COMMUNICATIVE CAPITALISM: CIRCULATION AND THE FORECLOSURE OF POLITICS

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ABSTRACT   What is the political impact of
networked communications technologies?
I argue that as communicative capitalism
they are profoundly depoliticizing. The
argument, first, conceptualizes the
current political-economic formation as
one of communicative capitalism. It then
moves to emphasize specific features of
communicative capitalism in light of the
fantasies animating them. The fantasy of
abundance leads to a shift in the basic
unit of communication from the message
to the contribution. The fantasy of activity
or participation is materialized through
technology fetishism. The fantasy of
wholeness relies on and produces a global
both imaginary and Real. This fantasy
prevents the emergence of a clear division

between friend and enemy, resulting instead in the more dangerous and profound figuring of the other as a threat to be destroyed. My goal in providing this account of communicative capitalism is to explain why in an age celebrated for its communications there is no response.

NO RESPONSE

> Although mainstream US media outlets provided the Bush administration with supportive, non-critical and even encouraging platforms for making his case for invading Iraq, critical perspectives were nonetheless well represented in the communications flow of mediated global capitalist technoculture. Alternative media, independent media and non-US media provided thoughtful reports, insightful commentary and critical evaluations of the "evidence" of "weapons of mass destruction" in Iraq. Amy Goodman's syndicated radio program, "Democracy Now," regularly broadcast shows intensely opposed to the militarism and unilateralism of the Bush administration's national security policy. The *Nation* magazine offered detailed and nuanced critiques of various reasons introduced for attacking Iraq. Circulating on the Internet were lists with congressional phone and fax numbers, petitions and announcements for marches, protests and direct-action training sessions. As the march to war proceeded, thousands of bloggers commented on each step, referencing other media supporting their positions. When mainstream US news outlets failed to cover demonstrations such as the September protest of 400,000 people in London or the October march on Washington when 250,000 people surrounded the White House, myriad progressive, alternative and critical left news outlets supplied frequent and reliable information about the action on the ground. All in all, a strong anti-war message was out there.

But, the message was not received. It circulated, reduced to the medium. Even when the White House acknowledged the massive worldwide demonstrations of February 15, 2003, Bush simply re-iterated the fact that a message was out there, circulating – the protestors had the right to express their opinions. He didn't actually respond to their message. He didn't treat the words and actions of the protestors as sending a message to him to which he was in some sense obligated to respond. Rather, he acknowledged that there existed views different from his own. There were his views and there were other views; all had the right to exist, to be expressed – but that in no way meant, or so Bush made it seem, that these views were involved with each other. So, despite the terabytes of commentary and information, there wasn't exactly a debate over the war. On the contrary, in the days and weeks prior to the US invasion of Iraq, the anti-war messages morphed into so much circulating content, just like all the other cultural effluvia wafting through cyberia.

We might express this disconnect between engaged criticism and national strategy in terms of a distinction between politics as

the circulation of content and politics as official policy. On the one hand there is media chatter of various kinds – from television talking heads, radio shock jocks, and the gamut of print media to websites with RSS (Real Simple Syndication) feeds, blogs, e-mail lists and the proliferating versions of instant text messaging. In this dimension, politicians, governments and activists struggle for visibility, currency and, in the now quaint term from the dot.com years, mindshare. On the other hand are institutional politics, the day-to-day activities of bureaucracies, lawmakers, judges and the apparatuses of the police and national security states. These components of the political system seem to run independently of the politics that circulates as content.

At first glance, this distinction between politics as the circulation of content and politics as the activity of officials makes no sense. After all, the very premise of liberal democracy is the sovereignty of the people. And, governance by the people has generally been thought in terms of communicative freedoms of speech, assembly and the press, norms of publicity that emphasize transparency and accountability, and the deliberative practices of the public sphere. Ideally, the communicative interactions of the public sphere, what I've been referring to as the circulation of content and media chatter, are supposed to impact official politics.

