Understanding the New Digital Masses

Mass Subjectivity Under Siege

by

Raymond L. M. Lee

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Acknowledgments

Older researchers and writers will always wonder if they still have to run the gauntlet in an even more competitive world of publishing today. Would they still be deterred by the relentless scrutiny of overzealous gatekeepers or the habitual hostility of unsympathetic reviewers? But these deterrents are only illusory when we discover new people who don't always tightly padlock their gates or consider other viewpoints as irrelevant. For this experiencing this fresh openness, I would like to thank Christian Borch, Simon Dawes and David Arditi for their generous reception of my work on digital masses. Also, my thanks to Sarah Palmer, Ben Williams, Klaus Meyer and the EIP editorial team for giving me the bullet-train experience in publishing: smooth, comfortable, and always arriving ahead of time.

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Chapter 1
Introduction

In today's world, digital society is by definition mass society as all objects are reducible to binary data forming the basis of any type of aggregation for organizing social actions, attitudes and behaviors. People anywhere can be convened, corralled, or herded online through their electronic connectors like smartphones, tablets and laptops to become collective participants or merely data-points in digital space, much like confetti floating in mid-air and ultimately piling scattered on the ground. Most end-users are generally unaware of their confetti-like position in digital space, thinking only that they are participating autonomously as individuals with the option to switch off or remain online as they wish. But once online, they automatically become the invisible particles of signal transmission that are continuously rearranged in and for collective engagement. There is no actual freedom to opt out since users voluntarily enter a shared universe of speech and action. It is a universe of mass subjectivity that flattens all participants into a signalled field of cacophonies, texts, imageries, games, adverts, and finances that never stops circulating like pin balls hitting and bouncing off targets only to restart automatically. As such, mass subjectivity in digitalized environments is open ground for affective changes, mood manipulation, selective influencing, attitude and behavioral control, and not least of all, the continual marketing of new merchandise that makes upgrading intrinsic to all aspects of contemporary consumption. No one wants to be left behind in the digital rush to hit technological pay dirt. It is the rush of the technologically famished, the consumers

whose only concern is not being deprived of the sharing ecstasies enabled by a mass subjectivity steeped in machinic connectivity.

The consequences for individual consciousness and freedom are massive. Since the modern era, there has been a tendency for most people to believe in their own individuality. We all seem to have full trust in our own selves as cognitively and rationally intact individuals who can make independent decisions and judgments. Yet when placed in a collectivity or a gathering, the participants may lose their sense of single-mindedness and be seen as simply following the herd or be considered copycats without any autonomy of thought. In digitalized milieus, this kind of mass behavior is often referred to as an effect of virality – a term of power related to the speed and spread of various ideas, beliefs and conduct in vast populations seen to be acting, thinking and responding uniformly.[1] It is as if going online is hardly different from making one's way into an open field of viral infection and being constantly exposed to microscopic influences from unseen and unfelt sources. How and why is this happening? Digitalization has created the appropriate circumstances for participants to be intricately connected by electronic means and effectively influenced by signalled transmissions in an unprecedented manner which facilitates the emergence of a mass subjectivity readily swayed by unseen contagions. Like the virus which circulates and invades by physical contagion, digital connections are also the conduits for another type of contagion by speech, text and imagery. The difference lies in the absence of face-to-face contact.

In pre-digital times, people generally reached out to one another by meeting up personally. We could alternatively contact friends, colleagues, relatives and others by landline phone, telegraph and

postal mail, but personal ties as determined by physical presence was still preferable as a means of knowing that one was always available through sight, smell and touch. Nowadays, being there in person at a particular time and place is no longer a requirement for maintaining social relationships. Time and space have been compressed by electronic media. There is no longer any urgency to be specifically and viscerally present. For instance, we teleconference instead of showing up at an official meeting or we pay bills online rather than over the counter or shop by mobile phone and skip out on travelling to the store and supermarket. We can even hail a taxi on a mobile phone instead of standing on a street and waving down the driver. Things seem to have become more convenient by computerized communication because digitality makes possible contact without proximity. There is no more sense of place as Joshua Meyrowitz anticipated forty years ago.[2] We have now fully transitioned into a compressed social existence where omnipresence and instantaneous connectivity are the norm, rather than something unusual, like in a sci-fi fantasy where people can materialize and de-materialize at will.

