (brand loyalty, reliability, available applications, connectivity), but stresses a concern for his future goals. In this statement Robert also displays signs of what could be thought of as the monitoring of his future growth and practices in relation to the use of his mobile device (Foucault 1986:43). Similarly, Barry’s report shows a concern for his current needs rather than future expectations or secondary stimuli:

Barry: I’ll stick with it until it stops serving my purposes and at that point I’ll get a new one…It did the things I wanted at the time, I thought it was pretty neat at the time as well, now its out of date though…Its just a choice. I could choose to not have it if I didn’t want to…there’s been times when I haven’t needed one.

For Barry mobile phone selection is a choice made in connection with cultural ties and it is, at times, unpredictable. Still others indicated choice is the culmination of events mapped over time:

Mike: I’ve always had like hand-me-downs like from like my mom and dad and siblings, [they] just give me old phones of theirs, then they get new ones and I get hand-me-downs…I figured, this was probably May, well it’s about time I get like, a good phone, cause I started doing all these multi-media things, and I was like I need a phone that keeps up with me on these kinda things.

Adrienne: Honestly I’ve had a phone since I was in like grade 4 or 5 just for like emergency purposes, then it started getting to the point where having a phone for pleasure versus like necessity, so I probably say in high school was when I started using it more for like personal use rather than just like emergency phone calls between me and my parents.
What these four students illustrate is that while mobile phone selection is part of the mass consumption of these devices, they do so in ways that are sometimes contradictory or unbalanced as Daniel Miller (1987) suggests or as objects with agency that together produce a social reality as Bourdieu (1977) reasons (cited in Lury 2011). These actions also mirror differences in the innovation-decision process; the steps used to establish whether or not a device has operated as was intended and suited their expectations (Rogers 2003). Importantly, mobile phones are also markers of a personal transition. An event Adrienne and Mike are able to trace by identifying particular devices at particular points in time. Moreover, these transitions serve to reinforce their uniqueness. As Adrienne asserts:

We’re, I just think we’re more dependent on technology and the Internet, whereas the skills we would have developed, like going to the library and researching, that’s like a life skill people aren’t really getting anymore.

The usage of the pronoun “I” in this instance seems to serve two functions. It signifies that her actions were based on her own conceptions and also I feel as if she wished to dispel the remarks of opinion leaders wishing to speak on her behalf as to why she had chosen that particular phone. In total, these students support the claim that the adoption of mobile phones, as material objects, typically has more to do with a reflexive relationship to identity (Lury 2003) and a myriad of social and technological appraisals (Rogers 2003) than critics indicate.

The principal motive for mobile phone adoption amongst the sample was communication channels. Six of the students, 54% of the respondents, said the general opinion others ascribed to a phone influenced their decision. When asked to explain what made them choose that particular device, statements such as “basically everyone”, “feel like”, and “just because” often followed, and while these descriptions may appear to be impulsive and thoughtless at first glance, in concert they form part of a much larger picture:
Peter: I think just basically everyone was kinda moving away from the Blackberry, so I didn’t want to have my Blackberry. And so I swapped over to the iPhone.

Susan: I feel like mostly what other people have. I feel that way you know, like if a lot of people have the same thing that’s like, I’m probably gonna like it to. So that’s like what I pay attention to.

Anne: Um, I think just because everyone had it and I thought I wanted like, Instagram, and that stuff, and no one else had Blackberry’s I feel, like everyone was already shifting to an iPhone.

Though the Apple brand is mentioned in two of the three accounts, in half of the six actually, it would be a mistake to imply that brand loyalty was the principle-motivating factor since, as the evidence suggests, multiple communication channels are visibly at work. It is important to note that when asked if he thought advertisements influenced his mobile choice Peter responded:

Ah, no. I think zero percent. Cause, like they do advertise cellphones, sometimes, like you’ll see Rogers or Telus or something, and their on the TV or you’ll see the app pop up on different things, and their clearly pushing that phone…and I think to myself “oh that’s kind of cool”, but ultimately I think I just want what my friends have.

Evelyn, Nancy and Phillip had similar answers, and while the other two note advertisements had some influence on their phone choice, Susan (above) and Anne’s follow-up suggests otherwise:

[The phone] is “cool”, and seen as “with our generation”, people would chose the iPhone over the android, not because of its technology, just because of what its associated with when we think it’s the thing we want.

In other words, the students did not feel they were being influenced by mass media channels, which brands often utilize, but by interpersonal channels, which has linked the students through similar “socioeconomic status, education, or other important ways” (Rogers 2003:65). The above indicates that students consider mobile phone selection to be a necessary part of daily life, one that is beginning to be “instilled in ways of living…giving rise to relations between individuals, to exchanges and communications, and at times even institutions” (Foucault 1986:45).
In addition, the student’s acquisition of mobile phones is not to be confused with the neoliberal seduction that Bauman (1987) says keeps people's appetites appeased in order to keep them involved with such a system (cited in Lury 2011). For example, when Evelyn was given a phone as a birthday gift by her parents, she notes a more personal influence: “I gave hints that I really wanted one because my brother got one, [whispers] and I’m like ooohh I really want one”. While not technically a choice, it is equally fair to say that in Canadian society when one “hints” at gifts for special occasions (e.g. birthdays, Christmas, weddings), such gifts tend to appear if possible; which makes it, superficially at least, a choice. Comparatively, Phillip reasons:

This particular phone, um, I’d say its pretty random, just like family, like my dad you know, a lot of, he has his own business so he uses a blackberry, and uh, my mom had a black…

Halting midsentence, though, Phillip changes gears and begins to lament his past choice:

…I think a lot of it has to do with hype and functionality to be honest, its just like, Blackberry used to be “the shit”, everyone wanted a Blackberry, it was dominating the market, and that made, it sort of a luxury item, it was fetishized…

Though he suddenly comes full circle and concludes, “…but ya I mean I think ya I just, family and the function of it”. These accounts support the idea that material goods are not just objects, but can develop meaning and aid in the formation of meaningful relationships (Lury 2011). On several occasions, both of these students’ note that their mobile phones had implications for framing their relations with both family and wider society.

It is worth exploring these communication channels in detail since they have a significant influence on the students’ choice of mobile phone. Specifically, the types of exchanges, in terms of emotions, sentiments, implications, evaluations, and so on, that take place among students and the individuals and organizations they communicate with. Presently, however, the impacts will
be restricted to a “mapping out” of the more frequently cited effects, therefore allowing the next section deals with these causes more carefully. As such, a few general statements will do.

Overall, the students frequently remarked on how cellphones allow them to quickly access information resources (25+ references) with relative ease and expediency (15+), while organizational utility and the belief that new technologies will help to create better lives tended to play a lesser role (<15 each). Nevertheless, three crucial attitudes and attributes were distinctly present. Cellphones are communicative devices (50+), which negatively influence (45+) or cause the students a great deal of tension (40+). Put differently, the representations the students have identified are important since this will play a role in how they examine, monitor, and sort out an internalized code of conduct throughout the use of their device (Foucault 1986:63).

These sets indicate that even at the general level there is no universal understanding of what owning a mobile phone helps to achieve. Moreover, the evidence does not support the idea that an increase in mobile phone adoption rates are due to technological advances, lower costs, or being the next logical step for society. The rationale behind acquiring a cell phone is, to be sure, related to a specific style of judiciousness that has been displayed here by lifecycle choices and communications channels, with brand loyalty playing a small part in device adoption. However, adoption is, as the below describes, part of a larger truth involving a sense of place and purpose.

5.3 Conversant Contracts: Good-Morning Mobile, Good-Night You

The Oxford English Dictionary defines conversant as being familiar with something through use or study, occupied or concerned with, and to be intimately acquainted (OED 2014). Of course, a modern understanding of the word is frequently associated with spending much of one’s time in a place or living or associating with, but its archaic form implies a more intimate association as one’s activities and attentions are engaged in, exercised about, or having to do with
things (OED 2014). The heading of “conversant contracts” implies both definitions. There are a few reasons behind this. First, students are certainly familiar with and noticeably engaged in the use of mobile phones. Second, the students use them to form personal relationships with others. Third and most important, while students form close relations with others, they also form intimate and deeply personal relationships with their mobile phones, actively structuring and organizing their days around and through the use of these devices. In brief, the students are being conversant with the world by conversing with their devices. Put differently, mobile phones are functioning as if they were analogous to an appendage; or an extension of the senses, as McLuhan would say, with its use helping to “configure the awareness and experience of each one of us” (1994:21).

The CRTC and Pew are capable of reporting on the increased numbers of mobile phone owners, but to draw conclusions about how this is affecting human awareness and experiences on an individual level would be nearly impossible. Elsewhere, contemporary interpreters attempt to speak to this issue more frankly. For example, a recent poll of 1500 Canadian citizens suggests, “smartphone addiction is on the rise” (Rezaiean 2014). The report broadly positions the impact of mobile phones as inherently negative and a condition that needs assessment and correction. On the positive end of the spectrum, there are new applications that allow people to self-diagnose any physical ailments they may be having. While these applications are not a substitute for a doctor, the reporter is keen to note, “their improvement seems inevitable” (Gerlin and Kitima 2013); a notion reminiscent of the way new technologies seemed to advance the goals of early social institutions in great strides (Foucault 1963, 1975). In short, mobile phones, and technology in general, symbolize an accessory that will improve the quality of human life.

In place of the notion that the high frequency of mobile phone use by students will have an inherently positive or negative impact on society (c.f.2.4), this section presents a more accurate
analysis by including the meaningful daily processes of individuals and groups. A feature Rogers employs in his studies of the adoption of various innovations. The remainder of this chapter will focus on exploring how mobile phones impact the students’ lives by analyzing the processes these devices have attached themselves to and what barriers, if any, the devices have had to overcome in order to find a role in the students’ lives. As in the above section, the habits and practices of mobile phone use will not depend solely on the devices presence or abilities, but will also include a consideration of the devices perceived impacts on the self and others.

The first step in exploring what practices the students have attached to the phone is the matter of their reliance on it. While Jean may have stood alone for selecting her device based on brand loyalty, she is part of a shared majority in terms of the role it has in daily life. After a brief conversation about the positives and negatives of their mobile phones, the students were asked if they had any other mobile devices; which typically included tablets, laptops, mobile phones, and MP3 players. Then they were asked, “Which of these devices do you rely on the most?”, which resulted in a number of crisp retorts. Jean seemed almost shocked by the question, responding “Obviously my phone. Ya, oh yeah…”, while Susan presents a more commonsensical outlook, “Just because, I guess, I always have it”. Though their responses were sometimes brief, others were more drawn out and weighted, such as Mike who spent some time explaining why “most reliance would probably be my phone, preferentially would be my laptop”. In total, five of the eleven students felt they relied more heavily on their phones than any other devices.

A second cluster of students, however, felt that they relied more heavily on their laptops than on their phones, and their reasoning matches what one would expect of students whose work depends largely on technology. As Evelyn explains, “because it’s like most…its work prioritized, and like that’s what I’m here for”. Moreover, there are similar experiences:
Adrienne: …That’s where I kinda store all my documents; mostly for school…my computer is kinda like my professional kinda space.

Nancy: My laptop, definitely, cause like all my schoolwork is on there.

Still, some of the students’ responses indicate that the laptop is more than an educational aid:

Evelyn: [the laptop is] another way of communicating because I can go like on Facebook on that…I feel like it has a longer life than my phone does.

Robert: …[my] laptop’s the hub of everything. Just everything from like school to everything I do outside of school.

There seems to be, then, a nearly even split between how much the students feel they rely on a mobile phone versus a laptop. Interestingly, however, the favoring of digital devices will shift in an exploration of the students’ newsgathering practices in the following chapter.

Beyond reliance, however, the students felt that cellphones had several different kinds of social utility and their use of the devices frequently lay outside of “efficiency orientated systems planners” (Feenberg 2001:x). At this point, the discussion turns to exploring the uses of mobile phones in greater detail by assuming a narrative form, assembling the students together as if they were a single voice. More specifically, the chapter will weave all of the students’ stories together to resemble the viewpoint of a single mobile phone, passed from student to student in one day.

While it is true that each student has different perceptions about the role of the device in their lives, and not all of them share the same uses, how they choose to employ these differences will be explored more in the following chapter. For now, the purpose is to show how intense these differences really can be by running the gamut, jumping from student to student, touching on the expected and unexpected pervasiveness of mobile phones as conveyed by the students.

People often use watches and clocks to maintain a daily schedule due to the importance of “being on time” for work or school in modern society. However, in the case of contemporary
students, this is not so. As Robert notes, “I don’t have an alarm clock, I don’t even think I have a light [on the end table] or anything like that”. Instead, Robert, as well as Anne and Nancy, take a different route and decide to “use their phones as alarm clocks”. Although a sound signaling the commencement of the day has served its purpose, the utility of the phone does not stop there. It is also one’s entry into connecting with personal and social spheres. As Jean recalls it:

I wake up and I check my Instagram, ah, my emails, my Facebook sometimes, its usually, I usually go on that on the computer, um messages obviously, so that’s like the first thing I do in the morning.

The reason for this is beyond reacting to a noise from across the room, as Jean continues:

Like in the morning right, like I don’t, I wake up, and I’ll take like 5 minutes to check everything on my phone, it’s just kind of become like a second like habit kind of a thing.

What becomes apparent, and often omitted from popular accounts of how these devices might be influencing students, is that the mobile phone has embedded itself into the practice of waking up. Not simply that it can wake them up, through cause and effect, but that students begin to pull in a range of other practices through the phone in an attempt to realize how their day might advance. This is an example of instrumentalizations at work. In other words, the students have combined the decontextualized elements of the mobile phone – an alarm, a touch screen, an internet source, and much more – to create a societal function (Feenberg 2003:205), and together the phone and the student set the day in motion; an act well beyond the raw functioning of the phone as object.

