The Rise of Nerd Politics
Digital Activism and Political Change

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In May 2012, the Canadian sci-fi writer and digital rights activist Cory Doctorow wrote a piece in the Guardian titled ‘The problem with nerd politics.’ This came in the wake of successful campaigns against intellectual property legislation that technology ‘nerds’ saw as curtailing digital freedoms, as well as fresh electoral gains by the nerdy Pirate Party in Germany. Doctorow entreated his fellow nerds not to seek tech solutions to political problems, but rather to ‘operate within the realm of traditional power and politics’ and defend the rights of ‘our technically unsophisticated friends and neighbours’ (ibid.).

It is unclear what effect, if any, this call to arms had across the world of nerd politics. What we can say with certainty is that this social universe has continued to expand in the intervening years since Doctorow’s article. This expansion includes the space of formal politics, which the Pirate parties and other nerd formations have managed to penetrate in recent times. The rise of nerd politics has, in fact, been a global trend hiding in plain sight for many years now, a trend crying out for an explanation. Since the late 2000s, the international media have covered many instances of it, including Anonymous’s war on Scientology, Iran’s Green movement, WikiLeaks’ Cablegate leaks, the Arab Spring, Spain’s indignados, the Occupy movement, Edward Snowden’s revelations about the US National Security Agency (NSA) and Russian and British meddling with the 2016 Trump campaign, most recently in connection to the UK firm Cambridge Analytica. But so far we have lacked a common narrative to bind together these seemingly disparate events. Uniting all of them, I suggest, is the pivotal role played by a new class of political actors I call ‘techno-political nerds’ – or simply ‘techpol nerds’. By this I refer to people who operate at the intersection of technology and politics, and who care deeply about the fate of democracy in the digital age. They will be our guides to the expanding world of nerd politics and its global ramifications.
For the last eight years I have investigated this dynamic social world. One of my first encounters with it was in October 2010, during anthropo-

gical fieldwork in Barcelona, Spain. It was then that I attended the Free

Culture Forum, a global gathering of hackers, geeks, lawyers, bloggers and

others interested in issues of internet freedom and 'peer-to-peer' forms

of cultural production. During a break I struck up a conversation with a

young hacker and information activist from Iceland. We talked about how
difficultly anthropologists and hackers understand political systems (see

Kelty 2008: 263). I explained that many anthropologists today are averse

to notions such as 'structure' or 'system' and prefer to think of human

life in terms of 'social practices' (Postill 2010). For my interlocutor, by

contrast, the notion of system remains key. Political systems, he said, are

no different from any other system in that they can be collaboratively

studied, modified and improved — in other words, they can be hacked

(Brooke 2011).

A few weeks after this conversation, in November 2010, the whistle-

blowing site WikiLeaks began the release of over 250,000 US diplomatic

cables in partnership with leading international newspapers such as the

Guardian, the New York Times, Le Monde, and El País. Suddenly, my chosen

research focus on digital freedom activism — until then a rather obscure

choice in need of justification — had taken centre stage globally. The

worldwide impact of the leaks was huge at the time, and Julian Assange,

WikiLeaks and Anonymous were now household names. When the US

government pressurised MasterCard, Visa and PayPal into blocking

donations towards the legal fees of Assange, the WikiLeaks founder, the

online network Anonymous mobilised large numbers of internet users

who attacked and disabled their servers (Coleman & Ralph 2011). Soon

after that, both WikiLeaks and Anonymous became embroiled in the

fledgling Arab uprisings and in the wave of protests that swept through

Spain, Greece, Mexico, the United States, Britain and many other

countries throughout 2011.

To try and make sense of these events, I searched online and found a

Swedish TV documentary on WikiLeaks. To my surprise, the Icelandic

hacker I met in Barcelona was one of the talking heads in the film. His

name is Smári McCarthy. He recounted the 'information famine' that

had befallen Iceland after the implosion of its banking system in 2008.

The then little-known WikiLeaks had obtained documentation that laid

bare the tight grip of cronyism on the country's financial system. When

the bankers realised that this documentation had been posted online,
itarian regimes such as Russia, China or Iran – or indeed, about nerds quietly furthering the ambitions of large digital corporations like Google, Facebook or Microsoft, those involved in organised cybercrime and so on (see Deibert 2013; Tsui 2015).

The dynamic world of nerd politics has been in the making since the 1980s, but it is currently undergoing a remarkable growth spurt triggered by a series of ‘critical events’ (Sewell 2005), such as Cablegate, the Arab Spring, the indignados and Snowden’s NSA revelations. This acceleration is linked to the post-2008 global crisis of liberal democracy, fuelled by the political passions of nerds, and enabled by the proliferation of digital media. The rise of nerd politics matters to us all because activist nerds are at the very heart of some of the key political, economic and cultural battles of our times. These include struggles over the meaning and practice of democracy, over freedom of expression, intellectual property and the creative industries, and the right to privacy in an age of ‘datafication’ among other issues.

