

Power, Politics and the Internet.

"Bill Gates' plan for interactivity is to make people stupid. Subordinate them to technology by way of interactive shopping"

.....Noam Chomsky [1]

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Introduction

It may be no surprise to some that the media guru of the 70s and 80s, Noam Chomsky takes a very dystopian view of the Internet as a potential area for greater political freedom in the future. Chomsky's position is at odds with those who claim that, because the Internet is not yet owned or controlled by states and corporations, it has the capacity to challenge existing power structures in ways that have never existed before. The apparent breakdown of traditional notions of the nation-state in the globalised economic/communications era may seem by some to be evidence of the Internet's potential to re-arrange and restructure political power relations in the future, but what realistic projections are we able to make at this time?

In this essay I shall consider the question of whether the Internet might change the lives of the average person as much as did the telephone in the early 1900s and the advent of television in the 50's and 60's. Also to be taken into account is the debate as to whether the Internet might be changing the nature of power relations and political activity in society. What might be the future possibilities of empowerment or dis-empowerment for small collectives, social/political movements, nation states and transnational corporations? And I will consider the question of whether the Internet might facilitate the centralization or decentralization of power, wealth and control.

Throughout this essay I shall approach these questions from an indigenous perspective and seek to draw conclusions that specifically relate to the future benefits or disadvantages for indigenous communities locally and globally.

A Short History of the Internet

"Communication technologies, from alphabets to Internets, have been changing the nature of communities for nearly 10,000 years. We just did not know it until recently." Rheingold, Howard [2]

Literacy was an important development in human history as it represented a time that saw the emergence of abstract thought and linear forms of thinking and expression, as well as a change of perception of time and space. There are said to have been two important shifts in the history of literacy; the first being the evolution from orality to the invention of the alphabet and literacy. Early written communication on stone tablets, clay, wax and stone allowed for information to be stored and read by others at a later date. But, as Lloyd Peppard noted,

"The storage and transport of information using this early technology was labourintensive, slow, and hence costly. As such, in most societies, it and the information itself, was used and controlled by the rich and powerful."[3]

This situation of access and control did not really change with the second important historical shift when Gutenberg invented the printing press in the 15th century. Whilst information could now be transferred to more people, in more places at a cheaper cost, the storehouses of the literature were libraries which more often than not were accessible only to the powerful or the clergy. Around the same time, as Howard Rheingold argues, the advent of the newspaper helped to undermine a certain kind of local community as people began to *"identify with other people who were not geographically adjacent"*. [4] Rheingold suggests that separation from tradition and the invention of a new, more abstract kind of relationship among people (which he called 'virtual') was made

possible by the printing press.

Later development of newspapers and magazines resulted in a concentration of ownership and thus power in the hands of relatively few. Rheingold argues that the trend over the past five hundred years since the Gutenberg revolution has been toward the democratization of information and communication technologies. He claims, "*That which had been the exclusive private property of powerful elites became the public social capital of populations*".[5] To some this might be debatable given the dominance of the Packer and Murdoch families in Australian media ownership today, but the essence of his point about democratization is valid.

In the early part of the 20th century the invention of radio and television greatly accelerated the dissemination of information albeit in a form that was mostly one-way, thus again proportioning a significant power in the hands of the wealthy owners of recording and broadcasting technology. At the same time, as Silverstone has noted, an illusion was being created whereby the populace of western nations were being induced into believing that the new electronic communications systems, like the telephone and television,

"liberate our domesticity from its dependence on physical location and enhance our social and cultural freedoms by enabling us, as active consumers and users, to create our own distinct and meaningful cultural identities." [6]

This is a contested proposition when extrapolated to the new computer technologies, which began to develop when the U.S. defense agencies sought to create a system to make the U.S. military's weapons systems less vulnerable to attack. By the late 1960s the military set about ensuring the safe transport of data between huge mainframe computers at different strategic locations by creating unlimited alternate communication routes in case of bomb attack. In doing so they decentralized the system and thus ensured that the destruction of any

single computer would not disable the total network.

