

The Political Potential of the Web

Noam Cohen

AS A LOYAL, if discontented, *Dissent* reader, I was only mildly surprised that you would print a pair of articles that are sullen and cautionary about a recent technological and cultural phenomenon called the Internet ("The Information Society, the New Economy, and the Hype," by James B. Rule, Fall 2000 and "Highway to Nowhere," by Gina Neff, Winter 2001). I suppose *Dissent* would find reasons why manna from heaven would promote the current power structure, but joking aside, these articles' dyspeptic attitude toward the World Wide Web and all it contains and all it promises should be particularly disturbing to all of us. It means that talented people on the left haven't even dipped their toes in the currents of cyberspace to consider how to use this unprecedented opportunity to heal the crazy, unjust world we live in. And if something like the Internet—which has conjured up a host of billion-dollar-valued companies in less than a decade, threatens to reconceive entire industries (such as recorded music, publishing, news gathering, and retail sales), and offers a heretofore unimagined model of community building—can't generate enthusiasm among a group of social critics, it's hard to imagine what will.

There are reasons why the Internet has been pushed aside by people on the left—so much of the discussion about the World Wide Web is linked to commerce and stock price, venture capitalists and day-traders. But these characteristics, which surely are less relevant after the crash of Internet stocks last year, should not excuse the blithe ignorance of most *Dissent* editors and the outright hostility of its writers.

In fact, the Internet embodies much of the internationalist thinking that once used to char-

acterize the left, all that "workers of the world, unite" stuff I read about in college. Yes, in the short term, the Internet has made it easier for companies to hire cheap labor around the world. But it has also made it easier for oppression to come to the world's attention. Eventually, the Internet should make it easier for unions to organize internationally, as Marx and others imagined. (In fact, progressive-minded unions, such as the Communications Workers of America, to which I used to belong, already have extensive ties to European counterparts.) And we on the left should celebrate the world's coming together. Sure, I, like nearly all *Dissent* readers, opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement because of the lower salaries and degraded working conditions it meant for American workers—the ones to whom I obviously owe the greatest allegiance—but I also recognize that some day we will have worldwide standards for workers and that I really should care about the Mexican workers whose base salaries and working conditions are invariably lifted by free-trade agreements like NAFTA. Instead of decrying the capitalistic tilt of the Internet and globalism in general, shouldn't we be encouraging the globalization of labor?

On other matters of social justice, the Internet also has great potential. In Yugoslavia, China, and the Middle East, the freedom of the Internet has worked against the iron-fisted control that allows oppression to continue. In my few forays into turn-of-the-century socialist thinkers, I have read how committed people of the left quixotically tried to rally around Esperanto (a so-called universal language that, reflecting the times, seemed a lot like a hybrid European language) to further social justice and end hatred around the globe. Yet, thanks to the Internet, we actually have such a language (English) and the means of universal communication that dreamers like

Antonio Gramsci could never have fathomed. But the left passes over all the improvements such a common tongue could bring.

Furthermore, as fate would have it, the biggest proponents of the Internet (a group hereafter affectionately referred to as "geeks") happen to have an anticapitalist attitude toward property—a true communitarian spirit that was responsible for the creation of the Internet itself. And the geeks have fought hard against corporate attempts to rein in that spirit. Perhaps because of their outcast status in society, they have tended to minimize the importance of "owning" the programs they have created for the sake of improving everyone's interaction with the Internet.

AS A RESULT, there is a growing following for the "open-source" movement, the particular scourge of software giant Microsoft. While Microsoft has leveraged its creations—some would say extorting the public in the process—the credo of open-source programmers allows people to freely use their work provided that they promise, in turn, not to charge others for it, and they agree to share whatever improvements they come up with. This ethic is obviously toxic to capitalism, but I'd say it is still the prevailing one on the Internet. It helps explain why the Web has resisted easy profits—not business-to-business companies, not peer-to-peer companies, or any other combination touted by investors. In fact, in the last few months, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation and Disney, among others, have fled the Internet after losing millions of dollars. It's responsible for the "information wants to be free" mantra that has undercut my own employer—*Inside.com*, an entertainment and media news site. For more than a year, the most compelling phenomenon on the Net has been Napster—with more than forty million users worldwide—which allows for unlimited swapping of all kinds of music (through MP3 files).