In the United States today, however, they don't, or, less bluntly put, there is a significant disconnect between politics circulating as content and official politics. Today, the circulation of content in the dense, intensive networks of global communications relieves top-level actors (corporate, institutional and governmental) from the obligation to respond. Rather than responding to messages sent by activists and critics, they counter with their own contributions to the circulating flow of communications, hoping that sufficient volume (whether in terms of number of contributions or the spectacular nature of a contribution) will give their contributions dominance or stickiness. Instead of engaged debates, instead of contestations employing common terms, points of reference or demarcated frontiers, we confront a multiplication of resistances and assertions so extensive that it hinders the formation of strong counterhegemonies. The proliferation, distribution, acceleration and intensification of communicative access and opportunity, far from enhancing democratic governance or resistance, results in precisely the opposite – the post-political formation of communicative capitalism.

Needless to say, I am not claiming that networked communications never facilitate political resistance. One of the most visible of the numerous examples to the contrary is perhaps the experience of B92 in Serbia. Radio B92 used the Internet to circumvent governmental censorship and disseminate news of massive demonstrations against the Milosevic regime (Matic and Pantic 1999). My point is that the political efficacy of networked media depends on its context. Under conditions of the intensive and extensive proliferation of media, messages are more likely to get lost as mere contributions to the

circulation of content. What enhances democracy in one context becomes a new form of hegemony in another. Or, the intense circulation of content in communicative capitalism forecloses the antagonism necessary for politics. In relatively closed societies, that antagonism is not only already there but also apparent at and as the very frontier between open and closed.

My argument proceeds as follows. For the sake of clarity, I begin by situating the notion of communicative capitalism in the context of other theories of the present that emphasize changes in communication and communicability. I then move to emphasize specific features of communicative capitalism in light of the fantasies animating them. First, I take up the fantasy of abundance and discuss the ways this fantasy results in a shift in the basic unit of communication from the message to the contribution. Second, I address the fantasy of activity or participation. I argue that this fantasy is materialized through technology fetishism. Finally, I consider the fantasy of wholeness that relies on and produces a global both imaginary and Real. I argue that this fantasy prevents the emergence of a clear division between friend and enemy, resulting instead in the more dangerous and profound figuring of the other as a threat to be destroyed. My goal in providing this account of communicative capitalism is to explain why in an age celebrated for its communications there is no response.

In the months before the 2002 congressional elections, just as the administration urged congress to abdicate its constitutional responsibility to declare war to the President, mainstream media frequently employed the trope of "debate." Democratic "leaders," with an eye to this "debate," asserted that questions needed to be asked. They did not take a position or provide a clear alternative to the Bush administration's emphasis on preventive war. Giving voice to the ever-present meme regarding the White House's public relations strategy, people on the street spoke of whether Bush had "made his case." Nevertheless, on the second day of Senate debate on the use of force in Iraq, no one was on the floor – even though many were in the gallery. Why, at a time when the means of communication have been revolutionized, when people can contribute their opinions and access those of others rapidly and immediately, has democracy failed? Why has the expansion and intensification of communication networks, the proliferation of the very tools of democracy, coincided with the collapse of democratic deliberation and, indeed, struggle? These are the questions the idea of communicative capitalism helps us answer.

COMMUNICATIVE CAPITALISM

The notion of communicative capitalism conceptualizes the commonplace idea that the market, today, is the site of democratic aspirations, indeed, the mechanism by which the will of the demos manifests

itself. We might think here of the circularity of claims regarding popularity. McDonald's, Walmart and reality television are depicted as popular because they seem to offer what people want. How do we know they offer what people want? People choose them. So, they must be popular.