In 1969, the U.S. Department of Defense's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) created the Internet. Initially called "ARPA" or "ARPAnet," it was related to security and defense. ARPAnet used myriad connections to link together four mainframe computers; at Stanford Research Institute, the University of California at Los Angeles, the University of California at Santa Barbara, and the University of Utah; so that if one node were destroyed, information would continue to flow among the others over alternate paths. The technology that made this possible was a new concept called packet switching, which enabled data to be segmented into chunks or " packets" of one to 1500 characters for random transfer to their ultimate destination. This allowed for the same line to be shared by multiple users.[7]

By 1986 another U.S. government agency, the National Science Foundation (NSF) had established a network called NSFnet which enabled academia to access new and increasing networks between academic institutions and the NSF supercomputers. Throughout the 1980's, technological advances in computer hardware and software made powerful computers more accessible to the public. Better communications systems allowed more computers to link to the network. Still, during this period, computers on the Internet numbered only in the hundreds and, for the most part, were used primarily by government and scientific researchers.[8]

In 1964 IBM had invented the term *word processing* to describe a brand of typewriter which used a magnetic tape to store pages of text,[9] and in 1981 the same corporation 'persuaded business that computerized spreadsheets would increase productivity. It wasn't long before word processing software and personal computers (PC's) brought the possibilities of the new technology into the domestic space. In 1996 figures supplied by the Internet Business Center put the number of

potential direct consumers of electronic information at 22.6 million; for those who could at least send and receive email, they estimated a figure closer to 35 million. Today, no one knows the number of individuals connected to the Internet, but nine months ago Howard Rheingold has put the figure as 200 million.[10]

Silverstone observed that western domesticity is the product of interrelated social and cultural processes in which media and information technologies have been intricately involved. One suspects that this will remain the case albeit possibly in future in ways we cannot imagine yet. So the Internet has evolved into a *"vast collection of computers linked to networks within larger networks spanning the globe - a huge anarchic, self-organising and relatively unpoliced system"*. [11] And whilst we may get excited about the potential for new spaces and cyberplaces, we should not forget that even as recently as fifteen years ago computers were still largely the province of science, engineering, business and the military. The speed with which this new communications technology has become part of our lives is remarkable. As we try to keep pace with new developments, let alone the extraordinary possibilities and potential, the question arises whether we should be concerned about, and conscious of, the implicit and explicit dangers and threats to our freedom of expression.

The Internet: Access and Power

"All communication media, not just the Internet-enabled kind, are inherently political." Howard Rheingold [12]

One of the major problems in conceiving the possibilities of the Internet communications 'revolution' in the manner of its most ardent advocates, is in the obvious disparity of access to the basic technology for most people on the planet. The reality today is that the Internet is largely a resource *"available only to multinationals, governments, armies, and the elite"*. [13] In the United States of America, currently the major consumer

of information technology, according to the 1993 US Census, only 16% of blacks and 15% of hispanics had access to a computer at home, and only 15% of households with an annual income of less than \$20,000.[14] Joseph Lockard summed up the inequity when he noted,

"Access to cyberspace is effectively divided between self-financed, and unprotected non-access. Private access requires significant disposable income to cover computer capitalization and the continuing outlays of phone bills, repair of maintenance-intensive equipment, and periodic recapitalization. For those whose employers pick up the tab, the cost arrives in the form of hierarchical workplaces and limited personal autonomy on the networks." [15]

In Australia, despite popular mythology of an egalitarian society, in 1996 the top 20% of wealth holders owned 72% of the wealth of the nation, and the top half of the populace owned 98.4% of the total wealth which, as Frank Stilwell points out, doesn't leave much for the other half.[16] Furthermore, accessibility is determined by more than just race and class, in that, of the 4,290 million inhabitants aged 15 and over on our planet in 2000, almost 1 billion (or 21.8%) will be unable to read or write.[17] These statistics clearly indicate that access to the new technologies is very dependent on whether you belong to the affluent, literate, white community in an advanced western nation. With such extensive exclusion in global terms, one might think that the situation would be hopeless for the poor, dispossessed and disadvantaged to connect and/or get their message out.

Yet it is precisely the opportunities created by the world wide web that has enabled scores of otherwise voiceless struggles to be heard, sometimes in spectacular ways, as in the creative and effective use of the Internet by the Zapatistas in the Chiapas region in Mexico in their 1995 revolt.[18] Furthermore, extensive use of the Internet by indigenous groups around the world to not only project news of their struggles and their ideas and philosophy, but also to connect up with fellow indigenous peoples around the globe and share experiences and aspirations. So, the question may not be whether the poor and

dispossessed and disadvantaged actually have the resources to purchase the hardware, but rather it might be a question of how creative people might be in gaining access (through educational institutions and community organisations etc) and technical and aesthetic production of online content.

If one considers the element of access through schools and community organisations then 52% of blacks and 52% of hispanics in America in 1993 had access to computers.[19] This figure would be considerably higher today both in the United States and Australia, so to a certain extent the disadvantaged in western nations do at least have the possibility of access. This still leaves the great mass of people in underdeveloped countries who struggle to merely survive on a daily basis, let alone ponder the inconceivable luxury of an Internet chat line connection.

