

New Media and Oppositional Politics: A Critical/Reconstructive Approach to Blogs and Beyond

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It has been just over a decade since the blossoming of hypertext and the emergence of the utopian rhetoric of cyberdemocracy and personal liberation that accompanied the growth of the new online communities that formed the nascent World Wide Web. While the initial cyberoptimism of many ideologues and theorists of the “virtual community” (Rheingold; Barlow; Gates; Kelly) now seems partisan and dated, debates continue to rage over the nature, effects, and possibilities of the Internet and technopolitics.¹ Some claim that the Internet’s role, as the primary engine driving the ecological arrangement of today’s new media, is simply to produce a proliferation and cyberbalkanization of “daily me” news feeds and fragmented communities (Sunstein; Van Alstyne & Brynjolfsson), while others argue that Internet content is often reduced to the amplification of cultural noise and effectless content in what might be termed a new stage of “communicative capitalism” (Dean).²

In our view, the continued growth of the Internet and other new media has ultimately to be thought through together as a complex set of digital tools for organizing novel relations of information and global/local cultural interaction. From a theoretical perspective, this requires that the technopolitics of such new media ecologies be continually re-theorized from a standpoint that is both critical and reconstructive. By this, we mean an approach that is critical of corporate and mainstream forms and uses of technology and that advocates the reconstruction, or re-

deployment, of such technologies to further the projects of progressive social and political struggles.

Thus, we do not mean to imply that new media such as we study here are *essentially*, or even *mostly*, participatory and democratic. We recognize major commercial interests at play and that new technologies are presently the site of a struggle involving competing groups from the far right to the far left on the political spectrum. Further, it is clear that as new media evolve such that technoculture and culture come to be more closely one and the same, decisive political issues require answers such as the role of public participation in Internet design and access to how individuals and groups will use and configure information and communication technologies (Feenberg, *Alternative Modernity and Questioning Technology*; Luke, “Cyber-schooling and Technological Change: Multiliteracies for New Times”; Winner). Recognizing the many ways in which politics become limited as they implode into technoculture, we therefore want to engage in dialectical critique of how emergent types of information and communication technologies (ICTs) have facilitated oppositional cultural and political movements and provided possibilities for the sort of progressive social change and struggle that is an important dimension of contemporary cultural politics.

Alternative Globalizations: Global/Local Technopolitics

Sociologically, the “Information Society” signifies a dynamic and complex space in which people can construct and experiment with identity, culture, and social practices (Poster; Turkle). It also represents the possibility of cultural forms like the Internet to make more information available to a greater number of people, more easily, and from a wider array of sources, than any instruments of information and communication in history (Kellner, “The Media

and the Crisis of Democracy in the Age of Bush”). On the other hand, information and communication technologies have been shown to retard face-to-face relationships (Friedman; Nie and Ebring), threaten traditional conceptions of the commons (Bowers), and extend structures of Western imperialism and advanced capitalism to the ends of the earth (Trend). Rightwing and reactionary forces can and have used the Internet to promote their political agendas as well. Indeed, one can easily access an exotic witch’s brew of websites maintained by the Ku Klux Klan and myriad neo-Nazi assemblages, including the Aryan Nation and various militia groups. Internet discussion lists also disperse these views and rightwing extremists are aggressively active on many computer forums.³

These organizations are hardly harmless, having carried out violence of various sorts extending from church burnings to the bombings of public buildings. Adopting quasi-Leninist discourse and tactics for ultra-right causes, these groups have been successful in recruiting working-class members devastated by the developments of global capitalism, which has resulted in widespread unemployment for traditional forms of industrial, agricultural, and unskilled labor. Moreover, extremist websites have influenced alienated middle-class youth as well (a 1999 HBO documentary “Hate on the Internet” provides a disturbing number of examples of how extremist websites influenced disaffected youth to commit hate crimes). In fact, as websites like www.alneda.com attest, a particularly disturbing twist in the saga of technopolitics seems to be that global “terrorist” groups are now increasingly using the Internet and websites to document, promote and coordinate their causes (Kellner, *From 9/11 to Terror War: Dangers of the Bush Legacy*).