Four Corners of a World

In this book I argue that techpol nerds operate in a highly dynamic ‘social world’ (Strauss 1978) that intersects multiple other social worlds, including politics, culture and business. This is a world subdivided into four main subworlds (or spaces): data activism, digital rights, social protest and formal politics. To gain a first appreciation of these four corners of the nerd politics world, let us briefly consider the case of a Barcelona-based group of activists named Xnet. This group is unusual for its high degree of nerd politics nomadism, but it is precisely this characteristic that will help us gain a quick overview of this complex social world.

I first met the unofficial leader of Xnet, the artist and activist Simona Levi, along with her team, in the summer of 2010, during the anthropological fieldwork in Barcelona just mentioned. Indeed, the Free Culture Forum event mentioned above was organised by them. The group was then a few years old and had been active exclusively within the digital rights space – a space of political action in which nerds fight for online freedom of expression and other digital freedoms, where they abide by the maxim that ‘digital rights are human rights’ (see Chapter 4). At the time, Xnet were fighting an ‘anti-piracy’ bill that they saw as criminalising the everyday online practices of millions of Spaniards. The bill was known as Ley Sinde (Sinde’s Law) after its main champion, the then minister of culture, Angeles Gonzalez Sinde.

In November 2010, nerd suspicions that the US government, and not its Spanish counterpart, had drafted the new bill at the behest of US culture industry lobbies were confirmed by US diplomatic cables releases by WikiLeaks. In December 2010, as the bill was set to be passed by the Spanish Parliament, Xnet and fellow nerds from across Spain successfully mobilised against it. Their most effective action was arguably a voluntary blackout by Spain’s prime streaming and downloading websites, which accounted for more than 70 per cent of the country’s internet traffic. Visitors were greeted with the lines: ‘If Ley Sinde is passed this page will disappear. The internet will be one more TV in the service of power’. At a stroke, millions of Spaniards were denied their favourite weekend entertainment. As a result, a mass audience instantly morphed into an outraged public. The following day, there were cyberattacks against the e-mail addresses and websites of the main political parties and Parliament, as well as physical protests outside the parliament building in Madrid. Finding themselves under pressure, some political parties backed out and the bill was initially defeated (see Chapter 4).

Alas, Spain’s digital rights nerds had little time to bask in their glory. Just six weeks later, their elected representatives ignored the popular revolt and signed the bill into law. Xnet responded to this perceived betrayal by migrating to the social protest space. They did this by supporting and joining the fledgling protest platform ¡Democracia Real Ya! (Real Democracy Now!), which called for mass marches on 15 May 2011 to demand ‘real democracy’. To this end, they transformed their own workspace, a venue known as Conservas, into the unofficial DRY headquarters in Barcelona. This switch from digital politics to politics writ large amounted to a Turnerian ‘schism’ (Turner 1974: 42) between Spain’s nerds and its now discredited political class. The marches were well attended and led directly to the unplanned occupation of dozens of squares across the country, which in turn led to the 15M movement (see Chapter 5). The social protest space, at least as it has evolved since the Arab Spring, is based on the occupation of public space and seeks to rediscover the true meaning of democracy through popular assemblies. While the digital rights space tacitly subscribes to the ideal of a liberal, representative democracy, the social protest space openly embraces assembly democracy.

Exactly a year later, in May 2012, in front of a large crowd gathered in Barcelona’s Plaça de Catalunya to mark the first anniversary of the
15M movement, Simona Levi announced a new crowdfunded campaign named 15MpaRato. Their five-year goal was to bring to justice Rodrigo Rato and other senior bankers responsible for the collapse of Bankia, one of Spain’s leading financial institutions. Bankia was bailed out at enormous cost to taxpayers in the wake of the post-2008 property market collapse. Xnet urged prospective whistle-blowers to leak data on Bankia to a secure website they had set up for this purpose. In other words, Xnet were now moving into the data activism space (see Chapter 3). The maxim animating this space is that ordinary people should empower themselves by using digital data to hold the powerful accountable for their actions – what Keane would call a ‘monitory democracy’ ideal (Keane 2009: 676 et passim).

In early 2013, Xnet migrated once again to another corner of the nerd politics world. This time they relocated to the formal politics space, where they registered a new political party called Partido X to campaign in the 2014 elections for the European Parliament. Inspired by hacker principles and practices, Partido X displayed both similarities with and differences from existing Pirate parties across Europe (Chapter 6). Levi argued at the time that the 15M movement was entering a new phase in its evolution; now that the ruling elites felt ‘surrounded’ by civil society, the indignados were finally in a position to ‘take the institutions’. In doing so, Partido X was breaking the 15M taboo of not engaging in representative politics, paving the way for other grassroots formations such as Podemos and Barcelona en Comú. To manage this dissonance, they rejected the telegenic ‘personality politics’ of mainstream campaigns in favour of candidates chosen for their integrity and expertise, and called themselves a ‘citizen network’ (red ciudadana) (Chapter 6).

