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New media and internet activism: from the ‘Battle of Seattle’ to blogging

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Since the 1990s, there have been growing discussions of internet activism and how new media have been used effectively by a variety of political movements (Best and Kellner, 2001; Couldry and Curran, 2003). The early adoption and successful use of the internet in the early 1990s by the indigenous EZLN Zapatista movement in the Chiapas region of Mexico quickly dramatized how new media and grass roots progressivism might synergize, excite the world, and challenge status quo culture and politics (Best and Kellner, 2001). Activists who were already deploying the internet as a technology for organizing and communicating in digital hubs such as The Well, quickly drew upon the Zapatista’s imaginative use of the internet to begin broadcasting and tailoring their own messages to an emerging global audience.

In the late 1990s, such activists began employing the internet to foster affiliations and stage events against the excesses of neo-liberalism and transnational corporate capitalism. Beginning with the 18 June 1999 ‘Carnival Against Capital!’ demonstration that covertly organized hundreds of thousands of protesters (including labor, environmentalist, feminist, anti-capitalist, animal rights, anarchist, and other groups) throughout the world to demonstrate in new found solidarity, the Carnival continued with the infamous ‘Battle for Seattle’ against the World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in December 1999. Thus, an international protest movement surfaced in resistance to neo-liberal institutions and their related globalization policies, while democracy, social justice, and a better world were championed. Since then, broad-based, populist political spectacles have become the norm, thanks to an evolving sense of the way in which the

internet may be deployed in a democratic and emancipatory manner by a growing planetary citizenry that is using the new media to become informed, to inform others, and to construct new social and political relations.

In the wake of the 11 September terror attacks and resulting terror war on a global scale, a tide of political activism has risen, with the internet playing an increasingly central role (Kellner, 2003). In late 2002 and early 2003, global anti-war movements began to emerge as significant challenges to Bush administration policies against Iraq and the growing threat of conflict. Reaching out to broad audiences, political groups such as MoveOn (<http://www.moveon.org>), ANSWER (<http://www.internationalanswer.org>), and the United for Peace & Justice (<http://www.unitedforpeace.org>) used the internet to circulate anti-war information, organize demonstrations, and promote a wide diversity of anti-war activities. One need only recall the unprecedented public demonstration of millions around the world on 15 February 2003, calling for peace in unison to realize that the new media represent a groundbreaking tool for global democracy. Indeed, after using the internet to successfully organize a wide range of anti-war and anti-corporate globalization demonstrations, activists (including many young people) are now continuing to build a 'virtual' bloc that monitors, critiques, and fights against the sort of aggressive versions of Western capitalism and imperialism being promoted by Bush, Blair, and their neo-liberal G8 counterparts.

The global internet, then, is creating the base and the basis for an unparalleled worldwide anti-war/pro-peace and social justice movement during a time of terrorism, war, and intense political struggle. Correspondingly, the internet itself has undergone radical transformations during this time. New web forms of design, such as web logs and wikis,¹ have evolved the internet's hypertextual architecture, even as such online phenomena as hacker culture, terrorism, and internet militancy have emerged from the technical-fringe to become a central feature of everyday life on the world wide web. In what follows, we will briefly examine how the internet has become steadily politicized in recent times, and how internet developments themselves have furthered oppositional politics generally. However, while our analysis will look to chart what we believe are some of the most interesting and powerful expressions of a politicized sensibility occurring today in new media spheres, our analysis is anything but another paean to 'cybergnosis' and the digital sublime. Rather, we believe that the internet activism of today is best perceived as informed by the spirit of the EZLN, the 'Battle of Seattle', and the diverse amalgams of social movements and subcultures that have matured along with the new media over the last five years. This is the internet as a living, historical force

and one of the keys to understanding and shaping the political and cultural life of the present age.

HACKING THE SYSTEM TO BYTES: THE INTERNET IN SOCIAL STRUGGLE

In opposition to the capitalist strategy of globalization-from-above, subcultures of cyberactivists have been attempting to carry out globalization-from-below, developing networks of solidarity and propagating oppositional ideas and movements throughout the planet.² Against the capitalist international of transnational corporate-led globalization, a 'Fifth International', to use Waterman's (1992) phrase, of computer-mediated activism is emerging that is qualitatively different from the party-based socialist and communist internationals. As the virtual community theorist Howard Rheingold notes (2002), advances in personal, mobile informational technology are providing rapidly the structural elements for the existence of fresh kinds of highly-informed, autonomous communities that coalesce around local lifestyle choices, global political demands, and everything in-between.

