

Controlled Horizontality:

Relativized and Radical Information in the Net Ecology

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I

If one agrees with the argument that the first information revolution began with the invention of the Gutenberg press in the sixteenth century, then it follows that printing entailed the first form of regulated information control. Formally, this appeared as an emerging format consisting of elements such as pagination and paragraphing to facilitate indexing; socially, it was observable through a marked increase in the number of schools (Postman 62). Information that was available to the masses grew to a previously unthinkable volume, a phenomenon that Neil Postman has termed an ‘information crisis’ (62). But these developments were nevertheless local and required an active role on the part of users to access information. In *Technopoly: the Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Postman argues that “prior to the telegraph, information was sought as part of the process of understanding and solving particular problems, [...] information tended to be of local interest” (67). Through this process, the notion of space-time began to diminish, and simultaneously, the phenomenon of context-free information began to proliferate. As Postman argues, “information appears indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume and at high speeds, and disconnected from theory, meaning, or purpose” (70). By the mid nineteenth century, aided by Morse code and newspapers that took immediate advantage of it, information was transformed into a commodity, and the press proceeded to disseminate data according to marketability and novelty, regardless of function, context and relevance. Over the next century, this process continued to be exacerbated by new thresholds reached through communication technology (in terms of factors like speed, efficiency, immediacy, capacity, and ubiquity), such as broadcasting and the Internet.

This paper will explore the contemporary information landscape, in particular, how the Internet contributes to a horizontalization effect that abolishes significance and relevance, as well as its political implications in terms of control and agency.

It has become increasingly easier for anyone to disseminate information, from self-publishing to Youtube to social media. The presumed potentiality for individual expression which this entails was much celebrated in the 1990's as the Internet first went public and theorists touted the opportunity to branch rhizomatically against hegemonic universality (Stallabrass 23). Today, while certain sites and databases remain exclusive, it would appear that the majority of the Net is accessible to all. However, as Delany and Landow quickly point out, "the problem in networked communication has become not how to acquire texts but how to sift out the ones we value from the deafening babble of global electronic traffic" (Delany and Landow 15).

Writing in 1846, Søren Kierkegaard's *Present Age* decried the burgeoning occurrence of an increasingly apathetic mass public while prophetically anticipating the modern age of mass media:

"Our age is essentially one of understanding and reflection without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose. A revolutionary age is an age of action; ours is the age of advertisement and publicity. Nothing ever happens but there is immediate publicity everywhere." (Kierkegaard 3)

In his book *On the Internet*, Hubert Dreyfus discusses Jürgen Habermas' history of the birth of the public domain in the mid eighteenth-century, which was believed to support a new, disinterested, politically-disengaged, and non-partisan subject position among the citizenry through public venues such as the press. According to Enlightenment intellectuals, the press embodied the virtues of a utopian and democratically free society. Habermas champions the idea of individuality in regards to information perception, production, and dissemination. Likewise, Postman cites individuality and intellectual freedom as staples ushered in by the press. However, Kierkegaard prophesied that the copious amount of de-situated and context-free information brought on by the press would yield a public that is apathetic, due to the disengaged manner in which one consumes knowledge and forms opinions (Kierkegaard 64). Dreyfus extends Kierkegaard's disillusion and skepticism with the press and the public in his assessment of the Internet, arguing that "thanks to hyperlinks, meaningful differences have, indeed, been leveled [...] relevance and significance have disappeared" (Dreyfus 79). For him, the liberty espoused by champions of the Internet has magnified the problematic situation presented by the press, namely, the overabundance of information and its subsequent leveling of the varied degrees in significance and relevance. The ubiquity of the Internet and instant accessibility to all information renders everything uniform and abolishes qualitative boundaries. While putting forward a compelling critique of the Internet, it should also be noted that Dreyfus's perspective alone essentializes the web and should be balanced against the forms of critical exchange and political action that depend on the horizontal platform of the web, a point that will be addressed later in the essay. The Net presents a dialectic that oscillates between the rhizomatic ecology that supports new forms of political action and a homogenized, flattened landscape marked by a loss of significance due to an overwhelming availability of information-commodity.