But how do we account for mass gatherings where people do not need to meet up at a specific location in order to see and feel each other's presence, and yet are able to think, feel and act unanimously? This is a question of mass subjectivity in an era of remote connectivity that opens up a new field of inquiry on the way people relate to one another in digital space and create communities, movements and compacts online. By using one's mobile phone, laptop, desktop, tablet or any electronic device, a user can easily connect with others in computerized networks and become a member of various virtual groups. In other words, the user can flit anonymously between these groups without ever

showing up personally. However, it does not mean that virtual presence has reduced or even eliminated the need for physical contact in large gatherings. Crowds, mobs and social movements are still regarded as the bane of government authorities because their physical presence involving the convergence of multitudes often results in riots, looting and violence. These convergences may build up virtually as participants contact one another on their phones and computers, and eventually lead up to public gatherings where they become a formidable challenge to public authorities. Nowadays, the difference is in the speed of mass formation aided by virtual contact through computerized networks. The study by Manuel Castells of such mass formation via these networks during the Arab Spring of 2011 demonstrates the radical changes in the organization of social movements.[3] Organizers and participants connect electronically on these networks to launch protest actions. Without the deprivation of mobile media, thousands of participants can easily and quickly gather in public spaces to form protest movements and storm public buildings like what happened at the Capitol in Washington D.C. in 2021 when people rioted against the outcome of the 2020 U.S. elections.[4] We now live in a new age of electronic masses that organize by mobile phone and assault by physical presence.

The purpose of this book is to examine the meanings of these changes in mass formation and their consequences for individual involvement in contexts of constant touch. We want to know what the implications are of becoming members or participants in very large groups or mass formations simply by using a mobile device or computer. What are the meanings for mass subjectivity as people communicate and respond very rapidly via their computers and mobile devices? How does mass subjectivity impact on their

everyday lives? Can being connected to virtual masses render participants more vulnerable to a host of hidden influences? What type of world do we now live in where massification by mobile media may be a stronger determinant of social thought and action than the emphasis on individualistic cognition and conduct? These questions raise the plausibility of a *Stepford* world perpetually exposed to unseen signalled control from media and state agencies.[5] People might think they are cogitating and acting individualistically without fully realizing that a *Stepford* world has possibly been set in place and progammed digitally to reduce nearly all thoughts and actions to the signalled flows of mass subjectivity in computerized networks cutting across all boundaries. No matter where you are, whether in London or Lod, New York or New Caledonia, Singapore or Siena, Tokyo or Toledo, you can instantly become a *Stepford* person simply by swiping your mobile phone or clicking on your cursor/mouse. This is the power of virality, the transference of one's individuality to the trans-individual setup of the Internet where diversity becomes a monolithic jumble of binary codes and signals to be tapped, reproduced and re-utilized for various purposes. By this power, we become archipelagos of thought and action intertwining with each other through the data flows that cut across individual participation on the Internet.

The Internet is our new parallel world subsisting alongside the physical reality of visceral actions and face-to-face interactions. Yet, it is also an autonomous world of unparalleled innovations, movements and breathtaking changes. In this world, mass signals are an unseen force reshaping individual desires, perceptions, attitudes, and conduct. The option to elide or avoid mass signals is becoming more remote as this world relentlessly impinges on

almost everyone's life any time and any day. Millions of mobile phone users live their lives interchangeably with these signals as their umbilical cords to virtual existences. We now soar and suffer under the shadow of the Internet; a vast matrix of signals transmitted between computers mostly under the control of big corporations and governments. This is not just control to make life more liveable but to make *dividuals*, or fractalized individuals, templates of new synthetic realities to replace the analogue realities of the pre-digital era. To understand how this control is unfolding requires a new approach to mass society, one that draws on recent works focusing on online masses, signal transmissions, digital capitalism, data capture and control, and the consumption of contagions. Together, these works depict the power of the Internet as not only creating a new condition for the transmission of affect, emotions, and feelings but also a new form of domination via the production of data mass as the basis for advanced governance of mass populations and constructing synthetic realities.