The obvious problem with this equation is the way it treats commercial choices, the paradigmatic form of choice per se. But the market is not a system for delivering political outcomes – despite the fact that political campaigns are indistinguishable from advertising or marketing campaigns. Political decisions – to go to war, say, or to establish the perimeters of legitimate relationships – involve more than the mindless reiteration of faith, conviction and unsupported claims (I'm thinking here of the Bush administration's faith-based foreign policy and the way it pushed a link between Iraq and Al Qaeda). The concept of communicative capitalism tries to capture this strange merging of democracy and capitalism. It does so by highlighting the way networked communications bring the two together.

Communicative capitalism designates that form of late capitalism in which values heralded as central to democracy take material form in networked communications technologies (cf. Dean 2002a; 2002b). Ideals of access, inclusion, discussion and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications and interconnections of global telecommunications. But instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence, instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world's peoples.

Research on the impact of economic globalization makes clear how the speed, simultaneity and interconnectivity of electronic communications produce massive concentrations of wealth (Sassen 1996). Not only does the possibility of superprofits in the finance and services complex lead to hypermobility of capital and the devalorization of manufacturing but financial markets themselves acquire the capacity to discipline national governments. In the US, moreover, the proliferation of media has been accompanied by a shift in political participation. Rather than actively organized in parties and unions, politics has become a domain of financially mediated and professionalized practices centered on advertising, public relations and the means of mass communication. Indeed, with the commodification of communication, more and more domains of life seem to have been reformatted in terms of market and spectacle. Bluntly put, the standards of a finance- and consumption-driven entertainment culture set the very terms of democratic governance today. Changing the system – organizing against and challenging communicative capitalism – seems to require strengthening the system: how else can one organize and get the message across? Doesn't it require raising the money, buying the television time, registering the domain name, building the website and making the links?

My account of communicative capitalism is affiliated with Georgio Agamben's discussion of the alienation of language in the society of the spectacle and with Slavoj Zizek's emphasis on post-politics. And, even as it shares the description of communication as capitalist production with Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, it differs from their assessment of the possibilities for political change.

More specifically, Agamben notes that "in the old regime . . . the estrangement of the communicative essence of human beings was substantiated as a presupposition that had the function of a common ground (nation, language, religion, etc.)" (Agamben 2000: 115). Under current conditions, however, "it is precisely this same communicativity, this same generic essence (language), that is constituted as an autonomous sphere to the extent to which it becomes the essential factor of the production cycle. What hinders communication, therefore, is communicability itself: human beings are being separated by what unites them." Agamben is pointing out how the commonality of the nation state was thought in terms of linguistic and religious groups. We can extend his point by recognizing that the ideal of constitutional states, in theories such as Jurgen Habermas's, say, has also been conceptualized in terms of the essential communicativity of human beings: those who can discuss, who can come to an agreement with one another at least in principle, can be in political relation to one another. As Agamben makes clear, however, communication has detached itself from political ideals of belonging and connection to function today as a primarily economic form. Differently put, communicative exchanges, rather than being fundamental to democratic politics, are the basic elements of capitalist production.

Zizek approaches this same problem of the contemporary fore-closure of the political via the concept of "post-politics." Zizek explains that post-politics "emphasizes the need to leave old ideological divisions behind and confront new issues, armed with the necessary expert knowledge and free deliberation that takes people's concrete needs and demands into account" (1999: 198). Post-politics thus begins from the premise of consensus and cooperation. Real antagonism or dissent is foreclosed. Matters previously thought to require debate and struggle are now addressed as personal issues or technical concerns. We might think of the ways that the expert discourses of psychology and sociology provide explanations for anger and resentment, in effect treating them as syndromes to be managed rather than as issues to be politicized. Or we might think of the probabilities, measures and assessments characteristic of contemporary risk management. The problem is that all this tolerance and attunement to difference and emphasis on hearing another's pain prevents politicization. Matters aren't represented – they don't stand for something beyond themselves. They are simply treated in all their particularity, as specific issues to be addressed therapeutically, juridically, spectacularly or disciplinarily rather than being treated as elements of larger signifying chains or political formations. Indeed,

this is how third-way societies support global capital: they prevent politicization. They focus on administration, again, foreclosing the very possibility that things might be otherwise.