II

The melding of various spheres (be it the trivial and pertinent, amateur and professional, or commercial and political) previously discussed that occurs with the advent of the information saturation is not exclusive to the web, and has been documented by various theorists. In *The Consumer Society*, Jean Baudrillard boldly describes contemporary society as a “generalized neo-culture where there is no longer any difference between a delicatessen and an art gallery, between Playboy and a treatise on paleontology” (Baudrillard 28). Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s account of the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* also outlines the melding, flattening, and leveling effect of mass culture that produces and renders everything uniform (while ingeniously inducing the public to believe they are choosing from disparate products, a point I will return to later).

In the art context, this thematic is elaborated by art historian Julian Stallabrass in *Art Incorporated*, who insists that “consumerism appears to become ever more cultural, as much concerned with selling or displaying images, sounds, and words as it is with material things [while art] has become increasingly integrated into the general run of capitalist activity.” (Stallabrass 73, 81) Lastly, in an interview with the *Journal of Visual Culture*, Martin Jay responded to a question regarding the democratization of images in visual culture by contending that “the danger in such an indiscriminate leveling is the loss of an ability to make distinctions among different kinds of images” and that he still wishes to “maintain the vexed distinction

between genuine works of art and derivative kitsch, high and low, [...] at least as a way to avoid the promiscuous reduction of everything to the same level of cultural significance” (Jay 88).

The contemporary Internet ethos that celebrates the individual’s ability to freely and indiscriminately absorb/produce any information, has paradoxically resulted in a leveling of any degrees of values. The postmodern doctrine of placing emphasis on relativism, the non-absolute, non-universal, the particularities and differences has produced a curious and potentially dangerous horizontality on the Internet. As Donna Haraway, author of “The Cyborg Manifesto” argues, “relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideology of objectivity, both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspectives” (Haraway 680). In other words, relativism is really just another form of totalization. A lack of apparent differences between the so-called ‘differences’ produces yet another kind of universalism. Relativism does not mean that everything is equated isomorphically, however it does mean that the differences between disparate information are of equal weight and value, therefore negligible.

Inherent within this horizontality of the web, this seeming democratization of information, is the perpetuation of veiled power structures. The Net ecology’s disintegration of boundaries and conflation of distinct spheres is not the egalitarian emancipation promised by the rhizome of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, but the assertion of power structures that are already inscribed in place: specifically, neoliberalism, which has appropriated the postmodern ethos of openness, boundary-erosion, and particularities so characteristic of the Internet. In this sense the rhizome reveals itself as the horizontality upon scrutiny, a landscape that is at once potentially liberating and closely administered. The irony is salient as Diana Saco announces that “the free and

enterprising spirit of the (electric) frontier was perfectly compatible with the free enterprise spirit of liberal capitalism” (Saco 191), a statement which aptly encapsulates how the democratic ethos of the Net becomes a self-negating illusion masking a clandestinely controlled horizontality. Yet, a discussion between Andrew Keen and David Weinberger demonstrates diverging perspectives on this issue. Keen, an unabashed critic of the Net, argues that the new abundance of information leads to digital narcissism and a ‘cult of the amateur,’ and that in the chaotic and self-infatuated cyberspace where “everyone claims to be an author, there can be no art, no reliable information, no audience” (Keen). Weinberger on the other hand, insists that the web is a self-fixing problem that has always been an attempt to allow the populace to filter and manage its mass amounts of information effectively through ever-enhancing taxonomies, not to mention its utopian ability to allow genuine exchanges between convivial and de-hierarchized communities. While for the most part diverging, the two writers’ respective arguments point towards the dialectical nature of such a horizontal landscape, one that entails both control and freedom simultaneously. More specifically, the horizontality of the web induces a digital relativism spearheaded by the concealed capitalist universality as much as it fosters the potential of political agency and democratic communication.