When Partido X failed to secure any seats in the European Parliament, the group went through a period of soul-searching that eventually led them back to the data activism space in 2016. There they wrote and directed the ‘data theatre’ play Hazte banquero (‘Become a banker’), based on their 15MpaRato leaks, which earned them critical and popular acclaim (see Chapter 3). Through this play, the Xnet activists wanted to tell two stories simultaneously: the story of the ‘culture of impunity’ enjoyed by Spain’s ruling elites, and the story of how it is only ‘organised citizens’ who can put a stop to it. Its co-author, the activist Sergio Salgado, described the play to me as ‘pure data’ (datos puros). He also told me that audiences felt ‘empowered’ on leaving the show, and that they congratulated the activists more for the play than for the leaks that made it possible.

Finally, in late 2017, Xnet re-entered the social protest space when the group became involved in Catalonia’s independence referendum. This entailed, among other things, denouncing moves by the Spanish state to censor the internet and taking to task a major unionist newspaper from Madrid, El País, for unfairly accusing the regional government of violating the data privacy of its own citizens (see Chapter 5). It remains to be seen where the group will operate in the coming years, but to judge by their trajectory to date it is unlikely that they will restrict themselves to their original corner of the nerd politics world, that of the digital rights space.

Xnet holds a special place in my eight-year struggle to understand the rise of nerd politics, for it was precisely their unusually nomadic trajectory that revealed to me the invisible external and internal boundaries of the nerd politics world. These boundaries may be both porous and imperceptible to the human eye, but they are as empirically real as a herd of elephants or a parliamentary building. Xnet provided me with a map of Spain’s techno-political terrain that I then applied to case studies from Indonesia, Brazil, Iceland, Tunisia, Taiwan and the United States – as well as globally. The map was a breakthrough: the same four-cornered, dynamic geometry found in Spain helped to explain the limits and possibilities of nerd politics elsewhere, including on a global scale.

But before I can support this bold claim, and how it will unfold in subsequent chapters, I must first review our existing knowledge of nerd politics. As it turns out, we know far more about this thriving social world than we may think, yet this knowledge is strewn across numerous literatures and hampered by the lack of a common conceptual language and frame of reference.

Geeks, Hackers et al.

Although there is to date no scholarly literature on nerd politics as such, three overlapping literatures have advanced our current knowledge of this emergent phenomenon, namely digital politics, hacker politics and techno-politics. While digital politics has a much broader scope than nerd politics, hacker politics is more narrowly focused on a single category of nerd (that is, hackers). For its part, techno-politics has the same scope as nerd politics, yet without the explicit human element (nerds) that occupies us in the present study. Let us briefly review each literature in turn.

The growing use of digital media by political actors of all kinds – politicians, journalists, activists, celebrities, religious leaders and so on – has
spawned a burgeoning literature, albeit one that is highly diverse and split along disciplinary and topical lines. The term ‘digital politics’ only began to acquire academic currency in the early 2010s (Postill 2012). This signalled a rapidly growing scholarly interest in both the digitisation of traditional politics and in the politicisation of the digital realm. Adapting an earlier scheme by Chadwick (2006), we can speak of four main sub-areas of study: digital government (executives and bureaucracies), digital democracy (community, deliberation, participation), digital campaigning (parties, candidates, elections) and digital mobilisation (interest groups and social movements) (Postill 2012). A forerunner to this umbrella term was ‘internet politics’, with a number of textbooks under this rubric appearing in the mid 2000s with the phrase in their titles (e.g. Chadwick 2006; Chadwick & Howard 2008; Oates et al. 2006). A good example of the recent terminological shift is the collection on digital politics by Coleman and Freelon (2015), which features, among others, sections on theories of digital politics, collective action and civic engagement, and government and policy.

Of special relevance to the study of nerd politics is the work of the British political communication scholar Andrew Chadwick. His concept of ‘the hybrid media system’ (Chadwick 2013, 2017) has been particularly influential. This is the simple but powerful idea that our current media environments are a combination of old and new media technologies, practices and actors interacting in complex, non-teleological ways. Chadwick argues that the political sphere is increasingly dominated by those individuals, groups, and organisations best able to ‘strategically blend older and newer media logics’ (Chadwick 2013: 204). The encounter between these contrasting media logics, he suggests, can sometimes cause confusion and disorder, yet it also creates ‘new patterns of integration’ (ibid.: 209). For instance, techpol nerds (my term, not Chadwick’s) such as Assange and Snowden chose to partner with the Guardian and other established media in order to amplify their whistle-blowing campaigns, thus producing a mutually beneficial outcome (Chadwick & Collister 2014; see also Di Salvo 2017). In turn, such collaborations had a profound effect on the international media landscape (Karatzogianni 2015), with some scholars positing the emergence of a ‘networked fourth estate’ (e.g. Benkler 2011: 311).