The post-political world, then, is marked by emphases on multiple sources of value, on the plurality of beliefs and the importance of tolerating these beliefs through the cultivation of an attunement to the contingencies already pervading one's own values. Divisions between friends and enemies are replaced by emphases on all of us. Likewise, politics is understood as not confined to specific institutional fields but as a characteristic of all of life. There is an attunement, in other words, to a micropolitics of the everyday. But this very attunement forecloses the conflict and opposition necessary for politics.

Finally, Hardt and Negri's description of the current techno-global-capitalist formation coincides with Agamben's account of communication without communicability and with Zizek's portrayal of a global formation characterized by contingency, multiplicity and singularity. For example, they agree that "communication is the form of capitalist production in which capital has succeeded in submitting society entirely and globally to its regime, suppressing all alternative paths" (Hardt and Negri 2000: 347; cf. Dean 2002b: 272–5). Emphasizing that there is no outside to the new order of empire, Hardt and Negri see the whole of empire as an "open site of conflict" wherein the incommunicability of struggles, rather than a problem, is an asset insofar as it releases opposition from the pressure of organization and prevents co-optation. As I argue elsewhere, this position, while inspiring, not only embraces the elision between the political and the economic but also in so doing cedes primacy to the economic, taking hope from the intensity and immediacy of the crises within empire. The view I advocate is less optimistic insofar as it rejects the notion that anything is immediately political, and instead prior-itizes politicization as the difficult challenge of representing specific claims or acts as universal (cf. Laclau 1996: 56-64). Specific or singular acts of resistance, statements of opinion or instances of transgression are not political in and of themselves; rather, they have to be politicized, that is articulated together with other struggles, resistances and ideals in the course or context of opposition to a shared enemy or opponent (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1986: 188). Crucial to this task, then, is understanding how communicative capitalism, especially insofar as it relies on networked communications, prevents politicization. To this end, I turn now to the fantasies animating communicative capitalism.

THE FANTASY OF ABUNDANCE: FROM MESSAGE TO CONTRIBUTION

The delirium of the dot.com years was driven by a tremendous faith in speed, volume and connectivity. The speed and volume of transactions, say, was itself to generate new "synergies" and hence wealth. A similar belief underlies the conviction that enhanced

communications access facilitates democracy. More people than ever before can make their opinions known. The convenience of the Web, for example, enables millions not simply to access information but also to register their points of view, to agree or disagree, to vote and to send messages. The sheer abundance of messages, then, is offered as an indication of democratic potential.

In fact, optimists and pessimists alike share this same fantasy of abundance. Those optimistic about the impact of networked communications on democratic practices emphasize the wealth of information available on the Internet and the inclusion of millions upon millions of voices or points of view into "the conversation" or "public sphere." Pessimists worry about the lack of filters, the data smog and the fact that "all kinds of people" can be part of the conversation (Dyson 1998; cf. Dean 2002a: 72–3). Despite their differing assessments of the value of abundance, then, both optimists and pessimists are committed to the view that networked communications are characterized by exponential expansions in opportunities to transmit and receive messages.

The fantasy of abundance covers over the way facts and opinions, images and reactions circulate in a massive stream of content, losing their specificity and merging with and into the data flow. Any given message is thus a contribution to this ever-circulating content. My argument is that a constitutive feature of communicative capitalism is precisely this morphing of message into contribution. Let me explain.

