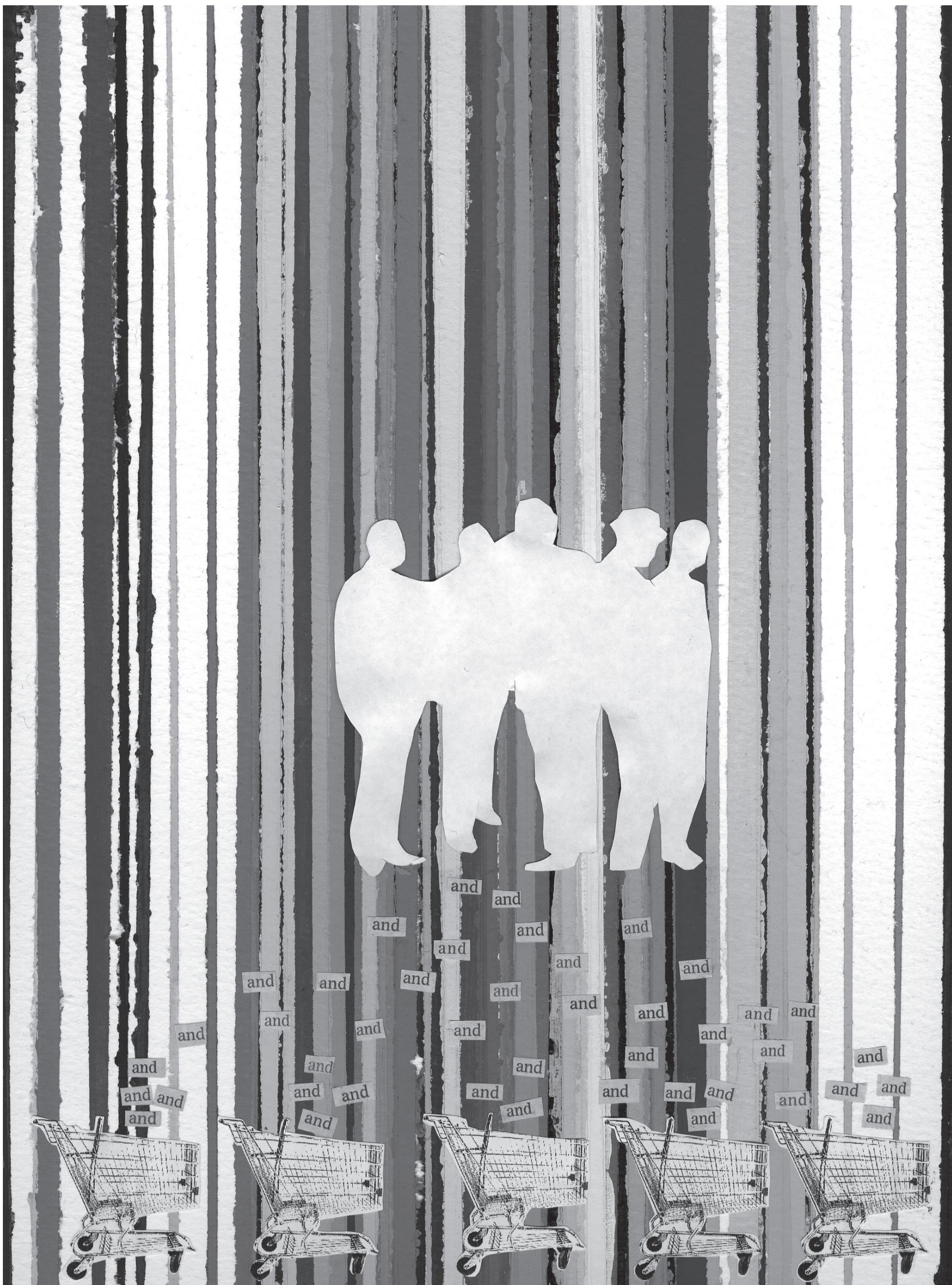




The Internet and Democracy: Beyond the Techno-libertarian Rhetoric

Ann McCluskey

Enthusiasts of early computer culture regarded the new technology as being politically empowering and therefore a means of undermining prevailing hierarchies and power structures. Ted Nelson and Harvey Rheingold were part of 1960s US Californian counter-culture, who were aligned with early proselytisers. In 1974 Nelson's proselytising had him claim, in *Computer Lib/Dream Machines* that: "the purpose of computers is human freedom"; they would provide an environment "which will enhance and nourish our minds and their capabilities, taking us not only to former levels of literacy, but far beyond, to new levels of understanding and literacy". The technology was therefore seen as a conduit to a utopian future. Rheingold¹, for his part, was by 1985 espousing a virtual community and citing the "potential importance of cyberspace to political liberties." This meant that cyber community campaigning was possible via email and electronic bulletin boards, greatly reducing the organisational complexity of traditional citizen activism – attracting sufficient numbers, keeping groups informed, organising meetings. Problems of locating and orchestrating the like-minded in 'meat space' were overcome, with a potential increase in political, social and intellectual leverage. Rheingold's only caveat was fear of corporate infringement on cyber open space. Nelson qualified his enthusiasm in a plea for user-friendly software and applications. So far as they are concerned, the only impediments to freedom are technical and economic.