Along with Chadwick, other communication scholars have also investigated the various forms of expertise that go into the practical repertoires of digital politics agents. For instance, Kubitschko (2015a) describes how Germany’s Chaos Computer Club (CCC), a hacker organisation founded in 1981 (see Chapter 3), proved that computerised voting was unsafe. In doing so, they not only politicised a technological issue but also attained a ‘concrete change in democratic procedure’ (ibid.: 399), that is, the scrapping of e-voting. CCC activists used a rich media repertoire to engage with diverse publics through ‘ongoing communicative action’ (ibid.: 397). Over time, they developed a set of ‘interlocking arrangements’ with politicians, journalists, judges and other digital stakeholders through ‘multilayered media practices’ resulting in a virtuous cycle of cooperation (ibid.: 399). For his part, Hussain analyses the role of policy entrepreneurs in the promotion of internet freedom. These ‘political technologists’ played key roles in the 2011 protest movements in the Arab world and elsewhere, creating ‘new norms about digital infrastructures’ (Hussain 2014: 102; see also O’Maley 2015, 2016). Similarly, I have written elsewhere about the involvement of ‘freedom technologists’ – a term I later replaced with ‘techpol nerds’ – in the new protest movements, with Iceland, Tunisia, and Spain as the case studies (Postill 2014a).

Turning now to the second emerging literature – hacker politics – here the two more influential authors are the American anthropologists Chris Kelty and Gabriella Coleman. In his ethnohistorical study of the free-software movement, Kelty contends that geeks and hackers ‘argue about technology but also argue with and through it’ (Kelty 2008: 5). These political actors continually modify and maintain their social world by ‘figuring out’, both discursively and technically, how to proceed with their projects. Kelty calls the emergent, dynamic socio-technical sphere in which hackers operate a ‘recursive public’ (ibid.: 7). Blending social and operating systems into their politics, free-software nerds regard the internet not as something fixed but rather as a flexible ‘standardised infrastructure’ (ibid.: 34) that sustains their social identity. Theirs is not a story of hacker genius but rather of the ‘active modulation’ (ibid.: 181) – that is, translation – of practices linking human and non-human agents.

Unlike Kelty, Coleman distinguishes – at least in some of her work – between geeks and hackers (Coleman 2011: 512). While computer geeks are ‘literate in digital media’, they are not as ‘technically skilled’, she notes, as hackers. The latter often self-identify as hackers, subscribe to ‘some version of information freedom’ and can be found at events such as the annual Chaos Communication Congress (ibid.: 512–513). In occupational terms, hackers are often hardware makers, programmers, security researchers and system administrators. Geeks and hackers may be different in some regards, but they do share a ‘closeness to the machine’.
and a staunch anti-authoritarianism (ibid.: 512–513). Moreover, both see a crucial difference between ‘free speech’ and ‘free beer’: to them, freedom refers to ‘personal control and autonomous production’ (Coleman 2013: 36). Repurposing Scott’s famous ‘weapons of the weak’ concept (Scott 1985), Coleman coins the term ‘weapons of the geek’ to refer to ‘a shared set of cultural practices, sensibilities, and even political tactics’ conducted by geeks and hackers (Coleman 2017: 100). These constitute ‘a class of privileged and visible actors’ who, unlike Scott’s Malay peasants, ‘often lie at the center of economic life’ (ibid.: 100). The political lives of geeks and hackers, she concludes, result from ‘the concrete experiences of their craft’ (ibid.: 100).

Coleman (ibid.) argues that hacker politics has intensified since 2010, and seeks to provide an ‘inventory’ of this process. Drawing on Sewell’s theory of historical change (Sewell 2005; see also Chapter 7), she suggests that ‘a handful of [critical] events’ have driven this intensification, ‘beginning with WikiLeaks, followed by a burst of multiyear activity from Anonymous, and being capped off, finally, with Snowden’s megaleak’ (ibid.: 100). She also notes the ideological and geographical diversity of this strand of political action. This diversity is a result, in part, of the ambiguity of liberalism as a political ideal, and also of the fact that hackers ‘labor on different objects, initiate different types of projects, and are located in many different parts of the world’ (Coleman 2011: 514).

Recently, Coleman and Kelty pooled their expertise to co-edit an issue of the journal Limn on the proliferation of ‘hacks, leaks, and breaches’ across the contemporary political landscape (Coleman & Kelty 2017). In their editorial, they ask whether hackers and hacking ‘have crossed a techno-political threshold’ and to what extent, if at all, these practices and actions are ‘transforming our world, creating new collects, and changing our understanding of security and politics’ (ibid.). The rise of hacktivism exemplified by Anonymous, they contend, signals as much a cultural and political change as it does a technological one. At the same time, though, the ‘complex tools, techniques and infrastructure[s]’ of hackers have not fundamentally changed (ibid.).