One of the most basic formulations of the idea of communication is in terms of a message and the response to the message. Under communicative capitalism, this changes. Messages are contributions to circulating content – not actions to elicit responses.[1] Differently put, the exchange value of messages overtakes their use value. So, a message is no longer primarily a message from a sender to a receiver. Uncoupled from contexts of action and application – as on the Web or in print and broadcast media – the message is simply part of a circulating data stream. Its particular content is irrelevant. Who sent it is irrelevant. Who receives it is irrelevant. That it need be responded to is irrelevant. The only thing that is relevant is circulation, the addition to the pool. Any particular contribution remains secondary to the fact of circulation. The value of any particular contribution is likewise inversely proportionate to the openness, inclusivity or extent of a circulating data stream – the more opinions or comments that are out there, the less of an impact any one given one might make (and the more shock, spectacle or newness is necessary for a contribution to register or have an impact). In sum, communication functions symptomatically to produce its own negation. Or, to return to Agamben's terms, communicativity hinders communication.

Communication in communicative capitalism, then, is not, as Habermas would suggest, action oriented toward reaching under-standing (Habermas 1984). In Habermas's model of communicative

action, the use value of a message depends on its orientation. In sending a message, a sender intends for it to be received and understood. Any acceptance or rejection of the message depends on this understanding. Understanding is thus a *necessary* part of the communicative exchange. In communicative capitalism, however, the use value of a message is less important than its exchange value, its contribution to a larger pool, flow or circulation of content. A contribution need not be understood; it need only be repeated, reproduced, forwarded. Circulation is the context, the condition for the acceptance or rejection of a contribution. Put somewhat differently, how a contribution circulates determines whether it had been accepted or rejected. And, just as the producer, labor, drops out of the picture in commodity exchange, so does the sender (or author) become immaterial to the contribution. The circulation of logos, branded media identities, rumors, catchphrases, even positions and arguments exemplifies this point. The popularity, the penetration and duration of a contribution marks its acceptance or success.

Thinking about messages in terms of use value and contributions in terms of exchange value sheds light on what would otherwise appear to be an asymmetry in communicative capitalism: the fact that some messages are received, that some discussions extend beyond the context of their circulation. Of course, it is also the case that many commodities are not useless, that people need them. But, what makes them commodities is not the need people have for them or, obviously, their use. Rather, it is their economic function, their role in capitalist exchange. Similarly, the fact that messages can retain a relation to understanding in no way negates the centrality of their circulation. Indeed, this link is crucial to the ideological reproduction of communicative capitalism. Some messages, issues, debates are effective. Some contributions make a difference. But more significant is the system, the communicative network. Even when we know that our specific contributions (our messages, posting, books, articles, films, letters to the editor) simply circulate in a rapidly moving and changing flow of content, in contributing, in participating, we act as if we do not know this. This action manifests ideology as the belief underlying action, the belief that reproduces communicative capitalism (Zizek 1989).

The fantasy of abundance both expresses and conceals the shift from message to contribution. It expresses the shift through its emphases on expansions in communication – faster, better, cheaper; more inclusive, more accessible; highspeed, broadband, etc. Yet even as it emphasizes these multiple expansions and intensifications, this abundance, the fantasy occludes the resulting devaluation of any particular contribution. Social network analysis demonstrates clearly the way that blogs, like other citation networks, follow a power law distribution. They don't scale; instead, the top few are much more popular than the middle few, and the middle few are vastly more popular than the bottom few. Some call this the emergence of an "A

list" or the 80/20 rule. As Clay Shirkey summarily puts it, "Diversity plus freedom of choice creates inequality, and the greater the diversity, the more extreme the inequality" (Shirkey 2003).[2] Emphasis on the fact that one can contribute to a discussion and make one's opinion known misdirects attention from the larger system of communication in which the contribution is embedded.

To put it differently, networked communications are celebrated for enabling everyone to contribute, participate and be heard. The form this communication takes, then, isn't concealed. People are fully aware of the media, the networks, even the surfeit of information. But, they act as if they don't have this knowledge, believing in the importance of their contributions, presuming that there are readers for their blogs. Why? As I explain in the next section, I think it involves the way networked communications induce a kind of registration effect that supports a fantasy of participation.

