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A Review of Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice

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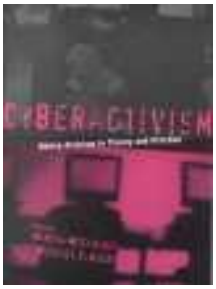

Martha McCaughey and Michael D. Ayers, eds.
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At the time that I picked up Martha McCaughey's and Michael D. Ayers's edited collection, *Cyberactivism*, I had been asking myself a series of questions: What is empowerment? Do computer technologies facilitate empowerment? If so, how? I was surprisingly pleased that several of contributing writers indirectly addressed these questions, especially within the scope of local contexts and specific Internet technologies. Throughout this collection, many of the writers recognize that "political activism on the Internet" (1) – or what the editors are calling "cyberactivism" – has residual implications for power dynamics. According to the editors, cyberactivism covers a range of practices from orgranizing a movement through email to hacking. More specifically, McCaughey and Ayers frame this collection as a response to the commercialization of the Internet. In contrast to the recent spate of popular publications about using the Internet to become wealthy, this collection's editors and contributors "share a modest belief that new technologies can become agents of social change" (2).

Placing their collection within its historical context, McCaughey and Ayers note that communication technologies (e.g., print, radio, television) have long been associated with activist movements, and while computers replicate several features of these other technologies, computer technologies also introduce a whole new set of (rhetorical) challenges. For example, does a computer mediated protest – without any risk to an absent body – constitute the same type of social action as marching against the World Bank in Seattle or standing in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square (4-5)? These, I believe, are good questions. As Internet-based organizations, like Moveon.org allow us to be lawn chair activists, we need to question how much the computer technologies are helping or hindering our deliberation of the democratic project. And this, of course, brings us back to McCaughey and Ayer's original concern about the commercialization of the Internet: Are we being "sold" prepackaged political positions? Are commercial interests appropriating political movements' online presences (9)? And we begin to understand the issues connected to empowerment. Several essays in this volume address these concerns.

For an audience interested in digital rhetoric, I suspect that some of the contributor's multidisciplinary examination of Internet-mediated activism will provide refreshing perspectives about their understanding of writing, reading, and the Internet, especially in high stakes contexts. For example, Maria Garrido and Alexander Halavais use social-networks analysis to map the online Zapatista movement and to explain how

the movement has successfully employed the Internet to further their political agenda. In contrast, other contributors' approach may seem trite and outdated to this audience.

By the collection's very nature, the contributors provide no pedagogical recommendations. Yet, I am confident that several of the chapters will inspire assignments and activities for different writing courses. For example, Joshua Gamson's analysis of popular gay media sites and Laura J. Gurak and John Logie's examination of Internet protests may, respectively, inspire assignment sequences about reading and producing social action texts on the Internet. I also found that several essays to be accessible to upper division students and could provide useful readings for advanced writing courses. Additionally many Web sites discussed in this volume are still available (as of this review's publication), which enhances the class's discussion of these chapters. I would hope that students who read these chapters, and possibly work with the Internet artifacts analyzed therein, would come to understand that writing for the Internet does not occur in a social or political vacuum and has real world consequences. Finally, David Silver, in the epilogue, proposes a research agenda that I can see graduate students being inspired to address.

Part I: Cyber-social Movements Emerging Online

1. "Internet Protests, from Text to Web" (Laura J. Gurak and John Logie)
2. "Indymedia.org: A New Communications Commons" (Dorothy Kidd)
3. "Classifying Forms of Online Activism: The Case of Cyberprotests against the World Bank" (Sandor Vegh)
4. "The Radicalization of Zeke Spier: How the Internet Contributes to the Civic Engagement and New Forms of Social Capital" (Larry Elin)

In the first part of this volume, we are introduced to the practical ways activists use the Internet – with various degress of success – to stay informed as well as actively instigate and sustain movements. Dorothy Kidd, like many Americans, has become disillusioned with corporate media outlets, especially after September 11th; therefore she has turned to Independent Media Centers (IMC) to get a panoramic perspective on specific events by tapping into the plethora of voices that this site welcomes. Kidd's chapter mostly traces the historical precedents of the Seattle IMC, from the feudal commons or to the recent nongovernmental organizations' use of the Internet. To argue that computer media can overcome the problems that early inceptions (e.g., radio, cable, satellite) had, Kidd, using the grassroots effort of the Seattle IMC as a model, explains how individuals can pull resources of money, technology, and a knowledge of using the technology to inform the world about local events. Picking up many of the themes about corporate media that Kidd lays out, Sandor Vegh develops a classification system for various forms of online activism and applies them to various cyberprotests. Vegh's classification system, which includes Awareness/Advocacy (i.e., the informing and organizing the people), Organization/Mobilization (i.e., the decision to proceed with an action in online or offline contexts), and Action/Reaction (i.e., the various forms of hacktivism), gives a useful vocabulary for discussing these different computer-mediated practices. A majority of Vegh's chapter focuses on the numerous strategies and consequences for hacktivist activities, especially those utilized to protest the World