IT evangelism has a contemporary expression in, among others, the Free/Libre and Open Source Software movements (FLOSS)² who do much besides alleviating fears of technical clunkiness and commercial displacement. "Free software" does not mean no payment required, but is instead technologically predicated, it's "free as in speech, not beer"³. These not-for-profit organisations develop programs operating under different licensing regimes to proprietary software. Unfortunately, a schism erupted between the two camps in a drive for business-friendliness. Open Source advocates considered the Free Software camp's emphasis on ethics, freedom and social impact to be impediments to engaging successfully with the business community. As a consequence Free/Libre maintains two criteria that differentiates the respective positions: users are free to use the program for any purpose; and users are free to distribute the software to others. Both make source code available for examination and tinkering by other techno-enthusiasts. The founding principle of the free software philosophy is that the sharing of programs – which are for the public good, in whatever form – engenders a spirit of altruism and neighbourliness. Those espousing this philosophy consider themselves to be in essence a social movement.

Richard Stallman, founder of the Free Software Foundation, fears restrictive licensing will "damag[e] social cohesion". Freedom to distribute programs to others and use them for any purpose underpins Stallman's ethos. Failure to share is harmful to wider society causing psychosocial harm in the shape of a diminished sense of the public spirit and the public good. For the free software movement 'freely' available virtual produce is an essential cog in the

functioning of a benevolent society. Its pivotal place is defacto, and within this logic, necessary for the literacy and liberation so valued by Rheingold and Nelson. The idealism typified in Nelson and Rheingold pervades the contemporary FLOSS ethos, which seems to be that freedom is realised by operating outside the stifling bind of copyright law. But however liberating this may be in a creative sense, how liberating is on a social level?

In 'Change of the century: free software and the positive possibility',⁴ Martin Hardie examines the 'licence fetishism' of FLOSS, which seeks alternatives to copyright law and notions of intellectual property. Hardie unpacks the copyleft/General Public License models used by FLOSS. For him, these licences are alternative laws, invoking the globalising tendencies of US imperialism – rather than an alternative *to* law. So we have the rather less liberating impetus toward a cyber implementation of American notions of law that are based on free speech. The extension of thinking in the legal arena morphs into virtual applications of freedom:

In the popular narrative, "social movements" such as the Free Software Foundation (FSF), and its relations, the Creative Commons and the Electric Frontier Foundation, act as "patriots" and guardians of "our" law and freedom. This freedom is bound intimately with the logic of open democracy and with free and open markets.

The logical outcome of liberal democratic models of governance is the libertarian nature of FLOSS, whereby the right to freedom includes the freedom to own property. Radicalised elements among FLOSS users⁵, however, want to see notions of property-owning overcome, as these movements prefer property-free communism rather than accommodate capitalism. But can the idealistic claims for software technology bear scrutiny in the 21st Century's informatic capitalism? The spectrum of thinking within FLOSS includes anti-capitalism as well as moderated or tempered capitalism. These ambiguities harbour the undoing of some of the principles so dearly held in cyber communities. Questions arise in relation to the role of cultural and communication produce in a market-driven economy, especially while these renegade producers make claims for a resistant or radical stand in the face of the law and the market.

If computer technology is to have meaningful political or democratic application, how is this to be achieved in the spheres of media and governance? Widespread Internet uptake in consumerist societies has established its place as a popular medium of information and communication. But uses are diverse. FLOSS ideals do not author the technology (even though programs devised under these licences provide the infrastructure for much Internet use and content). Techno-libertarians may imbue the computer with an 'intentional' meaning, determining what it's supposed to be simply by how they describe it. But describing it as liberating falls short of it being so. For instance, how liberating, or intellectually expanding, is watching porn or shopping on the Internet? As the progeny of technical evolution, the Web and Internet are still genetically framed by their provenance in computer culture. If computers' purpose is freedom, its technological offspring

by inference have the same liberating DNA. The claims for liberation or freedom percolate into popular discourse. Only when censorship kicks in – Google removing links to politically sensitive sites in China – is the tip of the apolitical iceberg glimpsed, and the contradictions manifest themselves.

This technological determinism forecloses a debate which tackles the Internet's role in the messy, material world. Potentially, this can play into the hands of the less-democratically minded. If engaging with a computer enables 'liberation' and by extension, democratic good health, then no-one and nothing else need struggle to maintain a polity. (However, a geographical community still needs to be engaged with⁶.) But beyond the rhetoric of freedom, and in light of its commercial as well as social applications, what are the real possibilities for Internet technology in a democratic realm? A meaningful relationship between information communications technologies (ICT) and politics requires more than just rhetoric and wishful thinking.