The third and final literature, techno-politics, is best represented today by its Spanish name, tecnopolítica, for nowhere has this strand of scholarship and activism taken firmer roots than in Spain and Latin America. At the turn of the millennium, Douglas Kellner defined techno-politics as ‘the use of new technologies such as computers and the Internet to advance political goals’ (Kellner 2001: 182). More recently, in the Spanish-speaking world, this notion has been linked to the emergence of ‘connected multitudes’, conceived as a new type of political actor, as well as to Castells’s notions of ‘the network society’ (e.g. Castells 1996) and ‘mass self-communication’ (Castells 2007), that is, networked individuals’ newly found ability to send digital messages that can reach masses of people (Treré & Barranquero 2018: 48). In Spain, the term tecnopolítica has spread widely in connection with the indignados movement, or 15M. For authors such as Alcazar et al. (2012) and Tore (2013), 15M is a ‘post-media movement’ that takes advantage of the networked affordances of mass self-communication to bypass the mainstream media and develop a ‘collaborative social subjectivity’ (Treré & Barranquero 2018: 49). Calleja-López conceives of 15M as a ‘networked movement of the squares’ in which technological and political contention are thoroughly entangled – a phenomenon he labels ‘contentious techno-politics’ (Calleja-López 2017: 85). In their overview of the Spanish-language literature on tecnopolítica, Treré and Barranquero list five potential contributions of this regional scholarship to a future dialogue with anglophone scholars: a ‘non-instrumental’ understanding of the relation between politics and technology; careful attention to ‘hybrid (online–offline) political action’; a focus on political innovations derived from user-friendly adaptations of hacker/free culture; an interest in the symbiotic relations between human and non-human actors; and an emphasis on the role of emotions in the new protest movements (Treré & Barranquero 2018: 53–56).

All three literatures set us up for the arduous task of exploring the nerd politics world. The digital politics literature rightly stresses the hybridity of contemporary media systems rather than assuming a ‘replacement theory of media’ (Apprich 2013) whereby new media substitute old media. This is an important corrective to common visions, including among nerds themselves, of social and political change being driven by new technologies – visions in which earlier technologies are ‘left behind’. Notions such as ‘the hybrid media system’ (Chadwick 2013), ‘interlocking arrangements’ (Kubitschko 2015a) and ‘political technologists’ (Hussain 2014) point us towards the symbiotic relationships of techno-political actors, and how they are mediated not only by technology but also by expertise, nationality, social capital and so on.

Meanwhile, the hacker politics literature teaches us to consider carefully some of the key people involved in contemporary techno-politics (hackers), and to appreciate the close link between their craft (hacking) and their politics. It also demonstrates the power of combining ethnographic and
historical research in seeking to understand a socio-political trend (for example, the rise of hacker politics) in different cultural contexts. This stands in contrast to much of the digital media literature, which suffers from a lack of cultural and historical awareness (Goggin et al. 2013) and an excess of ‘present continuism’ – that is, a blurred focus on how things may be changing in the present instead of how they actually changed, or not, in the recent past (see Postill 2017a and below). Hacker politics scholars have also fashioned useful conceptual tools for the study of nerd politics, including notions such as ‘recursive public’ and ‘modulation’ (Kelty 2008) and ‘weapons of the geek’ (Coleman 2017).

For its part, the techno-politics (tecnopolítica) literature demonstrates the importance of paying attention to Spain as an extraordinary laboratory of democracy, one in which nerd activism and scholarship have intermingled and co-evolved with the 15M movement. Indeed, as I show in Chapter 5, this movement was conceived, gestated and brought to life in the activist-researcher circles of Madrid, Barcelona and other major cities where I was conducting fieldwork at the time. Putting aside the unhelpful notion that we live in ‘network societies’ underpinning much of their thought – an idea that I have critiqued elsewhere (Postill 2008) – Spain’s nerds have not only written about the fate of democracy in the twenty-first century, they have already reshaped their country’s democracy by conducting numerous techno-political experiments (or ‘prototypes’) in all four corners of the nerd politics world, including the spaces of social protest and formal politics, where they have scored a number of successes (see Chapters 5 and 6). This is a track record largely concealed from the anglosphere behind a language barrier, but it is one that deserves to be better known outside Spain.

Considered together, these three literatures suggest that techpol nerds are important historical agents located at the heart of current processes of political and cultural change at a time in which the ideals and practices of liberal democracy are mired in a global crisis. Rather than being ensconced in a world of their own, these nerds engage in reciprocal, symbiotic relations with other human actors such as politicians, journalists and judges, as well as with non-human actors like apps, platforms and infrastructures. These interactions take place in hybrid media systems that are ceaselessly co-created and maintained by geeks, hackers, lawyers, journalists and other nerds pursuing political projects that express and refine their respective crafts.