In the final analysis, Internet access is a luxury enjoyed only by a minute percentage of the human populace, but it might be worth remembering that similar things were said about television less than twenty years ago, and consider the predominance of television in virtually all parts of the world today. Are we able to confidently state at this moment in time that a similar level of utilization of computer technology will not be possible in the future, especially if the product becomes cheaper with new advances?

Political Possibilities, Limitations and Dangers

"We don't stop with asking what a tool does. We ask about what kind of people we become when we use it." Amish man [20]

One of the most attractive attributes of the Internet for political activists would be its ostensibly uncontrolled nature. The fact that the Internet is able to render irrelevant the laws and controls of nation-states, and the

essentially 'anarchic' quality where there can be genuine freedom of expression are qualities that attract those who have been voiceless in the past. The range of groups active on the Internet vary from feminists and environmentalists to indigenous and liberation struggles to right wing extremists and white power advocates. Every conceivable group of like-minded people on the planet is theoretically able to connect and communicate with their fellow-travellers. Furthermore, the global nature of the Internet means that for minimal outlay political activists now have the whole world as a potential audience for their propaganda via web sites, e-mail and discussion groups.

It is interesting that the erosion of the public sphere by the advent of the Internet and its utilization by political activist groups has coincided with a general disillusionment with the mainstream political process in most major western nations. Political activist campaigns have been conducted far more successfully than mainstream political party attempts so far. Compare the successful anti-McDonalds campaign,[21] or the Zapatistas successful utilization of the Internet in 1995, with the miserable failure of Jeff.com during the last Victorian election campaign. But with the rise of global corporations and increasing major corporate interest now being shown in the Internet, we can expect more sophisticated campaigns, both political and commercial. Whether these major corporate interests (including Australia's Packer and Murdoch family empires) are able to ultimately impose their commercial muscle to gain control and censorship over the system remains of concern for the future.

That global corporations should seek to turn the Internet into a world-wide vehicle for consumption and commerce should not be a surprise. After all, the Internet's predecessor, television, helped dramatically expand consumerism and repressive, patriarchal notions of domesticity in Australia and the U.S. in the 50s and 60s, so we should not be surprised when the same newspaper and television dynasties today

seek commercial domination of the Internet.[22]

Therefore one of the major threats to the ultimate independent nature of the Internet might be posed by the major commercial imperatives of the new global corporate interests with incredible wealth and power. Others, like Howard Rheingold, believe,

"Structurally, the Internet has inverted the few-to-many architecture of the broadcast age, in which a small number of people were able to influence and shape the perceptions and beliefs of entire nations. In the many-to-many environment of the Net, every desktop is a printing press, a broadcasting station, and place of assembly. Mass-media will continue to exist, and so will journalism, but these institutions will no longer monopolize attention and access to the attention of others." [23]

Furthermore, BBC Online last year published online a *Manifesto for local online communities*, subtitled, "Making sure the Internet is for everyone" which argues that all citizens, regardless of economic circumstance should be able to share the benefits of the 'Information Age'. [24] The manifesto outlines the manner in which this might be achieved through local community technology centres placed in public libraries and community organizations, and is exclusively concerned with democratization of resources in a western European style of community. Therein rests a significant weakness for those who try to advocate cyber-egalitarianism. They invariably talk in terms of their own cultural and socio-economic experience in western society, thereby excluding possibilities for the greater part of the global populace.

That is not to dismiss potential solutions to address inequity in countries such as Australia, England and America, as proposed by groups such as BBC Online as invalid. Indeed, programs that seek to overcome inaccessibility because of economic inequality are desperately necessary in a place like Australia if we are to see a broad cross section of the community share in the social, economic and political benefits that might be gained from the 'Information Age'. But access to the

Internet is a problem that can be overcome relatively fast in Australia. In most Melbourne newsagents today one can buy the equivalent of a phone card to gain access, and computer ownership is soaring. Once one has access there is a multitude of ways to explore and find expression on the 'net'.

This is where one can be reassured that the global corporations and nation-states will not be able to get it all their way. Once on-line the individual user is able to utilize a vast range of information resources, from finding out on a web-cam what the surf is like at Bondi, to trading stocks or connecting with a myriad of political, social, sexual, sporting or other bodies to share information and knowledge. Howard Rheingold, in his essay *The New Interactivism: A Manifesto for the Information Age*, provides a small sample of some of the possibilities for political activists on-line in the United States with 'profit-making and nonprofit enterprises that are experimenting with different tools for citizen empowerment.' [25]

In addition to mainstream sites such as the above there is also the vast array of discussion groups and forums available through Usenet and Freenet, which to Hauben are examples of the contemporary electronic practice of the uncensored accessible press. [26] Consequently, given previous examples of creative use of forums and websites by indigenous, environmentalist and grass-roots political movements, it seems at this point that the freedom of the Internet is alive and healthy.