Early enthusiasts eulogised over new technology prior to the present multimedia use of computers. Convergence is now upon us as TV, radio and newspapers all move to sharing a single outlet and go online⁷. The implications of this for road-to-nirvana claims in a contemporary media landscape set new challenges at the interface of ICT and democratic governance. So we must ask ourselves what histories of technology reveal in terms of democratising hopes? "Utopian archaeologies" have been examined by John Dovey⁸ in relation to video technology. The advent of video in the late 1960s precipitated revolutionary hopes of usurping centralised media and aspirations of generating democratic participation framed the utopian discourses. Here was a counter-attack to the debilitating impact of television, which had contributed to the "imperialization of the intellect"⁹ and whose technology lay beyond the access of many, if not most, due to its institutional and technical opacity. The 'liberating' capacity of video was inscribed in its technical specification. It possessed attributes of access (technology was no longer the sole domain of the expert) and also allowed editorial control and interactive feedback (no messing with "the truth"). And it was a technology affordable to, and used by, wage-earners. As a consequence, it was perceived as a medium enabling mass participation – there was no limit to who could film, nor what could be recorded. Its putative place in a decentralised media signified its techno-libertarian credentials. Sadly, for the techno-libertarians, it did not realise its revolutionary potential. Centralised media was not only maintained, but it has also since been elevated to even greater privilege in the contemporary neo-liberal atmosphere. As Dovey unveils, the tale of technological determinism is fraught with unfulfilled prophecies and misguided futurology.

Contemporary claims for the empowering potential of the World Wide Web and the Internet share similar aspirations. Once again, attributes of accessibility outside centralised media and interactive feedback – think blogs and wikis as the latest examples – are equated with ideas of freedom and the ability to be intellectually engaged/empowered. But, can the Internet with its infrastructure of Web pages¹⁰ overcome the

shortcomings of video culture? The distribution capacity of the Internet addresses issues of reception and audience which remained the obstacle for video output in the 1970s. There is a potential audience of billions for Net produce. But do numbers alone ensure its capacity to undermine centralised media? And is democratic participation merely about numbers? What about content, or patterns of audience reception?

Democracy and the Public Sphere

Before examining these issues, firstly, it is necessary to establish a workable concept of democracy. In doing so, the potential scope and limits of technologies in a democratic sphere can be fleshed out. Exploring initiatives that provide the Net with a place in the democratic process illustrates its role in a functioning polity. Iris Marion Young in *Inclusion and Democracy* (2000) states that:

Democracy is better thought of as a process that connects ‘the people’ and the powerful, and through which people are able significantly to influence their actions.

In complex mass societies these processes operate via the mechanisms of representative democracy. In order to be politically represented a citizenship needs to be informed. This is the part the media plays in a polity. Concerns from personal experience, or those expressed for the ‘imagined community’, can then be made known to politicians. This is the point of connection. There is not space here to explore the shortcomings of parliamentary systems. Suffice to say, issues of privileged access and lobbying undermine the connective aspect of this model. However, barriers to influence and engagement notwithstanding, the Internet does have a place in a *deliberative* democracy. Properly configured it has a role to play in enabling an informed citizenship: “the point of the deliberative process is to allow people to form opinions, rather than just express them.”¹¹ This foregrounds its role in the public sphere – a site of debate, contest and opinion forming. Nevertheless, these democratic processes are complex. Certain aspects of techno-libertarian thinking appear to invoke the less involved and negotiated forms of government found in self-regulation, dispensing with the need to engage with the complexities of a society where differing opinions exist. Perhaps there is a yen for the state-free direct or delegative democracy of the Commune which Marx envisaged¹². Here, I can only address the Internet’s role in deliberative democracy, as presently exists which, argues John Street¹³, produces “better decisions... in the face of social problems”. In acknowledging the gap between the claims and the realities of representative democracy, it is perhaps helpful to invoke David Held’s notion of an “ideal normative agreement” in relation to our adherence to democratic models. This agreement

... follows rules and laws on the grounds that they are the regulations we would have agreed to in ideal conditions, with, for instance, all the knowledge we would like and all the opportunity we would want to discuss the requirements of others.

However, before addressing the challenges facing the Internet’s capacity to function as a cyber public sphere in a deliberative democracy, let’s examine contemporary claims made for Internet culture in the form of ‘Web 2.0’ and its implications for notions of ‘freedom’. As the most recent technological evolution in Web culture its enthusiasts once again promote a popular and idealised discourse. New cultural forms are being forged, often in the potentially fortune-making world of entrepreneurial culture. But in a neo-liberal economic environment what is being overlooked is that the role of the citizen in a functioning polity is conflated with that of the consumer in a free-market. And the freedoms

sought are not necessarily political, but economic.