THE FANTASY OF PARTICIPATION: TECHNOLOGY FETISHISM

In their online communications, people are apt to express intense emotions, intimate feelings, some of the more secret or significant aspects of their sense of who they are. Years ago, while surfing through Yahoo's home pages, I found the page of a guy who featured pictures of his dog, his parents, and himself fully erect in an SM-style harness. At the bottom of his site was the typical, "Thanks for stopping by! Don't forget to write and tell me what you think!" I mention this quaint image to point to how easy many find it to reveal themselves on the Internet. Not only are people accustomed to putting their thoughts online but also in so doing they believe their thoughts and ideas are registering – *write and tell me what you think*! Contributing to the infostream, we might say, has a subjective registration effect. One *believes* that it matters, that it contributes, that it means something.

Precisely because of this registration effect, people believe that their contribution to circulating content is a kind of communicative action. They believe that they are active, maybe even that they are making a difference simply by clicking on a button, adding their name to a petition or commenting on a blog. Zizek describes this kind of false activity with the term "interpassivity." When we are interpassive, something else, a fetish object, is active in our stead. Zizek explains, "you think you are active, while your true position, as embodied in the fetish, is passive . . ." (1997: 21). The frantic activity of the fetish works to prevent actual action, to prevent something from really happening. This suggests to me the way activity on the Net, frantic contributing and content circulation, may well involve a profound passivity, one that is interconnected, linked, but passive nonetheless. Put back in terms of the circulation of contributions that fail to coalesce into actual debates, that fail as messages in need of

response, we might think of this odd interpassivity as content that is linked to other content, but never fully connected.

Weirdly, then, the circulation of communication is depoliticizing, not because people don't care or don't want to be involved, but because we do! Or, put more precisely, it is depoliticizing because the form of our involvement ultimately empowers those it is supposed to resist. Struggles on the Net reiterate struggles in real life, but insofar as they reiterate these struggles, they displace them. And this displacement, in turn, secures and protects the space of "official" politics. This suggests another reason communication functions fetishistically today: as a disavowal of a more fundamental political disempowerment or castration. Approaching this fetishistic disavowal from a different direction, we can ask, if Freud is correct in saying that a fetish not only covers over a trauma but that in so doing it also helps one through a trauma, what might serve as an analogous socio-political trauma today? In my view, in the US a likely answer can be found in the loss of opportunities for political impact and efficacy. In the face of the constraining of states to the demands and conditions of global markets, the dramatic decrease in union membership and increase in corporate salaries and benefits at the highest levels, and the shift in political parties from person-intensive to finance-intensive organization strategies, the political opportunities open to most Americans are either voting, which increasing numbers choose not to do, or giving money. Thus, it is not surprising that many might want to be more active and might feel that action online is a way of getting their voice heard, a way of making a contribution.

Indeed, interactive communications technology corporations rose to popularity in part on the message that they were tools for political empowerment. One might think of Ted Nelson, Stewart Brand, the People's Computer Company a
nd their emancipatory images of computing technology. In the context of the San Francisco Bay Area's anti-war activism of the early seventies, they held up computers as the means to the renewal of participatory democracy. One might also think of the image projected by Apple Computers. Apple presented itself as changing the world, as saving democracy by bringing technology to the people. In 1984, Apple ran an ad for the Macintosh that placed an image of the computer next to one of Karl Marx. The slogan was, "It was about time a capitalist started a revolution." Finally, one might also recall the guarantees of citizens' access and the lure of town meetings for millions, the promises of democratization and education that drove Al Gore and Newt Gingrich's political rhetoric in the nineties as Congress worked through the Information and Infrastructure Technology Act, the National Information Infrastructure Act (both passing in 1993) and the 1996 Telecommunications Act. These bills made explicit a convergence of democracy and capitalism, a rhetorical convergence that the bills brought into material form. As the 1996 bill affirmed, "the market will drive both the Internet and

the information highway" (Dyer-Witheford 1999: 34–5). In all these cases, what is driving the Net is the promise of political efficacy, of the enhancement of democracy through citizens' access and use of new communications technologies. But, the promise of participation is not simply propaganda. No, it is a deeper, underlying fantasy wherein technology functions as a fetish covering over our impotence and helping us understand ourselves as active. The working of such a fantasy is clear in discussions of the political impact of a new device, system, code or platform. A particular technological innovation becomes a screen upon which all sorts of fantasies of political action are projected.

