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# NPT1 - Editorial: First Life

A year ago, the two of us were total strangers. Neither of us had even heard of the other. Nor had we heard of many of the contributors to this book.

The fact that we are now collaborating together and with the rest of the people who contributed to this book is one small instance of the extraordinary flourishing and expansion of networks which marked 2011. For us and for many others, this was a year in which new contacts were made in new ways, in which strangers turned quickly into friends and collaborators. A year in which people reached out.

The technological base for this expansion is not new. Children born the same year as the World Wide Web are now out of their teens, and there is a sense of the technology itself coming of age. The significance of the interconnections it makes possible has led us to speak of 'the network' as the defining social and political phenomenon of our time.

In the past year, the new social forms which ride the network made their entrance on the stage of history. Their manifestations may be profoundly hopeful or, at times, alarming; but the wave of networked disruption which broke across the world has swept away the idea that these technologies are only about throwing sheep at one another, or hiding away in Second Life.

Yet despite its overwhelming extension, the grain of our networked reality still seems elusive: on a human scale, it remains puzzlingly insubstantial. Much of the activity that makes up the network seems too loose and haphazard to be significant, by the standards of the world in which we grew up. It runs on serendipity and near-randomness. It extends simultaneously in contradictory directions.

This book is both a reflection on the puzzling nature of the network and a modest example of what it looks like in practice. The ease with which reading an article can lead into making contact and beginning a conversation, the lightness with which an idea in a conversation can be floated as a project, the swiftness with which others can join their efforts behind a project, the freedom with which tools built for other purposes can be put to use for one's own: these are among the factors that made possible the collaboration now before your eyes.

It seems relevant, too, that we recognised in each other - and in many of our co-conspirators here - the lineaments of an unclassifiable career: loose and serendipitous as the network, precarious but meaningful, led by curiosity and often illegible to institutions.

The spirit of improvisation which is the life of the network is all the more striking because it has arisen at the end of an unprecedented age of orchestration. (Think of the resemblance between the unified movements of an orchestral violin section and the coordination of physical effort in the industrial-era factory, or the way that the conductor on his podium echoes the stance of that era's political leaders.) The network is breeding new forms of politics and new forms of work, and though their shape remains far from clear, the practice of improvisation may offer clues.

A further puzzling feature of life in the network is the lightness with which we let things go. We hold on to the people who matter to us, aware of our interdependence, but are quick to loosen our grip on ideas or projects that don't fly. Again, this has been reflected in our personal experience of 2011: each of us floated projects

which came to nothing, and have tried to learn not to hold on too tight, recognising how often the essence of a project will return in a new form, somewhere down the road. A similar principle applies to the rhythms of networked protest that we are witnessing: a new meme surfaces, surges with life for a while, and then the momentum moves elsewhere. Both personally and more broadly, this letting go is not without pain and frustration, but it seems likely that it is an essential skill for navigating this new reality.

The mysterious qualities of networked reality and the force with which it now interacts with hard political, economic and social realities has led us to embrace Pamela McLean's description of it as 'the Invisible Revolution'. Three further senses of this invisibility leave their footprints in the pieces published here.

First, as McLean suggests, the puzzle of how to make sense of the transformations now underway becomes clearer when one compares it to the Industrial Revolution. In that earlier period of great change, you could imagine someone pointing to a steam engine and asking: 'What on earth is that?' Today, it is hard to think of a similarly totemic object which embodies the technological and social changes we are living through. Pointing to a laptop or an iPhone is not that helpful, nor does the Twitter home page get you closer. As McLean puts it: 'What defines the Invisible Revolution is that key elements of the changes we are living through are impossible to point to; and yet, if you are experiencing them, they become more real than the realities that you can see.'