So compelling is the argument that you can't charge for material "located" on the Internet—words, music, video, you name it—that businesses have had to look to other techniques, whether generating demographically useful E-mail lists or selling off-line products.

(After losing a lawsuit against the major record labels, Napster—ever the business optimist—entered into a partnership with the parent of one of them, Bertelsmann, and plans to limit the service to paid subscribers.)

To recap, this thing called the Internet has the power to establish a sisterhood and brotherhood of the world, it is built on principles of sharing and common purpose, and it stubbornly resists the efforts of capital to yield profits. Yet we are told by *Dissent* that it is a neutral development, at best, that has already been horribly co-opted.

Bringing this argument closer to home, I can cite some practical examples of the ways that the Internet has already been used to destabilize the status quo and encourage the causes of democracy and political action.

Access to Information

The Internet ties together like-minded thinkers. A search for "John Ashcroft," for example, on Google, a popular Web search engine, leads to a box for an anti-Ashcroft site that provides facts and contact information. Yes, the connection is facilitated by money—although the advertising fees are surprisingly cheap—but suddenly people can be quickly joined together and assisted in protest. There are a host of other examples of how the Web aids collective action, including the work of the Direct Action Network (www.directactionnetwork.org), which helped organize the Seattle World Trade Organization protests.

Likewise, sites like Matt Drudge's *Drudge Report*, *Slashdot.org*, and *Plastic.com* challenge accepted notions that there should be these people called "editors"—employed, it so happens, by huge, typically multinational, corporations—who are supposed to decide what news is, and then there are others—readers—who lap it up. Whether you like him or hate him for his right-wing slant, Drudge opens up the channels of newsgathering. (If a piece is killed for corporatist reasons, a reporter thankfully has another outlet.) *Slashdot* and *Plastic* (with which *Inside* has a relationship) encourage readers to say that a certain text, a certain article, a certain song, is "big news." The content consists of submitted links plus the reader comments on these submissions. Granted,

there are gatekeepers acting like editors, but with a much lighter touch, with everything generated by contributors. When Gina Neff says that news sites aren't particularly popular with users—a claim I'm not sure is true—I hope you recognize that there are nontraditional sites that have a power and potential to shake *CBS.com* or *CNN.com* to their very roots.

I think, also, of a Napster-fueled episode about a year ago—the spread of Bruce Springsteen's "41 Shots: American Skin" about the police killing of unarmed African immigrant Amadou Diallo. The haunting and beautiful song came to public light when Springsteen, a champion of the worker, unveiled it at a series of concerts at Madison Square Garden, drawing the wrath of the Policemen's Benevolent Association, normally a solid fan base of his. The song had not been released commercially, he had just written it, yet bootleg copies from the concert were soon burning up Napster. A protest anthem went from the writer's pen to hundreds of thousands in a matter of days.

Napster is a broadening experience in another way, in that only a single copy of a song (say something long out of print) is required for it to proliferate to all who would want to hear it. Record executives, like news editors, no longer have exclusive control over what's in the public consciousness and what isn't. This power of digitization and the Internet to make all music and all books available to people anywhere in the world can easily be overlooked when all one reads are churlish accounts like Harold Bloom's in the *New York Times* that

fetishize "The Book" and imply that reading literature in any other format is somehow less than worthwhile.

Challenge to Materialism

If the open-source geeks, the alternative on-line news outlets, and the Napster file-sharers win out, they will obliterate the century-old structure organized around cultural packagers, those select few who are responsible for setting public tastes. Who says that music has to be so expensive? Who says that the range of human knowledge should be reserved for elite universities? Who says a handful of people should decide what news is? Who says that people should watch or listen to what has been demographically chosen for them? Who says that culture is fundamentally about marketing, rather than about the shared experience of creative works?