Bank. Through this analysis, he also raises several helpful questions about the digital divide's effect on activists' participation. In his narrative about Zeke Spier, an activist who was arrested at the 2000 Republican National Convention, Larry Elin balances a touchy-feely story with some personal cyberactivist strategies. Elin weighs down this chapter with a back story that explains how an individual can specifically be a "criminal," but within this narrative we also learn how Spier specifically employs the Internet to participate in various offline protests.

Best in Show

In their chapter, Gurak and Logie draw upon several in depth cases to compare text-based Internet protests (i.e., Lotus MarketPlace, Clipper Chip) with Web-based one (i.e., Petitionsite.com, Yahoo!/GeoCities). To illustrate different responses to text-based Internet protests, the writers compare how a massive email campaign successfully halted the release of Lotus's MarketPlace: Households software (i.e., a program that could track the spending habits of 120 million individuals) to an unsuccessful bid to use email petitions to stop the NSA from installing Clipper Chips as the encryption standard into telephone and fax machines. Gurak and Logie explain that these examples teach us lessons about timing and what the technology has helped protesters to accomplish. First, the Lotus protest occurred in the early 1990s when the technologies were still novel; therefore, as the writers explain, the company was "caught off guard." However, four years later the U.S. government was more prepared to handle such Internet protests and like companies today were able to take such protests "with a grain of salt" (26). Overall, Gurak and Logie believe that these textual protests have shown us that the Internet facilitates protesters' ability to:

- Come together quickly, especially when an interest in an exigency already exists.
- Make assumptions about the communities ethos (e.g., knowledge and interest with the given exigence) and construct their correspondences accordingly.
- Bypass the standard hierarchies of many organizations and work from the bottom-up (e.g., rallying around a specific text).

In contrast, using the Internet's capabilities also raises questions about a movement's credibility and concerns about misinformation; these themes reappear throughout the volume.

Web-based Internet protests have simplified many processes of textual protests, as exemplified by Petionsite.com that serves as a clearinghouse for various online activist movements. But the Web also expands the types of rhetorical strategies available to activists. For instance, with their buy out of GeoCities, Yahoo! appropriated ownership of GeoCities' customers' personal Web sites (in spite of GeoCities agreement with these customers) and prompted a quick response guided by a single Web page. Following these guidelines, Web site owners not only emailed complaints to Yahoo's copyright office, but they developed parody banners (i.e., Yahoo!-like banners that spoke out against Yahoo's unethical policies) and haunted Web sites (i.e., former GeoCities Web sites in which the original personal content is replaced by Yahoo's

questionable policy statement and links to protest sites). Participants in this protest also garnered national media coverage. Within two weeks of revising GeoCities's policy, Yahoo! revised its own policy. Based upon the success of this protest (and to a lesser degree Petitionsite.com), Gurak and Logie argue that like the textual protests, Web protests can be organized quickly and reduce hierarchical structures. Additionally, the use of hyperlinks allows the movements' participants to rally around the ethos of a specific site and demonstrate their solidarity. Yet the play and parody that commonly occurs on the Web can also diminish the credibility of some of these movements.

I appreciate how Gurak and Logie draw upon four specific examples to illustrate how certain movements used the Internet to initiate change. In these examples, empowerment clearly gets equated to the movements' success or the desire to achieve this change. Gurak and Logie also highlight the factors that contributed to these movements' success or failure, which helps us strategize our own digital writing – activist or otherwise. Yet, I would have liked the writers to focus more on the audiences of these protests. Can we truly equate a corporate protest with a government protest? Also, the two successful examples involved Internet-related issues; how does the issue relate to the movement's success?

