Grassroots and Digital Branches in the Age of Transversal Politics

The politics of the Internet is a common theme in cybertheory, though commentators work with a variety of different notions of the political. Among the main issues are the question of whether the Internet may enhance or detract from the processes of deliberation traditionally seen as crucial to a strong civil society, along with that of whether online voting could usher in an era direct democracy where citizens vote regularly in referenda and ostensibly become the arbiters of their own collective destinies. Others are more interested in identity politics than the formal political system. Many have argued that the Net empowers individuals to present themselves to others in ways that transcend the restrictions of socially ascribed or embodied identities, thus enhancing personal freedom by opening up possible ways of being. There are issues of privacy and civil liberty—questions of who has rights of access to messages and the right to compile information about Internet users, and questions of unequal access, especially that of the uneven social distribution of the benefits of the Internet. Just a step away is the broader political economy of the Net. Is it above all the motor of capitalist expansion and even perhaps neo-colonialism? Or is it better characterised as an unprecedented gift economy of information exchange?

These approaches often clash in practice. For example, while Ed Schwartz believes national online referenda could make everyone a politician,1 Stephen Lax argues that the Net does little to enfranchise groups—such as women, the poorly educated and lower social classes—that are already marginalised in political processes. In his view, unequal access means that the ideas that the Internet is ‘an inherently democratic technology’ or even that ‘it can be used in ways that enhance democracy’ offer ‘little more than a technical fix to an old political problem’.2 Writers who celebrate the radical forms of subjectivity supposedly allowed by online communication are shadowed by those who see the Internet as a space sequestered from a large part of social reality or as essential to the project of capitalism. There are, of course, those who see the Net as politically ambivalent. Manuel Castells sees it as driven by informational capitalism yet simultaneously as an important space ‘for the electronic grassrooting of democracy’.3 And, in The Control Revolution, Andrew Shapiro, is as heartened by online grassroots activism, the possibility of direct democracy, and experiments with identity as he is worried about online surveillance, the unreliability of information circulated on the Net and the likelihood that users may construct bespoke online realities rather than engage with a range of Others in the spirit of civil society.4

Theories

Given this array of approaches, it might seem that there are simply as many conceptions of the politics of the Internet as there are conceptions of the political that are projected onto it. Yet different visions of online politics are not simply incommensurable with each other. Running through many differing accounts are theoretical concerns with identity, agency, reality, community and relationships between community, space and the body. In this paper I want to raise some of these issues with regard to a particular modality of politics: activism. I argue—with reference to some Australian examples of online activism—that the Net lends itself to associational forms of political community which both interconnect and ‘intraconnect’ communities at different spatial scales allowing networks of activists to pursue both local and internationalist agendas. On a theoretical level this entails questioning models which, in my opinion, misinterpret the ‘deterritorialising’ effects of the Net, seeing it as a communications space set aside from ‘offline’ social reality and/or as inimical to local community.

Such underlying suppositions are held by commentators with very different political views. It is often argued that the Net creates elective, virtual communities which transcend embodied and fixed identities and non-elective communities based on accidents of place. In this vein Cathy Bryan et al. propose that ‘The Net itself is a metaphor for and a precursor of a new anarchic political community in which traditional political identities linked to territorial and sectional interests are undermined, and new forms of politics emerge free of state coercion’. Other writers emphasise that the Net transcends real space and thus allows an ‘unshackling from real-life constraints’, or depict it as ‘forming a utopia of decorporalised, postmodern subjects’ able to assume multiple or experimental identities and engage in non-linear paths of communication with virtual others. In her celebrated study of virtual relationships, Sherry Turkle argues that ‘We are using life on computer screens to become comfortable with new ways of thinking about evolution, relationships, sexuality, politics and identity’. In this view the virtual space of MUDs allows participants to ‘become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction’. Perhaps the most utopian vision of the emancipatory potential of the Net is given by Pierre Lévy. He sees it as integral to a new deterritorialised knowledge space which is different from ‘the conventional physical environment’ as it enables ‘members of delocalised communities to interact within a

mobile landscape of signification’. The resultant development of collective intelligence will supposedly lead to a new mutuality which transcends ‘the cult of fetishised and hypostasised communities’. For Lévy, cyberspace offers nothing less than the rebirth of ‘the social bond’ through real-time direct democracy among all people.