Alternatively, as early as 1986, when French students coordinated a national strike over the Internet-like Minitel system, there are numerous examples of people redeploying information technology for their own political ends, thereby actualizing the potential for a more participatory

society and new forms of social organization (Feenberg, *Alternative Modernity* and *Questioning Technolog*). Since the mid-1990s, following the EZLN Zapatista Movement's deployment of the Internet to enlist global support for their regional struggle, there have been growing discussions of Internet-related activism and how new media have been used effectively by a variety of progressive political movements (Best and Kellner; Meikle; Couldry and Curran; Jenkins and Thorburn; McCaughey and Ayers). Infamously, in the late 1990s, activists began employing the Internet to foster movements against the excesses of corporate capitalism. A global protest movement surfaced "from below" (see Brecher, Costello and Smith; Steger) in resistance to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and related globalization policies, while championing democratization and social justice, and this movement has resulted in an ongoing series of broad-based, populist political spectacles such as the "Battle For Seattle" and February 15, 2003's unprecedented public demonstration of millions around the world demanding peace and an end to war.

Recent advances in personal, mobile informational technology, combined with widely syndicable new HTML-forms like blogs, are rapidly providing the structural elements for the existence of fresh kinds of global/local technoculture and politics (Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*). As Rheingold notes, the resulting complex of multi-user networks have the potential power to transform the "dumb mobs" of totalitarian and polyarchical states into "smart mobs" of socially active personages linked by notebook computers, PDA devices, Internet cell phones, pagers, and global positioning systems (GPS). New media ecologies such as these thus provide an important challenge for developing a critical theory of globalization.

From the perspective of contemporary technopolitics it can be argued that dichotomies such as the global and the local express contradictions and tensions between crucial constitutive forces of

the present age. Therefore it is a mistake to reject a focus on one side in favor of an exclusive concern with the other (Cvetkovich and Kellner; Kellner, “Globalization and the Postmodern Turn”; Castells; Kellner, “Theorizing Globalization”). Hence, new media ecologies force us to think through the relationships between the global and the local by specifically observing how global forces influence and structure an increasing number of local situations and how local forces inflect global forces to diverse ends and produce unique configurations of the global/local as the matrix for thought and action in media culture (Luke and Luke).

In an important recent example, mobile global/local digital media were essential to Spain’s March 2004 mobilizations wherein activists utilized them to quickly organize people for a mass demonstration against the conservative government’s official account of (and indirect role in) the Madrid subway terrorist attack. With haste, mobile technologies such as cell phones, email and websites were also used to achieve a stunning political upset when the anti-war Socialist party was elected into office because of a massive on and offline “get out the vote” campaign. It is our contention here that examples such as this are becoming increasingly common and that the intersections between the ICTs, other digital tools like cameras, mass populaces, and democratic politics represent powerful new networked spaces for the progressive reconstruction of social life. Thus, while emergent media tools like Internet-ready personal digital assistants (PDAs) can provide yet another impetus toward experimental identity construction and identity politics when loosed in a technoculture, the multifaceted social ecologies that they constitute also link diverse communities such as labor, feminist, ecological, peace, and various anti-capitalist groups, thereby providing the basis for a broadly democratic politics of alliance and solidarity to overcome the limitations of postmodern identity politics (see Dyer-Witheford; Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Adventure*; Burbach).

Contemporary Internet-related activism is arguably an increasingly important domain of current political struggles that is creating the base and the basis for an unprecedented worldwide anti-war/pro-peace and social justice movement during a time of terrorism, war, and intense cultural contestation. Examples such as what occurred in Spain mirror what has been occurring with the anti-globalization and war movements, and all of these together demonstrate that while it is significant to criticize the ways in which new media ecologies can serve as one-dimensionalizing environments, it is equally necessary to examine the ways in which everyday people subvert the intended uses of these media tools (and so those that produce them) towards their own needs and uses.⁴ Correspondingly, new media such as the Internet have undergone significant transformations during this time toward becoming more participatory and democratic themselves. Innovative forms of communicative web-based design, such as blogs, wikis, and social networking portals have emerged as central developments of this trend.⁵

Blogs, Wikis, and Social Networking: Towards Alternative and Participatory Global/Local Interventions

Emergent interactive forms of new media, such as blogs and wikis, have become widely popular Internet tools alongside the ultimate “killer app” of e-mail. The mushrooming community that has erupted around blogging is particularly deserving of analysis here, as bloggers have repeatedly demonstrated themselves as technoactivists favoring not only democratic self-expression and networking, but also global media critique and journalistic sociopolitical intervention.