Chapter 2 examines this new condition by asking what exactly are digital masses? How can these masses be found online and identified as impacting our personal thoughts and actions? Do such masses have more power than those in the pre-digital era whose presence was largely physical? Can we say the old, real-time masses are no longer relevant? These questions point to the fact that masses are no longer confined to the physical realm because with the rise of digital media, mass convergences can also be considered occasions for transforming collective actions into binary codes for future feedback with new consequences for real-time social behavior. But first, we want to know where digital masses are located. If physical environments are no longer a prime determinant of large gatherings and mass convergences, it implies

that digital space has now become the mainstay for anyone wanting to join a large group or be involved in large-scale activities like crowdfunding or political campaigning. These activities usually involve networking as the principal means of contacting and staying in touch with significant others. Are digital masses similar to networks? In order to clarify the whereabouts of contacts and the effectiveness in reaching them, masses would need to be compared with networks to demonstrate levels of interchangeability. It means that masses may not necessarily be amorphous or chaotic by definition but can be conceptualized as forms of volatile organization in which networks feature as bonding action among segments or parts of the whole. To look into networking as a form of organized mass connectivity is also a way of addressing the emergence of swarming on the Internet where any individual facing a screen can be directed without any obvious coercion into acting and thinking uniformly as if he or she were part of a herd or horde. As an aspect of mass convergence, swarming can be considered a type of leaderless formation in which remote participation does not jeopardize unified action to achieve particular goals.

To posit that such formation is workable, the argument is made in Chapter 3 that online mass convergences are enabled by the continuous emission and exchange of electronic signals. Internet users create and follow signals transmuted from keyboard strokes and touchscreen swipes into the texts and imageries circulating in digital space. These signals form a new mode of capitalist domination and exploitation, succeeding the sign-driven markets of the preceding postmodern era. The sign itself may be considered a type of signal but in postmodernity it was depicted by Jean Baudrillard as a code of reproduction to demonstrate the power of

repetition generated in a regime of simulacra that tended to produce passive consumption. With the onset of digital technology, this regime can consolidate its control and shape consumption through the emission of carefully regulated signals that many users presume to be an open field of connectivity. Instead, this is a field of social, economic and political cultivation made to look like a techno-utopia of unending innovations and free communication. The millions of users drawn into this field are not only imagining their ultimate transcendence of time and space but also unwittingly individualizing their own alienation by signals transmitted to create an illusory sense of virtual community. In this community, alienation occurs by default when users are sitting alone facing a screen and corresponding only through signal-induced thoughts and actions. This action may generate a sense of comradeship from a distance but in the long run it only produces a state of being alone together, an island in a sea of personalized mirages.

By being a lone recipient of signals, the user becomes susceptible to the multiple flows of affect surging through digital networks that can unsuspectingly bend individual thought and action. Chapter 4 probes these affective environments as a force field reshaping individuality through the unseen powers of emotion, feeling and mood that may surface as behavioral trends, fads and alignments embracing the attention of users as they go about their daily lives entangled in a daze of distant signals. Even though they are cocooned within their own private space surrounded by screens of their choice, their online habits make them perfect candidates for constant exposure to the atmospherics induced by digital transmissions. However, they are never fully conscious of the subtle difference made to thought and conduct in digitalized

surroundings because of the priority given to all visible networking opportunities. Each mouse click or phone swipe is intended as connective action and not as an analytical probe into online affectivity. This lack of consciousness is contributing to another aspect of individualization that highlights imitation and mimicry as driving forces of innovation, production and consumption. Thus, individualization in the digital era is not really about increased self-freedom but its perpetual realignment in the context of affective flows throughout the digital universe. It is in this context that contagions can be rapidly and surreptitiously generated to spread through the masses locked into myriad entanglements from which they are enticed to remain or unable to break away. Entanglements are the essence of a sharing culture that renders all ideas, thoughts, observations, and behaviors to be publicly circulated and consumed, and in the process become fodder for agencies of control harvesting and quantifying it as data mass for prediction, predominance and profit. Mass contagion is the means by which entanglements are turned into conduits for re-individualized alignments to affect and its influence on communication, consumption and collective action. Over time, it becomes the singularly most powerful technique of mass persuasion and manipulation.