Part II: Theorizing Online Activism

5. "Democracy, New Social Movements, and the Internet: A Habermasian Analysis" (Lee Salter)
6. "Comparing Collective Identity in Online and Offline Feminist Activists" (Michael D. Ayers)
7. "Mapping Networks of Support for the Zapatista Movement: Applying Social Networks Analysis to Study Contemporary Social Movements" (Maria Garrido and Alexander Halavais)
8. "Identifying with Information: Citizen Empowerment, the Internet, and the Environmental Anti-Toxins Movements" (Wyatt Galusky)

Writers presented in the second part of McCaughey and Ayer's volume have applied social theories from different disciplines to elucidate our understanding of specific online protest movements and to test the applicability of these theories in cyberspace. Echoing Kidd's concerns about the media, Lee Salter challenges those who have projected the bourgeois public sphere onto the Internet without considering the breadth of Habermas's scholarship. He argues that the Internet in itself is not the bourgeois public sphere, but can be the foundation for one. As a result, "it is imperative that Internet users take an interest in how they shape the medium" because if they do not, corporations and governments will force the "small-holders" into "heavily populated, controlled, and regulated areas such as those provided by [AOL] and Microsoft Network" (138-39). In order to understand how computer-mediation affects the formation of collective identity within social movements, Michael Ayers, empirically studied an online feminist movement (i.e., NOW Village) and an offline feminist organization (i.e., Womenspace). Despite some of the acknowledged limitations of his research methodology, Ayers learns that the online movement's collective identity revolved more around personal goals rather than political goals; in short, the

participants were having difficulties fulfilling the media's political potential. In contrast, Ayers speculates that Womenspace has a more cohesive collective identity because of the participants' proximity to each other. Garrido and Halavais hold up the Zapatista Movement (from the southern Mexican State of Chiapas) as an example of a grass roots organization that successfully bypassed the traditional hierarchies of the Internet. After mapping the connections between the Zapatista sites and other movements' sites, the writers conclude, "a careful examination of this hyperlinked network of Web sites provides a unique insight into the character of the Zapatistas' phenomenal success, and particularly the degree to which the group has become a catalyst for a transnational network of activists" (166). This chapter also provides an in depth discussion about the useful methodology they use to design their map.

Best in Show

Wayne Galusky essentially asks: are informed citizens empowered citizens? But he does not stop there; he also questions what makes an informed citizen. In the wake of such environmental disasters as the Love Canal and the Union Carbide gas leaks in Bhopal, India and West Virginia, corporations have been required to report the types and amount of toxins they are emitting. Although this information (e.g., numbers of pounds of a certain gas released into the air) is readily available on the EPA Web site, the presentation of the data only makes it understandable to specialized audiences.

Galusky specifically applauds the design of the Environmental Defense's scorecard.org site because the organizers help to interpret the data (although industry experts have criticized their measurement systems) and provide guidance for taking action. The organizers of scorecard.org, Galusky points out, assume that their audience will want to fight for their community. On the other hand, Galusky also finds that scorecard.org limits how their audience members participate within a community. These sites construct their audience as toxin activists who will use the presented information for a single purpose. He explains that this Web site's audiences merely get positioned as consumers of knowledge and contribute very little to the creation of this knowledge. Therefore, Galusky advocates that "the conflicts about the nearness of toxins are not the result of knee-jerk reactionary irrationalism, but instead are contestations made by empowered citizens about the value of communities and the role of expertise in everyday life" (199). Unfortunately Galusky stops after essentially dismissing the Internet, at least as it is currently used, as a means for initiating or creating reform. Although Galusky prompts his audience to consider how the Internet can be used to promote change, I would have liked to have seen him start this work; this conclusion would demonstrate that he not only knows what the Internet cannot do, but that he also understands what it can do.

Part III: Cautionary Readings of Community: Empowerment, and Capitalism Online

9. "Wiring Human Rights Activism: Amnesty International and the Challenges of Informational Communication Technologies" (Joanne Lebert)
10. "Ethnics Online Communities: Between Profits and Purpose" (Steve McLaine)

11. "Gay Media, Inc.: Media Structures, the New Gay Conglomerates, and Collective Sexual Identities" (Joshua Gamson)