We might think here of peer-to-peer file sharing, especially in light of the early rather hypnotic, mantra-like appeals to Napster. Napster – despite that fact that it was a commercial venture – was heralded as a sea change; it would transform private property, bring down capitalism. More than piracy, Napster was a popular attack on private property itself. Nick Dyer-Witheford, for example, argues that Napster, and other peer-to-peer networks, present "real possibilities of market disruption as a result of large-scale copyright violation." He contends:

> While some of these peer-to-peer networks – like Napster – were created as commercial applications, others – such as Free Net – were designed as political projects with the explicit intention of destroying both state censorship and commercial copyright.. The adoption of these celebratory systems as a central component of North American youth culture presents a grassroots expansion of the digital commons and, at the very least, seriously problematizes current plans for their enclosure. (Dyer-Witheford 2002: 142)

Lost in the celebratory rhetoric is the fact that capitalism has never depended on one industry. Industries rise and fall. Corporations like Sony and Bertelsmann can face declines in one sector and still make astronomical profits in others. Joshua Gamson's point about the legacy of Internet-philia is appropriate here: wildly displaced enthusiasm over the political impact of a specific technological practice results in a tendency "to bracket institutions and ownership, to research and theorize uses and users of new media outside of those brackets, and to let 'newness' overshadow historical continuity" (Gamson 2003: 259). Worries about the loss of the beloved paperback book to unwieldy e-books weren't presented as dooming the publishing industry or assaulting the very regime of private property. Why should sharing music files be any different?

It shouldn't – and that is my point; Napster is a technological fetish onto which all sorts of fantasies of political action are projected. Here of course the fantasy is one deeply held by music fans: music can change the world. And, armed with networked personal computers, the

weapons of choice for American college students in a not-so-radical oh-so-consumerist entertainment culture, the wired revolutionaries could think they were changing the world comforted all the while that nothing would really change (or, at best, they could get record companies to lower the prices on compact disks).

The technological fetish covers over and sustains a lack on the part of the subject. That is to say, it protects the fantasy of an active, engaged subject by acting in the subject's stead. The technological fetish "is political" for us, enabling us to go about the rest of our lives relieved of the guilt that we might not be doing our part and secure in the belief that we are after all informed, engaged citizens. The paradox of the technological fetish is that the technology acting in our stead actually enables us to remain politically passive. We don't have to assume political responsibility because, again, the technology is doing it for us.

The technological fetish also covers over a fundamental lack or absence in the social order. It protects a fantasy of unity, wholeness or order, compensating in advance for this impossibility. Differently put, technologies are invested with hopes and dreams, with aspirations to something better. A technological fetish is at work when one disavows the lack or fundamental antagonism forever rupturing (yet producing) the social by advocating a particular technological fix. The "fix" lets us think that all we need is to universalize a particular technology, and then we will have a democratic or reconciled social order.

Gamson's account of gay websites provides a compelling illustration of this fetish function. Gamson argues that in the US, the Internet has been a major force in transforming "gay and lesbian media from organizations answering at least partly to geographical and political communities into businesses answering primarily to advertisers and investors" (2003: 260). He focuses on gay portals and their promises to offer safe and friendly spaces for the gay community. What he notes, however, is the way that these safe gay spaces now function primarily "to deliver a market share to corporations." As he explains, "community needs are conflated with consumption desires, and community equated with market" (Ibid.: 270–1). Qua fetish, the portal is a screen upon which fantasies of connection can be projected. These fantasies displace attention from their commercial context.