Missing from the existing scholarship, though, is a conceptualisation of nerd politics as a social world in its own right – as a highly dynamic, internally differentiated world that intersects countless other worlds. We need to know much more about the similarities and differences between geeks, hackers and other techpol nerds (for instance, artists, journalists, lawyers, bureaucrats and politicians), and how these play out in different cultural contexts and at various historical conjunctures. Finally, we must investigate the political and cultural consequences of nerd politics by studying the ‘concrete changes’ (Kubitschko 2015a: 399) – as well as the concrete continuities – resulting from nerd interventions around the globe. These are precisely the main lines of the inquiry supporting my main argument in subsequent chapters, to which I now turn.

The Main Argument

The present book is the first comprehensive exploration of the worldwide rise of nerd politics. My textual strategy is simple. Drawing from long-term anthropological fieldwork in Spain and Indonesia, as well as secondary research from elsewhere (including Iceland, Tunisia, Brazil, the United States and Taiwan), I follow the nerds to key sites of political action so as to find out who they are, what they do and with what consequences – if any. I focus on a specific historical moment – 2010 to 2017 – for two main reasons: first, because this is the period when I conducted the bulk of the research; second, because these years were marked by a steep worldwide rise in the size, visibility and impact of nerd politics. I contend that this world has already made a significant impact on the political, economic and cultural lives of billions of people around the globe.

The argument unfolds over six chapters. In Chapter 2 I draw from a cross-cultural range of empirical examples to detail the main attributes of the heterogeneous class of political actors I call ‘techpol nerds’ (or simply ‘nerds’). I define them as pro-democracy agents operating at the intersection of technology and politics. While some of them are geeks and hackers, many are not; indeed, among their ranks we find artists, journalists, economists, lawyers, politicians and many other specialists, even anthropologists. But not all forms of expertise are born equal in the world of nerd politics. Five specialisms, in particular, take pride of place: computing, law, art, media and politics. I capture this five-field dominance through the lowercase acronym ‘clamp’ (computing, law, art, media, politics), and suggest that ‘clamping’ is a more fitting term than ‘hacking’ to capture
the diversity of nerds' techno-political praxis. Uniting all politicised nerds of this kind above all, their differences is the conviction that the fates of democracy and the internet are inextricably entwined, and that they can use their skills to collectively build new systems of democracy that are fit for the digital age. (Once again, I should stress that in this study I focus on pro-democracy nerds, not on nerds working for authoritarian regimes intent on undermining democracy).

In ideological terms, they range from liberals and radicals on the pro-state side of the fence to anarchists and libertarians on the anti-state side. In other words, they are not predominantly libertarians, as often portrayed in North America – as Coleman (2017) notes. Cutting across this ideological diversity is a shared 'pragmatic utopianism' and staunch anti-authoritarianism, which translates into practical actions to defend the internet and other digital technologies from efforts by governments and corporations to control them, or to launch actions unrelated to digital issues. These actions are often led by crowd-powered teams pursuing concrete goals. Nerds are typically 'rooted cosmopolitans' (Tarrow 2005: 29), that is, women and men who are generally more politically involved in their own nations of residence or origin than in third countries. When their projects or actions involve non-nerds, I denominate them 'strategic part-nerdships'. Techpol nerds may spend countless hours online every day, but this does not mean they live in a mythical 'cyberspace', unmoored from the actualities of life on earth. Instead, these are 'nerds of a feather' who flock together in concrete places, both online and offline.

Having established who we are dealing with, we then move on to four core chapters devoted to exploring each of the four corners (or spaces) of the nerd politics world. In Chapter 3 we see that nerds operating within the data activism space dream of future democracies in which ordinary citizens can empower themselves to keep the powerful in check through accessing, creating and sharing open data. They therefore implicitly subscribe to the moral-political ideal of a 'monitory democracy' (Keane 2009: 676) - a desirable political system whose citizens are 'well informed, watchful and holding government accountable' (Ruigier et al. 2017: 46). The space of data activism is divided into two main subspaces: hacktivism and civic hacking. The chapter begins by comparing and contrasting two famous hacktivist groups, WikiLeaks and Anonymous, paying particular heed to the former's 'space oddity' status as a group not averse to violating the space's anti-authoritarian ethos and its commitment to 'responsible' data practices. By contrast, although some Anonymous tactics are controversial among liberal nerds, no one doubts its anti-authoritarian track record (Gorham 2017). I then provide a brief overview of the civic hacking space, whose practitioners are often regarded as the somewhat effete 'white hat' cousins of hacktivists, but whose actions can also, in fact, bring about concrete political changes (Schrock 2016: 583).