Although this third section is entitled "Cautionary Readings of Community," I found the chapters to read more like thoughtful analysis about taking one's movement online than warnings. From all three essays the reader should be able to extrapolate heuristics for developing an online movement. In particular, Steve McClaine's and Joshua Gamson's complementing chapters respectively examine how corporate entities influence Web sites deemed to facilitate online communities among ethnic minorities and gay/lesbian/bi-sexual/transsexual (GLBT) populations. While McClaine demonstrates several examples in which an online community for Asian Americans successfully raised various corporate awareness about their questionable representations of this population, he also shows how these ethnically based Web sites can serve mostly as a marketing tool for the corporations that own them. Resonating with Samantha Blackmon's and Lisa Nakamura's recent scholarship, McClaine argues that corporate control makes it difficult for these communities' participants to achieve the technologies' potential of fostering social change. Gamson, in his analysis of PlanetOut Partner's Gay.com monopoly, illustrates the corporations' perspective of these minority sites. The corporations unabashedly position themselves as simply service providers for one of the most profitable minority communities. Although these corporate heads do not feel accountable to the GLBT community, some of them argue that their marketing strategies correct the "social isolation" of this community. Yet, Gamson does recognize that "[n]ew technologies, as they are used to build commercial media institutions, wind up being used in ways that are quite hostile towards queer ideas of fluid, intersectional, performative, dissident, and challenging sexual identities" (273). Both McClaine and Gamson raise questions about what it means to be empowered in technologically advanced societies that are driven by capitalism.

Best in Show

Amnesty International (AI) has become synonymous with human rights activism and also prides itself on its thorough investigations of human rights violations before calling people to action. Yet, as Joanne Lebert demonstrates, the electronic age has both facilitated AI in accomplishing their goals and has presented them with several organizational challenges. Through this analysis of AI, Lebert presents many concerns that other activist groups, international and grass roots, should also consider when making rhetorical decisions about moving their organization online:

- Speed – The Internet helps to increase the speed at which human rights violations are reported to AI and then passed on to the activists. But the Internet has not aided the investigative process of confirming these reports, especially with the larger distribution of information that the Internet facilitates. Unfortunately, similar and less careful organizations challenge AI's efforts by 1) making AI's work potentially moot, or 2) making them guilty of misinformation by association.
- Potential Ineffectiveness – Utilizing email as the only means to correspond with human rights violators, may be ineffective. Mass emails do not have

credibility among certain governments' officials and can also be simply deleted. Bags of hard copy letters still carry more weight, literally.

- Audience – The AI Web site attracts activists, casual surfers, as well as those interested in undermining the movements' goals. Therefore, the organization has to cater to the disparate agendas of the former two, but still protect itself from the latter one. While some have argued that the site should predominantly serve the human rights activists and be guarded from miscreants, other have argued that the "potential" activists and contributors are necessary for the cause.
- Misinformation – Just like corporate sites, AI's Web site is also a target of hacking and parody. Also, limited resources, including technological knowledge has made it difficult for the organization to coordinate with local sections of AI; this raises concerns about the misinformation they may become morally and legally responsible for.
- Access – Many human rights activists throughout the world do not have access to viable technology. While some simply do not have computers, others reside in countries with Internet infrastructures that are poorly developed or closely regulated. These factors make it difficult to receive and distribute information to these places other than through traditional postal services.

To develop this itemized list, I pulled from different sections of Lebert's discussion. While Lebert helps activist organizations think about how the Internet can be used to fulfill their purposes and their constituents' needs, I believe a clearer organizational structure of her essay would have helped her audience discern these rhetorical issues.

Epilogue: Current Directions and Future Questions by David Silver

I found the end of David Silver's Epilogue a stimulating finish to a very satisfying volume of essays. After explaining the significance of this volume to the current state of Internet studies, Silver pinpoints several of the issues that this volume raised and that the field of Internet studies still needs to investigate. As a teacher and scholar of rhetoric, I found myself supporting this research agenda and seeing relevance to this and other related fields:

- *Historically contextualize case studies about the Internet*. This practice emphasizes the fluid nature of the Intenet, media that both shape and respond to the contexts in which they get used. Silver states that these "histories can tell us what happened, what could have happened, and what should have happened" (288).
- *Emphasize the rhetorical component of cyberactivism*. Silver recognizes that our scholarship about cyberactivism competes with popular stories about the same movements and same technologies. As a result, he advocates interrogating these tropes into our scholarship. Likewise, he sees the stories that the scholars tell affecting the work that cyberactivists

do; therefore he suggests more open discussion between the two stakeholders.

- *Do more ethnographic research*. Silver believes that we can learn more about the process of Internet activism by working with the activists, the movements' coordinators, the Web designers, and the audiences.
- *Study the interfaces*. Studying the interface, at the surface and at the level of code, will help us understand the overt and subtle power struggles that the Internet facilitates.
- *Study a wider political spectrum*. Noticing that most of the sites the contributors chose to study supported a leftist agenda, Silver, profoundly suggests scholars who favor anti-corporate, socially progressive positions should also study the rhetorical strategies that the right uses to digitally construct and reify their political foundation on the Internet.

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