If mass contagion is the engine of affective networking in the new markets of high-tech communication, we need to know how these sources operate as the basis of profit generation in digital capitalism. Chapter 5 focuses on this capitalism as catapulting the drive for surplus in high-tech environments where users and consumers circulate and imbibe the very data tapped and processed through feedback loops by operators of a viral economy. In this economy, contagions diffuse across networks silently and

surreptitiously as objects of consumption to be routinized in the same way smartphone users receive their daily dose of repetitious calls, messages, videos, news feeds, and radio-frequency radiation. Digital capitalism fosters consumption by affective habit because it can source consumer and user data with little or no controversy and reproduce them as contagions in feedback loops to shape and reshape minds and behaviors. In this process, consumers and users are ultimately consigned to an otherness that transforms them into dividuals – individuals unpacked and remade statistically and repackaged collectively as new profiles for prediction and manipulation. Processing consumers and users as digital-dividuals suggests an emerging colonialism utilizing smart technology that captivates minds and captures data. It is a smart colonialism of the twenty-first century for extracting surplus through the non-conscious collaboration of unsuspecting users already colonized by their habitual predilection to participate in any media event or networked gathering. Their footprints in cyberspace have become the colonial trails of dividualized others.

Even as users are automatically and non-consciously colonized by their own digitalized mindset, their mass subjectivity in the digital world where they share thoughts, ideas and actions is also a collective zone of new implosions. Chapter 6 discusses these new implosions from data capture to recirculation as an algorithmic process by which mathematical engines purposively designed for reconfiguring and rearranging social and political patterns are set in place to fulfill specific agendas. Algorithms are the coded form of behavioral implosion, the means of mass control that can be launched from a distance in centers of calculation away from public gaze. These centers are the new fortresses of an emerging feudalism that traps users and consumers of online services in a

perpetual debt relationship to the powerful owners and providers of digital/media technology. Although feudalism was a system of debt peonage and bondage rampant in medieval times, it has not disappeared completely in today's high-tech world but taken on a new form as the implosive forces of digital control in mass populations firmly locked into the power structures and practices of the Internet. Somewhat like the serfs and peasants of medieval feudalism, digital users and consumers make their way through the Internet locked in debt bondage to Big Tech without realizing their participation as data-doubles or multiples. At the same time, their time on the Internet is also creating new risk conditions that are not openly confronted because the knowledge of being highly vulnerable to the forces of surveillance, addiction and electromagnetic fields is simply repressed, ignored or suspended.

In Chapter 7, the Internet is dissected as the medium of the mass age in which the whole, and not its parts, is construed as the pristine condition for experimentation and synthetic makeover. The whole constitutes the behavioral machine of the digitalized masses, the affectively driven and repetitious actions of multitudes around the world. Domination of machinic masses provides the ideal conditions for testing new tools and programs that reinforce the power of the technological and ruling elite. This is the elite that wants to see how each mouse click or phone swipe can be used in innovative ways to prepare the ground for generating more revenue and user control. At the same time, the data mass culled from clicks and swipes becomes the recycled means for synthesizing new realities to be instilled as the prevailing techno-utopia of the new mass age. Tony Sampson emphasizes that the most effective dystopias are ones that dress themselves up as utopias.[6] And the prevailing techno-utopia may be considered one

of these covers for virtually readying the dystopian future of the new mass age. Yet, we can also re-imagine the possibility of resistance unfolding against the might of this future in ways that may take us beyond rudimentary adherence to the Internet, perhaps to new spaces for reviving community without datafication and reorganizing individuality without dividualization.

Notes

[1] Tony D. Sampson (2012) *Virality: Contagion Theory in the Age of Networks*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

[2] Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) *No Sense of Place*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[3] Manuel Castells (2015) *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge: Polity.

[4] The observations by Eugene Thacker ('Networks, swarms, multitudes', *CTheory*, 2004, Articles 142a & 142b) on the protest movement against WTO in Seattle, 1999 and by Stephanie Baker ('The mediated crowd: new social media and new forms of rioting', *Sociological Research Online*, 2011, 16(4), Article 21) on the riots in London, 2011 also show the new partnership between mobile media and mass gatherings in the social movements of the digital era.