Cultural Forms and Libertarianism

In discussions of Web 2.0, its function is detached from instrumental political process. Liberty, freedom and empowerment are implied, but more in the name of escaping or circumventing the inaccessibility of state-regulated media or corporate power. It is less “connecting the people and the powerful” and more putting two fingers up to the powerful in acts of rebellion. It is no revolution. There is an emphasis on undermining the consumer/producer distinction, i.e. the consumer is *producer*, but the identity refracted through the prism of individualism is that of consumer.

The ambits and forms being disrupted and reconfigured by the Internet are entrepreneurial and business models. This is especially evident in the areas of retail, promotion, distribution and copyright. As online buying grows exponentially, the high street is hit and the economic bite is felt, most recently by music retailers HMV.¹⁴ Costs calculated to ensure viability in a limited, and costly, square-meterage of city-centre prime real estate are undercut by the cyber-stocked online suppliers.¹⁵ Consequently, exigencies of economies of scale no longer apply. Subcultural, non mainstream CDs or books are in abundant supply in the long tails of cyber listings. The stranglehold of the conglomerate suppliers loosens and niche markets are no longer the risk factor of before. In other words, there’s more choice, and so more to consume.

Meanwhile, the intermediary-laden world of promotion is romantically sidelined as singer/songwriters’ and bands’ websites and webcasts replace agents, managers and PR machines. The Arctic Monkeys gained a reputation via the web and eventually signed up for a recording deal with Domino, whilst Sandi Thom captured live performances from her flat on a humble webcam. She began with an audience of 70 which soon grew to 100,000 across Europe. The Internet as an open forum for distribution has a capacity to circumvent the niche marketing of big business, and in doing so snubs the exclusive promotion processes of major record labels. These shifts may be alternatives to promotion and distribution, but musicians still sign contracts with the transnationals. Thom, for example, signed to RCA/Sony BMG once established through a free source, again giving more choice to consumers. However, the claim for free consumption belies computer and broadband costs even if it does provide a broader cultural landscape. But the corporates still win in claiming the talent they see profits in.

Building audiences from the interpersonal to a global fan base is now achievable via social networking. This is a ‘Web 2.0’ application and the term alludes to the “architecture of participation”¹⁶ lauded by the techno-enthusiasts. Everybody gets to join in and be a producer as well as a consumer. In another display of techno-communitarianism Aleks Krotoski writes in the Guardian that this social software “elevates the Internet from a simple tool into an interpersonal phenomenon connecting people in a meaningful way.”¹⁷ By tagging favourite articles, videos or images, like-minded souls can locate cultural products to their taste. It takes the bookmarking function of a browser, creating a classification system of data which can be accessed by others with a similar online profile – a “folksonomy” rather than a taxonomy. Other Web 2.0 applications have enabled blogs and wikis – salient and, undoubtedly, instrumental additions to participation culture in terms of political spheres, as well as those that are purely commercial. But this cosy world of cyber friends enriching the cultural landscape has significance beyond the merely emotional and interpersonal realms.

Claims made for social networking are also

premised on empowering users: data is elicited from a social source rather than a corporate-owned search engine. Google, once the epitome of the Web’s egalitarian principle, prioritises its listings via sponsored advertising rather than being user-generated. It is now regarded with compound distrust in the aftermath of its acquiescence to the Chinese authorities. In other words, participation is government permitted. Political and economic forces undermine liberating hopes which have been placed in technology. Google, post sell off, is more atuned to maintenance of foreign markets and a new mass consumership rather than the political rights of global citizens. The *realpolitik* of government interference and corporate financial imperatives have combined, as they do in the meat world, to strip the Internet of its frontier-trouncing capacities.

In addition, the Internet, in the guise of Web 2.0 applications, is a new battleground in the intellectual copyright war. The dotcom crash of Web 1.0 chastened the venture capitalists and a halcyon era of inflated hyper-investment in speculative virtual enterprises ended. However, recent acquisitions mark a renewed interest in cyber entrepreneurialism. News Corporation’s buy-up of the loss-making MySpace for \$580million may seem financially wanton. But the surge of conglomerates onto the Net, in whatever form, is testament to its capacity to deliver advertising revenues now in decline in newspapers and television and on the increase in cyberspace. Sites with vast audiences are proffered vast sums in acknowledgement of their realisable commercial potential. Both the social networking site Del.icio.us and the community photo-sharing site Flickr were bought by Yahoo; the latter sale causing considerable consternation amongst its 1.2 million members. Yahoo had previously sought to claim intellectual rights over the contents of a previous site it bought up, although in the case of Flickr they provided reassurances that this would not happen again. However, the danger is that big business simply appropriates the community kudos invoked by Creative Commons licences, which in its increasing use now has wider cultural resonance. Subcultures are regularly consumed by corporations to bolster goods’ sellability.

Herein lies an essential tension and contradiction of Net entrepreneurial development. In its libertarian and altruistic character, the FLOSS world of code producers provides the Web with its intellectual copyright-usurping products, yet capitulation to the market is the course taken by those exploiting these non-corporate software forms. Members of community sites are left adrift in a corporate sea they specifically chose to avoid when first joining these sites.