Blogs, short for “web logs,” 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 RSS and Atom platforms (as well as e-mail), blogs are popular because they represent the next evolution of a web-based experience that is connecting a range of new media. If the World Wide Web managed to form a global network of interlocking, informative websites, blogs make the idea of a dynamic network of ongoing debate, dialogue, and commentary come alive both on and offline and so emphasize the interpretation and dissemination of alternative information to a heightened degree.

While the initial mainstream coverage of blogs tended to portray them as narcissistic domains for one's own individual opinion, many group blogs exist, such as American Samizdat (www.drmenlo.com/samizdat), Metafilter (www.metafilter.com) and BoingBoing (www.boingboing.net), in which teams of contributors post and comment upon stories. The ever-expanding series of international Indymedia (www.indymedia.org) sites, erected by activists for the public domain to inform one another both locally and globally are especially promising. But even for the many hundreds of thousands purely individual blogs, connecting up with groups of fellow blog readers and publishers is the netiquette norm, and blog posts inherently tend to reference (and link) to online affinity groups and peers to an impressive degree.

A controversial article in the *New York Times* by Katie Hafner, "For Some, the Blogging Never Stops" (May 27, 2004), cited a blog-tracking service Technorati which claimed that there are currently 2.5 million blogs active. Hafner cited a Jupiter Research estimate that only 4 percent of online users read blogs, while bloggers were quick to cite a PEW study that claimed 11 percent of Internet users read blogs regularly. Although Hafner's article was itself largely dismissive, it documented the passionate expansion of blogging amongst Internet users and the

voluminous blogger response to the article showed an aggressive activism within the blogosphere.

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 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 number one for each and every one of those keywords—whether the blog itself had important substantive material on them or not.

While those in the blog culture often abused this trick for personal gain (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 get pointed to a much-linked blog post titled "McDonald's Lies about Their Fries" as the top entry. Another group carried out a campaign to link Bush to "miserable failure" so that when one typed this phrase into Google one was directed to George W. Bush's official presidential website. 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 deemphasize blogs in its rating system and may soon remove blogs to their own

search subsection altogether—this despite blogs accounting for only an estimated .03 percent of Google’s indexed Web content (Orlowski. Online).

Google or not, many blogs are increasingly political in the scope of their commentary. Over the last year, a plethora of leftist-oriented blogs have been created and organized in networks of interlinking solidarity, so as to contest the more conservative and moderate blog opinions of mainstream media favorites like Glenn Reynolds (www.instapundit.com). Post-September 11, with the wars on 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 (www.gseis.ucla.edu/courses/ed253a/blogger.php), have provided a broad range of critical 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 (www.dear_raed.blogspot.com), gave outsiders a dose of the larger unexpurgated reality as the bombs exploded overhead in Baghdad. Meanwhile, in Iran, journalist Sina Mottallebi became the first blogger to be jailed for “undermining national security through cultural activities.”⁶ And after the 2004 election in Iran, boycotted by significant groups of reformers after government repression, dozens of new Web-sites popped up to circulate news and organize political opposition. In response to the need for anonymous and untraceable blogging (as in countries where freedom of speech is in doubt, such as China, which has forced its blogs to register with the government), open source software like invisiblog (www.invisiblog.com) has been developed to protect online citizens’ and journalists’ identities. Recent news that the FBI has begun actively monitoring blogs in order to gain information on citizens suggests a need for US activist-bloggers to implement the software themselves, just as many use PGP (Pretty Good Privacy) code keys for their email and anonymity cloaking services for their web surfing (www.anonymizer.com).

On another note, political bloggers have played a significant role in several recent media spectacles in US politics, beginning in 2003 with the focus of attention upon the racist remarks made by Speaker of the House Trent Lott and then the creation of a media uproar over the dishonest reporting exposed at the *New York Times*. Lott's remarks had been buried in the back of the *Washington Post* until communities of bloggers began publicizing them, generating public and media interest that then led to his removal. In the *NYT* example, 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. Likewise, CBS News and its anchor, Dan Rather, were targeted for disgrace when rightwing bloggers attacked and debunked a September, 2004 report by Rather on *60 Minutes* that purported to reveal documents suggesting that the young George W. Bush disobeyed an order in failing to report for a physical examination and that Bush family friends sugar coated his National Guard service.