The second half of Chapter 3 is devoted to three data activism case studies from Spain and Indonesia. I first discuss a crowdsourced legal action named 15MpaRato undertaken by Barcelona nerds against leading bankers responsible for the collapse of a major Spanish bank. This successful five-year project blended elements from both civic hacking and hacktivism to mobilise small investors affected by the crash as well as journalists, judges and other professionals. I then analyse a piece of 'data theatre', a play written and directed by the same group of nerds, Xnet, based on verbatim renditions of the leaked e-mails that provided evidence for their case against the bankers. The play garnered critical and public acclaim, bolstering the group's campaign in favour of what Schudson would label 'monitory citizenship' (Schudson 1999: 21). The third case study is a data-monitoring action named Kawal Pemilu (Election Guardians) undertaken by five Indonesian tech nerds in the aftermath of Indonesia's 2014 presidential election. Like the Spanish activists, Kawal Pemilu opted for crowd-powered teamwork, in their case to prevent rather than denounce fraud at the highest levels of the polity. Together, these examples show that 'data do not speak for themselves' (Mattoni 2018: 736). Instead, skilled political agents with both technical and artistic skills are required to transform data into meaningful cultural stories.

In Chapter 4 we explore the other nerd politics subworld in which techpol nerds are in a clear majority: the digital rights space. If the data activism space revolves around the fairly unproblematic ideal of monitory democracy, the digital rights subspace is tethered to the ever more wobbly flagpole of liberal democracy. This problematic bond is clear from the central tenet 'digital rights are human rights'. I start by discussing the multi-stakeholder, liberal narrative of democracy that predominates in the digital rights space as well as its radical discontents, for whom digital rights are merely a PR smokescreen for Silicon Valley corporations engaged in data farming. To these two narratives - liberal and radical - I add a third, cultural narrative, arguing that the liberal versus radical opposition is not sufficient to account for the cultural diversity of the digital rights space. For instance, it cannot explain the religious dimension of internet freedom campaigns in religiously conservative countries such as Indonesia. In sum, I regard
digital rights not as an increasingly homogeneous global movement (pace Croeser 2012) but rather an ideologically and culturally heterogeneous space of political contention.

To develop this idea, I discuss local refractions of this worldwide space through case studies from the United States, Spain, Brazil and Indonesia. In all four cases, digital rights made ample use of their 'clamping' abilities to campaign against internet bills or laws that they regarded as undermining basic human rights, particularly freedom of expression. Digital rights campaigns, I suggest, are Turnerian 'social dramas' (Turner 1974) as well as 'strategic action fields' (Figgis & McAdam 2011) that coalesce around a contentious techno-legal issue having first been framed in culturally compelling ways by teams of nerds. This leads me to conclude that digital rights activists are at the forefront of fierce battles over the future of (liberal) democracy in the digital age, especially over freedom of expression, cultural production and privacy issues.

Chapter 5 is the first of two chapters on a subspace where nerds are heavily outnumbered by non-nerds yet in which they have still been able to make a significant impact within a few years. These are domains where nerds have strayed from their comfort zones in pursuit of novel ways of 'resetting' or 'clamping' democracy so that this political system can survive and prosper in the twenty-first century. In the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, economic conditions greatly deteriorated for large swathes of the lower and middle classes in the countries worst affected by the downturn. This created a great deal of unrest, which in many countries turned into mass protests and uprisings, with 2011 seeing the emergence of new protest movements across the Arab world, southern Europe, North America and other regions.

Contrary to global media representations of these protests, which portrayed them as spontaneous explosions of youthful outrage, in Chapter 5 I argue that the new protest movements were co-designed, launched, spread and remixed by crowd-powered teams of nerds, both young and old. In countries as culturally distinct as Tunisia, Spain, the United States and Taiwan, techpol nerds made use of rich 'clamping' skillsets to redirect their energies from single digital issues to general political ones. They were not alone but in 'part-nerdship' with other political actors by means of 'bridging frames' (Lim 2013) that allowed them to throw in their lot with that of the non-nerd masses. In addition to framing and launching the new pro-democracy movements, nerds were crucial to the setting up and maintenance of their communication infrastructures, to the 'mobilisation of data' for logistics, collective identity-building and political pedagogy, and to the movements' replication and remixing across physical and online sites. Nerds were also the first to protest at a fundamental design flaw in the movements' core political ideal - assembly democracy - which they saw as being incapable of scaling up to the millions of participants required by a modern democracy.

This frustration with assembly democracy led many nerds to attempt to migrate to the fourth corner of the nerd politics world, formal politics, where they pursued a different political ideal: participatory democracy. Their aim was now to 'reset' (or 'clamp') the political system from within. Chapter 6 follows this migration through case studies from Iceland, Spain and Taiwan. I contend that nerds have found two main routes to this space, namely the electoral and the administrative route. While the former depends on the creation of new political parties - as I show through the examples of Iceland's Pirates and Spain's Partido X - the latter entails being invited by an existing administration to set up a 'digital participation' initiative, the examples here being Barcelona's Decidim platform and the vTaiwan initiative in Taiwan. Nerds had some competitive advantages, I argue, when seeking to enter formal politics. Not only did they possess a rich set of 'clamping' skills; they also had ample experience as political activists in other nerd spaces, as well as a willingness to expend a great deal of time and effort for the sake of positive change. Yet they also faced formidable obstacles, including a profound dislike of televangelism 'personality politics', a nerdy superiority complex towards less digitally savvy political actors, a negative image as brainy 'geeks' detached from ordinary people, a dependence on their political patrons and the inherently fraught notion of 'participation' - a mode of praxis highly vulnerable to accusations of deceit (Kelty 2017).