It is interesting that some of the most strident critiques of ‘cyberutopianisms’ do not challenge underlying theoretical concepts such as deterritorialisation, decorporalisation and virtuality, but interpret their social significance in different, negative, terms. Kevin Robins wants to ‘question the unreflective assertion that the new, deterritorialised technological space is a ‘better’ space than the other (i.e. embodied and situated) spaces’. He believes that it is corporate network space that disenfranchises the territorialised knowledges of the rest of the world’s population. According to him, the Internet is a sequestered self-referential arena that, far from being enfolded in and partly determined by specific social practices, has nothing to do with the ‘real world’. Michele Willson’s critique also maintains the theoretical underpinnings of the utopians, but inverts their significance. Where Lévy depicts cyberspace as allowing one to ‘recognise the other as an intelligent being’, she, in contrast, argues that ‘through the withdrawal of community from an embodied, political and social arena—either to lodge within a philosophical abstraction or to become a disembodied, technologically enabled interaction—an ethical or political concern for the Other is rendered impotent and unreliable’. In her view, the flipside of connectivity in virtual space is the disconnection of the individual from the embodied interactions of their environment and this can lead to apathy towards the wider offline community and detachment ‘from the political and social responsibilities of the real space environment’. She distinguishes virtual participation from embodied political activity such as that of ‘actually attending a demonstration and being surrounded by activity, and the noise and smells of crowd contagion’.

The cyberutopians and their critics agree that cyberspace is very a different communications space from that provided by other media. The Internet provides an unprecedented number of people with the ability to exchange complex textual and multimedia messages with distant (and multiple) Others at high speeds. At the same time much theorisation of the significance of these formal qualities either treats them abstracted from any particular form of Internet use, or focuses on Internet use (MUDs, virtual communities etc) by Net enthusiasts besotted with the possibilities of the medium

12. Lévy, 57-88.
15. Lévy, 15.
17. Willson, 655.
18. Willson, 650.
for its own sake. I have no objection toward the latter as long as the results of research are framed as showing how particular cultures use the Net. But to use such studies to generalise about the political potentials of the Net per se seems akin to attempting to ascertain the general social impacts of the book by studying the subculture of bibliophiles.

This is not to say there’s nothing in the concept of ‘deterritorialisation’. As Arjun Appadurai argues ‘the cultural dynamics of what is now called deterritorialization’ requires that we rethink ‘the link between space, stability and cultural reproduction’.\(^\text{19}\) The increased movement of people, goods, information and capital (facilitated by contemporary media and transport technologies) creates complex ethnoscapes in which the experiences and identities of many individuals and communities derive from a diverse range of cultural and spatial locations. The Internet plays a role in these processes. However, the metaphors of deterritorialisation can be misleading, suggesting that ‘real’ or ‘physical’ space is somehow transcended by new media technologies when in fact they foster the reconfiguration of relationships across and within spatial scales. Internet use is not a zero sum game where affiliation with disembodied non-locals necessarily replaces affiliation with embodied locals. Rather the speed and efficiency of communication allow greater connection at all scales: local, national, regional, global.

**Netactivism**

The actual role of the Net in reconfiguring relationships cannot be considered in isolation from the exigencies of broader cultures that use the medium. The culture of interest here is political activism. According to Damian Sullivan of Friends of the Earth, the Internet is currently changing the face of activism by helping local groups hook into international campaigns and actions.\(^\text{20}\) The Internet has allowed the emergence of translocal alliances that work around shared interests. Some scholars in international relations, notably Roland Bleiker, are attempting to account for the emergence of such associational politics in the age of electronic media. Bleiker calls it 'transversal' politics in order to emphasise how information flows problematise the received spatial logic of international relations. In a world where ideas and images can be networked and travel through various spaces, transversal media feedback can have real effects in 'local' spaces.\(^\text{21}\) Peter Waterman is another who denies the antimony between 'global' and 'local' spaces. According to him, ‘Progressive and humanistic forces and voices are increasingly recognizing that defence of national or ethnic variety, or of threatened places, requires activity in global spaces, including cyberspace’.\(^\text{22}\) He talks of ‘communications internationalism’, the basic

---

The relational principle of which is ‘that of the network rather than the organization’. This new internationalism creates solidarity between individuals and groups around the world whose concerns converge upon issues including human, women’s and indigenous rights, war, imperialism and the environment. It not only links people within these subcultures of activism, but—as the global movement against neo-liberal globalisation shows—creates links between them.

Since the mid-1990s the Internet has played a crucial role in catalysing the alliance against neo-liberalism. Although they were largely ignored in the mainstream media of the North, the 1990s saw huge protests against economic rationalism in the global South (especially in IMF debtor countries). The spread of this movement to the North took place in the late 90s. Its first major success came when the OECD was forced to drop its proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment in 1998. Negotiations for the MAI took place strictly behind closed doors until a group of Canadian activists published the entire leaked draft document on the Web in early 1997. According to James Goodman OECD governments were unable to contain the opposition that grew out of the subsequent anti-MAI network. The ‘network mode of campaigning’ involved up to fifty websites and a plethora of discussion lists at sub-national, national and international levels and it led to the speedy drafting of an ultimatum demanding the MAI be shelved, which was signed by 600 organisations from seventy countries. This took place in October 1998 after several potential signatory governments withdrew their support.