Flickr’s submission of photographs operates under Creative Commons licences, which is a form of ‘copyleft’ whereby text and imagery can be reused, but only if it’s not for profit and the author is credited. If money is made, fees can be arranged. These licensing forms have enabled “mashups” – hybrid cultural forms constructed by taking data from one site and adding it to data on another.¹⁸ The BBC have provided Feed Factory and Backstage.bbc.co.uk to enable mashups, claiming it’s done as part of their public-service profile. Suspicions are raised, however, when other BBC initiatives are blatantly for financial gain, such as their on-demand programme download service. Why does the BBC support mashups, when it appears that forays into new media are generally part of agendas with long-term financial goals in mind?

One hypothesis requires first of all examining big business behaviour in this arena. There is no business model logic as yet for mashups, but corporate enterprise is lowering its resistance to what traditionally would have been copyright

infringement cases. Rather than sue (as witnessed in cases of illegal downloading of music files) film studios, for example, are now in discussion either with mashup creators (any publicity is still publicity), or with peer-to-peer application providers.¹⁹ Big business rationale could be two-fold. Firstly, if money is to be made from sites containing data provided for free, investment in terms of waiving copyright fees is repaid in future advertising revenues, or subscription/download charges. Secondly, as FLOSS technologies overtake corporations in terms of innovation, the ‘can’t beat them, join them’ strategy is deployed in an attempt to head off piracy culture. However, if these technological innovations are now being bought up and/or embraced by the conglomerates, what are the implications for the egalitarian principles of techno-libertarianism as well as public space?

Communications media has always profited from what John Thompson refers to in *The Media and Modernity* (1995) as the ‘symbolic valorisation’ of media text. But mashups and peer-to-peer technologies are innovations outwitting existing modes of data creation and dissemination, thereby signifying another notch on the nerd’s bedpost as he usurps standard regulation/copyright/publishing practice of traditional media. In the fusion of the postmodern world of bricolage and cyber information fetishisation, the symbolic valorisation of text can be recycled to squeeze further marketability from it. Data operates as a signifier: what is signified is economic viability and what is connoted in the creation of new ‘signs’ is the mythology of ‘democratic freedom’. Or, for the more radical ‘communist’ elements of FLOSS deploying filesharing, the myth is the end of capitalism. Reordering data becomes an endless process of fishing through the deconstructed ether of hypertext, fetishistically privileging cybered form over political content. But information text is neither knowledge nor ‘freedom’. Often, the only liberty being sought is untrammelled access to new markets. Information fiddling replaces politics and democratic endeavours in place of meaningful communication or participation.

So, this cat-and-mouse game may not be as radical or anti-corporate as envisaged. And in the event of even public organisations such as the BBC providing data for these new cultural forms, how is any public media space to be maintained if it is continually absorbed into other media forms which could be put to commercial use? The battle to maintain non-corporate and egalitarian space in the virtual world is undermined as the public spaces created and maintained in this arena become corporatised in the buy ups and sell offs. Rheingold’s fear that the big boys will belligerently invade the space is misplaced: instead it’s being voluntarily handed over to them – by the techno-communitarians. Access to digitised spaces requires either investment in technology hardware or access to distribution platforms. As consumers, these artefacts and services are to be paid for. Public space is ever diminished in the conflation of freedom of access and choice in the market with political equality. And radicalised elements may be burying their head in the sand in an opt-out culture which does not tackle the real problems of diminishing public service media. Remaining marginalised will mitigate against the political leverage hoped for by Rheingold. The victim is a pluralist public space free from corporate influence.

The notionalities and idealism surrounding the Web/Internet and democracy may be attributable to the American political culture FLOSS communities hail from. Cass Sunstein in *republic.com* (2000) examines the role of the Internet in a US republican system of representative democracy. There is an emphasis on free expression as a pivotal aspect of democratic functioning. Whilst Sunstein is thorough in

politically constructing the Internet as a site for democratic process, the techno-enthusiasts may equate the unfettered registering of free expression in cyberspace as a sufficient criterion to claim democratic credibility. And the free expression is not only registered in contraposition to the influence of the corporation, but also to government: the techno-communitarian ethos is strongly anti-regulation. Cyberspace activist, John Perry Barlow of the Electric Frontier Foundation, in his piece “A Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace”, requested that “Governments of the Industrial World, I ask you to leave us alone.” As Sunstein points out, regulation established the Internet in the form of government action and subsidy at its inception. The fetishisation of free expression, in whatever form, whilst divorced from complex democratic processes may be attributable to the US Constitution’s First Amendment. The right to free speech is undoubtedly a tenet of a democratic society, but it is not assured without the facilitation of regulated frameworks. As John Street reminds us: It makes little sense to talk of ‘free speech’ without reference to the methods by which (mass) communication occurs. This ability to speak freely depends on access to the main means of communication, and this is not a necessary or natural state of affairs. It has to be organized or created.