Finally, in Chapter 7 I bring together the separate forays into the four corners of the nerd politics world to reach some conclusions about the rise of this thriving 'social world' (Strauss 1978) and its consequences. I do so by means of a conceptual trinity developed by Sewell (2005) to unpack the multiple modernities of historical changes, namely events, trends and routines (the latter renamed 'practices').

First, I suggest that events are most useful when linked to a specific period, or phase, in a process of transformation. Thus the rise of nerd politics has seen three main phases to date, each marked by a major event: phase one (1981 to 1995) began with the founding of the Chaos Computer Club in Berlin in 1981; phase two (1996 to 2009) opened in Davos, Swit-
The rise of nerd politics itself is itself a trend made up of a number of sub-trends. For the sake of brevity, I single out three: population growth, diversification and institutionalisation, and suggest that this rise has accelerated in the 2010s.

Third, I conclude that we should take techpol nerds seriously for seven fundamental reasons, namely because they are: (1) a global democracy buffer against authoritarianism and populism; (2) major civil society hubs around the world; (3) influential geopolitical agents holding huge reserves of technical and symbolic capital; (4) new mediators in our increasingly viral, hybridised media systems; (5) mass producers of open/public knowledge about the world we live in; (6) cultural brokers between the creative industries and state regulators; and (7) canaries in the big data mines, that is, early-warning systems about the threat to privacy posed by 'datafication'.

Digital Ethnography

This book is a 'digital ethnography' (Hjorth et al. 2017; Pink et al. 2016) of nerd politics in Spain and Indonesia, supplemented with secondary research on Iceland, Tunisia, the United States, Brazil, Taiwan and other countries (see Figure 1.1). As there is no agreed definition of digital ethnography, in the present study I use this term to mean the ethnographic study and analysis of how a certain social group or category of people (in this case, techpol nerds) use and/or transform digital technologies, issues, ideas and practices. By ethnography, I mean a social scientific study that combines participant observation with other methods, such as surveys, semi-structured interviews, archival research and non-participant observation. The main periods and locations of physical fieldwork were 2010 to 2011 in Spain (twelve months) and 2014 to 2015 in Indonesia (six months), with a substantial amount of additional online and 'remote' fieldwork (Postill 2017b) conducted part-time between 2010 and 2017, as well as a number of collaborative research and writing projects with colleagues in Spain and Indonesia during the same period (see below).

The present study takes the history of the recent past seriously (Postill 2017a), combining synchronic and diachronic methods of investigation and analysis across a large set of locations and historical moments spanning seven years. Although global coverage within a single study is, of course, impossible, the book aspires to methodological globalism in its ambition to overcome the limitations of relying exclusively on one or two field locations – in this case, Barcelona and Jakarta – whilst drawing a great deal of empirical and theoretical inspiration from these sites. For instance, an intimate knowledge of the Barcelona nerd scene gained over twelve months in situ, plus extensive online research and shorter revisits, allowed me to ask probing questions about similar scenes in Madrid, Jakarta, Reykjavik and so on. An analogous process of analysis made it possible to compare and contrast the dynamic techno-political cultures of the respective nation-states where these small scenes are embedded, as well as their transnational connections to scenes and events elsewhere.

This approach is encapsulated in Thomas H. Eriksen's well-known formulation of anthropological research as the study of 'small places, large issues' (Eriksen 2001).

In July 2010, I moved with my partner and children from England to Barcelona to conduct fieldwork for a period of twelve months, originally on the topic of social media and activism. My host institution was IN3, an internet research centre at the Open University of Catalonia led by Manuel Castells, the theorist of the network society. Having investigated internet activism in Malaysia in the early 2000s (Postill 2008, 2011), I was initially curious, before deciding to focus on nerd politics, to know whether post-2004 platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube were making any significant difference to socio-political activists, albeit this time in a very different part of the world. As a Spaniard – a reluctant Spaniard of mixed parentage to be sure, but a Spaniard all the same – this was my first 'anthropology at home' (Strathern 1987) after many years living and working overseas.

When planning my Barcelona fieldwork whilst still in the UK, I did not expect the #SpanishRevolution (as the indignados movement, or 15M, was originally known). As a matter of fact, no one did – certainly not in Catalonia, with its strong tradition of nationalism and reluctant Hispanity. One of my Catalan colleagues even suspected that the indignados had been 'astroturfed' by Spain's intelligence services to derail Catalonia's pro-independence movement. Indeed, on 10 July 2010, the day prior to my arrival, a million people had rallied in Barcelona against a ruling by Spain's