[5] The reference here is to the 1975 movie, *The Stepford Wives* (Columbia Pics., dir. Bryan Forbes) that features the theme of perfected uniformity through a built-in control of mass behavior. In this movie, a woman and her family arrive in the town of Stepford to discover the women residents to be unusually pliant, courteous, well-groomed, almost passionless, and highly attuned to set routines. She later discovers these women are robotic simulations of the original wives who had been disposed of by their doubles under the control of a group of men that includes her husband. The film was interpreted as a satire on 1970s feminism but in today's digital world, it could be regarded as a diatribe

against the work of high-tech corporations and agencies in transforming people into sleepwalking technophiles and phone zombies: also known as 'smombie', a pairing of smartphone and zombie (Nicole Aschoff, 2020, *The Smartphone Society*. Boston: Beacon Press, p.9) who are only beholden to the screens of their choice.

[6] Rizosfera (2017) 'Digital neuroland: an interview with Tony D. Sampson', *Rhizonomics RNZ002*, p.26. <http://obsoletecapitalism.blogspot.it>

Chapter 2
Do Digital Masses Really Exist?

Not too long ago, I was riding a subway train minding my own business and observing my fellow passengers busying themselves with their mobile phones. At one of the stations, a group of saleswomen from a mobile phone company boarded the train to sell prepaid phone subscriptions. One of them came up to me and inquired whether I was interested in buying the special package. I told her I could not accept the offer since I did not own a phone. Flummoxed, she asked me how I could live without a phone. Pointing to the commuters, I said they all seemed to be enslaved by their phones but without one I was a free man. Stunned by my retort, she hurried away to accost another commuter. At that moment I realized that even as a free man, the physical space I was standing in was also digital because it catered to the masses of phone users on the train and the saleswomen who probably imagined the physical was also digital. What this experience implies is that the distinction most of us tend to make between physicality and digitality does not really apply. The real-time moments of the physical environment can also be thought of as the compressed virtual moments of digital space, not something abstract existing in another dimension but right here in the present moment as a visceral connection that brings people together. I was reminded particularly of the shopping mall scene in which a mother and her daughter walking down different aisles looking avidly at the shelves were also talking incessantly to one another on their mobile phones. At what point in this scene is the physical different from the digital? The two seemed interchangeable,

blending to make shopping both a physical and digital experience. Given this realization, how can one conjecture about the location of digital masses? Can we consider them as occurring simultaneously in physical and digital space, or can we also say they are co-eval in an age of technological domination?

The Masses Online

The idea of mass society goes back to the classical problem concerning the autonomy of the individual in circumstances framed by the presence of large groups and collectivities. This was also a problem of mass conformity: uniformity across diversity. Rising populations around the world may have contributed to the notion of increasingly large collectivities or masses putting pressure on individual thoughts and actions. In a well-known work, *The Lonely Crowd* by David Riesman and his colleagues, they sought to emphasize this idea of mass pressure by developing a concept of the other-directed person, someone "whose conformity is ensured by the tendency to be sensitized to the expectations and preferences of others."[1] Conformity as a central feature of mass society made it look like there was little or no room for independent or creative thoughts and activities. It also appeared to reflect the nature of the modern person as "an echo of truly ancient themes, such as those plebeian attributes of traditionlessness, lack of moral self-discipline, and immediate and uninhibited responsiveness to certain stimuli, especially those elicited by demagogues."[2] Modernity merely provided new circumstances for hoary reactions to power and authority. Masses were like the hoi polloi kneaded like dough to be baked evenly.

Thus, mass pressure toward conformity was seen to open the way to approaching the question of mass politics in modernity as an emerging theater of behavioral extremism where eruptions of violence could be easily incorporated into political forms and manipulated by members of the elite. It was an approach focusing on power elites that possessed the wherewithal to control the behavior of masses, as in the words of William Kornhauser, "mass behavior is inhibited neither from above nor from below because mass society possesses both accessible elites and available non-elites."[3] In short, there is no lack of opportunity in mass society for the political manipulation of masses. This view also formed the response of Hannah Arendt to the origins of totalitarianism. More specifically, she considered masses as people "not held together by a consciousness of common interest and ... cannot be integrated into any organization based on common interest ... [and] who never join a party and hardly go to the polls."[4] Masses were, therefore, political fodder for elites intent on turning them into vanguards of a totalitarian upsurge. But for Alan Swingewood, mass politics was not simply a case of totalitarian control because masses in modern capitalism were not deprived of choices and could redirect their ideological attention elsewhere.[5] Whereas totalitarianism implied top-down total control, mass politics suggested a more levelled but differentiated field of ideological domination.