Another major blog intervention involves the campaign against Diebold computerized voting machines. While the mainstream media neglected this story, bloggers constantly discussed how the company was run by Republican activists, how the machines were unreliable and could be easily hacked, and how paper ballots were necessary to guarantee a fair election. After the widespread failure of the machines in 2003 elections, and a wave of blog discussion, the mainstream media finally picked up on the story and the state of California cancelled their contract with the company. Of course, this was not enough to prevent Diebold's playing a major role in the 2004 presidential election, where bloggers were primarily responsible for challenging e-vote machine failures and analyzing alleged vote corruption in states like Ohio, Florida, and North Carolina (Kellner, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy*).

Taking note of blogs' ability to organize and proliferate groups around issues, the campaign for Howard Dean became an early blog adopter (www.blogforamerica.com) and his blog undoubtedly helped to successfully catalyze his grassroots campaign (as well as the burgeoning anti-war movement in the US). In turn, blogs became *de rigueur* for all political candidates and have been sites for discussing the policies and platforms of various candidates, interfacing with local and national support offices, and in some cases speaking directly to the presidential hopefuls themselves.⁷

Another momentous media spectacle, fueled by intense blog discussion, emerged in May 2004 with the television and Internet circulation of a panorama of images of US prisoner abuse of Iraqis and the quest to pin responsibility on the soldiers and higher US military and political authorities. Evoking universal disgust and repugnance, the images of young American soldiers humiliating Iraqis circulated with satellite-driven speed through broadcasting channels and print media, but it was the manner in which they were proliferated and archived on blogs that may make them stand as some of the most influential images of all time. Thanks in part to blogs and the Internet this scandal will persist in a way that much mainstream media spectacle often does not and so it is not a complete overstatement to say that blogs made an important intervention into Bush's and future American military policy as a result.

Bloggers should not be judged, however, simply by their ability to generate political and media spectacle. As alluded to earlier, bloggers are cumulatively expanding the notion of what the Internet and new media are and how they can be used. In the process they are questioning, and helping to redefine, conventional journalism, its frames, and limitations. Thus, a genre of "Watchblogs" (www.watchblog.com) has emerged that focuses upon specific news media, or even reporters, dissecting their every inflection, uncovering their spin, and attacking their errors. Many

believe that a young and inexperienced White House press corps was overly hypercritical of Al Gore in the 2000 election, while basically giving George W. Bush a pass; since the 2004 election, however, the major media political correspondents have been minutely dissected for their biases, omissions, and slants.

One astonishing case brought by the watchblogging community was that the Bush administration provided press credentials to a fake journalist who worked for a certain Talon News service that was barely a front for conservative propaganda. The Bush White House issued a press pass to avowed conservative partisan “Jeff Gannon” who was a regular in the White House Briefing Room, where he was frequently called upon by Bush administration press secretary Scott McClellan whenever the questions from the press corps got too hot for comfort. After he manufactured quotes by Senators Clinton and Reid in White House press conferences, bloggers found out that Gannon’s real name was “James Guckert” and that he also ran gay porn sites and worked as a gay escort. As another example of the collapse of the investigative functions of the mainstream media, although “Gannon” was a frequent presence lobbing softball questions in the White House briefing room, his press colleagues never questioned his credentials, leaving investigative reporting to bloggers that the mainstream media was apparently too lazy and incompetent to do themselves (Kellner, *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy*).

Undoubtedly, a result of the 2004 election has been the decentering and marginalizing of the importance of the corporate media punditocracy by Internet and blogosphere sources. A number of websites and blogs have been dedicated to deconstructing mainstream corporate journalism, taking apart everyone from the right-wing spinners on Fox to reporters for the *New York Times*. An ever-proliferating number of websites have been attacking mainstream pundits,

media institutions, and misreporting; with the possible exception of the *New York Times*'s Paul Krugman, Internet and blog sources were often much more interesting, insightful, and perhaps even influential than the overpaid, underinformed, and often incompetent mainstream corporate media figures. For example, every day the incomparable Bob Somerby on *dailyhowler.com*, savages mainstream media figures, disclosing their ignorance, bias, and incompetence while a wide-range of other websites and blogs contain media critique and alternative information and views.

As a response there have been fierce critiques of the blogosphere by mainstream media pundits and sources, although many in the corporate mainstream are developing blogs, appropriating the genre for themselves. Yet, mainstream corporate broadcasting media, and especially television, continue to exert major political influence, and constant critique of corporate media should be linked with efforts at reform and developing alternatives, as activists continue to create ever better critical and oppositional media linked to ever-expanding progressive movements. For without adequate information, intelligent debate, criticism of the established institutions and parties, and meaningful alternatives, democracy is but an ideological phantom, without life or substance.