A second line of invisibility cuts through those pieces which touch most directly on the global events of 2011. Most dramatically, in Smári McCarthy's account of life as part of the network of western 'hacktivists' providing tech support to the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East. When young people set up camp in the public spaces of Madrid, New York or London and drew comparisons to Tahrir Square, critics called the comparison immature: proof that they don't know how lucky they are. In response, we can argue - as Paul Mason has - that, in democracies and dictatorships alike, unrest has grown out of a generation who find themselves poorer than their parents, in societies marked by widening economic inequality. But what McCarthy tells us is how integrated he and his colleagues have become in the bloody reality of countries like Syria: the Telecomix activists providing infrastructure support to the Syrian opposition are in a not dissimilar position, he suggests, to the drone pilots flying remote-controlled missions over Afghanistan, and are vulnerable to the same levels of stress and burnout.

For some of us, then, the reality of life in 2011 has been of an invisible but brutally real frontline which runs from Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park, and its events, as Eleanor Saitta writes, 'only a rehearsal, a tiny taste of what will likely be decades of chaos.' Others, such as Vinay Gupta, are less enthusiastic about the way in which lines have been drawn. 'I will think of this as the year in which all of my fears about network-centric radicalism came to pass,' he writes, 'and in which the need for coherent modern governance moved from being an important task for the future into being a crushingly urgent need in the present.'

The coexistence of these voices within an ongoing conversation, and not simply as opponents scoring points off each other, was the hope behind the launch of New Public Thinking a year ago. Our desire was to leave behind the sterile, combative framing of issues which still characterises the old media: not to replace this with a cosy consensus or a party line, but to take the risk of doing our thinking in public, rather than defending carefully prepared positions. To worry less about proving ourselves right; to be more willing to follow new threads, to surprise ourselves and to change our minds.

There is something here - in this spirit of improvisation, of puzzling through the world as we find it, rather than fitting it into black-and-white oppositions - that resonates with the new styles of protest and activism, but also of creativity and collaboration, characteristic of those riding the network. And this suggests a final thread of revolutionary invisibility; because there have been moments when it felt like this spirit owed more to the imagined world of Grant Morrison's comic book series, *The Invisibles*, than to the handbooks inherited from radical theorists and organisers of the 19th and 20th centuries. Morrison's story of magical anarchists begins firmly in the classic mode of good-versus-evil; but to follow it to the end is to be initiated into a more fluid and

playful mode of engaging with power, in which every moment brings another turn in perspective, and the figure who seemed your worst enemy a moment ago is the one whose unexpected help may make all the difference now. There is a kind of postmodernism here which is not the clever defeatism we were taught at university. Comic books are not political theory, but there is something in the agility of attitude, the playful pragmatism, the sense of agency and even the dress sense of the networked generation of activists which has more in common with an Invisibles cell than with the political cadres of previous generations.

If it sounds as though we are placing a lot of hope on the way people are using networked technologies - for ends far different from those for which they were designed - then this is not least because it seems to be one of the few directions from which hope is coming. There are plenty of reasons to believe the world is darkening. For all its moments of euphoria, 2011 left many of us with uncomfortable questions: about the gaps in our lives, in our societies, in our attempts to change the world or to make sense of the changes already going on within it.

This book began, three months ago, as a conversation over lunch. That became an open invitation to reflect on the events of the past year, in our own lives, on a local or a global scale. An invitation that travelled along the threads of a network built up from conversations, over Twitter and around campfires, in squatted social centres and hacklabs, but also in thinktank seminars and the pages of the old media.

We have been surprised by the range and depth of the responses that came back. They are not essays written at leisure, but despatches from the middle of events which are still unfolding. They have an urgency and immediacy that embodies the continuous present of the network. Taken together, an outline begins to emerge of the changes taking place around us and our attempts to make sense of them.

Editing this book has given us fresh energy for the New Public Thinking project. We find ourselves already thinking of the voices missing from these pages, people we would like to publish in future, online or in further books. So we hold out the possibility that this is the first in a series, without holding on to this more tightly than is needed.

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