Despite these varying views of mass conformity and control, political behavior and action were still believed to be firmly rooted in physical settings where people could gather and act, and at the same time be subjected to mass pressure. They could not respond or relate to one another otherwise. The physical provided the overall structure of interaction, mostly involving face-to-face

contact like politicians making public appearances to woo and appeal to the masses. If they were considered charismatic, it was because their real-time presence came to be considered magnetizing, dynamic, and definitely not soporific. But things have changed overnight. In today's world, politicians and individuals with public clout need not make real-time appearances all the time because they can always go online using their Internet webpages and platform-based connections to communicate with their followings and millions around the world. Just witness celebrities, influencers, and even parvenus creating waves and waves of enthusiasm in digital space, perhaps even outshining those who only rely on physical outreach and contact. They are the pied pipers of cyberspace, drawing in crowds with their digitalized demeanor and diatribes.

The online world has no precedent in the immediate past. It is primarily driven by an absent form of presence and does not rely on the real-time interactive mode as in the previous analogue era where presence related to a person being there on the spot, experiencing with others the action taking place at that particular moment. There was a very strong visceral dimension in that era that made face-to-face relations an urgent and expected requirement of many forms of social activity. Take, for instance, the old form of university lecture attendance. Students were required to be present in an auditorium listening to the professor drone on about something which was generally considered arid, unappealing and monotonous. If they found the lecture boring, they could not simply walk out and not be reprimanded by the professor. They had to be there face-to-face with the professor, and if they felt like drifting or dozing off they often did it with their eyes wide-opened or half shut. There was nothing like staying

away and not earning the wrath of a professor who took attendance. Fast forward to today's e-university where many lectures are conducted online. Students no longer need to occupy auditorium space to gaze at the professor and others while instructions are dutifully and ritualistically imparted. They stay put in their personal spaces with their desktops, laptops and phones as the professor speaks through the screen, live-streamed or video-recorded. The professor, on the other hand, is in his or her office staring at the webcam or other cameras and no longer needs to confront a sea of sleepy faces. No student attendance is recorded and students can fall asleep looking at the screen without any reprimand. What we witness, then, is the hyper-real relations between virtual bodies within an old mundane setting like a university lecture. So, when crowds and large gatherings appear online, how does that translate into real-time social action, or how does real-time crowd behavior captured on video come to impact viewers surfing through their screens?

Masses come alive through our imagination of size, proportion and movement. Crowds, mobs, rabbles, and various formations of great magnitude often depict the mass spectacle that attracts anyone's attention because they represent in real-time the visceral power of combined bodies or moving objects. In cinema and on television, however, we see these scenes of visceral power only as images of convergence, confusion and conquest. Just recall the cinema or TV screen crowded with horseback warriors charging their enemies or hordes of rioters or zombies roaming the streets of post-apocalyptic Manhattan and other decaying cities. Viewers are not directly a segment of the screen-time crowd but through their gazes alone they can become vicariously the new masses of the cinematic world. In other words, by sitting at home or in the

cinema they are individually the embodied extensions of the crowd-image involving virtual multitudes filmed or videoed in physical settings elsewhere at an earlier time. By the same token, we can also ask if it is appropriate to speak of the masses today without needing to presume the constant presence of embodied gatherings. Instead of looking at masses of people in amoeba-like gatherings, as visualized by the earlier writers of crowd behavior such as Gustave Le Bon,[6] we may be able to rework the idea of real-time crowding or massification into an alternative concept of mass convergence by proxy via digital media. This involves a two-step process.