The good thing is that these questions have already fueled a strong opposition movement—whether through relatively new organizations like the Electronic Freedom Forum or more established ones like the American Civil Liberties Union. And the idea of Napster and a related program, DeCSS (software that breaks down protections on DVDs that could allow them to be swapped as well), has already motivated a sleepy, contented on-line population. The opportunities for the left have never appeared greater, but that means learning about the new technological revolution, not mindlessly blocking it out. ●

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Gina Neff Replies

NOAM COHEN makes several very good points about the possibilities of social change occurring from the technological revolution of the Internet. Before we on the left embrace the Internet as a cure-all for the woes of modern consumerism and alienation, I think we need to reconsider the connection between technological change and social relations. Media are as much social phenomena as technological ones. Just because sweeping tech-

nological changes have occurred, social ones—despite the predictions of Cohen and many others—will not necessarily follow. Take media concentration, for example. Cohen has a point about the "freedom" that the Internet promises from pesky editors and global media conglomerates. But the facts remain: media are concentrated in a few corporate hands, despite the bluster of Internet boosters about "disintermediation." The "we'll print anything"

sites do not necessarily constitute a more political form of communication, nor do they challenge the power of mainstream media. Power comes from the kind of integrity built upon a reputation for truth-telling, and just because something is in print or on-line does not mean people will be inspired to take action. *Plastic*, the *Drudge Report* and the various chain E-mails all suffer from this huge political downside of disintermediation and, ultimately, are no more effective than an individual yelling on a street corner. Take a look at well-meaning—but wrong—chain E-mails to “save NPR,” or oppose the Taliban. Both of the servers to which recipients are urged to reply have long been shut down. Messages urging people to stop “Bill 602P” which would “tax E-mail” are part of a hoax. The scheme to “click here to send a poor person food” or “donate a mammogram today” was set up by a for-profit company that was recently dropped as a donor by the United Nations Development Program because of its deceptive advertising and dubious finances. There has been some genuine facilitation of activism, but these resemble older forms of turning people out to real demonstrations or asking people to write real letters. Cohen points to the Direct Action Network as being very good at on-line organizing, but many groups that use the Internet were also very good at contributing to the organization of major demonstrations through old-fashioned poster and bus logistics before their use of the Web and E-mail. The power of the left is still through organizing, and although there are ways that on-line communication can facilitate that, political power isn't virtual.

As for the excitement about information yearning to be free, we on the left need to remember that *people* actually do the work of cre-

ating information. Napster, the popular music “sharing” service, isn't the same as a public library where I can borrow CDs for free; it is more akin to an international bootlegging operation. Sure, musicians should get more money and not have to deal with nasty major record labels, and (as any serious collector of Bob Dylan bootlegs already knows) there will always be a place for unauthorized duplication. But this is not, as Cohen puts it, “a challenge to materialism.” If anything, Napster is encouraging a kind of hyper-consumption akin to looting during a riot, and the same is happening with the wholesale giveaway of writing on-line. As John R. MacArthur, a publisher of one of those old-economy magazines, *Harper's*, has argued, publishers' and authors' livelihoods won't be improved by the Internet's being “not much more than a bigger, faster Xerox machine with a telephone jack.”

Napster and other forms of information sharing raise tough questions about how to pay for intellectual content. I'm a writer, and until my landlord takes my prose in lieu of cash, I still have to pay the rent. Cohen's employer may be failing miserably at its attempt to get people to fork over two hundred dollars a year for on-line subscriptions, but people still work there, and somehow they need to get paid. Erasing the work involved in the production of music or writing or any other form of on-line content isn't a political strategy the left should pursue.

Rather than embrace the mainstream hype about a new economic revolution, we need to continue to fight for real solutions and question the false promise of virtual quick fixes to political and social problems. ●

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