Once the phone has been impressed upon the student in the morning, it will remain close by. “It’s in my hand a lot, I check it a lot” notes Robert. While occasionally used as a device to track others, as Wallis (2012) mentioned of the workers in Beijing for instance, Robert has a very personal sense of mobile ownership:
It’s for…it’s for me. It’s for me. It makes everything easier for me. Like, the reason why I got an iPhone was just cause I wanted to see all the other…apps.

“Everything” may seem like a far stretch, but Adrienne corroborates this thinking:

Everything is all in one place. So, if I want to go on the Internet I can, my music’s there, calculator, flashlight, it’s just like everything you’ve ever needed in one little device.

The use of mobile phones in the practice of trajectory alignment is routine. In fact, its utility is so extensive that the very idea of continuing the day without it seems quite unreasonable:

Mike: I forgot it this morning when I went to class, I had to go back after class to get it… its surprising how much I rely on it, but it kinda is the glue that holds my life together.

However, running home to get the phone is not always an option. At this point, students become discouraged and unsure of themselves, forcing a range of recuperative efforts to be set in motion:

Peter: It’s, it sucks…it just sucks. Like, there’s nothing, its not a good feeling, You, ya it sucks. And then immediately I have to, I feel…get on my computer and I like message…my girlfriend, and be like “oh I forgot my phone”.

Robert: It’s a pain in the butt…but it’s the expectation that you do have it. Like, if I don’t have my phone, sorry, if my phone broke, I can go on Facebook and prepare everyone, like “ok guys, I don’t have a phone, message me though Facebook, like I’m offline”.

For some, the absence of a mobile phone is more than an inconvenience. It can spawn a host of uneasy feelings: anxiety or a sense of missing out (Anne), distress (Nancy), or the notion of “going crazy” (Jean). On occasion, however, the students plan for its absence:

Barry: I leave it at home sometimes if I’m going to study and just don’t want to be bothered, or if I’m going out somewhere and I know I’m not going to need it.

Evelyn: It depends on where I’m going. And it depends on who I’m with…if I’m going to class and I forgot my phone, I can leave it at homes its not that big of a deal. If I’m going to take a bus to go see a friend, or if I’m not going to be home for a long time and I forget my phone then I’m probably going to be in deep crap.
What the “forgotten” and “planned” separation from their phones suggests is that while students are not wholly dependent on the device, they certainly do not favor its absence. In addition, when removed from access to their – planned or otherwise – there is visible reduction in their access to socially constructed worlds. However, if the phone is safe in hand, the day continues. During the day students knowingly use their phones on a consistent basis while walking to and from school, on the bus, in class, or simply because “I’m standing in line and have nothing to do” (Anne). If she has forgotten her phone, Anne notes the onset of “FOMO”:

So, fear of missing out...[because] my friends are in different social circles, so when I’m spending time with um, like my boyfriend I’m not able to interact with my girlfriends and my groups of friends, sometimes I feel like I’m missing out on what they’re doing.

Additional tasks systematically work their way into the daily use of the mobile phone. For example, the phone becomes an appointment book, with the date and time either stored in the phones bundled software or accessible on email. In short, the phone is involved in the practice of scheduling. Without this feature, students are likely to forget “where my prof’s office is…his office hours, where my interview was and the actual instructions of where to go for it, things like that” (Mike). Besides, the phone does not require enduring attention. Instead, mobile phone use is often sparse, helpful for finding “a time I’m supposed to meet someone, or where [to meet]…I would never sit on my phone and like [motions fiddling and gawking]…it’s just usually to check something quickly” (Robert). The students also tend to check-in on a number of sites that detail information external to their immediate person:

Robert: …any breaking news update, news to do with current events or sports, and I also obviously use it for instant messaging and stuff like that.

Which is often followed by a check of areas that house information related to both self and other:
Anne: …then emails, cause those are the things I actually need to respond to, and then I’d go look at Facebook, probably, and then once I’m sick of Facebook I would go to twitter.

While students frequently attended to these tasks, mobile phones are more than an intermediary between them and the external world; they can also be used to measure what is going into the body. Specifically, health conscious students will pull-up the “Tim Horton’s nutrition guide” (Anne), while some carefully tended to their overall intake through applications like iCal (Jean). In other words, the student’s phone also plays a role in the practice of dietetics.

The telephone enables people to maintain personal and professional relationships across great distances, but the idea of owning a mobile phone in particular is heavily impressed upon the students. As Peter explains:

My family…moved from Toronto recently to Kansas. So I FaceTime them a bunch, with my ahhh phone. And my girlfriend’s in Halifax right now so, like, I cant really see how those, like those kinds of relationships would ahhh be as strong as they are without a cell phone.

Quite simply, a host of mobile applications makes the students’ communiqués feel more intimate by providing a sense of close proximity to ties that might otherwise dissolve. Similarly, phones help align professional ambitions:

Mike: I work for the [Student Government], I just started my own club…[it] deals with integrating or helping integrate transitioning students from the [International Study Center to the University], as well as broadening that [to include] a mobile network of Alumni to work together.

In addition to these goals, the students use mobile phones to maintain ties with the communities that they are absent from due to the location of the University. Robert, for example, maintains contact with sporting colleagues in Toronto: a link that the following chapter will explore.

It is commonplace for the devices’ power supply to run out on its user due to its frequent use. While batteries may be on record for lasting upwards of eight hours of Internet use (Apple
2014), students occasionally forget to charge their devices. When this occurs it is both a nuisance and an expected occurrence. There may be a great deal going on in a day, but as Peter remarks, “Oh gosh, I should have thought of this”. Similar to leaving the phone at home, the students’ day continues rather dispiritedly as there is a sense that life has been cut short by the devices death:

Peter: …You kind of feel like just left out, its like that pit in your stomach that you kind of think to yourself and be like “oh I could have been doing this”, but …I don’t know, It’s just like you consistently are sitting there being, thinking what you could be doing.

Without connectivity, life appears to slow down or discontinues in extreme cases. However, sometimes the difficulty of completing daily tasks is not because the device dies. Instead, the blame falls squarely on someone else’s device, or lack of, as Jean says of her brother:

[He] doesn’t actually have a phone, a I honestly am so just baffled…like how he goes about [the day]… I was with him for thanksgiving, we went to pick up our uncle for the family, ah dinner, and he had to go get mayo so I was waiting in line to get the alcohol, and then I didn’t, we didn’t, specifically say like a meeting ground, so I obviously started panicking, like look at the car see if he was there, and back and waited for him, and like he took forever, but I was all like, like anxious that I couldn’t like get in contact with him.

The cellphone is vital to the successful maintenance of interpersonal ties, and without it extended social interactions become almost inconceivable. In other words, since the phone is so heavily embedded in daily errands it is involved in practices of the moment. With a mobile phone you can simply say “start the dinner already,” Phillip notes, “it’s just so cool that we can transcend physical space and time really, because it takes two seconds, for a message to send”. In those two seconds, as in Evelyn’s case, one can also ensure the safety of others:

I wont be home, remember to lock the door, because in my house, we don’t lock the door [every time], the last person does, and if we know you’re out, we won’t lock the door for you, you’ll lock it when you come back. So it’s just a way of communicating, hey I’m here. Hey, I’m not coming home…
Entrance to one’s living quarters is essential, and the phone helps to arrange that access, but just because students have completed their academic duties does not mean the day’s use of the phone is over. The reality of cellphone ownership is that almost everyone, not just friends or family, uses them to communicate. Nancy catalogues a few of these connections, “like for you job, for like getting around, emergency situations, like you need a cell phone”. After having worked late into the night, the phone then becomes a lifeline for many students. Its importance is so critical that its presence or absences helps Anne decide how she is going to get home:

Ya, like walking home from work, when I used to walk home from work alone, um, if I didn’t have my phone I wouldn’t walk home.

In other words, the phone is a part of daily safety practices. When walking is not an option, the students arrange drives or call a cab to ensure their safety. While some students do not seem to be as worried about their person, the use of a mobile phone in such situations is a very real possibility. While walking home late one night, nearly a year ago, Phillip recalls the feeling of comport his mobile provided him:

Some really sketchy/shady looking people walking down the street, they’re physically intoxicated, you know, one guy had bruises on his face, and you know, you look, they were looking around for a provocation…I was far enough away that I could cross the street without signifying sort of submission, and it was like safe and smart for me to do that, cause at the time I was like oh I have my phone.

Having retired to their places of residence at the end of a long day, students begin the practice of daily reflection. “Sometimes,” starts Phillip, “if I want to listen to some music I’ll just plug my headphones in and have my phone beside my bed and just sleep”. At other times, the phone goes on the table beside the bed because of parental influence. Susan explains why this is so:

I used to sleep with my phone like on my bed, right beside my head, she’s like “no your gonna get cancer” so [now] I don’t.
In addition, at night Phillip will mull over the information that the mobile phone has accumulated throughout the day before deciding just how important the information will be to his future plans. Whatever is written down has the potential to impact how the next day will proceed, or as Robert shows, may be looked upon less favorably “‘that’s the stupidest thing I ever heard’, I’ll just like not take it”, and the information is discarded.

The frequent use and negotiation of daily processes via mobile phones often collides with other events (health warnings, other devices, implications of use, and so on). However, students are still using carefully selected practices regarding their mobile phone use. Doing so allows students to create, as Lury says, meaningful experiences and formulate social relations through the framing of daily events (2011:193). For students, mobile phone selection and its use in daily life embodies what Foucault calls a “domain of moral valuation and choice” (1990b:32). More precisely, they are a part of the “rich and complex field of historicity in the way the individual is summoned to recognize himself as an ethical subject” (ibid.). In addition, it can be said that the students have made a substantial effort in determining how much time, in the run of a day, they will devote to attending to their daily activities through the use of their mobile phones, a crucial aspect of what Foucault notes as the practice of caring for the self (Foucault 1986:50). Similarly, the students’ extensive and fully intertwined use of cellphones shows that, as Feenberg would say, the devices are used to achieve certain daily tasks, but they also belong “to the realm of meaning as much as anything else we can name” (2001:xi). The presence, or lack of, a mobile phone can dramatically affect the students’ emotional and physical wellbeing, their daily routine, and the connection to social worlds.
5.4 Summary

While critics continue to push singular, universally driven reports on the reason behind increasing mobile phone adoption rates, there is much more at work here. In fact, the reasons for adoption are many, and in the students’ case, three stood out: communications channels, lifecycle choice, and brand loyalty. Auxiliary influences were present throughout the students’ reports, but these primary influences were undoubtedly the determining factors. While brand loyalty was the determinant factor for one of the students, larger processes such as innovation-decision making processes and the exchange of information in communications channels shared roughly equal ground as the reason for mobile phone adoption. In the course of a twenty-four hour period, the level of involvement of mobile phones in daily life is both visible and astonishing. The mobile phone is embedded in practices of waking up, scheduling, dietetics, communication, daily and momentary activities, protection, and winding down. In short, mobile phones act in much the same way as Jean relays: “It’s just one of those things where like you use it for every single aspect of your life that like when its gone I feel like confused, I feel like disorganized”.

Chapter 6

The Politics of Routine Communications

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter stressed that mobile phone adoption is a complex and carefully calculated exercise. Moreover, it demonstrated that students form close and personal ties with their mobile phones that extends into and shapes their use of these devices and their perceptions of self and society. This chapter will explore, in detail, the degree to which the students use of mobile phones and social media platforms play a role in shaping their evaluation of contemporary politics and level of involvement in civic and political activities. In order to illustrate this, the first section sketches the students’ initial thoughts on contemporary politics and important issues. The second section then outlines the students’ definition of news and what they see as the role of institutionalized journalism in present-day society, compared against their habits and practices of newsgathering via mobile phones and social media. Then, the final section explores the deeper rationality behind their negotiation of and involvement in civic and political affairs in daily life.

6.2 Contemporary Politics, Contemporary Issues

Recently, declining rates of civic and political participation among youth have caused commentators (Blais and Loewen 2011, Barnes and Virgint 2013) to forecast a troubled outlook for democracy in Canada. However, these claims may be a bit presumptuous since students are not as detached as they presume. Not only do they sketch out the nature of politics and its role in social direction, they demonstrate an up-to-date and wide-ranging awareness of societal issues.

6.2.1 Student Thoughts on the Contemporary Political Structure

In the treatise Politics, Aristotle claims that “the city-state is a natural growth, and that man is by nature a political animal” (1959:9). Although many contest the naturalism Aristotle
assigns to political action, the state, and to human beings (c.f. Held 2006, Cohen 2002), an
assessment of the students’ feelings on the nature of politics and its role in their lives will help
frame its present-day structure. For example, Peter’s definition of politics is quickly spoken, but
inherently conflicted:

I think politics is like just having individuals representing you and have the best
interests for you at hand. I don’t know. That’s tricky.

Equally, Robert takes his own political activities and ascribes them to the wider world of politics:

I’m in [student parliament] and I’m just going off the fact that it’s a lot
of…actual parliamentary like, politics of states, like it’s a lot…I guess not, some
politics can just be like a dictatorship…but it’s a lot of like back and forth
between people. Like I guess of ideologies maybe, I don’t know.

What is noticeable here is nervousness in defining the role of contemporary politics that, as the
material below stresses, is caused by a discrepancy in the students’ preconceived ideals of politics
versus its actual operation. This feature is present in all of the students’ initial responses.