In the first place, we have to assume that there is an analogy between real-time crowding and digital convergences. When people gather spontaneously or by other predetermined means in public spaces, they are seen as representing bodily convergence for accomplishing certain goals such as voicing dissent or listening to rants or just gawking at some odd event. As a publicly visible collectivity, they are treated as inherently purposive since participants show up in order to fulfill their desires, tasks and curiosities. In short, public masses are generally goal-driven. The same can be said about digital convergences because users typically go online in order to seek out others with similar outlooks, missions and predispositions, quite like flocks of birds or schools of fish from the same species converging in unison in search of food and shelter.[7] However, the difference lies in user visibility. Like the collectivized birds and fish, people in real-time crowds do not lack visibility as they can be unmistakably detected and scrutinized as coalescing bodies in contact and moving through public spaces. Computer users, on the other hand, are not readily seen in those spaces since they are sitting in a room at home

or in other places where privacy permits undisturbed interaction with a screen. What this means is that without face-to-face communication as a prerequisite for organizing any type of group action, online participants can go the full mile in non-bodily involvement that leads to a sense of being alone together.[8]

Secondly, it might seem implausible to think of people sitting alone facing their computers or any electronic device with a screen could actually add up to a mass or large collectivity simply through the uniformity of tapping, clicking, thumbing, swiping, and gazing actions. But this is exactly the basis for reimagining masses as invisible collectivities. Without the need for embodied relations, digital masses comprise a new form of gathering or convergence lacking physical co-presence but requiring signalled transmissions. It is in these transmissions that invisibility is induced by reducing physicality into a binary code form to generate massification by numerical patterns and not by perceived propinquity. Numerical patterns can be rearranged algorithmically,[9] many times removed from the original setup to produce new correlational interpretations of mass presence and behavior. Hence, invisibility has its uses not just as a technical procedure of representing people as collated numbers but also as a power tool for cloaking the machinations of engineers and entrepreneurs.

From this angle, we can say that invisibility is not a form of disappearance induced by a wave of a magical wand but a codification of the visceral into electronic pulsations mixing and travelling through cables and airwaves to reach receptors in people's pockets, bags, offices and homes. It is an invisibility of both sight and mind traversing both physical and digital dimensions to impact on individual users as if they were already

interlinked as a collectivity brought together by the same goals and visions. Take the case given earlier of my phoneless presence in a train packed with phone users. There was undoubtedly a physical mass of commuters riveted to their phones, but it was the signals emitted by the phones that became the template for networking the users into an even larger mass beyond the train, which enabled a new form of peripheral co-presence by electronic means. The idea here is to see the commuters not just as a physical mass confined to a coach but also as an online mass produced by a device of networking, although one can say that massification is not always necessarily a consequence of networking as seen in cases of people milling, massing and converging in public spaces.

At a cursory level, a network may be thought of as an intricately produced mass formation. We do not actually see or feel it; rather we imagine it through the ways we connect with various people. For instance, when we have a plumbing problem in the kitchen or bathroom, we would try to contact a nearby plumber or one who could come quickly. Given that yellow pages in phone directories are scarce or non-existent these days, we would typically go online to find a plumber but if we find this to be a hassle we might try and ask a neighbor or a friend or relative to recommend one. Once this is initiated, we have tapped into a network to locate a plumber. The neighbor might call someone who knows a plumber or suggest we find one through a hardware store that sells plumbing supplies. The hardware store owner might recommend a plumber who happened to be busy and so needed to redirect us to one of his partners or co-workers, and so on. A network appears to come into existence through practice in which an individual is compelled to act via other individuals whom he or she knows directly or indirectly. In the empirical world, a network comes into play and

evolves because most people need to keep making and finding new contacts in rapidly changing contexts that go beyond the notion of traditional bonding or belonging. Hence, networks are not simply a regular means of linking up with friends, relatives and strangers, but they are also post-traditional interdependencies involving the ramifications of weak ties,[10] the rhizomatic mode of widening relationships,[11] and the globalization of interlocking arrangements.[12] These interdependencies mean that networking is a flexible and innovative way of setting up wide-ranging connections that can provide many options and opportunities not usually encountered in traditional relationships.