Conclusion

"The issue is not just who can use computers and the Internet; it is where do these electronic pathways lead." - Manifesto for local online communities [27]

The above quote seems to me to summarize the question we need to ask at this stage of the history of the Internet. If we can regard the powerful global capitalist corporations as 'paper tigers' which, despite

their intense desire to do so, are unable to 'own' the Internet, and if we might disregard the present inequities in on-line access, we should turn our attention to the question posed by the Amish man to Howard Rheingold, *"We don't stop with asking what a tool does. We ask about what kind of people we become when we use it."*

We should remember that the Gutenberg's printing press resulted in a fundamental change in the way in which people in Europe related to each other, and of the concept of community. This change in part contributed to notions of nation-states and imperialism, the results of which transformed the socio-economic and political shape of the world. In our enthusiasm for the potential of the Internet to change our lives, we should be wary of the more subtle alterations in our sub-conscious and our attitudes to each other as human beings. The internet might open up vast social and political possibilities for most, and thereby further empower the historically voiceless at the expense of the historically powerful, but it also has the capacity to make its most ardent advocates more anti-social in the 'real' world.

There is no doubt in my mind that if the Internet continues to develop in the manner it has to date, the prospects look good for a broader decentralization of power and control in both local and global communities. As a dispossessed indigenous person I can only welcome such a development if my community is able to have some control over our interaction with this new technology. With a new generation of Aboriginal activists who acquire the new skills whilst at the same time being alert for the cultural shifts in attitude that might compromise their 'Aboriginality', the future looks bright for our struggle for justice.

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Notes

- [1] Chomsky, Noam et al, 'Manufacturing dissent', *21C*, 2, 1995.
- [2] Rheingold, Howard , "Technology, Community, Humanity and the Net", at , 1999.
- [3] Peppard, Lloyd, *Information Technology and Society: Issues of Control and Choice*, 1993 at
- [4] Ibid., Rheingold."Technology, Community, Humanity and the Net"
- [5] Rheingold, Howard, 'The New Interactivism: A Manifesto for the Information Age' at , 1999.
- [6] Silverstone, Roger, 'Future Imperfect: Information and Communication technologies in Everyday Life', in Dutton, William, ed, *Information and Communications Technologies: Visions and Realities*, New York:Oxford University Press, 1996, p.223.
- [7] Leiner, Barry et al, *A Brief History of the Internet*, at , 1997.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Heim, Michael, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- [10] Rheingold, Howard, 'The Addiction Addiction', 1999, at .
- [11] Kitchin, Rob, *Cyberspace: The world in wires*, Chichester: Wiley, 1988, pp. 3-4.
- [12] Rheingold, Howard , 'The New Interactivism: A Manifesto for the Information Age' at , 1999.
- [13] Willet, Giles, 'Global communication: a modern myth?', 1997, at
- [14] US Census table in, Silverstone, Roger, 'Future Imperfect: Informatio and Communicatio technologies in Everyday Life', in Dutton, William, ed, *Information and Communications Technologies:Visions and Realities*, New York:Oxford University Press, 1996, p.230.
- [15] Lockard, Joseph, "Progressive politics, electronic individualism and the myth of the virtual community", in David Porter, ed, *Internet Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 220.
- [16] Stilwell, Frank, *Economic Inequality: Who gets What in Australia*, Sydney:Pluto Press, 1993, p. 22.
- [17] UNESCO 1990, *Compendium of statistics on illiteracy*, Paris: Division of Statistics on Education, Staistical reports and studies no. 31., 1990 edition.
- [18] See, Castells, M. *The Power of Identity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1997., and Cleaver, H., 'The Chiapas Uprising', *Studies in Political Economy*, 44, 1994, pp.141-57.
- [19] US Census table in, Silverstone, 1996, p.230.
- [20] Old Amish man, talking to Howard Rheingold, 1998, at
- [21] See, < <http://www.mcspotlight.org/>>
- [22] See, Silverstone, Roger, 'Television and a Place Called Home', *Television and Everyday Life*, New York & London: Routledge, 1992.
- [23] Rheingold, Howard, 'Community Development In The Cybersociety of the Future', BBC Online, at , 1999.
- [24] BBC Online, 'A Manifesto for local online communities', at , 1999.
- [25] Rheingold, Howard, 'The New Interactivism: A Manifesto for the Information Age' at , 1999.
- [26] Hauben, Michael, 'The Computer as a Democratizer', *The Amateur Computerist*, v.4 n.2-3. [27] BBC Online, 'A Manifesto for local online communities', 1999.

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