And Sunstein reminds us that free speech is not an absolute in terms of beneficence: making available on websites lists of doctors who have carried out abortions is a call for criminality, not public good.

Reconfiguring the Public Service Ethos for Digital Media

The above outlines how the apolitical concept of the Internet engenders a culture which may be neglectful of its place in public space whilst claiming to uphold that public space from corporate and state infringement. However, beyond the democratic shortcomings of corporate machinations and techno-communitarian solipsism, the politics of citizenship are further challenged, not by laissez-faire libertarianism, but by the media landscape shifting toward “narrowcasting” – as opposed to broadcasting – and also by “cyberbalkanisation”. This is the tendency of some users to visit only those websites that confirm and pander to already-held prejudices, or move to ever more extreme positions once a group sharing one’s opinions is identified.

Digitisation, convergence, and the customisation of media pose significant challenges in maintaining functioning public spheres. Habermas’s conceptualisation of 17th Century bourgeois mercantile culture as an idealised ambit of political communication²⁰ has its shortcomings, but it functions to differentiate this sphere from public space which is not necessarily about opinion forming. The public sphere model dovetails with Graham Murdock’s model of cultural citizenship²¹, comprised of information and cultural rights. Information rights are the provision of a full range of information on government and corporate issues impacting on people’s lives and the “broadest array of arguments and conceptual frames”, to enable the interpretation of this information. This provides a framework for the forming of knowledge. Cultural rights embody having one’s “experiences, beliefs and aspirations represented in the major fora of public culture.” Clearly, the Internet is potentially able to fulfil these requirements, being both a provider of information and a forum for expression and debate. Yet impediments exist to ensuring its place in a public sphere.

In the mass mediated culture of broadcasting, a plurality of recipients determined the audience.

In a narrowcast culture, the fragmenting audiences and markets of a multi-channelled, digitised landscape cannot assure hybrid audiences of differing opinion and proclivities. As radio and television converge on the Internet, narrowcasting exponentially establishes a mode of reception which challenges the rights to the plethora of information and arguments required for opinion forming. Multichannelledom and its genre-limited content pander to the myth of choice but that there are fewer genres and therefore less choice in the audience-grab of ratings-assured programming is a fact that is ignored in the freedom-of-choice rhetoric.

The second shortcoming in this neo-liberal invasion of communicative space is a withdrawal from the normative criteria of public service broadcasting. In a discursive shift to consumership, only tokenistic nods to social responsibility, accountability and diversity are apparent. This occurs in an attempt to bridge the contradiction that is political regulation requiring public service programming and simultaneous political harassment demanding justification for the licence fee. The BBC, while having been assured licence-fee funding until 2016, is now morphing less discreetly into an international media player. Lacking unqualified political support since the Peacock report in 1986, the BBC has hedged its bets. Its trajectory in the direction of commercialisation is justified as a means of returning money made “back to licence fee payers to invest in programmes.”²² Deregulation since the Government White Paper of 1988 has proceeded apace. Globalisation of media operations, as the background against which all interests must operate and compete, underpins government deregulation and commercial rationales.

As television prepares for Internet convergence, the diminution of public service content meets the culture of choice of multichannelledom. What are the ramifications for the polity of a public sphere? In an ambit in which different arguments are brought to bear, and through debate opinion is formed, can plurality be sustained if an audience is no longer subject to (albeit paternalistic) scheduling but free to choose in niche channels? If documentaries, current affairs and also socially reflective drama are overlooked in the indulged preference for sport, music, or lifestyle programming, what scope remains for Murdock’s requirements for cultural citizenship? In an atmosphere of deregulation, the risk is a media landscape doomed to entertainment and leisure fulfilment, with spectacularised news coverage as the only recourse to current affairs.²³

The distributive capacity of the Internet is being utilised to meet these concerns. In the US, where the retreat from public service television runs at pace, vociferous legal lobbying is deployed to forestall any attempt at even the meagrest public service provision. Corporate media lawyers invoke infringement of the First Amendment – free speech signifying unregulated commercial operation – to ward off governmental regulation being imposed on commercial imperatives.²⁴ In the US and UK websites are being established that reclaim a public mediated space in the face of corporate hegemony and government deregulation. Democracy TV is an example of this²⁵. It is a free, open-source platform based in Massachusetts which gives space to video and film covering social and political issues. In the UK, the Broadcasting Trust has a website²⁶ with 25 hours of archive material from community and grassroots films. The hopes for democratic participation are met as access and distribution limits are overcome. But does this establish Internet programmes as inherent facets of a public sphere? Are the hopes of techno-libertarians finally realised?