Democracy requires action, even the activity of computer terminals. However, part of the excitement of blogs is that it has liberated producers/designers from their desktops. Far from writing in virtual alienation from the world, today's bloggers are posting pictures, text, audio, and video on the fly from PDA devices and cell phones as part of a movement of mobloggers (i.e. mobile bloggers; see www.mobloggers.com). 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 and a new genre of confblogs (i.e., conference

blogs) has emerged as a result.⁸ One environmental activist, a tree-sitter named Remedy, even broadcast a wireless account of her battle against the Pacific Lumber Company from her blog (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 coexist with wilderness and other species.

In fact, there are increasingly all manner of blogging communities. Milbloggers (i.e., military bloggers) provide detailed commentary on the action of US and other troops throughout the world, sometimes providing critical commentary that eludes mainstream media. And in a more cultural turn blog-types are emerging that are less textual, supported by audio bloggers, video bloggers and photo bloggers, with the three often meshing as an on-the-fly multimedia experience. Blogging has also become important within education circles (www.ebn.weblogger.com) and people are forming university blogging networks (blogs.law.harvard.edu) just as they previously created city-wide blogging portals (www.nycbloggers.com).

While the overt participatory politics of bloggers, as well as their sheer numbers, makes the exciting new media tool called the wiki secondary to this discussion, the inherent participatory, collective, and democratic design of wikis have many people believing that they represent the coming evolution of the hypertextual Web. Taken from the Hawaiian word for “quick,” wikis are popular innovative forms of group databases and hypertextual archives that work on the principle of open editing, meaning that any online user can not only change the content of the database (add, edit, or delete), but also its organization (the way in which material links together and networks). Wikis have been coded such that they come with a built-in failsafe that automatically saves and logs each previous version of the archive. This makes them highly flexible because users are then freed to transform the archive as they see fit, as no version of the previous

information is ever lost beyond recall. The result, then, is not only of an information-rich databank, but one that can be examined as *in process*, with viewers able to trace and investigate how the archive has grown over time, which users have made changes, and what exactly they have contributed.

Although initially conceived as a simple, informal, and free-form alternative to more highly structured and complex groupware products such as IBM's Lotus Notes, wikis can be used for a variety of purposes beyond organizational planning (Leuf and Cunningham). To the degree that wikis could easily come to supplant the basic model of the website, which is designed privately, placed online, and then is mostly a static experience beyond following preprogrammed links, wikis deserve investigation by technology theorists as the next wave in the emerging democratic web-based media.

One interesting wiki project is the dKosopedia (www.dkosopedia.com), which is providing a valuable cultural resource and learning environment through its synthesis and analysis of the connections behind today's political happenings. Perhaps the pre-eminent example of wiki power, though, is the impressive Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), a free, globally collaborative encyclopedia project based on wiki protocol that would have made Diderot and his fellow *philosophes* proud. Beginning on January 15, 2001, the Wikipedia has quickly grown to include approximately 600,000 always-evolving articles in English (with some 1,300,000 in more than 100 languages total) and the database grows with each passing day. With over 13,000 vigilant contributors worldwide creating, updating, and deleting information in the archive daily, the charge against wikis is that such unmoderated and asynchronous archives must descend into informative chaos. However, as required by the growth of the project, so-called Wikipedians have gathered together and developed their own loose norms regarding what

constitutes helpful and contributive actions on the site. Disagreements, which do occur, are settled online by Wikipedians as a whole in what resembles a form of virtualized Athenian democracy wherein all contributors have both a voice and vote.

Blogs like Corante's Many2Many (www.corante.com/many) track how blogs and wikis are pointing towards a greater trend in new media development towards "social software" that networks people around similar interests and other semantic connections. As alluded earlier, Howard Dean's campaign use of web-facilitated "meet ups" generated a new paradigm for grassroots electoral politics enthusiasm, but notably people are using online social networking to gather around all manner of topics and issues (www.meetup.com). More recently, social software has moved to incorporate a quasi "six degrees of separation" model into its mix, with portals like Friendster (www.friendster.com) LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), Ryze (www.ryze.com), Orkut (www.orkut.com), and FriendFan (www.friendfan.com) allowing groups to form around common interests, while also creating linkages and testimonials between friends and family members. This has allowed for a greater amount of trust in actually allowing virtual relationships to flourish offline, while also allowing a new friendship to quickly expand into the pre-existing communities of interest and caring that each user brings to the site.