Nevertheless, following Held’s (2006) inquiry into the social arrangements of politics
will help to outline how the students perceive the current administration. In the interviews, one
prevailing social condition arises: elite interest groups are bidding for power; a concern noted by
nine of the students. For example, Nancy points out the exclusivity of contemporary politics:

In my mind there is like a psychological manipulation from the people in power
towards the people voting the people/elites into power….it’s very imbalanced,
and in my head it’s a little fake…like I obviously think that the concept of
democracy is flawed because even though we do vote, um, politicians into power,
a lot of people…they’re not aware enough of issues and what politicians are
actually about to make educated decisions when they vote, I feel like it’s very
superficial; who has the most money for campaigns, who says the right thing…

Here, she has carefully identified a system of checks in operation (i.e. voting and representation),
an insufficiently open government (i.e. “what politicians are actually about”), and a system that is
benefiting from a politically apathetic population; all points Held has touched on in terms of pluralism (2006:204-205). In addition, Barry imagines politics as beyond direct involvement:

I guess issues regarding the groups of people who govern society. So, issues within them and between them.

Interestingly, he noted that representatives deal with socially constructed issues as well as their own; an added obstacle to direct citizen participation for Held (2006:217). These remarks seem to indicate that the students have problematized the status of elites and their ability to properly govern society (Foucault 2005:44), nevertheless the pairing of elites with politics is indicative of the pluralistic premise discussed earlier (c.f. 3.5.3).

The students commented on the general conditions and features of modern politics, but what is not detectable are their thoughts on a central ethic of political reason. Only Evelyn came close to producing such an account:

Politics is a way of like communication, and it’s a way of expressing what you want and what the world is orientated to[ward].

This is what Held (2006) defines as a nation’s principle(s) of justification, but it lacks any particular direction. Although there is no mention of a central rationality, pluralism or otherwise, this does not mean that one does not exist or that students do not utilize it in daily interactions with peers, other members of society, or existing political structures. What is important, for now, is they have collectively outlined what they perceive as the general social conditions and key features of contemporary politics. In terms of the relations of power, the students’ initial opinions position politics as something outside of their control, with decision-making occurring on a level of elite interest groups, which they must frequently adapt to in daily life.
6.2.2 Student Perceptions of Society-Government Relations

Taking a step back from the pluralistic comparison for a moment, a particular set of political ideals are seen in the students’ vision of politics; namely, the notion of a deliberative democracy. Peter noted above that politics ought to nourish society’s “best interests” and Evelyn notes it involves “people, definitely people”, but this may not be the case. It is “inefficient,” says Mike, advising what “generally comes to mind when I talk about politics; and misrepresentation”. While Nancy notes, “I don’t know, I just don’t think it’s very reflective of what the people want”, Phillip says it is a means to negotiate power in socio-economic relations, the import of this being:

The only thing we have to keep us from being really cruel to each other is like laws, and norms, and values…what collectively as a society do we value or not, what should be considered morally right and morally wrong.

This is indicative of the central ethic of Protective Liberalism, which protects social interests via collective laws, morals, and values (Held 2006) but Mike is doubtful of any societal involvement:

People don’t notice these things because, they’re busy with their own lives, and they have their own interests, they have families to worry about…politics should then be, you know, people vested in making the system still good and being able to represent those that can’t speak for themselves in these sort of situations.

Though his statement is symbolic of Developmental Liberalism (Held 2006), he also indicates a concern for what is good for society. Altogether, regardless of what principle of justification the students note (and there are more), each has integrated some version of the common good into its practices; granted they have not yet said what that good is (“helping” is too broad an expression).

Besides the incorporation of the common good, Mike is also keen to note that politics ought to ensure a form of equality among citizens:

I personally would like politics to be the people being able to be represented in a manner in which they, everybody would be able to have an equal voice and that regardless of the interest groups there…everybody would be working to promote an overall wellbeing, as opposed to just their own vested interest.
This sentiment is similar to the idealized organization of Athenian democracy, though as Held (2006) states was actually an elite, male centered system, much like Nancy lamented above. However, because of the overwhelming presence of elite interest groups in their minds, the students do not refer to political bodies as supporting equality. Instead, they suggest politics merely fulfills public wants and needs. As Anne relays, “I would guess politics would be the governing of a society based on the society’s wants and needs”, which implies change based on social demand, but Robert sees it as more of an order than general sentiment since it is, to him, “the philosophical engineering of like a nation state”. In any case, their statements imply that at some level politics plays at least some role in shaping a citizen’s identity and interests.

Interestingly, Nancy’s definition of politics virtually replicates Cohen’s (2002:90-96) reasoning for the prevalence of deliberative democracy in contemporary society:

It’s a social and psychological relationship between people in power and those voting them into power.

While the students sometimes distance themselves from politics – Adrienne is “not informed enough to say that it’s a concern for me”, and Jean remarks, “Don’t follow them”, this not mean they lack a general sense of its operation. Instead, the students tended to mention that despite elite involvement and democratic ideals, politics is a collective undertaking. What the interviews as a whole suggest is that students feel the principle justification of politics ought to be based on strong democratic deliberations; specifically, the open and reasoned agreement of the public with “mutual justifiability” as the ethic for political choices to collective problems (Held 2006:253). While the link between citizens and the state carries a sense of superficiality, deliberative politics still thrives among the students. Students, then, are not so much stuck on Rawls notion of
deliberative democracy as they are calling for a “more substantive idea of an association that is
regulated by deliberation aimed at the common good” (Cohen 2002:96).

6.2.3 Student Awareness of Political Issues in Contemporary Society

With the political system and its operation defined, the discussion can now address what the evidence suggests students have identified as civic and political issues in need of resolution. While a general distaste for political bodies and processes is visible among students, they have not, as some suggest (Clarke et al 2004, Fieldhouse et al. 2007), distanced themselves from awareness of social and political issues. However, if an examination of these issues were to stop at this point, it would be easy to mistake this hostility for a lack of caring about society’s welfare. But this is not so, and a detailed inspection of the data points to a different connection.

Drawing from a number of the interview questions, the students gave considerable attention to three broad categories of social issues. The first is the ongoing and hotly debated issue of surveillance. Due to the increased presence of digital technology, and the seemingly inerasable nature of digital text, Evelyn carefully considers her mobile phone use because she says the government can:

Go into your phone and track you down and see what you said…the government has been going into peoples phones when they log in to Wi-Fi and they can see everything that [you’re] doing, and so what you say…

Because of this awareness, Evelyn exhibits signs of what Foucault terms “focusing attention” on her actions (1988:50), causing her mobile habits to develop along a different path than the one she has already established:

…everything that’s like very personal to you…you’re not gonna say through a phone…whereas when you say it in person, then you might not be able to track down what they said.
In short, she has isolated her use of the mobile phone so it can be very schematically studied and critiqued in order to avoid any unwanted attention (Foucault 1988:58-63). However, it is not an altogether negative setting for the students. In fact, Phillip suggested that surveillance is actually a useful public tool:

[If] someone does something wrong, you film it, you know, that holds way more accountable. Or you have, just the function of the Internet, is anything you want to put up, you can put up, it can’t be taken down.

Digital permanence is employed this time to monitor and secure public safety, demonstrating how “even individuals who are not connected are nonetheless affected by the technological changes” (Quan-Haase 2013: 160). As Phillip notes, however, the actions of everyday citizens are not the only exploits that become public information:

Snowden is a perfect example, right, like he leaks his story online, exposing you know, the CIA, or whatever, and that changes policy around the world, so like one network, operating on another network, like you know.

Here, Phillip has turned the tables on “Big Brother” and shown how technology can force a change in extant political conditions based on social desires (Street 1992:158). In this case, Edward Snowden exposed the government’s current tactics, which caused public uproar and a demand for greater regulation and transparency.

The second issue is as old as politics itself; that is, state relations and warfare. The students are attentive to what is going on within and external to Canadian boarders. For example, Mike noticed that China was the subject of many news reports, and because of this:

Any news that popped up that was about China, I stopped whatever I was doing and I read it because I just developed a really big fascination for that whole that whole situation, every situation they’re in…it’s a very dynamic situation.
This is quite the opposite of politically inattentive, and Mike is not the only one to ascribe the same importance to such matters. More locally, Robert contemplates his uncertainty as to whether or not sending soldiers to conflict zones is having the desired effect:

Would you sing up for the army kinda of thing to protect whatever you believe in?...I would never do it, like to go...Afghanistan, and do something stupid.

He pauses, aware of his violation of “rational conduct in all forms of active life”, and revisits his remarks to “conform to the principle of moral rationality” (Foucault 2005:9):

Sorry, that’s not appropriate, I shouldn’t have said that, that’s too, that’s too…

Stopping again, he carefully concludes this thought in a morally rationalized fashion:

...I understand that there is people there, and we’re trying to help them, but like, no one really knows the best way to do it, so it’s kinda like shooting in the dark. So, that’s why I said stupid, I don’t want to...offend anyone, obviously I would offend anyone, especially people who were involved in it, or if their family is involved in it, but I just think that, what is your end goal, what are you trying to do, like I don’t know if, soldiers will tell you what they’re trying to create stability, but is it the right way to do it, you know what I mean...

Aside from paying close attention to his political opinions, Robert has taken charge of his actions and exemplified how “one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself” (Foucault 2005:11). In essence, Robert substitutes his initial statement for one mediated against the “representations which appear in the mind” (Foucault 2005:11). Evelyn also broaches state relations, though spuriously as she is neither confident in her awareness nor the trustworthiness of the state, but the point is that these international dealings do not pass blindly by; the students maintain both an account of these events and their ties to it.

The third issue relates to the environment and concerns about current business practices in the fields of animal rights and human rights/community repercussions. Four students spoke of animal rights violations for the sake of economic success. For example, Canada Goose brand
winter jackets have gained notable success for their warmth and film presence (e.g. The Day After Tomorrow, Captain America), but as Susan notes they cannot escape cruelty claims:

A couple of years ago there was a big thing on Facebook about how Canada Goose jackets were made with dead coyotes...a big thing went around...not that I’d get a Canada goose jacket because they are like so expensive, but if kinda makes me like them a little less.

Elsewhere, Jean speaks on the impact of a couple of recent and revealing documentaries:

Have you ever seen The Cove? So...in Japan, killing dolphins and all that is a big problem...[there was] massive criticism after the movie came out [as] fish is substituted for dolphin meat and sold as something else, and because dolphins, have a lot of mercury in it, cause they’re so high up on the food chain...

Looking to me for a common awareness of the situation, Jean points to animal mistreatment, but also to the danger of them becoming a part of the food supply due to such high level of mercury poising. However, the goal here is not just to attack what Japan has done. She continues:

…what was my point there, oh ya, politics...somewhere around [Scandinavia], they have this tradition that when boys become males they start killing dolphins. And they have like this massive ceremony in like one of the lakes and...they cut them open, there’s so much blood, and it’s just...to celebrate that you’ve become a male, so it was just like saying how like you know like there’s so much scrutiny in Japan... but like look, this is not even getting any international recognition and this is just like the most pointless thing in the world, like do you know what I mean...

Again Jean assumes an air of cohesion between her ideals and mine, which may not be far apart, however what is important that she is displaying a particular style of political awareness. In the same way, Anne and Nancy made it a point to follow PETA in order to uphold a vegetarian diet and to provide valuable information about cosmetics tested on animals, respectively. Overall, their remarks are indicative of what Foucault calls a “history of ‘ethics’, understood as the elaboration of a form of relation to the self that enables an individual to fashion himself into a subject of ethical conduct” (1990:251). These students are positioning themselves as morally
upright in character and, at the same time, demonstrating a desire for ethical campaigns to
“transform everyday ethical consumption practices in some way or another” (Lury 2011:180).

The second group operating under the flag of environmentalism monitors the effects of
large corporations’ business practices on human communities and the ecosystem. When asked
about circumstances that have influenced his views, Peter mentions the effects that Charles Koch
has on his family since they now reside in Kansas. Being an enormous politico-economic
influence in the U.S., much debate surrounds the Koch family, a fact Peter knows very well:

Initially when my family [was] moving there and my dad who works for
[retracted], I’d formulated a pretty strong opinion that he was…a pretty
aggressive, political activist on a side I don’t agree with.

However, his display of political acuity did not end with a presumed opinion regarding the states
operation. Instead, Peter sought out more information and concluded “but from that, I definitely
learned more about what [Koch] does for that community, [and] saw a softer side of him”.

Peter also noted the harmful impact of cell phone swapping on the environment, a
notion that looms in Evelyn’s mind: “people should acknowledge that by changing cell phones,
let’s say once a year…they’re wasting technology”. In a similar tone, Adrienne and Mike spoke
at length on how corporations manipulate the public by using community engagement as a
means to increase in profits margins.

Continuing to speak on the impact of social interests, some note the harsh treatment of
the ecosystem by businesses that generate income from cultivating the land. Philip, being up-to-
date on “the whole agro business in the United States”, speaks uneasily on expected impacts:

Drastic changes…[in] Monsanto and…Coca-Cola and the economics on it how
they use corn syrup instead of natural sugar, and what the health effects are for
that…definitely some articles you should read…they make you aware of certain
practices that are unethical, that are, you know, morally wrong.
Damages to the world’s food supply, the human body, and business ethics are all issues that Phillip is wrestling with and suggests that others should to the same as well. Likewise, Barry is keen to notice “any story about a mining company that has some human rights violations”. At one point Barry refers to mining as having large impacts on the land, but he also stresses an important social effect: “I know mining has a lot of effects that are related to indigenous issues,” and later notes this “happens pretty frequently, [and] makes me judge the industry, judge the company in particular, and the people responsible”. The students’ comments on eco-politics are quite telling. They have problematized it, setting “a positing of the body as a fragile entity in relation to its surroundings…[and] called for a constant attention to oneself, to the state one was in and to the acts that one performed” (Foucault 1998:101-102). The harmful effects of politico-economic elites, mobile phone waste, genetically modified foodstuffs, and mining reveals the students’ strong awareness of social issues, but it also signifies an intensification of their alertness of these settings and apprehensions about its projected impacts on them (ibid:103).