As techno-communitarianism is testament

to, the Internet is a medium conducive to communing with the like-minded. However, is the role of the Internet in a public sphere of debate and opinion-forming foreclosed in the nature of Net engagement? In a replay of computer communities’ “narcissism of similarity” – identified by Stephen Doheny-Farina in *The Wired Neighbourhood* (1996) – websites are visited which relate to personal interests and/or reflect already-held opinions and beliefs. The capacity of the Internet for mass customisation of information reduces the likelihood of serendipitously encountering new voices and opinions, reducing its deliberative capacity. This certainly puts paid to Sunstein’s view that “unplanned, unanticipated encounters are central to democracy itself.”

Sunstein also fears that not only will democracy itself suffer, but there is a tendency toward cyberbalkanisation. He offers several solutions to the potential for cyberbalkanisation on the Net, all involving degrees of regulation. One proposal requires providing hyperlinks to sites with differing opinions, although he prefers this to be done via voluntary self-regulation using co-operative agreements rather than government imposition. Andrew Shapiro, on the other hand, in *The Control Revolution* (1998), advocates government funding of a Public.Net site dedicated to dissemination of differing points of view. For such a site to have a visible public profile, he proposes an icon on the computer serving as both an advertisement and a gateway. Thirdly, paralleling the arbitrary nuggets of information encountered in physical public spaces, Noah D. Zatz²⁷ suggests cyberspace ‘sidewalks’ – an automatic, and interruptive, connection to alternative-view sites. All these initiatives are attempts to configure the Internet as a forum for opinion forming by providing structures enabling its place in a cyber public sphere, where different arguments and beliefs are aired and which provides the opportunity for opinion forming, not just opinion expression.

Regulatory suggestions such as those posited by Sunstein may be countered on several fronts, even by those sharing these concerns. Any attempts at regulation in the name of public service could precipitate a wholesale regulation. The plethora and plurality of opinion and information presently available online could be undermined. In China, a licence is required for Internet access. Could attempts in liberal democracies to ensure “balanced” views, or regulate access, risk unleashing increasing editorial imposition? The danger is ideological gerrymandering if not quite the blatant censorship of Chinese expression and a reassertion of, what is arguably, the present situation in broadcasting regulation.

The dissolving of geographical boundaries in cyberspace is reflected in globalisation’s arguable dissolving of nation state boundaries. However, the nation state can swiftly reassert its geographical sovereignty if threatened in virtual space. The Chinese government’s interventions too clearly illustrate that free expression and liberty are dependent on more than technology. These tensions are a harbinger of the potentially illiberal nature of cyber meddling. Regulation – even in the name of balance – can be a Pandora’s Box.

Conclusion

Claims for a global utopia afforded by the Internet seem spurious in the face of the economic and structural realities facing the developing world²⁸. However, the presence of domestic computers and burgeoning Internet access precipitated by broadband in western consumer societies is reaching a critical mass. As a tool in negotiating mediated space, it is no longer the domain of its early proponents who were principally white, English-speaking,

middle class males. Iris Marion Young advocates conceptualising the public sphere as both singular and containing “subaltern counter publics”. These are the groups often deploying the Net as an organising tool. In the wake of globalisation John Keane in ‘Structural transformations of the public sphere’ (1995), further distinguishes public spheres operating at micro, meso and macro levels. The thousands of disputants at localised level embody the micro public sphere, whilst the nation-state and supra-national agencies – such as the EU – are respectively reflected in the meso and macro public spheres.

The Internet’s capacity to compress space and time and connect people across global geographical divides attests to its role in providing a forum for negotiating the meso and macro public spheres – albeit in a qualified form, unless every member of the globe is Internet linked. Whilst much of Internet culture – including its egalitarian principles – is rooted in its US origin, the concerns of the radical elements of techno-enthusiasts are pan-national in a globalised arena of capital accumulation and conglomerate manoeuvring. The Internet is presently prey to the consuming energies of big business²⁹. So provision must be made to maintain its ability to function as a public space and a public sphere. If regulation incites fears of hierarchies and power structures that are reconfigured for virtuality then a debate is required in the name of public good that tackles maintenance. Many benevolent operators determining the pace of Internet change work to a model of social entrepreneurship. But this is the desultory face of individualism left to save the Net from ‘the doing evil’ problems of corporate capitalism. The Internet requires forms of public service action, as well as free software/open source initiatives and deployment, to ensure its democratising potential. Presently this is negotiated in the shadow of the fickle interface between national government and the globalised market. Any technology is bedded in social and political cultures, and is a product of those cultures: meanings and applications are contingent. Unfortunately, libertarianism will not protect the democratic application of the Net from voracious market forces. Indeed, it is in danger of paving the way ideologically for total commercial appropriation of the Net. The idealising rhetoric, in which many evangelising Web groups couch their philosophy, may in fact rob a new technology of its place in the polity.

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With thanks to Peter McCluskey and Nic Wistreich.