These multiple networks of connected citizens and activists transform the so-called 'dumb mobs' of totalitarian and polyarchical states into 'smart mobs' of socially active personages who are linked by notebook computers, personal digital assistant (PDA) devices, internet cellphones, pagers, and global positioning systems (GPS). Thus, while emergent mobile technology provides yet another impetus towards experimental identity construction and politics, such networking also links diverse communities such as labor, feminist, ecological, peace, and various anti-capitalist groups, providing the basis for a new politics of alliance and solidarity to overcome the limitations of postmodern identity politics (see Best and Kellner, 2001; Burbach, 2001; Dyer-Witheford, 1999).

Of course, right-wing and reactionary forces can, and have, used the internet to promote their political agendas as well, and an additional twist in the saga of technopolitics³ seems to be that allegedly, 'terrorist' groups are now using the internet increasingly to promote their causes. This has led to the post-Patriot Act implementation of powerful governmental surveillance systems such as Echelon and Carnivore, which monitor all forms of electronic information for keywords and behavior patterns that are deemed potentially threatening. Furthermore, the Bush administration has begun the attempt to discontinue websites which, it suspects, terror cells are frequenting to gain information and organize terrorist attacks – as happened infamously to Al Qaeda's Alneda.com. Moreover, the Bush administration proposed a TIA (Total Information Awareness, quickly changed to Terrorism Information Awareness) databank that would combine all extant data on individuals in one location, evoking fears of a digital panopticon.

Despite the expectation that any governmental administration would seek to target and disarm its enemy's information channels, it is the extreme reaction by the Bush administration to the perceived threats posed by the internet that have the subcultural forces associated with the battle against corporate globalization and war fighting in opposition to US internet policies. Drawing upon the expertise of a subculture of politically-minded computer 'hacktivists',⁴ people are becoming more informed about the risks involved in online communications. Thanks to the beneficent hacker culture, oppositional groups are now aware of the threats to their privacy posed by monitoring government agencies such as the Office of Homeland Security, and this in turn has led to a wider, populist opposition to Bush administration internet policies generally.

Additionally, hacktivists are involved in creating open-source software programs that can be used freely to circumvent the attempts by government and corporations to control the internet experience. Notably, and somewhat scandalously, hackers have released programs such as Six/Four (after Tiananman Square), that combines the peer-to-peer (P2P) capabilities of Napster or Kazaa along with a virtual private networking protocol that makes user identity anonymous, and Camera/Shy, a powerful web-browser stenography application that allows anyone to engage in secret information storage and retrieval. On a less militarist note, hacktivists have offered software such as the word processing suite OpenOffice (<http://www.openoffice.org>), thereby providing powerful and free alternatives to the PC hegemon Microsoft.

Another hacker ploy is the monitoring and exploitation for social gain of the booming wireless, wide-area network market (i.e. Wi-Fi, WAN, or WLAN). Besides offering institutions, corporations, and homes the luxury of internet and local network access for any and all users within the area covered by the wireless signal, potentially Wi-Fi also offers such freedoms to nearby neighbors and wireless pedestrians if such networks are not made secure. Thus has arisen the activist technique of 'war driving', in which a hacker drives through a community equipped with a basic wireless antenna and computer, searching for network access nodes (see <http://www.wardriving.com>). These free broadband internet access points are then gathered and added to online databases for community use, thereby providing 'gift economy' internet connectivity to all within range (see <http://www.freenetworks.org>).

BLOGGING: VIRTUALLY DEMOCRATIC

Free internet connectivity in itself does not necessarily lead to social benefit if its only use is the sort of e-commerce typical of the late 1990s corporate web and today's eBay. Importantly, however, new socially-interactive forms of internet media, such as web logs (blogs) and wikis, have become widely

popular communication tools alongside the ultimate 'killer application' of email. The new internet subculture that has erupted around 'blogging' is particularly deserving of analysis here, as bloggers have demonstrated themselves as technoactivists favoring not only democratic self-expression and networking, but also global media critique and journalistic sociopolitical intervention.

Blogs are partly successful because they are relatively easy to create and maintain – even for non-technical web users. Combining the hypertext of webpages, the multi-user discussion of messageboards and listservs, and the mass syndication ability of XML and email, blogs are also popular because they represent the next evolution of web-based experience. If the world wide web was about forming a global network of interlocking, informative websites, blogs make the idea of a dynamic network of ongoing debate, dialogue and commentary central and so emphasize the interpretation and dissemination of alternative information to a heightened degree.