The societal effects of business, from animals to communities to an entire nation, are on the students’ minds. Students are not only troubled by these issues, they are well aware of how the fallout will impact them, their families, wider society, and the environment. To be brief, these are not the remarks of socially or politically withdrawn individuals. Thus, while claims of civic and political apathy amid youth abounds (Clarke et al 2004, Wattenberg 2002; Fieldhouse et al. 2007), the evidence in this study shows that students are not at all socially or politically apathetic in daily life. In sum, the students are harsh critics of the political system, and while the issues they encounter in daily life are not only visible, they knowingly internalize them. Yet, in spite of any political pitfalls, students remain engaged with public issues “from macro-fora to
transnational settings” in “E-democracy programmes including on-line public fora”, and attempt to utilize these groups for the “analysis and generation of policy proposals” (Held 2006:86).

6.3 “Networked” News in Contemporary Society

There have been many changes in the distribution of information related to the social and political spheres but the significance of news in the contemporary world has not diminished. The networked society has challenged the primacy of traditional journalism and a hands-on approach to newsgathering is having increasingly profound effects on all social matters. The truth telling abilities of traditional, broad-spectrum news reporting – the kind that catered to large and diverse audiences by assuming or proposing what the public should find important – is losing its ability to maintain the attention of younger generations under the influence of their increasingly mobile and diverse lifestyle habits. The focus of this section is to assess how the transformations that swept through journalism have impacted the ways present-day students interact with information on civic and political dealings by first isolating their definitions of news and who reports it, and then by clarifying how their habits and practices of newsgathering has an impact on their lives.

6.3.1 What is News Today?

The typical understanding of news suggests it is “regularly producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of public interest and importance” (Schudson 2011:3), and when asked to define news today the students see it in much the same way. For example, Barry sees news as “ahhh, [it] just be stories that are made publically available about events that interest people”, and Peter notes it is “probably like current events, like ah, that like help inform the general public”. For Nancy and Susan, news relates to recent events from around the world. As expected, however, when asked about their notions of institutionalized journalism the majority
of the students immediately attacked its practices, pervasiveness, content, and ownership. In Adrienne’s mind it is:

Pretty much anything that’s broadcasted by media corporations…like, whatever they portray as the most important thing, to them, that’s what is considered news.

And Anne holds the same conception of news as value inscribed products created by “media outlets”, while turning to Evelyn reveals an attack on the one-direction nature of the practice:

To find out what’s occurring in the world without actually communicating with it …Because they’re able to communicate what’s happening in their country or what’s happening in that area, but you can’t really contact them because you just like watching them, or you’re reading it…Like you can put your comment online …but the person that’s reporting it themself may not read that comment, because that’s not really important to them, because they already know what’s happening.

Despite innovative network relationships, which Lievrouw says “helps movements intervene in the workings of social and political institutions, changing norms and values and reconfiguring the distribution of power and resources” (2011:175), current news practices seem outdated to Evelyn.

In sum, traditional journalism fails to meet the students’ expectations and typically falls into three familiar labels: information, projected ideals, and spectacle. Robert’s definition first appeared as if it was going to match the standard:

News, it’s information. Hearing stuff that’s happening, or important topics, or what someone else has deemed important.

However, his last conjunction shows this is not so, and he conforms to the bias in news that Anne and Adrienne pointed out above. Robert goes on to criticize the format of the news:

They got like, the tickers, topics like, maybe you don’t care about them, you know what I mean, like some of the topics they’ll have up on there…CNN’s got like…7 or 8 tickers sitting on their thing…and half their tickers are…if you understand, this is CNN, it’s huge, and like 3 or 4 of their tickers are trash, like embarrassing.
While he has singled out CNN, it is common practice among network news stations to employ “tickers” that he would likely consider “trash”. It is important to note that the students are indicating a general dissatisfaction with the quality of network news, a condition Atton and Hamilton (2011) say helped stimulate an increase in alternative journalism. Elsewhere, others hostilely note their distaste:

Mike: Shabby, opinions. Not highly intellectual, not very mentally stimulating…I personally think that if people who initially started journalism, way back you know, back to the printing press and the idea behind it, like see news now, I think they’re all turning over in their graves.

Phillip: I guess ya, information imparted with a particular ideology. A certain way to convey information that carries a political or cultural social weighting. So, like ah, ya I don’t know, its information, but it’s like slightly biased information.

And even though Jean’s evaluation gives an indication of scale and availably:

News…it’s everywhere and constantly attainable kind of a thing…like obviously you still have bias news, that’s, let’s not kid ourselves…

News, for her, is remains rife with bias and fails to meet her notions of quality control standards. Still, there are two more interesting points found within the students’ definition of news. First, it involves personal interest and can be considered news if even one person finds it remarkable; and they are all in agreement here. Second, seven of them denoted what news is not, and Mike sums this up well by saying “and then you get like Fox News, which is a joke”, and when asked to elaborate notes:

Like anything on there, it’s over dramatized, it’s overemphasized, and it’s oversensationalized…[when] the pinnacle of a story is the drama behind it and not the emotional impact of the story, it was like the drama, then it [goes] from being…ah…news, to being like a Greek tragedy.
6.3.2 A Word on Reporters

Journalists are the primary means through which network news conveys its messages to the public. Their task, as Allan (2004) suggests, is to gather and report the latest information, in an expedient manner, while untying fact from fiction. However, the rise of citizen journalism has struck at the core of broadcaster integrity and authority, and the power of these professionals may not be as strong as it once was. Moreover, as the discussion of news continued with the students it became clear that they much to discuss in terms of reporters. Specifically, who they are, what they do, and what they fail to do. Reporters typically display confidence and a sense of authority in terms of their work, but for Evelyn their perspicacity does not outweigh their detachment, inactivity, and lack of reflexivity. Though interactivity helps ease dialogue between amateurs and professionals (c.f. Deuze 2007, Matheson 2004), her view is one of dissatisfaction. Building on her one-directional comments above, Evelyn says that the events a reporter details may be tragic, but it is just that – a tragic report – because “they’re not going to react to it because I guess you could say that’s not their area to look into it”. In short, reporters lack a stake in the situations they embed themselves in; once again referring to the use of new media to stimulate change via a mobile and networked society (c.f. Lievrouw 2011).

After a recent encounter with a group of reporters, Mike was equally displeased with the role of the reporter and quality of their reporting. Having stated earlier that “all of these news reporters trying to make the next big hit, so they are just [snapping fingers] turning around everything like that”, it is no surprise when he says the following of his run-in:

…the older ones were talking about how they used to have a lot more time to work on the paper, but it was still [snaps fingers] quick turnarounds. Now the new ones are saying “oh ya, we literally have the story done by like noon, we walk in at 8 we have to have the story written and ready by noon”.

He pauses since this event still causes shock, but endures and completes his thought:
But, but it’s a…150 word story. I was like how do you cover any question you ask any MP in 150 words, adequately…So when a reporter is like 150 they are not really looking for much, it’s, it’s really unfortunate…

Stressed here is his concern that reporters’ stories are shallow and yield to scheduling. He also suggests reporters are “politicized” in the same way as a news station can be. Peter says writers can create “interesting” bits of information, but the whole-picture requires end-user action:

I really enjoy reading what they have to say because they are at the scene…they can sort of say what they are feeling or like what they are thinking or what’s going on, um, and then attach the story later, so you can kinda get like a different view or opinion from ah, all these different people all at once.

There is no absolute truth, and this is something Peter mentions many times in his interview. In spite of increased liveliness, it is still necessary to consult several sources. Interestingly, though, Peter later reveals a developmental affinity for certain news channels due to its investigators:

I’ll watch it because of them, but I think it’s just cause what I’m accustomed to watching from a young age that I kinda carry that through.

Meanwhile, Robert takes up a more critical evaluation. Though he give the impression of holding his sister, a reporter, in high esteem he also notes that their position is not infallible:

…she’s an expert in the mayor’s office in New York, she’s so into it cause she creates bias, cause she so informed, you can’t dedicate and be so passionate about something without coming up with strong opinions, and then naturally…though you’re an expert in it, you’ve now become probably not the best source anymore.

When a reporter’s expertise is well developed, Robert fears they have stop investigating what an opposing source has to say. That is to say, sustained exposure to particular ideals may in fact compromise a reporter’s objectivity. Outside of family ties to journalism, as was the case with Robert, Jean may have a hard time identifying a reporter let alone charting their character, given that her response to broadcast news was “I don’t know I honestly, I don’t remember the last time
I watched like a live news report”. In short, the students no longer point to reporters as the incumbent “tellers of the truth” and the professional image they spent the last five centuries building is in a state of erosion.

6.3.3 The Habits and Practices of Student News Gathering

Based on the earlier discussions of social and political issues it is clear that the students are receiving new information about the world around them, but with the weakened authority of the reporter and the hostility toward broadcast news, where are they getting this news? How are they accessing it? These are the questions this section will answer by exploring the students’ habits and practices of newsgathering, including; their sources, rate of consumption, use of their mobile phones, and the sharing and role of news in daily life. It is here where the students’ ideas of what news is and ought to be diverge, and their notions begin to replace the definition of news that they associated with broadcast journalism. Also, while traditional news sources frequently appeared – only Adrienne, Jean, and Susan made references to social media as initial sources – there is an obvious variance in where they said news came from and where they sought out news.

In an analysis of the students’ newsgathering practices, two types of conversations were noticeable: a low intake or altogether avoidance of traditional news, and bouts of high and low intake of social media news. Traditional sources – papers or television, for example – are an almost foreign idea to some, as Jean noted above not remembering the last time she watched an actual report. In the same way, Evelyn replies, “I think it’s boring. I don’t usually like to look at that stuff”. In addition, the speed of newsprint is unsuitable to Robert: “I think that waiting the next day…to get the newspaper seems ridiculous to me”. Those with a low intake of traditional news tend to rely on their online platforms. For instance, while Anne feels that broadcast news is “pretty negative”, she does not seem to have the same reservations about their online portals:
I would be more likely to watch an online version, to read something online, than I would be to watch it…

Though not as deterred by their online versions, she adds:

…I think they need to integrate more, which their doing now with their ads, but onto social media because I wouldn’t um actively go out and seek it and type in like theglobeandmail.com.

Traditional sources are incompatible with her daily practices, a fact Susan validates, “I don’t have time to like sit down and read a newspaper or like watch the news on TV”. Interestingly, Anne notes she has access to The Globe and Mail paper at home since her family has “gotten that forever”, but at university she claims “no primary news source”. Equally, Phillip notes:

Ya, um, I don’t, I haven’t had a television since first year, but ah, generally ya, it’s more accessible for us to use the Internet, and like BBC.

The students make it a point to indicate that digital devices are so common that traditional news sources are not feasible for this generation. Their remarks are supportive of Castells’ notion that analogue media are less central to daily life and are often considered rather abnormal (2010:405).

The general sentiment among the students seems to be, as Jean says, “I sometimes will like use CTV I guess, but it’s more for the social media that they have”. Traditional news intake holds a remarkably low impact without the opportunities for expansion afforded by the Internet. However, those that note an intake of a traditional sources online platform are not convinced of its efforts. Remarking on the respectable quality of CTV and CBC, Peter begins his critique:

I think that some of them have really, ah, like really informative online websites and platforms…

Though it felt like he was going to maintain his support of the fourth estate, he adds:

…but you can definitely see…with Canada I feel like we’re trying to do, like use these platforms, I get like the Canada AM newsletter to my email, and I mean that’s pretty shoddily put together…

He may want the online extension of Canada AM to be helpful in newsgathering processes, but it
appears to have fallen short of his user experiences; while Robert’s response is not as forgiving:

> I just think that most news people don’t, news networks, don’t know yet what the hell it’s about. Like a lot of them scramble to make websites and stuff like that cause they don’t...I think a lot of companies right now do not know what they are doing with the online, they made the online cause they had to make the online cause they feel, they felt like, they were going to lose everything if they’re just sticking to TV and that their going to be phased out.

So while many network news stations feel as if they have conquered the online environment, as noted of MSNBC.com (c.f. 3.5.3), Robert views them as merely struggling to shove old news into the digital format to maintain the level of societal influence they once had. Again the students have touched on the importance of digital communications in daily life, but they have also indicated that even with the reabsorption of citizen journalists’ talents into mainstream channels, as many have noted (Allan 2006, Curran and Witschge 2011, Deuze 2007), traditional news fails to meet their expectations and is seen floundering about in an obscure fashion.

With traditional platforms diminishing in importance, it seems as though social media have gained much ground in the news world. However, some noted quite low levels of social media news intake while others noted very high levels. On the higher-end of the spectrum, in spite of previously claiming no primary sources above, Anne states she is never in the dark:

> Every big event that’s going on in the news I know about, and I know about it from Twitter or Facebook, so I guess I’m exposed to it a lot.

Besides, her rationality for gathering news from social media comes across as entirely obvious:

> Like they’re the biggest, Facebook and twitter, are the two biggest social networks, right, so it’s almost like you assume everyone has them.

Mike notes as much, though somewhat begrudgingly:

> Every [network] is using Twitter now, politicians are using Twitter, parliament is using Twitter, and like as a politics student I feel obligated to stay in touch and stay in touch with reality...if that means going on Twitter... I guess I have to.
For Robert, Social media news is becoming important because students are “wanting to get it as fast as possible. That’s what brings you to Twitter, and it’s quick too. So, no fluff”. For the high-intake group there is a general mentality surrounding its importance that Susan sums up nicely: “Ya probably, just because I pay more attention to Twitter than the news”. Put another way, for this group news from social media is seems to be the best means of getting the same information out to the general public, which Putnam (2001) says is essential for social decision-making; news that is fast, brief but detailed, and potentially free from bias and dramatization.