III

Stallabrass observes the marketability of ‘difference’ in the postmodern and postcolonial context of a rapidly growing number of international art biennales when he says “the new order required the abandonment of universality in favor of an exploration of diversity, difference and hybridity” (Stallabrass 19). Andrea Fraser also cites the recent museum slogan of egalitarianism

and populism being used as banners while entry fees are being increased. In a similar vein, Naomi Klein, in a chapter titled “Alt. Everything,” talks about the marketing of an apparently underground culture in an attempt to sell the idea of individuality and uniqueness to youth after the drastic decrease in the buying power of baby boomers in the 1990’s. Baudrillard sums up the notion succinctly when he declares the following:

“Differences of the personalizing type no longer set individuals one against another; these differences are all arrayed hierarchically on an indefinite scale and converge in models, on the basis of which they are subtly produced and reproduced. As a result, to differentiate oneself is precisely to [...] relinquish any real difference, any singularity” (Baudrillard 88).

The marketability of heterogeneity has been multiplied kaleidoscopically by a horizontal Net ecology. The ostensibly unregulated and dedifferentiated nature of information on the Internet, which abolishes distinctions for the average web surfer, only functions at the surface level. The idea being pushed is now the framing of networking, online-presence, particularity, heterogeneity, and self-expression as currency. The infrastructure underlying a surface level of seeming emancipation, is the clandestine but highly regulated informational system through which power structures perpetuate themselves. Neoliberalism, which has driven much of the sphere-conflation previously noted by Adorno and Baudrillard, has aptly appropriated the Internet ethos to their advantage by marketing a relativized sense of heterogeneity, a Deleuzian horizontal society of control. As Stallabrass aptly summarizes in the book *Internet Art*, “the structure of the Web is fluid, shifting and continually contested, but nevertheless it has acquired a strong tendency towards homogenization, closely reflecting the commercial and state powers that dominate both the Web and the offline world” (Stallabrass 20).

IV

Despite the oblique nature of post-Fordist control, the relativized information due to mass proliferation, and the possibility of online individual expression as a capitalist brand, one cannot occlude the ways in which online communities form and generate potentialities, as the controlled horizontality also entails traits of emancipation and political action. In “The Participatory Challenge,” Trebor Scholz talks about the phenomenon of voluntary online cooperation and collaboration, where users converge and share knowledge without necessarily receiving monetary compensation. Although the horizontality might be controlled and powers might have only transformed from centralized to distributed (Krysa 16), Scholz maintains that the Internet and its lateralization has endowed users with the opportunity to converge into gift communities and extreme sharing networks that have the potentials to thwart commercial interests (in his words, to out-collaborate them) and bring about novel and alternative outcomes (Scholz 196). For Kierkegaard, the abundance of information and the equivocal discussion platform contributes to an indistinguishably horizontal landscape. However, only through this landscape were Net-activist groups such as WikiLeaks and Anonymous able to emerge. In an interview on *e-flux* with Hans Ulrich Obrist, editor-in-chief of Wikileaks Julian Assange advocates for the necessity of building a common intellectual record, including clandestine information (Assange 7). In this case, the leveled horizontality of control and relativity actually provides the means necessary for political action to mobilize, negating claims of passivity and false agency, and revealing the power structure itself. As Matteo Pasquinelli describes, while the certain forms of administration-veiled-as-freedom constitute contemporary Net ecology, it is also constituted by

phenomenon such as collective intelligence, global cooperative networks, free software developers, Creative Commons, and media activism (Pasquinelli 269).

In conclusion, the contemporary Net ecology has created a lateralized situation in which information ceases to exist as distinct entities for the user but rather as interchangeable commodities as Baudrillard describes, or standardized and mass-produced consumables as Adorno and Horkheimer illustrate. Furthermore, this horizontalization simultaneously allows neoliberal power structures to propagate themselves under the guise of a postmodern celebration of the heterogeneous self, while concealing the fact that the global capitalist economic system is leveling distinctions into an ever more homogenized and totalized era, a controlled horizontality. That being said, the online landscape also fosters the emergence of online communities and activism, mobilizing shared networks and political action. The Net ecology has the potential to thwart the very source of control that it is entwined with, as freedom and control appear to be simultaneously present on the horizontality. Perhaps Walter Benjamin's point in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" still rings true, that the new technological apparatus could become a tool for subjugation but also has the potential to liberate the multitude, for discussion and sharing forums like 4chan (which spawned Anonymous) to "turn the sharing of knowledge [...] into new radical revolutionary productive machines (Pasquinelli 274).

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