Notes

- 1 ‘The virtual community: finding connection in a computerised world’, (1994), Secker and Warburg.
- 2 See www.gnu.org/philosophy/shouldbefree.html for Stallman’s position on the ideological differences between free and open source software. www.opensource.org/ for the Open Source Initiative’s site.
- 3 This is an oft-cited quote from Richard Stallman, the Free Software Foundation founder. Software may be free, as in gratis, but this is not a prerequisite of the term.
- 4 See *Mute – Underneath the Knowledge Commons*, (2005), Vol 2 #1 www.metamute.org
- 5 See *Mute* (ibid) for interviews with groups using FLOSS for file-sharing or supporting independent video-makers.
- 6 Kevin Robins critiques Rheingold as a techno communitarian who is conservative and nostalgic invoking a restoration of a ‘lost’ community. In evading issues of politics and power, Rheingold is proffering ‘not an alternative society, but an alternative to society’. See *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision*, (1996), Routledge.
- 7 See Charles Arthur’s article ‘Dreams of faster TV streams meet nightmares of reality’ in *The Guardian*, 2 February, (2006). This article outlines the bandwidth and software problems presently experienced. However,

- there are already initiatives by media companies to make programmes specifically for the Internet. A pilot project has already been run by BBC 2.
- 8 See ‘The revelation of unguessed worlds’, (1996) (no reference).
 - 9 People’s Video Theatre, ‘Proposal for Video Theatre’, *Radical Software*, Issue Two, (1972). For more dystopian technological determinism dealing with television, see Kalle Lasn’s *Culture Jam* (1999), Quill/HarperCollins.
 - 10 The Web is a collection of pages in HTML, although other languages also exist for Web content. The Internet is a network of computers enabling the dissemination of Web content.
 - 11 John Street in ‘Remote control? Politics, technology and “electronic democracy”’, *European Journal of Communication*, (1997), Vol. 12
 - 12 David Held in *Models of Democracy*, (1996), Polity, outlines the histories and aspirations of various democracy models. John Street, (ibid), examines the argument that plebiscite vote-registering, an example of ‘direct democracy’ – which the Internet could be deployed for – is simply an individualistic ‘registering of preferences’. Issues of the public good risk being circumvented without a representative system.
 - 13 Ibid.
 - 14 See Julia Finch’s article ‘HMV boss is first victim as Internet price war batters the high street’ in *The Guardian*, 6 January, (2006).
 - 15 www.wired.com/wired/archive/12.10/tail.html Chris Anderson outlines the ‘long tail’ phenomenon.
 - 16 Google ‘O’Reilly-What is Web 2.0’, for an article giving a technical break down of Web 2.0 applications.
 - 17 See ‘How the web will link us all’ 29 December, (2005).
 - 18 Jack Schofield’s article ‘In the mix’, *The Guardian*, 2 February, (2006) covers mashup culture and how those creating successful forms are headhunted by firms such as Yahoo.
 - 19 Bernhard Warner’s article in *The Guardian*, ‘File sharing? It’s great business’, (9 March, 2006) examines corporate embracing of previously illegal file sharing tactics.
 - 20 See *Masses Classes and the Public Sphere*, (2000), Verso, edited by Mike Hill and Walter Montag, a collection of essays examining the place of capitalism in the public sphere and the omission of women, the proletariat and minority groups from this conceptualisation.
 - 21 See ‘Corporate dynamics and broadcasting futures’, (1994), in *Controlling Broadcasting: Access and Policy and Practice in North America and Europe*, Manchester University Press.
 - 22 David Moody, head of strategy and a board member of BBC Worldwide, quoted in ‘The BBC wants to make money from the web’, by Jane Martinson in *The Guardian*, 29 March, (2006).
 - 23 In ‘Bad News from Israel’, (2004), Pluto Press, Greg Philo and Mike Berry highlight a culture in which editorial agendas are driven by decisions for dramatic visuals to retain audience numbers. In ‘Making television news in the satellite age’ (1997), *Live, Direct and Biased? Making Television in the Satellite Age*, Arnold, Brent MacGregor examines how technology has determined the ‘live’ and ‘latest news’ formats, both of which can dilute values of understanding and accuracy.
 - 24 See Cass Sunstein in ‘republic .com’
 - 25 See www.getdemocracy.com
 - 26 See www.showcase.commedia.org.uk
 - 27 This article ‘Sidewalks in cyberspace: making space for public forums in an electronic environment’ (1998), from Vol. 12 of the *Harvard Journal of Law and Technology*, is available on-line at <http://jolt.law.harvard.edu/articles/pdf/12HarvJLTech149.pdf>
 - 28 See ‘FLOSS redux: notes on African software politics’ Mute, (ibid) by Soenke Zehle, which identifies the uneven adoption of IT development in Africa, and the particular problems of corporate infiltration of IT provision which can shift wealth from local software industries.
 - 29 See Nic Wistreich’s article ‘The march for neutrality continues’ at www.netribution.net detailing Internet Service Providers’ moves to establish different speeds of Web information loading which will be paid for.