Conversely, social media news is not immune to disappointment, a fact that causes the same students to approach it cautiously at times and collect it in lower quantities. For example, when Adrienne gets news from Twitter on her phone she is not convinced of its importance:

I mean sometimes I’ll see what’s trending on twitter but I don’t normally agree with what’s trending on Twitter.

The questionable seriousness of Twitter is also mentioned by Susan, although not directly:

Well I go on Twitter, sometimes, so if something is really exciting it will usually be on Twitter or I’ll just hear about it from a friend. Or somebody will post about it on Facebook.

Put differently, news from these sites may not be as important as it is exciting. In the same vein, Barry suggests social media news can be important he is consciously critical of the source:

I definitely don’t get news from Twitter, on Facebook ya, but I’d say, that borders. If something’s newsworthy, I’d say that’s maybe more social news or um, I wouldn’t consider that news in the same sense of broadcast news.

What Barry has suggested here is that while something on Twitter may seem important, it is not necessarily civic or politically relevant material; similar to the light news critique that fell on network news stations in the broadcast era. There is also the enjoyable critique of self-declared comedian Phillip, who puts his unique spin on a particular source:
BuzzFeed, like it just seems like, a lot of cultural calories, like a Big-Mac for your brain. Like, oh Justin Bieber; five ways to wear the dress; like whatever, you know. Like what shoes match like your belt, or like the five reasons why Matthew McConaughey is so hot, or, it’s always they give you a number, and it’s just like their trying to manipulate…there’s a number, telling me this is factual information when it’s just garbage…one in twenty or thirty stories are good, but most of them are crap.

It may be humorous, but it is also a strong critique: social media news can be just as bad as traditional news at failing to produce material on relevant and important social issues. Still, a deeper inference is present here. Specifically, though the students criticize some of today’s news sources they are still, to varying degrees, organizing themselves around these cultural products or services (be it network news or social media) that “are the outcome of intellectual – or immaterial – labour” (Lury 2011:11).

All together, the students note high or low levels of social media news intake and a low or absolute avoidance of traditional news. Is this suggestive of the broadcast era trope of the audience(s) as a passive receiver now spread to the Internet? Alternatively, does the massive amount of information available on the Internet bewilder the students? Neither is the case, really, and their solution to this paradox is precise and systematic. They have developed a synergistic intake of news, pulling information from all available corners of the Internet, traditional news media, and in-person discussions. Adrienne explains how this process begins:

I kinda go with what’s trending on Twitter and I do, like I look at it and I either disagree or agree with it, or I like look, cause say on Twitter they give you like a hashtag or whatever and I take that like hashtag is a news title and I take that title and I do more research about it…

Once the students identify a topic deserving of attention it initiates an almost automated reaction:

So, that’s pretty much what, that’s like a starting point for me, I mean that engages me, gets my attention, which is probably what it’s used for, and then I do my own research on it.
Not merely a launching point, it is also an attempt at removing bias from information. Adrienne makes this point in reference to her own research, while Jean implies a collective sentiment:

I find before like social media you weren’t able to really find out what was going on in your own life, you can’t, you weren’t able to research it on your own, your just filtered by the media that like is already filtered by political um people.

After seeing a story on Twitter, the students employed a number of different responses:

Jean: …I’ll Google other things and try to like research it.

Mike: … the New Yorker posts some interesting stuff, just fun articles about things, and they are just fun to kind of peruse through.

Peter: …I’ll be like refreshing that or getting news from that. But then, usually click to go to their website or something to that extent.

All of the students have different patterns of execution, but the important part is that there is always a next step, which would seem to support Schudson’s claim that because news in the digital age has blurred the lines between “tweet, blog post, newspaper story, magazine article, and book…the story is never finished, never in final form” (2011:210). No report or site is accepted as a completed product and more work needs to be done.

The same pattern of identify and explore is used when students visit other popular social media sites (e.g. Facebook, BuzzFeed), but more importantly the students have also incorporated a number of sources that, while not widely considered news sites, are nevertheless utilized to learn about the world. Anne, for example, distances herself from TV’s one-to-many method of distribution, favoring instead the small-scale method of acquiring news from an online blog:

I guess I can relate more to the individual and I’m very… [I don’t know] like if its sympathetic or empathetic, but I really like can connect emotionally with people I don’t know, so I think that’s why I like hearing their stories so much, cause I feel like very like connected just by listening to an interview with them or something
Though she laughs half-way through her statement, it seems to have been related more to a fear of being judged for showing such concern for this relatively unknown individual – a stance some might find odd – than a lack of sincerity. Moreover, she later provides evidence of just how serious she is about this:

There is a girl I know, who has a tumbler…and she posts what’s going on in her life, and she’s like an activist. And I probably check her tumbler, ahh, like once a week, and that’s me actively seeking out just one person’s life, because I just find it interesting, like what she does.

Here, it is not a case of attraction to news that is shareable, as Barry alluded above, but a display of the girls’ genuine and active interest. News also comes from websites of particular interest:

Barry: There is a number of mining web sites that I think are good for just different stories on mineral economics and exploration projects.

Thanks in part to the Internet, particular areas of interest are able to distribute their own source material that students can seek out for themselves; specialized news is more accessible than ever.

Still, there are other widespread messages that, while often consumed for personal interest, also act as student news sources. For Mike, sources such as Netflix and Ted Talks are valuable because they “are interesting, I like those, and I pick the ones that are interesting to me, because that’s a good place to go do that”. While others insist that YouTube is an inspirational and thought provoking news medium. For example, Evelyn recalls how a particular video inspired her and has had an impact on a wider audience:

There is this girl with a disease which makes her look really skinny, and people have called her ugly, and basically her video is called What Defines Beauty, I think, and she talks about how you should look at it from your inner self and that you should be able to see what lies within instead of what peers and the external self… And by that she is able to change a lot of people’s views.
The video, and there are many like it on the Internet, seems to have spoken on matters of physical and mental health that Evelyn feels are important social concerns. Similarly, Phillip often reaches out to VICE’s YouTube news specials for coverage of important issues:

Every single place they do reporting on around the world, they actually have a micro news station there, and they hire reporters from that country to report on their own culture, so if they’re doing a report on Russia for example, their correspondent is fluent Russian, Ukrainian, like…

While language can be a barrier to communications between boarders, as he continues, his explanation offers another important reason:

He speaks all those languages…he grew up there, so he’s like probably the best candidate to actually investigate and tell that story, versus the traditional ethnographic, like some guy going to Papua New Guinea, “oh what do you think?”, you know, they have no idea what the hell is going on.

In other words, by employing local correspondents he abandons the globetrotting, nature of traditional news in favor of a more meaningful, informed, and relatable style of news. In these instances, new mediums have enabled the students to “seek, find, and assess information and each other…to cultivate relationships, seek and give advice, make recommendations, and amass and trade ‘reputation capital’ and trust online” (Lievrouw 2011:151).

Many students also believe that conversation is a good way to get information on public and political issues. That is to say, students do not feel as though they have to actively seek news since, as Susan says, they are often “hearing about it from friends or family”. In other words, students frequently broach topical knowledge in their daily meetings. Robert provides a good explanation on why this occurs:

People are always talking about stuff, I think it’s good, especially in university, people are, ah, savvy…I’m sure I’m not the only person who says they keep up-to-date with news. I think a lot of people are, because of their devices, like someone who wouldn’t normally…they would never read the newspaper or stuff like that way back when… the news it’s just easy to access, it’s interesting.
The accessing of information, then, seems to be a social norm. Verbal banter is conventional, but the fact that students first obtain the information digitally is striking. Moreover, while cellphones enable dialogue, they also appear to instill the notion that students have knowledge of the world; which will then functions as “a relevant part of the subject's practice on himself; an effective and efficient component in the subject's transformation of himself” (Foucault 2011:43; c.f. 1988:55).

The students’ regularity of actively gathering news divides them into three distinct groupings: frequent, moderate, and seldom. One student said they constantly check their phone for news and, as Peter imparts, this is not an exaggeration:

Um, probably like, once or twice an hour. Like ill refresh my Global…or Globe app, and then I’ll get those notifications, um, ya probably once or twice an hour.

Peter is seeking out news every thirty to sixty minutes to be sure he is always up-to-date, and while others students check their phones regularly – all the time, by the minute, or hourly – newsgathering was never specified in these instances; but sharing habits will shed some light on this below. Two of the students seldom used their phone for newsgathering, but noted their use while stationary. Phillip, for example, carefully orders his usage:

I would be reading news on my computer at home, any time I’m situated…I’m usually using my computer, but when I’m mobile and doing something I wouldn’t be reading news…but if I’m waiting for something and I’m mobile, like if I have a cold and I’m waiting for the clinic…then I would read news there to pass the time.

However, time is not the only reason students consume news while motionless. Barry blames his lack of newsgathering on his devices tiny screen and his carrier restrictions, but notes:

If I did have data or the access to do it I would be more likely to revert to my phone to read business insider, or whatever I was interested in at the time.

The remaining students noted actively searching for news along a more moderate spectrum of activity. Adrienne’s method of newsgathering is sporadic and even though it is sometimes
prompted by exchanges with friends, it typically falls in the range of “maybe once a week”, with major events being checked on a monthly basis. While Anne is likely to run into news on Facebook or Twitter on a daily basis, active seeking occurs “like once a week”. In addition, Mike reads *The Globe and Mail* every Sunday, but claims “I don’t really look at the news that often, unless of course I was following a particular story”. The intensity of news seeking shifts toward the more frequent end of the gamut for Nancy and Susan. The former claims, “I’ll check on it maybe once every other day, or while I’m sitting in lecture”, while the latter holds a more idle approach and notes “well, I go on Twitter, sometimes”; though the entirety of her interview suggests that she checks this regularly. Higher-end newsgathering occurs daily or multiple times throughout the day since, as Evelyn suggests, it is “a thing where you can check daily what’s happening and what’s going on”. For Jean and Robert it is a staple and repetitive daily habit. In the morning Jean wakes up and will “take like five minutes to check everything on my phone”, which included newsgathering, and the same applies to Robert who notes if “I got five minutes to kill...I’ll put out my Twitter and look up what’s happening”; but he says this is done on his laptop and not his mobile phone. Importantly, then, despite six of the students noting heavy reliance on their laptops throughout the day (c.f. 5.3), only three of the students defer to their laptops for newsgathering while the others routinely use their mobile phones.

Actively searching for news shows students interest, but a look at the group’s sharing practices helps to better place the spread of news and its importance to daily life. The students’ sharing habits corresponds with a standard Likert-scale model of measurement: always (3), most of the time (4), sometimes (3), and rarely (1). Anne, the sole member of the rarely category says, “I’m more of a lurker”. However, the majority of the students note that they share news when they locate something interesting or something that alarms them. The themes that emerged in
analyzing what type of news interested the students and how they thought it impacted daily life is seen extending into their sharing habits. Sometimes the students experience news as information that is only important because the source says so (c.f. Baudrillard 1995), and at other times it as hollow information for mere entertainment (c.f. Postman 1992). While the students recognize these effects, according to Adrienne it does not weight heavily on them:

If I take a side with someone from like a media corporation, their motivation for taking that side are different from mine, from my motivations, which means that I’m less informed about that issue.

All of the students related they do not want to be seen as uninformed, an interesting reflection given the link between practices on the self and self-transformation (Foucault 2011:43), so when they share this type of information it is not for educational purposes but for entertainment and they will selectively tag interested parties. When it comes to sharing “real news”, according to the students, their habits are directed by their moralities in an attempt to correct social and political failings. The students are inclined or feel responsible, due to their governing principles, for spreading the word to everyone they can think of, not just their close friends. For example, Nancy utilizes Facebook’s news feed to promote a new line of social thought on the treatment of animals because:

Nothing else like really stirs something up inside of me…I’m a vegetarian, I’ve been a vegetarian for 10 years, I’ve got like four cats at home, I’ve been raised with animals, my whole life it’s just something that I feel very strongly about.

Similarly, speaking once again on The Cove and Blackfish, Jean believes a lack of genuine consideration for the mistreatment of animals are “definitely problems that are going on right now”. Put differently, news that is seen as a distraction is summarily dismissed while real news encourages the students to share these events, largely through social media, which can be seen as
an attempt to enable them to exercise “power within a network in which one occupies a key position” (Foucault 1988:87).

Though news often relates to maintaining social connections, sometimes it is so personal in nature that the students do not always share it, even among close friends. As Adrienne says:

I don’t like to get my friends too involved with my personal life or my own views because I feel like they have their own lives, and ya our lives interconnect, but I don’t want my life to like be a part of their life completely…

News about Adrienne’s life, including social and political activities, is a highly personal matter and she chooses not to impose these thoughts on others. This supports Foucault’s techniques of the self, of monitoring one’s own actions, wrestling with their own views internally, since “by taking care of oneself…one makes oneself capable of taking care of others” (Foucault 2005:175).

Students also share news across great distances. If there is an issue that could impact family relations Peter will engage in a series of email exchanges with those that live in the U.S., while Evelyn chooses Skype to contact those not nearby, and Susan will begin messaging her friend in England. Any news that will influence these links appears to spark both dialogue and a reflection on the “relationship of reciprocity (usefulness of oneself for others and of others for oneself) within the general objective of our…care of the self” (Foucault 2005:195).