While recent mainstream coverage of blogs tends to portray them as narcissistic domains for one's own individual opinion, and center on conservative or neo-liberal individual bloggers, many group blogs exist, such as American Samizdat (<http://www.drmenlo.com/samizdat/>), Metafilter (<http://www.metafilter.com>) and BoingBoing (<http://www.boingboing.net>), in which teams of contributors post and comment upon news stories, events, and issues of the day. One of the most important is the ever-expanding series of international Indymedia (<http://www.indymedia.com>) sites, erected by activists for the public domain to inform one another both locally and globally. But even for the hundreds of thousands of purely individual blogs, forming groups of fellow blog readers and publishers is the norm, and blog posts tend to an overwhelming degree to reference (and link) social interaction amongst the group(s) proper.

One result of bloggers' fascination with networks of links has been the subcultural phenomenon known as 'Google Bombing'. Documented in early 2002, it was revealed that the popular search engine Google had a special affinity for blogs because of its tendency to favor highly-linked, recently updated web content in its site ranking system. With this in mind, bloggers began campaigns to get large numbers of fellow bloggers to post links to specific postings that were designed to include the desirable keywords that Google users might normally search. A successful Google Bomb, then, would rocket the initial blog that began the campaign up Google's rankings to No. 1 for each and every one of those keywords – whether the blog itself had anything to do with them or not!

Thus, while those in the blog culture often abused this trick for personal gain (e.g. to get their own name and blog placed at the top of Google's most popular search terms), many in the blog subculture began using the Google Bomb as a tool for political subversion. Known as a 'justice bomb',

this use of blogs served to link a particularly distasteful corporation or entity to a series of keywords that either spoofs or criticizes the same. Hence, thanks to a Google Bomb, Google users typing in 'McDonald's' might very well be pointed to a much-linked blog post entitled 'Lies About Their Fries' as the top entry. While Google continues to favor blogs in its rankings, amidst the controversy surrounding the so-called 'clogging' of search-engine results by blogs, it has recently taken steps to de-emphasize blogs in its rating system and may soon remove blogs to their own search subsection altogether – this, despite blogs accounting for only an estimated 0.03 percent of Google's indexed web content.⁵

Google or not, many blogs are increasingly political in the scope of their commentary. Over the last year, a plethora of Left-oriented blogs were created and organized themselves in networks of interlinking solidarity, so as to contest what was perceived to be a politically-domesticated forum of conservative opinion across the blogosphere.⁶ Post-11 September, with the wars upon Afghanistan and Iraq, the phenomenon of 'Warblogging' arose to become an important and noted genre in its own right. Blogs, such as our own BlogLeft (<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/courses/ed253a/blogger.php>), became distinguished for providing a broad range of trustworthy alternative views concerning the objectives of the Bush administration and Pentagon and the corporate media spin surrounding them. One blogger, the now famous Iraqi Salam Pax (http://dear_raed.blogspot.com), gave outsiders a dose of the larger unexpurgated reality as the bombs exploded overhead in Baghdad. Meanwhile, in Iran, Hossein Derakhshan became the first blogger to be jailed for 'undermining national security through cultural activities'. In response to the need for completely anonymous and untraceable blogging (as in countries where freedom of speech is in doubt), open source software such as invisiblog (<http://www.invisiblog.com>) has been developed to protect online journalists' identities.

Political bloggers have demonstrated the ability to influence decision making, with the campaign the focus of attention upon the racist remarks made by then Speaker of the House Trent Lott, and the creation of a media frenzy over the dishonest reporting that was exposed recently at the *New York Times*. In the first case, Lott's remarks had been buried in the back of the *Washington Post* until communities of bloggers began publicizing them and generating the public and media interest that then led to his removal. In the second, bloggers again rabidly set upon the newsprint giant, whipping up so much controversy and hostile journalistic opinion that the *Times's* executive and managing editors were forced to resign in disgrace.