While the advantages of the Net as an organising tool may be self-evident, it also transforms activist discourse. The MAI campaign created ‘linkages between internationalist aspirations and local or national contexts’. The way that geographically dispersed groups and individuals share experiences, news, critiques and tactics to an unprecedented degree has created a new *lingua franca* in which many apparently localised issues are understood as manifestations of the neo-liberal corporate agenda rather than as isolated phenomena. Whether it be the Brisbane City Council’s willingness to allow development of one of the city’s last significant wildlife gullies or the dispossession of indigenous land users in Mexico, activists are partly aiming their localised protests at the dominant political rationality which favours commercial interests over community ones.

I wish to argue that ‘transversalisation’ is a better metaphor than ‘deterritorialisation’ to describe the effects of the Net with regard to the culture of activism. It expresses the idea that messages and discourses increasingly cut across spatial scales. Deterritorialisation does not account for the dialectics between local and global affairs, or, for that matter the

23. Waterman, 216.
25. Goodman, 43.
27. Goodman, 49.
fact that the Net is often used by activists in coordination with other media and can facilitate face-to-face political community, especially the visceral politics of street protests (all of the recent demonstrations at major trade summits have owed their scale and speed of mobilisation to Internet communication). According to Patricia Ranald, Policy Officer with the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network, the Internet allows community organisations efficiently to develop shared materials and perspectives which increase their influence on government.\textsuperscript{29} AFTINET grew out of the MAI campaign and aims to facilitate community input into trade policy decisions. Although, according to Ranald, AFTINET’s impact upon the policies of John Howard’s government is limited, AFTINET pressure has led to new procedures for community consultation by government. It successfully lobbied for a Parliamentary inquiry into Australia’s relationship with the WTO, to which three hundred Australian community organisations made submissions, and senior negotiators of the Department of Trade and Foreign affairs now meet with community groups in all state and territory capitals to discuss Australia’s trade policy. Until recently they had consulted exclusively with the business sector on these matters.

AFTINET communicates with its sub-national affiliates mainly through email bulletins and its site, <www.aftinet.org.au>, and also coordinates with foreign organisations online. It is effectively an issue-based national lobby coalition. Other territorially-defined activist groups use the Net in different ways. Catalyst (<www.cat.org.au>) is an activist software development group based in Sydney. Its server, which receives 10,000 hits daily (up from 1,000 two years ago), hosts several activism sites, the largest of which is <www.active.org.au>. Active provides city-based activist self-publishing news and events fora. Users post items of local and global concern as well as notices for local events such as meetings and demonstrations. According to Jodie Green, coordinator for Active’s Brisbane site, as well as its calendar of events, Active provides media coverage and analysis that is not available in the mainstream local press.\textsuperscript{30}

\textbf{Conclusion}

This short paper has argued that the theoretical concept of deterritorialisation is inadequate to explain the use of the Internet by activists to intensify their exchange of messages across and within a range of spatial scales and has offered the concept of ‘transversalisation’ as an alternative. I have looked at three instances in which the Net has been used to intensify associations between actors at different spatial scales. The MAI campaign involved a global transnational alliance of activists, AFTINET is a nation-based coalition and Active.org.au works at the local community level. Yet activist discourses increasingly cut across these scales. Messages about local matters get distributed globally and messages about global matters locally. The result has been a new communications internationalism.

\textsuperscript{29} Patricia Ranald ‘Interview with Guy Redden’, 16 October 2001.
I hasten to add that I do not mean that there is no value in cybertheories predicated on the concept of deterritorialisation. It is just that the Net’s enlarged sphere of distribution does not mean that communities cannot use it in territorially and community defined ways to pursue matters (such as politics) that are very much part of ‘offline’ reality. This is where a heuristic distinction between medium and its use becomes helpful. The Internet certainly can be used in ways that transcend local or territorialised community (and related modes of identification). It can afford people the positive experience of experimenting with identity and it can also provide a means for people to ignore large parts of the world around them and political issues. However, these eventualities are functions of the use of a medium not the medium itself. Qualities of medium frame possibilities of use but do not completely determine them. The Net is to some extent what we make it—and this is a matter of ethical importance rather than pure theoretical speculation.