Lastly, whenever students share news related to issues of everyday, socio-cultural events, they do so for the purposes of exploring the mindset of their social collective. For example, Peter will use Twitter to employ a conversational form of news sharing:

If I see an article of interest…it’s kinda fun to like throw it out there to people that you know, and then kinda attach like a one line that you could say about it, and then get people talking about it is just kinda fun and interesting.

Twitter is therefore both a delivery platform for awareness and a discussion ground to collect and contemplate the thoughts of others. He also feels social media news should not be used to incite
action (as others did above), but “be there to inform and allow people to get ideas and opinions about these sorts of things and do research later on”. This is visible in his decision to make a rather large post on gas production, station franchise profit margins, and international relations to a Facebook page protesting a local Ontario gas station. His goal was to “strike up conversation” and not to “boycott the guys here at home”.

Barry had implied above that social media news is dubious at times and that students share news on these platforms that is not always in line with the public interest, but he later says it is “intentionally based around social dynamics and friends”. Mobile newsgathering, then, shapes the students’ relations of self, other, and society based on the daily exchange of information and dialogue among networked groups that carefully monitor and regulate information flows, but it also helps to create diverse and lively networks of informed citizens capable of taking part in social decision-making processes (Putnam 2001, Held 2006).

6.4 Ethical Knowledge, Mobile Technology, and Always-On Responsibility

The above illustrates that students are assuredly informed on civic and political affairs in contemporary society with the help of mobile phones and diverse social media networks, which is a condition supported by the findings of others (c.f. Campbell and Kwak 2012, Gordon 2007). The goal of these last sections is to show how these spaces are more than a place to exchange public information they are the centerpieces of daily life and have sizable effects on the students’ sense of self and their connection to the world. The first section focuses on the shaping of the students’ political values and self-identity in their assessment of information flows via mobile phones. Then, the final segment explores student persistence at participating in civic and political issues, and their views on mobile phones and social media as a means of influencing social direction.
6.4.1 The Reshaping of Political Values and Self-Image in Social Media Routines

Student mobile phone selection provides a reflexive relation to identity due to the active and dynamic ties they form with the device (c.f. 5.3), but more intensely focused shaping tends to occur as they use of these devices in daily processes. More specifically, socially linked process such as newsgathering triggers student moralities and the judicial monitoring of events as they contemplate the actions of the parties involved. Then, students choose to take up a position in relation to self and other as they formulate a course of action. There were two general responses to what guided student values: friends and family, and media and information seeking. Initially, only two students said social media is a big influence, and Adrienne was quite certain of this:

Definitely the media, like everything I know about politics is like what is broadcast right in front of my face, it’s because I don’t go out and search for it, it’s because pretty much the only resources I have are what’s in front of me.

It is obvious that Adrienne is once again speaking of broadcast media and not social media, but the point is that media, in one form or another, is shaping her value system, but not wholly:

Whatever people choose to show me is what I see and it’s up to me whether I acknowledge that or ignore it, and I, most of the time I tend to ignore it.

In other words, anything brought to her attention, not just through visual presentation, helps to shape her values. Though Jean casually retorts, “I guess social media”, her explanation is telling:

…again, I don’t go and seek out things right…whatever I see on social media I guess does influence me. I mean again, I have my own views and beliefs, but, I dunno, I guess whatever I see.

Here again, incoming information collides with her existing views and sometimes readjustment is required. Moreover, social media not only influence their political values, if they felt an issue would have an effect on them the imagined response involve more media. For example, if faced with the topic of abortion Adrienne explores all available information because:
I wouldn’t take one message and be like, ‘oh I agree or disagree with that’, I’m gonna take that message with me, go find out more about it, see what other people are saying, and then make a decision after that, about how I feel.

For Adrienne, no single message holds a feel of absolute correctness; much like the way the blurring of news media in the digital age prevents news reports from reaching a ‘final’ state (c.f. 6.3.3). Instead, the issue requires accessing informational roadways and juxtaposing them with her existing feelings before assuming a position. Jeans reaction is similar, but directed outward:

I definitely, like [if] I do see something I’ll try to repost it and see if my friends will like look at it and kind of spread the message kind of a thing.

In this instance, Jean takes the issue outside of her own mind in an attempt to reach out to those who she believes will share similar interests and values. Here, the students’ habits support the notion that news consumption “involves an ongoing, dynamic process in which individuals actively intervene in and respond to what is reflected back at them” (Lury 2011:28).

However, the majority of the students claimed that traditional influences such as friends and family were responsible for their value systems. A fact they were direct about:

Nancy: I think my parents to an extent, and my friends…the people closet to me.
Peter: I think like family has a huge influence on that, and then maybe underneath that economics is sort of in the back of everyone’s mind.
Evelyn: The university, and the government…I think I would say friends too.
Anne: The primary influencing factor would be my upbringing.

However, not all of the students are as direct in their assessments. Phillip, for instance, dresses up his answer with distinct classifications and rankings:

Definitely it’s a multitude of different factors. So I mean there is direct influences, indirect influences, obviously the big three for me, and I would assume most people, is family, friends, experience. Um, then the other ones would be like different institutions that you value, different I guess media outlets, different, ya different mobile technology.
Informational and media sources are present in the above, but the students still gave priority to friends and family. Likewise, Barry, Mike, and Robert give a lengthy and careful reflection of their value system, but the latter concludes: “At a certain point you take a stance for yourself, and that’s just kind of what I believe in”. Robert’s experiences are important, but self-determination appears to be of equal value; which suggests, as Lury notes, when we are free to choose “who to be and how to be, and thus in some sense, [we are] removed from any sense of responsibility to or for others …for we have made our choice (and must lie in it!” (2011:166). In short, these students have identified friends and family in contrast with their upbringing or experience as having the greatest influence on their political values.

However, when I asked these students how they might react if an issue affected them, the group once again begins to split into separate camps. The first camp retains their original stance, which is present in both their reactions and the renegotiation of their political values. For Barry, in-person communication occurs when he believes they might have a valid or informed opinion:

I’d talk about it with a different person or group of people, depending on what the issue is. So if it’s something related to my studies, talk about it with my classmates; if it’s something that I think is interesting or it’s a personal matter, talk about it with maybe a friend or a housemate.

Here, close, personal dialogue remains as a means to an end. In the same way, Phillip prefers to rely on meaningful personal contacts to spread awareness on important issues:

Like what as an individual can I do besides be aware, spread awareness, and maybe help out a charity or something….They have this whole homeless performance thing [on campus], and that’s great, you know, cause that’s a heavy trafficked area, people see it, they give some money, they learn about the cause, and if they’re so inclined they can help out the youth shelter.

For Phillip, getting people involved with this issue requires a very physical and public aspect, and he is highly critical of any other means:
I mean I think that’s a much better tactic than you know, like posting on Facebook, slactivism, oh like this Kony2012. It’s just…like one thing and then you’re absolved of any moral guilt.

Put differently, the use of social media has little practical appeal for him, associating its use with a lack of genuine concern.

Lastly, Robert takes a distanced approach to traditional involvement, and while he says he would naturally want “to take action”, remarking on the 2012 students protests in Montreal, but concludes, “I would, but only if it actually, if it mattered…like I’m an ingredient that will change something”. In sum, these students maintain their desires to employ traditional means of understanding and reacting to issues affecting society.

The second camp, however, demonstrates a fascinating shift in their probable reactions, allowing more modern influences to be folded into and help shape their political value systems. Remarkably, two of the students’ responses were virtually identical:

Anne: I’m not, like I’ve never been to protests or anything like that, or gotten involved…if I see something online that bothers me, um, I am one to comment…I might like share it.

Nancy: I’m not very, I’m not the type of person to like go there and do something about it, you know, like I’ll post something on Facebook, um, or I’ll talk to my friends about it.

In these instances the students’ peers are involved, both online and offline, but they prefer to bring these issues directly to social media spheres. Besides, as discussed in the previous section, when the students reach out to these platforms it is not to reinforce their existing beliefs or find an absolute truth, but to seek out and integrate all forms of information into their assessments. Therefore, when Anne and Nancy take issues of concern to social media, they are likely seeking out information and renegotiating their politics. While Peter’s response to an article on the poor treatment of Canadian veterans was more immediate:
The first thing in my thought was to tweet about it. So like I tweeted about the article, so that people like within my peer group could understand it.

Like Jean and Adrienne above, Peter feels that by spreading messages on social media he can better relate to his peers and possibly find common grounds for group membership in terms of his political views. Once again, as in the news section above, Peter uses Twitter as a discussion ground to collect and contemplate the thoughts of his peers.

Mike and Evelyn share near identical stories about the effects of social media on their political values. Wanting a career for himself in the political world, Mike is careful to assess the way the deployment of his political values will impact upon how other people assess him:

If I start posting things that are very anti-conservative on Facebook and be like ‘you guys really need to read this’, and start trying to you know, get the word out there, then I get labeled as an anti-conservative, and even though say one day even when their political party values line up with mine one day, and I want to join their party, they’re gonna be like, ‘but oh back in 2014, you were very much against this policy…blah, blah, blah…I don’t know if you’d be a very good candidate for us to have, you don’t really work well with the group’.

As Phillip noted in the first section, the seemingly durable nature of online communications causes Mike to carefully monitor his online political views. In fact, a recent survey from Pew suggests is an increasing norm when it comes to disagreement in online opinions (Hampton et al. 2014). But the monitoring of opinions seems to be a necessary act in order to avoid any future discomfort. Because while Mike’s views may change, he says others will note, “ya, but you said it thought, you did, you [knocking on the table indicating concreteness]”, and so, “you have to be mentally aware of all these things”. Evelyn feels much the same way, though she is not as goal orientated as Mike. Instead, she makes a much broader inference:

Social media has changed us. And like, everything around us has changed in a way because like we’ve always moved toward technology…and that’s the biggest thing that has changed the whole world… So everyone’s orientated towards like how people react to their certain situation, like we as individuals
pick up [how] others view ourselves, and we put that on ourselves and we push ourselves into a state where we’re just like taking in what people think about us.

For Evelyn and Mike, online political life must be carefully attended to and negotiated because political authorities and the general populous, representatives and voters, are ready to take a single, potentially ill-thought comment and ascribe that to their character.

Altogether, a wider assessment of the students’ discussion of politics shows that social media play a significant role in shaping the students’ value systems than they initially suggested. While only two of the students acknowledged this in the beginning, at this point the deployment and renegotiation of these values in daily life is seen in operation among seven of ten students (no conclusions could be drawn from Susan’s interview). However, I am not calling into doubt the weight of traditional influences on the students’ lives. Rather, that their present-day political value systems are being heavily influenced by diverse networks, illustrating the way in which mobile news consumption “infiltrates everyday life not only at the level of economic decision-making, social activities and domestic life, but also at the level of meaningful psychological experience. It affects the construction of identities, the formation of relationships and the framing of events” (Lury 2011:193).

Equally important are the questions aimed at assessing how social media habits influence the students overall sense of self. For example, Adrienne’s thoughts on others use of social media becomes a distinguishing mark of her sense of self:

…people get so consumed with them and that kinda bothers me sometimes…like going out with someone now is like their just on their phone, like posting a status about it, they’re letting people know where they are…It kinda takes away from the experience for me, which is why I try not to get consumed by that.
In her mind, mobile phones are so deeply entangled with social practices that it helps her to classify groups of people and, while not being “consumed” with social media, her habits on these platforms reflects the personal and close-knit image she relayed above:

I mean, I’m guilty of checking what other people are doing, but I don’t like to kinda broadcast what I’m doing in my life…I wouldn’t share something unless I was passionate about it.

If someone in her life wanted to know more about her personal sphere then her social media habits would become “more involved, and like kind of taking an effort to be…informed about their personal life because we share that close relationship”. When the same analysis is done for Jean, a different image emerges since her preoccupation with social media is not as reserved:

Oh ya, I like upload every weekend, like snap chatting… I [have] a really close group of friends back at home and some of them are in different universities, so just keeping it touch with, like being able to show them what we’re doing and all that stuff it kinda makes them closer to home kinda thing, I really think so.

Social media are useful for keeping in touch, but they also provide a sense of belonging for groups of likeminded individuals. Continuing her story, more personal feelings on this connection arise:

I think we’re definitely getting a lot more obsessed with it, like um, I just can’t help it, I understand that it’s not like a good thing that I can’t even go an hour without your phone, um, but, at the same time, I dunno, I feel like everyone is doing it around me, and I feel like if I don’t, I feel like confused and lost.

Obsessive at it may be, the necessity of these social media’s involvement in her life is a principle concern because without it she would feel out of place, lacking a distinct relation to others; as her news sharing habit of sending links about The Cove and Blackfish, helped to identify affiliations.

In Peter’s case, social networks are an important part of his life and frequently contribute to his sense of self due to the ease of accessing information and the phone itself:
I check it…all the time, especially during classes, it’s like really easy just to be checking. Um, and I like to be ‘up-on-the-know‘ with that kind of stuff…

Being up-to-date is what is important for Peter, and checking frequently is not so much obsessive as it is useful. Besides, frequency carries an additional purpose besides being up-to-date:

Your kind of defining yourself like more so because you have this ability to share all these different things and show people, and show your friends, and show your family, um your interests…because it’s your choice.

Self-image, for Peter, seems to be in a constant state of development, and each interaction with social media platforms builds on that sense of self through each choice that is made: that is, each link shared, clicked, commented on, and so on. While Barry, Phillip, and Robert did not feel as though social media influenced their political values, they do influence their self-images. For these three actively engaging with social media reveals both their intentions and ideal self:

Barry: [It] shows how willing you are to better yourself and inform yourself on things you consider important.

Barry: If you have an idealized self that’s [in]congruent with your actual self, then how you consume information and all that stuff would be different…[but] I’d like think that I’m pretty close.