While all of these examples are reason to hope that the new media can be tools for the strengthening of community and democracy amongst its users, it must be stressed again that we do not conclude that either blogs or wikis or social networking software, alone or altogether, are congruent with strong democratic practices and emancipatory anti-capitalist politics. For all the interesting developments we are chronicling here, there are also the shopping blogs, behind-the-firewall corporate wikis, and all-in-one business platforms such as Microsoft's planned Wallop application. It remains a problem that most blogs, while providing the possibility for public voice

for most citizens, are unable to be found by most users thus resulting in so-called “nanoaudiences.” Further, that a great many of the millions of blogs have an extremely high turnover rate, falling into silence as quickly as they rise into voice, and that huge amounts of users remain captivated by the individualistic diary form of the “daily me” means that the logic of capitalism is here too apparent.

Conclusion: Situating Oppositional Technopolitics

The analyses in this paper suggest how rapidly evolving media developments in technoculture make possible a reconfiguring of politics and culture and a refocusing of participatory democratic politics for 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, the 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.⁹ To a meaningful extent, then, the new information and communication technologies *are* revolutionary and constitute a dramatic transformation of everyday life in the direction of more participatory and democratic potentials. Yet it must be admitted that this progressive dimension coevolves with processes that also promote and disseminate the capitalist consumer society, individual and competition, and that have involved emergent modes of fetishism, alienation, and domination yet to be clearly perceived and theorized (Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Adventure*).

New media ecologies are thus contested terrains, produced by tools used by the 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 other

information technologies and will increasingly be so in the future. Our belief is that this is at least in part a positive development that opens radical possibilities for a greater range of opinion, novel modes of virtual and actual political communities, and original forms of direct political action. Those interested in the politics and culture of the future should therefore be clear on the important role of the alternative public spheres and intervene accordingly, while critical cultural theorists and activists have the responsibility of educating students around the technocultural and sub-technocultural literacies that ultimately amount to the skills that will enable them to participate in the ongoing struggle inherent in the present age (see Kellner, "Technological Revolution, Multiple Literacies, and the Restructuring of Education").

Technopolitics have become part and parcel of the mushrooming global movement for peace, justice, and democracy that has continued to grow through the present and shows no sign of ending. The emergent movements against capitalist globalization have thus placed the issue of whether participatory democracy can be meaningfully realized squarely before us. Whereas the mainstream media had failed to vigorously debate or even report on globalization until the eruption of a vigorous anti-capitalist globalization movement, and rarely, if ever, critically discussed the activities of the WTO, World Bank, and IMF, there is now a widely circulating critical discourse and controversy over these institutions. Whereas prior to the rise of the recent anti-war/pro-democracy movements average citizens were unlikely to question a presidential decision to go to war, now people do question and not only question, but protest publicly. While such protest has not prevented war, or successfully turned back globalized development, it has continued to evoke the potential for a participatory democracy that can be actualized when publics reclaim and reconstruct technology, information, and the spaces in which they live and work.

Online activist subcultures and political groups have thus materialized in the last few years as a vital oppositional space of politics and culture in which a wide diversity of individuals and groups have used emergent technologies to help produce creative social relations and forms of democratic political possibility. Many of these subcultures and groups may become appropriated into the mainstream, but no doubt novel oppositional cultures and different alternative voices and practices will continue to appear as we navigate the increasingly complex present toward the ever receding future.

New media such as the Internet provides the possibility of an alternative symbolic economy, forms of culture and politics, and instruments of political struggle. It is up to the oppositional groups that utilize these digital tools to develop the forms of technopolitics that can produce new relations of freedom and which can liberate humanity and nature from the tyrannical and oppressive forces that currently constitute much of our global and local reality. The present challenge for critical theorists of new media is to begin to conceive their political reality as a complex network of places embodying reconstructed models of citizenship and new forms of political activism, even as the new media themselves reproduce logics of domination and become co-opted by hegemonic forces. In this sense, we should especially look to how emergent digital tools and cultures are interacting as tentative forms of self-determination and control “from below” (Marcuse 180-182)—recognizing that today’s mediated citizen-activists represent historical oppositional forms of agency in the ongoing struggle for social justice and a more participatory democracy.