However, the success of blogging should not be judged solely on whether it generates obvious political effects. As alluded earlier, bloggers are expanding the notion altogether of what the internet is and how it can be used. Increasingly, bloggers are not tied to their desktops, writing in virtual

alienation from the world, but are posting pictures, text, audio and video on the fly from PDA devices and cellphones. Large political events, such as the World Summit for Sustainable Development, the World Social Forum, and the G8 forums all now have wireless bloggers providing real time alternative coverage. One environmental activist, a tree-sitter named Remedy, even broadcast a wireless account of her battle against the Pacific Lumber Company from her blog (<http://www.contrast.org/treesit>), 130 feet atop an old growth redwood. She has since been forcefully removed, but continues blogging in defense of a sustainable world in which new technologies can co-exist with wilderness and other species.

CONCLUSION: SITUATING OPPOSITIONAL POLITICS ONLINE

The examples in this article suggest how new media developments in technoculture make possible a reconfiguring of politics and culture and a refocusing of politics on everyday life. In this conjuncture, the ideas of Guy Debord and the Situationist International are especially relevant, with their stress on the construction of situations, use of technology, media of communication, and cultural forms to promote a revolution of everyday life, and to increase the realm of freedom, community, and empowerment.⁷ The ideas and practices of Debord and the Situationists have a bewitching afterlife in internet culture and its articulations with the social world. In summer 2003, new 'flash mobs' began emerging in major cities throughout the world, as groups of individuals answered email summons to appear in specific sites, coordinated through the use of hand-held GPS tracking systems, to carry out particular actions. These brief playful encounters, which united new cultural collectives through the use of the internet, usually involved absurdist interventions that confused shoppers, security guards, and the media, although many times their point was simply to liberate an urban space such that prevailing social norms were challenged and temporarily set aside.

Whether by using the internet to take part in a worldwide expression of dissent and disgust, to divert corporate agendas and militarism through the construction of freenets and new oppositional spaces and movements, or simply to encourage critical media analysis, debate, and new forms of journalistic community, the new information and communication technologies are indeed revolutionary. To a meaningful extent, they constitute a dramatic transformation of everyday life that is presently being constructed and enacted by internet subcultures. Yet, this transformation has often been a revolution that also promotes and disseminates the capitalist consumer society, individualism and competition, and that has involved new modes of fetishism, enslavement, and domination yet to be clearly perceived and theorized.

Thus, the internet is a contested terrain, used by Left, Right, and Center of both dominant cultures and subcultures in order to promote their own agendas and interests. The political battles of the future may well be fought in the streets, factories, parliaments, and other sites of past struggle, but politics is already mediated by broadcast, computer, and information technologies and will be so increasingly in the future. Therefore, those interested in the politics and culture of the future should be clear on the important role of the new public spheres and intervene accordingly, while critical cultural theorists and activists have the responsibility of educating students around the cultural and subcultural literacies that ultimately amount to the skills that will enable them to participate in the ongoing struggle inherent in cultural politics.

Thus, online activist subcultures have materialized as a vital new space of politics and culture in which a wide diversity of individuals and groups have used emergent technologies in order to help to produce new social relations and forms of political possibility. Many of these subcultures may become appropriated into the mainstream, but no doubt ever-new oppositional cultures and novel alternative voices and practices will appear as we navigate the ever-more complex present toward the always-receding future.

Notes

- 1 'Blogs' are hypertextual web logs which people use for new forms of journaling, self-publishing, and media/news-critique, as we discuss in detail below. For examples, see our two blogs: BlogLeft, URL (consulted November 2003): <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/courses/ed253a/blogger.php>; and Vegan Blog, URL (consulted November 2003): <http://getvegan.com/blog/blogger.php>. 'Wikis' (from the Hawaiian word for 'quick') are popular new forms of group databases and hypertextual archives, covered in more depth later in this article.
- 2 On globalization, see Best and Kellner (2001) and Kellner (1998, 2002). Of course, not all globalization-from-above is bad, as many human rights, environmental, and anti-war organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) demonstrate, and not all globalization-from-below is progressive, as terrorists and a multiplicity of reactionary groups who use the internet make clear.
- 3 On technopolitics, see Armitage (1999), Best and Kellner (2001), and Kellner (1997).
- 4 On hacker culture, see Himanen (2001) and Taylor (1999).
- 5 See Orlovski (2003).
- 6 The term 'blogosphere' has arisen to characterize the ecological nature of the blogging community. For a brief history of the term, see John Hiler's 'Blogosphere: The Emerging Media Ecosystem' at <http://www.microcontentnews.com/articles/blogosphere.htm>
- 7 On the importance of the ideas of Debord and the Situationist International to make sense of the present conjuncture see Best and Kellner (1997: Ch. 3), and on the new forms of the interactive consumer society, see Best and Kellner (2001).

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