Robert: I think you have to be aware of yourself. People are searching stuff online, learning other people’s perspectives and stuff like that, I think that helps you understand yourself.

Still, others are uncertain and decide to remark more briefly on the ways social media shape their self-images. For Evelyn it is almost an instinctive reaction, as “it’s just basically orientated toward how we initially react toward what we want”. Evelyn feels as though she is gravitating toward her personal interests, although she noted before (Sec. 6.3.3) that friends and new sources of information could change her views. Likewise, Susan feels her phone use in conversing with friends is a reflection of “something that’s like my opinion, something like that, so that’s my
opinion and nobody else’s”. While Nancy simply says, “I think there is an aspect of self-involvement to it…you can go beyond yourself to get really involved with worldly issues”.

While Anne and Mike had exhibited signs of social media influencing their political values earlier on, they did not feel that social media could accurately represent their self-images. According to Anne, “people only present their best self online…a lot of people are sharing all these current news events, when really…that stuff that’s going on is like 2% of you”. It is more of a superficial presentation for her, concluding “I just don’t think it’s a reflection of my whole self, it’s just whatever areas I choose to want to be represented by”; though research indicates that “most users present an identity online that largely conforms to or is truthful to who they are offline” (Quan-Haase 2013:178). While Mike sees it as more of an external regulation of his identity: “I don’t think it changes me, I think it changes what people think of me. People, just opinions of me will vary I think”. Altogether, however, in present-day life, social media spheres represent a large domain for individual growth and development. This demonstrates that news consumption in these environments is centered about a style of politics that is “less concerned with protesting about the actions of the others than with taking control…of the shape of his or her own life through the negotiation of self-identity” (Lury 2011:198). Students continuously probe these spheres for a sense of self and meaningful connections to daily life throughout routine communications.

6.4.2 Student Participation in Civic and Political Affairs through Mobile Phones

The Athenian model proposed that each citizen live their life in accordance with the state based on the notion of civic virtue, but shifts in political organization occurred as society matured and modernization has pushed direct political involvement beyond the ability of the average citizen (Held 2006). Regardless of the modern distancing of direct citizen involvement, as socio-
cultural transformations occur the general public characteristically demands that the authorities alter their existing habits to match these new desires (Held 2006). From time to time, then, the public is capable of employing its interests as a field or network of power as a means to ensure political activity in the pursuit of personal destinies (Foucault 1988:88-92). This final section focuses upon attempts to deploy networks of power via mobile phones and social media to address the issues in contemporary society that students felt demanded immediate action.

Deliberative democracy and ethical politics are prominent features of the interviews and eight students suggested that the world of politics is not performing the way it should. More specifically, they called into question its effectiveness in Western society and the students’ lives. Continuing her earlier attack on the unjust exclusivity of Canadian politics, Nancy exasperatingly remarked:

I don’t know, I just think politics is imbalanced, it’s just not right. Right now, I mean democracy, I shouldn’t generalize to politics…democracy is imbalanced…but it’s the only thing we have right now, cause communism didn’t work.

In fact, while students indicate that the assessment of social problems is a part of the political process, the success of this system fails to meet the expectations of them and their peers. For Adrienne the engrained conflict of present-day politics is excessive and uncompromising:

I just, like I don’t concern myself with it, I just think that because politics there’s so many different perspectives, I don’t want to have to get involved and take a side and like argue with people or cause like a conflict because I have a different perspective on what they feel.

Politics appears as a game of absolutes, focusing the students to choose one side or the other; a condition they have no interest in according to their newsgathering practices. Excessive conflict has caused Robert to consciously distance himself from modern party politics:

My belief is that people, especially within Canadian politics, gets too study in party or ideological belief, and it doesn’t really make sense because maybe, out
of ten topics, nine topics you could stand with the liberal party, and one topic you
don’t stand with the liberal party, but yet you’re gonna stand with the liberal party. So I think the idea…of categorizing yourself, in politics, is kind of stupid.

CR: Why is that?

Robert: …Party discipline is the most counterproductive, like sure it creates productivity as in bills will go through, but like if the ideas that you are supposed to represent people, your representing two things, your representing a party and riding of people, which one comes first? It’s…the party that comes first, in the system, when really the only reason you’re voted [in is]…you’re supposed to be for your constituent, but it’s actually the party that your following.

Roberts frustration with the Canadian political system has identified the participatory drawback found in the pluralistic model, which Barry also noted earlier (c.f. 6.2.1).

However, this does not mean that the students never take sides regarding contemporary issues. Despite Adrienne’s reluctance for conflict, her interview revealed one case of having chosen a side on “the whole Bell Let’s Talk initiative”. Although she notes the benefits of Bell’s initiative to raise mental awareness, she believes there is more to it than that:

I thought that was pretty political because you know it is coming from a company …they’re technically profiting from that because they’re doing brand awareness but their also raising awareness for like mental health, and like some people saw that as…that’s a great initiative, that’s a great organization, that’s awesome. But then this was like the only time people disagreed with me, because I said you know what, look at the bigger picture, they are a company, they’re advertising their name, they’re getting profit from it.

This post, an instance of political positing, caused a lot of controversy for Adrienne but she accepts that “because that kinda thing happens”. What is important is that she utilized her phone to take an issue to social media since it helps “facilitate discussion” and “bring people together in time and space”. The device and social media platform allowed Adrienne to uphold her political view on this issue, though she does note at some point “you need like action and like talking to people face-to-face”. Adrienne, at least, has taken sides in a societal conflict, but not in the same
way as the previous generation. The difference is that it is a conflict based on single issue that she has investigated herself and not one dictated by political pressure.

When the students attempt to carry this posture into political discourse, they sense a lack of communication between them and their government. Politics is not a conversation to students; it is simply a set of orders or conditions. Similar to Robert, Barry classifies politics as “how they interact and how we’re affected by them”. Though he did not elaborate on this statement, the language here is important. The term “they” puts distance between politicians and students, while the term “affected” seems to imply a demand that would be futile to resist. When asked if politics was a concern, Evelyn’s response also indicates a lack of communication as she remarks, “I’d probably have to say yes and no…No, because I don’t really give a crap, and yes because it does affect the university and it does affect what I pay”. The students feel as though they have no input in the operations or decisions of the Canadian government.

Nevertheless, the students’ mobile phone use and social media practices indicate that they are concerned with directing their energies toward civic and political activities. Adrienne, for example, keeps in touch with the Canadian Cancer Society using these platforms:

I mean, they’ve requested to follow me on Twitter and like keep in touch like that. …I really communicate the most through email and like personal meetings and stuff like that, and we get together in a room and discuss our ideas, whereas that would not happen over the phone, we don’t text each other our ideas, we sit down, we talk about it, and we deal with it there.

Here, Adrienne avoids potential conflict and a lack of communication because this institution has integrated the use mobile phones and social media platforms into its operation; a fact Mihailidis (2014) says makes these devices more central to life. The issue of veteran mistreatment incited Peter share this information via Twitter, but the target audience was not his friends:
then also, ah, I tweeted to like um my MP to sort of, I think it’s like an accessible way to get in contact with them. So, I just, I don’t know why…whether…he never replied, but…

Though members of the Canadian government did not reciprocate Peter’s effort to address a very serious issue, he remains optimistic about using cell phones because they allow people to:

Engage with the subject matter at hand, and I think like that the social media aspect of things has allowed people to engage, like as I say with on a political level you can engage with your MP just through Twitter or something like that pretty instantly, and sometimes they’ll reply, sometimes they won’t, but you can kinda know they’ll see it or someone will see it.

While effort is significant here once again, what is also important is that social media seem to have been elevated to a level of political utility and, potentially, a means of restoring direct participation in political affairs. Moreover, Mike suggests that although people used to mock the idea of social media as a way of engaging in political spheres, it seems quite plausible today:

[In] 2006 someone was like, oh ya, in a few years Harper will be tweeting things, you’d be like, whatever, like that’s funny, like that’s cute. Like 2006…I followed Layton and McNadia, and Harper and like they posted one or two things every campaign…and someone was like ‘oh no, they’ll keep using it’, I would have been like ‘ok, whatever, sure’. And now look, they actually do still actively use it, whether it is them saying things, well potentially Layton, the late Layton, but…

His confidence in certain political representatives notwithstanding, Mike feels he has watched, in the relatively short timeframe of eight years, social media develop into a worthwhile means of communicating with political representatives. This suggests that while modern politics are using or reaching out through mobile devices and social media, in truth only social institutions such as the Canadian Cancer Society, and not Canada’s political institutions, appear to have abandoned the one-way, broadcast nature of their dealings with the public.
The students acknowledge that the political sphere discusses plenty of issues, but they also see this as part of the problem. According to Robert, “it’s a lot of ‘talk’…actual parliament, politics of state…it’s a lot of like back and forth between people”. The insinuation here is that while plenty is being said in government, little is being dealt with; instead issues remain locked in a state of perpetual arbitration. Perhaps this is why Mike remarks, “it’s unfortunate but no one’s gonna sit down and watch question period, like I don’t even watch Question Period, it is rough, it’s boring”. Unlike the state of inaction that the students see in the political sphere, they often take steps to directly involve themselves with civic matters. Robert notes:

I am a coach with my back home Toronto community soccer team, and the use of like emails and stuff, like offline messaging, for like connecting of people and keeping up with kids, their development, is like…a lot of parents stay in touch with me about the kids development and stuff like that…so they’ll have a clinic once a week for like three teams, cause they don’t have enough coaches, and so like I’ll…send them stuff that I would recommend for them to do, so then I keep up to date with other coaches.

Barry had noted above that mobile phones have little practical value in terms of public support and awareness. This example certainly indicates that, for some issues at least, direct involvement is not only available but also successful. Nancy also takes direct action to circumvent the lack of involvement of the political world in the mistreatment of animals. Though not gathered on her phone, it is an example of social media channels having a direct impact on student politics:

PETA has a whole list of products that test on animals. Stopped using all of them. Most of them, 75%. The other ones are kind of hard to avoid, because they are everywhere…it’s like certain types of makeup, it’s like I’m not gonna go buy a 60$ mascara, I can’t afford that, I’m a student, I’m sorry, I have to use this one that’s been tested on animals because it’s like 6 dollars [laughs], but I would change that if I could, it’s just out of personal circumstance I cant.

Nancy renegotiates her politics based on new information, but she must sacrifice her beliefs due to personal desires and the general circumstance of being a student. In effect, this consideration
shows how Nancy has placed herself in “a field of action, so as to transform, correct, and purify oneself” (Foucault 1986:42), as she notes she would ‘change’ this if she could while speaking.

Mike and Peter, who generally support politics (though they often remark otherwise), also see administrative shortcomings. Mike maintains that politics is “everybody’s problem” and therefore everyone should be involved, but he senses that there is a big problem when it comes to politics and the time that one needs to invest in order to discern what is going on:

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\text{[M]ost of our general public…are terribly misinformed by the media, in terms of like an accurate representation of what’s happening. So, politics, is important to me…but not everyone has time to do it, and deal with it, and look and learn about the intrinsic details of how the Canadian government functions and how much we are actually sitting on the cusp of a dictatorship.}
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Mike’s claim that Canada is facing tyrannical rule is interesting because while he believes in the democratic process, he feels that a small, elite minority are controlling political processes. He has linked the information churned out by journalists (as he noted above) with entering into political discourse, mirroring Postman’s (1992) claim that information flows have become so extensive they are unworkable in daily life. Moreover, he implies that those not immersed in political life would find it impossible to get involved nowadays due to the complexity of modern politics.

Contrary to Mike’s less than optimistic sentiments on other people’s willingness or ability to dedicate time toward comprehending Canadian politics, student newsgathering habits indicate that they are in fact investing time in being aware of social issues as well as a desire to take action however they can. For example, after becoming aware of Monsanto and how it is affecting the agricultural business (see 6.2.3), Phillip decided this issue required more of his time and he “ended up watching Food Inc., which is a really good documentary on that”. Though he did not go into detail, the film touches on array of social, political, economic, and environmental impacts created by this corporation. Because this is “morally wrong”, he concludes:
You’re really kind of shocked, and you have a new choice, do I want to consume that product, or if it matters, but... chances are, everyone else is buying that. And just because you buy this product, or that product, they are probably owned by the same company anyways.

While Phillip is uncertain that his actions as a consumer will have any impact on a socio-political level, it nevertheless exemplifies how his regular newsgathering habits involve devoting time to grasping complicated politico-economic conditions that have adverse effects on the world, which have implications for how he will interact with this company in the future. In fact, all of the students’ newsgathering practices suggest that they often dedicate time to understanding the wider effects of specific issues. For example, Robert indicates how everyday citizens can invest their efforts to help transform local and international politics:

Look at the Arab Spring, that’s connectivity, that’s people, the organization of people... Like e-mail and these things, and I think that if you want to create change, like, you can, you’re not held back by like organization, can’t get ahold of people, blah, blah, blah, so I think the Arab Spring is a good example... a lot of it happened through social media, I’m pretty sure that they, they connected and rose up, um, and the young people, the young people who were using those social networks originally were the ones who made it possible, you know what I mean, for everyone else to come together.

If even a small portion of a population (youth) invests time to raise awareness and make an appeal for change, they can motivate others as well. In other words, this is an indication of how Street says technology, in this case the mobile phones, has fundamentally altered their access to workable knowledge of politics (1992:165-0165). Furthermore, this is an example of how everyday citizens can bypass traditional politics by investing in social networks to create new social conditions outside of “legal frameworks that protect and nurture” (Held 2006:274).