Notes

¹ By “technopolitics” we mean politics that is mediated by the wide range of digital tools such as broadcasting technology, cameras, the hardware and software involved with computers, and the Internet. Thus Internet politics and a myriad of other forms of media politics are contained under the more general concept of technopolitics, which describes the nature of the proliferation of technologies that are engaged in political struggle. In this paper, while we speak broadly about the innovative developments occurring between the Internet, other new media, and general populations, we will look specifically at how new World Wide Web forms are influencing and being influenced by technopolitics and culture. For more on technopolitics, see Kellner 1997 and Armitage 1999. For useful comments that helped us significantly in revising this article, we would like to thank the editors of this collection.

² While we agree with Jodi Dean’s analysis of the potential fetishism of the Internet and technopolitics, we believe that at times she illicitly totalizes the concept of fetishism in her denunciation of Internet cultural politics. Dean’s recent book on the subject, *Publicity’s Secret: How Technoculture capitalizes on Democracy*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002, does a more well-rounded job of valorizing the positive political potentials of the Internet and her idea concerning self-organizing networks of contestation and struggle is one that we are very much in support of here. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in more detail her polemic on the public sphere, we would argue for a more dialectical vision that seeks consensus and commonality amidst differences, but which emphasizes struggle and difference as a check to hegemonic consensuality, as well as to thuggish technocrats such as Arnold Schwarzenegger.

³ Extreme right wing material is also found in other media, such as radio programs and stations, public access television programs, fax campaigns, video and even rock music productions.

⁴ Ivan Illich's "learning webs" (1971) and "tools for conviviality" (1973) anticipate the cross-development of the Internet and other new media and how they may provide resources, interactivity, and communities that could help revolutionize education. For Illich, science and technology can either serve as instruments of domination or progressive ends. Hence, whereas big systems of computers promote modern bureaucracy and industry, personalized computers made accessible to the public might be constructed to provide tools that can be used to enhance learning. Thus, Illich was aware of how technologies like computers could either enhance or distort education depending on how they were fit into a well-balanced ecology of learning. See Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper, 1973) and *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper, 1971).

For a pre-Internet example of the subversion of an informational medium, in this case, public access television, see Douglas Kellner, "Public Access Television: Alternative Views" available at www.gseis.ucla.edu/courses/ed253a/MCKellner/ACCESS.html (accessed June 15, 2005). Selected episodes are freely available for viewing as streaming videos at www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner (accessed June 15, 2005).

⁵ "Blogs" are hypertextual web logs that people use for new forms of journaling, self-publishing, and media/news critique, as we discuss in detail below. People can implement their blog via software engines such as Blogger (www.blogger.com), Moveable Type (www.moveabletype.org), Typepad (www.typepad.com), and Live Journal (www.livejournal.com). It was estimated that there were some 500,000 blogs in January 2003,

while six months later the estimated number claimed to be between 2.4 and 2.9 million with a projection of ten million by 2005; see www.blogcensus.net for current figures. For examples, see our two blogs: BlogLeft: Critical Interventions, www.gseis.ucla.edu/courses/ed253a/blogger.php, and Vegan Blog: The (Eco)Logical Weblog, www.getvegan.com/blog/blogger.php. “Wikis” are popular new forms of group databases and hypertextual archives, covered in more depth later in this paper.

⁶ See Michelle Delio, “Blogs opening Iranian Society?” *Wired News*, May 28, 2003.

Another Iranian blogger, Hossein Derakhshan, living in exile in Toronto develops software for Iranian and other bloggers and has a popular Web-site of his own. Hoder, as he is called, worked with the blogging community to launch a worldwide blogging protest on July 9, 2003 to commemorate the crackdown by the Iranian state against student protests on that day in 1999 and to call for democratic change once again in the country. See his blog at <http://hoder.com/weblog>. On recent political blogging in Iran, see Luke Thomas, “Blogging toward freedom” (*Salon*, Febr. 28, 2004).

⁷ See www.dailykos.com (accessed June 15, 2005) for an example.

⁸ See <http://www.iht.com/articles/126768.html> (accessed June 15, 2005) for an example on how the World Economic Forum, while held in increasingly secure and remote areas, has been penetrated by bloggers.

⁹ On the importance of the ideas of Debord and the Situationist International to make sense of the present conjuncture, see S. Best and D. Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn* (New York and London: Guilford Press and Routledge, 1997) chap. 3, and on the new forms of the interactive consumer society, see Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Adventure*.

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