In the modern world, then, the term network arose because various social and political arrangements that once relied on pre-existing channels of communication and support were now assumed to be less bound by rigmarole and have greater plasticity as networks in reworking effectively lines of contact and commerce beyond local and regional boundaries. Essentially, networks were seen as ubiquitous patterns of connectivity that could be identified through their general properties and topologies,[13] leading to a plausible representation of mapped interconnections.[14] At the same time, networks were considered dynamic in the composition of individual nodes (or specific positions) and relations between nodes (termed edges). In this consideration, networks could only be described as living since all nodes were ultimately reducible to edges.[15] These propositions on networks may make it seem like they are not very different from masses since both are concerned with participatory relationships in rapidly changing and often anonymous conditions. However, networks are generally considered more rationalized than the perceptibly chaotic masses.

Yet, the higher profile given to networks in the recent past seemed to have reduced the relevance of masses. But the spontaneity of mass convergences and gatherings in environments facilitating network activity remained unresolved. It is puzzling to see how mass movements of people can still occur without some type of network being set up among them in the first place. Could masses, then, be considered a type of network or networks a type of massification? One way to resolve this conundrum is to address networks as distributed patterns of communication linking a variety of nodes without necessarily relying on centers of coordination. Lack of such centers can lead to open boundaries between networking members who can conduct informational exchanges with outsiders and still retain their original identity in the midst of a new mass formation. An example is the case of the 1999 Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization where masses aggregated from networks of different groups linking up without any central unifying structure. What brought this mass formation together were the common goals shared by the different networks that transformed chaos into a unified agenda of struggle.[16] We can say there is a distinct possibility that masses must include networks at some level in order to bind members into a position of unity and solidarity. With this possibility, masses may no longer be considered primordial or disorganized but be presented as "a way to talk about the emergent potentials of group energy that is at the same time a theory of social mediation."[17]

If social mediation is now considered central to understanding changes that translate into alternative group formations, then we may construe networks as constituting a mediating layer of mobile and wireless devices as well as streaming video for making possible the coordination of mass movements. Networking cannot

be dismissed as alien to masses since it exemplifies the means by which information is disseminated for specific convergences. In that sense, recent research on mobile media can be taken to demonstrate the connection between networks and emergent forms of collective action in digitalized environments.[18] So when we theorize masses as going online, we are advocating a mode of discourse on the power of mobile media to attract and consolidate widely distributed participants and users on various agendas and issues. In this usage, online masses are not simply an abstract reference to digital groupings but a derivation of real masses that connect through networks and social contagion.[19] Members of online masses are seen to behave as if physical contact still influences communication although such formations do not necessarily occur in shared geographical locations. Thus, it is plausible to conjecture that online masses straddle both physical and digital environments allowing members to "inhabit spatial settings in accordance with physical constraints at the same time as digitalization allows for enhanced activities."[20] By straddling the masses this way, we can retain the idea of networking and contagion while espousing a high-tech view on the dissemination of digital information.

Therefore, any discussion on social mediation must now include the role of digital technology because it is this technology that provides the hardware and software for making possible extensive online connections. These connections activate and disseminate thoughts, feelings and actions without repeatedly requiring physical co-presence. Only by networking can these thoughts, feelings and actions be systematically and effectively channelled and organized. Through networks, participants can individually connect with others to engage in interpreting messages, assessing

affect, and making decisions on future actions. At the same time, they are also a node with linkages to other nodes which implies that preservation of individual identity is not necessarily contradictory to one's insertion into a collective modality. Rather, this situation may depict a basis for online masses to represent the individual and the larger group simultaneously. However, this simultaneity can lead to the question of whether online masses demonstrate cumulative interaction in digital media or represent convergent acts of digital individualism. This is a question concerning the limits of methodological collectivism.

Methodological Collectivism

Are masses their own reality or are they reducible to discrete individual action? This question addresses the problem of how wholes and parts relate to one another. If parts were defined as having distinctively separate identities, then the identity of the whole would only be an abstract representation of these differences. We can grasp this conceptualization with a fictional example. Let us imagine a tourist arriving in London and asking someone on a street to show him the way to the University of London. In reply, the Londoner says which college or school does the tourist want to see; does he want to visit Senate House (the administrative center), King's College, Birkbeck College, Goldsmith's College, University College, City University, London School of Economics, School of Oriental and African Studies, and so forth? The tourist is confounded because he expects to land on the doorsteps of only one institution but instead he is told there are many subsidiaries located at different addresses without any centralization in a single place. He leaves London disappointed