If the student manages to find the time and effort, sorts through all of the conflicting arguments, makes a connection with someone in office, and moves the dialogue beyond words, the students often insinuate that while there are a number political parties and representatives, the
difference in their perspectives is negligible or trivial. A fact identified by Phillip, who is seen looking outside of his situation to best explain his grievances:

I mean, in Canada we are fairly privileged because we don’t see the implications of politics as much, but you know, in Syria, in Ukraine, you know, one law is the difference between your family being slaughtered and your land being taken away from you. Whereas here it’s like, well oh you know, ok ill vote, and we’ll [get] a Starbucks close to the hipster village in Toronto or something. Like that’s our politics, right, it’s so trivial compared to, you know, the others stuff…

An opinion that Robert and his sister clearly share:

[S]he always jokes around about ‘oh Canadians, it’s a joke, the spectrums, the parties are not far enough apart’. There’s not that much reason to care because there is not that much difference…I just don’t think…there’s not enough like differences in ideology for people to take sides and then have conflict.

While technically robust, Canadian politics is seen as flat and boring to the students, doing little to “grab the attention” of contemporary students; as Adrienne and Jean said in the first section.

The political discussion appears to hold little meaning for the students because all of the end results are imagined as less than effectual. Though politics appear trivial, the students have demonstrated that all events, regardless of their absence from traditional discourse, appear to have great importance in the lives of the students because they realize each decision they make can affect people everywhere. For Jean, the trivial matter of what condiment to use on one’s meals had a dramatic impact on her after she discovered information on how its manufacturing process was causing problems for local populations:

I saw it on Facebook and there was some scandal with Sriracha and I love Sriracha so I want to see what’s going on and read about it, and apparently …there factories are affecting all the people around it…if it was like the production process or the chemicals or the um just the hot sauce that is being made, how they wouldn’t even filter that, but anyway because it’s like affecting a lot of people, in the surrounding villages or towns whatever, and I stopped buying it.
This is certainly not a matter of concern for the Canadian government, though the California city council had initially filed a lawsuit (Carroll 2014), but in Jean’s case this issue is worth learning about and acting upon. Likewise, Mike recalls a social media outreach attempt by the local mayor that resulted in an unexpected debate:

[He] decided to say…something along the lines that ‘if more women were politically involved, the world would be a better place’. But he came off as sounding like ‘oh, women want to get involved because they’re women’, like he came off as very sexist, but from where I was standing I read it and was like that’s a terrible thing to say, you shouldn’t say it, I understand what he was saying though, he was trying to say the youth need to be more involved in politics...

In this case, a simple misunderstanding of words turned into an ill-tempered debate on feminism, masculinity, and political representation. These are not trivial matters, but this is illustrative of how mobile phone use and social media may encourage the formation of new political principles to emerge as people “are themselves shaped by it. It is not merely that technology enables us to do more things faster and cheaper, who we are and what we want also changes. We are different people because of our technology” (Street 1992:182).

Overall, students are challenging the issues affecting the efficacy of modern politics as they strive to reach a point wherein their habits and practices of mobile phone use on social media platforms can overcome the inadequacies of traditional policymaking. Mike makes an interesting point in this regard:

I think with the news on social media it’s almost like a flip, like people were imposing the social media on each other first, and then up-sprang news from within, and then that just kinda circulates, and everyone was like ‘oh we should do this’, and so the news was merged in with, with social media, and then now you see politics merging with social media.

This indicates that mobile phones are allowing students to engage in life-style politics and also that it is likely in a state of growth and development as they continue to be influenced by large
and diverse information flows. This also suggests that little tension exists between developing an independent versus state-dependent identity, since mobile phones and student networks seem to be replacing the role of the state. This means that students are seen taking civic and political matters into their own hands through these platforms, while working toward “intensifying regional and global relations, with marked overlapping 'communities of fate' …require[ing] entrenchment in regional and global networks as well as in national and local polities” (Held 2006:308). What is more, since there is no downtime, as the newsgathering section illustrated, the intensification of these bonds is a regular commitment. Finally, students appear to base their politics on news consumption habits, which then “inform[s] specific kinds of belonging to the social groupings of class, gender, race and age…[that] are being reworked in the diverse processes of making or assembling the self” (Lury 2011:215).

6.5 Summary

At the onset of the interviews, the students collectively outlined what they saw as the general conditions and key features of contemporary politics. The students position traditional politics as something they cannot be involved in, while important and impactful decision-making occurs at the level elite interest groups. While the students’ statements support the pluralistic comparison, deliberative democracy also has a significant presence. Moreover, while the link between the people and their representatives is viewed as mere political posturing, deliberative politics is a core principle of student dialogue. In addition, the students are not just following the ideal of deliberative democracy; they are seen searching for, as Cohen (2002) says, a practical awareness that is connected to their sense of the common good. While the students are harsh critics of the political system and often bear issues internally, they nevertheless engage with these
issues in online public fora in an attempt to generate group analysis and crowd created policy proposals.

Changes in the journalistic profession have influenced how the students interact with information related civic and political affairs. These changes include a widening of the definition of news, a growing disaffection for the role of traditional reporters and their ability to tell the whole story, and a dramatic change in the habits and practices of newsgathering in relation to the students’ daily activities. Mobile newsgathering and social media platforms play significant roles in shaping the students’ relations of self, other, and society based on the daily exchange of information and dialogue. In these spheres, groups and individuals carefully monitor, correct, and regulate information flows while also taking part in lively and diverse deliberations that have helped to create networks of informed citizens essential to social decision-making (Putnam 2001, Held 2006). Furthermore, the principal goal of participating in these spaces is not to control or protest the actions of others, which they also do, rather they are more concerned with shaping their own life, negotiating self-identity, and making meaningful connections throughout routine communications. In all, the students tend to be working simultaneously on overseeing civic and political affairs, both local and distant, while also assembling self-images through their habits and practices of mobile newsgathering.
Chapter 7

Conclusion

The prudence attached to mobile phone selection and its incorporation into daily practices helps to create a meaningful existence for students. The students demonstrate that while their use of mobile phones is by no means static, it does have specific contexts. To be sure, contemporary students use mobile phones to create, at various times and to varying degrees, practicable public spheres utilizing the near-synchronous speed of contact among close friends (Palackal et al. 2011) and the public (Gordon 2007). Simultaneously, the students continue to expand dialogue among like-minded groups (Campbell and Kwak 2012), including those with dissimilar interests. In the context of the modern university, however, the students reasoning behind acquiring and using mobile phones in daily life has its own uniquely social explanation.

Interviews with students have reinforced the notion that the process of mobile phone selection has little to do with advertising or the latest technical features of these devices. Instead, the students have shown that they base their choice of mobile device on its ability to co-create “meaningful and legitimate social activity” (Sassatelli 2007:134; original italics). The students exhibit a general awareness of the many types of mobile phones, the slew of technical features each device has, the overwhelming presence of advertising, and variations in the cost of each device. However, this should not be confused with being an indication of the presence of “marketization,” which holds that human relations are now “mediated by markets in more and more arenas of social life” (Lury 2011:166), since the students’ experiences point to a more critical rationality. The students have illustrated that while technical and economic factors are present, they are of little importance. What is more important, as Rogers (2003) suggests, are their situated assessments of whether or not a device has operated as intended and fit their
expectations. Here, I am not referring to devices functionally, though this is a general expectation that students hold, but rather its ability to match the “rhythms of people’s everyday lives” (Castells 2010:358).

Within the rhythms of the students’ lives, mobile phones are not only the centerpiece of daily exchanges but they also help create meaningful environments. Throughout this study, the students frequently demonstrated that their use of mobile phones went beyond the general use of the device, as suggested by technical experts and social critics. Even with this relatively small group, their life experiences indicate that mobile phones fill a variety of roles throughout the course of a day. The first thing some students reach for in the morning is their mobile phone and doing so allows them to begin formulating the day’s routine. Throughout the day students regularly defer to their devices for scheduling (both personal and professional), information exchanges, regulating their diets, getting directions, connecting to social words, and a host of other practices. At the end of the day, they use their phones to review all of the information they have gathered and begin to incorporate it into the following day’s routine. In other words, the intimate bonds the students have formed with their mobile phones effectively demonstrates that these devices, as a piece of technology, assuredly “belong to the realm of meaning as much as anything else we can name” (Feenberg 2001:xi).

In addition, the materiality of mobile phones begins to fade as the students begin to inscribe emotional and aesthetic self-images into their selection and use of these devices. With great consistency, the students fuse mobile phone use with their current actions and future goals. Because of this, the students tend to carefully monitor their use of these devices throughout a range of social expectations: appropriate usage times, social and or occupational requirements, and by what means to communicate with certain individuals (i.e. texting or calling), to name a
few. While this might make mobile phone selection appear to be a very social exercise, it is actually an internalized practice that represents a way for students to weigh who they are as individuals and, based on which device they choose, enables them to transform themselves and how their lives will develop. In this way, the selection of a mobile phone is folded into what Foucault calls “the art of existence…dominated by the principle that says one must ‘take care of oneself’” (1986:43). Mobile phones certainly allow students to take part in social worlds, but each time a new device must be selected, the students carefully reflect on their past and current uses in order to meet their perceptions of how to use it to care for themselves in relation to others.

Since the students demonstrated diverse and emotional ties to issues in contemporary society, it would be unfair to say that they are socially and politically withdrawn. Instead, it is clear that the contemporary political arrangement is not meeting the students’ expectations in terms of its efficacy or their involvement in its affairs. Though each student exhibits minor variations in what model of government contemporary society has, the consensus is that it should be one that is both collectively established and regulated. The central ethic of rationalization for this system is to establish a common good, not in terms of democratic deliberation (c.f. Rawls 1972), but the more practical notion that Cohen (2002) suggests will ensure its achievement. For the students, social media spheres represent their chance to be socially or politically active and it is within these spaces that they work, in diverse collectives, to hold meaningful deliberations and become involved with contemporary issues.

On a daily basis, students are actively involved with a number of societal issues because of the many changes that have occurred in professional journalism. Since the students’ habits and practices of newsgathering involve their moralities, they are critically evaluating any incoming messages and carefully monitoring their outgoing communications. In this way, newsgathering
has become more than a means of informing society; it aids in steering the direction of society as many have noted (Curran 2011, Couldry et al. 2007, Street 2001, Schudson 2011). The students’ sense of news, then, is geared toward creating a democratic revival hinted at by others (Dimmick et al. 2010, Kotilainen and Rantala 2009, Loader and Mercea 2011). Moreover, students use their phones to access the latest information sources in order to be able to “talk” with friends or “reach out” to members of parliament, which supports the idea that the Internet and mobile devices can have a positive effect on civic and political participation among youth (Hujanen and Pietikäinen 2004, Kavanaugh et al. 2008).

However, while students are actively engaged in civic and political issues through social media platforms, the contemporary political arrangement still presents problems for this group. Though the statistics on low voter turnout have caused some to cast doubt on the future of democracy in Canada, effectively placing the burden on students and youth in general, as some have decided to do (Barnes and Virgint 2013), such perceptions are misplaced. As Mihailidis (2014) has also documented, students use social media spheres to inform themselves and communicate with others and place the blame for low levels of impact on the institutional dismissal of the increased integration of social media and collectively initiated problem solving and policymaking. Based on the evidence provided, we can now attend to the questions posed by Street (1992) in Chapter 3 (c.f. 3.3).

Technology can shape the kind of political arrangement we have. In this case, mobile phones and social media are driving a wedge between the politics of the state and the lifestyle-politics of the students because the governing bodies have failed to incorporate these technologies into both deliberation and decision-making: superficiality is insufficient. The current political arrangement continues to operate on traditional practices while the students use mobile devices to
advance lifestyle-politics in socio-technical networks built around shared concerns, constitute themselves as publics, and change unwanted circumstances.

The students’ use these technologies to monitor and challenge corrupt or unreasonable social and political conduct but they are also doing the same with themselves and the general population as well. However, they are not doing this for the purpose of punishment or exclusion but, as many suggest (Morris et al. 2003, Silverstone 2000, Lury 2011, Benkler 2006, Bengtsson 2012, Papacharissi 2010), to raise awareness and to live morally in spaces that are mutually established in accordance with the ever-changing lifestyles of contemporary individuals. In this case, the students’ habits and practices indicate the formation of what Foucault calls ethical subjects able to monitor, test, improve, and transform their thoughts and actions (1990b:28). However, once final distinction remains.

I am not suggesting that students, by employing the “care of the self”, are transforming themselves into ethical subjects in service to or subject to the authority of the state (Foucault 2005:174-176). Instead I mean to say, as Foucault states, “that power relations, governmentality, the government of the self and of others, and the relationship of self to self constitute a chain, a thread, and I think it is around these notions that we should be able to connect together the question of politics and the question of ethics” (Foucault 2005:252). In short, the students have declared that the existing government is unable to adjust to and defend their ethical subjectivities. Moreover, feeling as though they are not being taken seriously, the students have turned to mobile phones and social media platforms to found a new chain of politics and ethics based on the relationships to self and others which they negotiate through the unbroken information exchanges in daily life.
The limitations of this study are largely related to the initial theoretical framework, which a review of the interviews helped to identify and redesign. More specifically, the framework was built around notions of choice, ethics, and identity, but the data gained by the interviews forced a slight alteration. Even though a number of questions that were on the interview schedule were well suited for analyzing the students’ political value systems and their self-images, the concept of identity was still too broad. In addition, there were perhaps too many questions since the majority of the recognizable patterns tended to fall within a specific set of inquiries. More concrete evidence may have been gained with more focused questions, but the questions asked were still quite useful as supportive material. In all, the interviews have shown the existence of certain modes of being, and with this baseline established, more direct questions on the lifestyle politics of students – how exactly institutional change should occur, what political roles they might take on, or how reporters can act more like diplomats than entertainers (which they have also hinted at) – can be asked in future studies.
Bibliography