Specifying more clearly the operation of the technological fetish will bring home the way new communications technologies reinforce communicative capitalism. I emphasize three operations: condensation, displacement and foreclosure.

The technological fetish operates through *condensation*. The complexities of politics – of organization, struggle, duration, decisiveness, division, representation, etc. – are condensed into one thing, one problem to be solved and one technological solution. So, the problem of democracy is that people aren't informed; they don't have the information they need to participate effectively. Bingo! Information

technologies provide people with information. This sort of strategy, however, occludes the problems of organizing and political will. For example, in the United States – as Mary Graham explains in her study of the politics of disclosure in chemical emissions, food labeling and medical error policy – transparency started to function as a regulatory mechanism precisely at a time when legislative action seemed impossible. Agreeing that people had a right to know, politicians could argue for warning labels and more data while avoiding hard or unpopular decisions. Corporations could comply – and find ways to use their reports to improve their market position. "Companies often lobbied for national disclosure requirements," Graham writes. "They did so," she continues,

> because they believed that disclosure could reduce the chances of tougher regulation, eliminate the threat of multiple state requirements, or improve competitive advantage . . . Likewise, large food processing companies and most trade associations supported national nutritional labeling as an alternative to multiple state requirements and new regulations, or to a crackdown on health claims. Some also expected competitive gain from labeling as consumers, armed with accurate information, increased demand for authentically healthful productions. (Graham 2002: 140)

Additional examples of condensation appear when cybertheorists and activists emphasize singular websites, blogs and events. The MediaWhoresOnline blog might be celebrated as a location of critical commentary on mainstream and conservative journalism – but it is also so small that it doesn't show up on blog ranking sites like daypop or Technorati.

The second mode of operation of the technological fetish is through displacement. I've addressed this idea already in my description of Napster and the way that the technological fetish is political for us. But I want to expand this sense of displacement to account for tendencies in some theory writing to displace political energies elsewhere. Politics is displaced upon the activities of everyday or ordinary people – as if the writer and readers and academics and activists and, yes, even the politicians were somehow extraordinary. What the everyday people do in their everyday lives is supposed to overflow with political activity: conflicts, negotiations, interpretations, resistances, collusions, cabals, transgressions and resignifications. The Net – as well as cell phones, beepers and other communications devices (though, weirdly, not the regular old telephone) – is thus teeming with politics. To put up a website, to deface a website, to redirect hits to other sites, to deny access to a website, to link to a website – this is construed as real political action. In my view, this sort of emphasis displaces political energy from the hard work of organizing and struggle. It also remains oddly one-sided, conveniently

forgetting both the larger media context of these activities, as if there were not and have not been left and progressive print publications and organizations for years, and the political context of networked communications – the Republican Party as well as all sorts of other conservative organizations and lobbyists use the Internet just as much, if not more, than progressive groups.

Writing on Many-2-Many, a group web log on social software, Clay Shirkey invokes a similar argument to explain Howard Dean's poor showing in the Iowa caucuses following what appeared to be his remarkable successes on the Internet. Shirkey writes:

> We know well from past attempts to use social software to organize groups for political change that it is hard, very hard, because participation in online communities often provides a sense of satisfaction that actually dampens a willingness to interact with the real world. When you're communing with like-minded souls, you *feel* [original emphasis] like you're accomplishing something by arguing out the smallest details of your perfect future world, while the imperfect and actual world takes no notice, as is its custom.
>
> There are many reasons for this, but the main one seems to be that the pleasures of life online are precisely the way they provide a respite from the vagaries of the real world. Both the way the online environment flattens interaction and the way everything gets arranged for the convenience of the user makes the threshold between talking about changing the world and changing the world even steeper than usual.[3] (Shirkey 2004)

This does not mean that web-based activities are trivial or that social software is useless. The Web provides an important medium for connecting and communicating and the Dean campaign was innovative in its use of social software to build a vital, supportive movement around Dean's candidacy. But, the pleasures of the medium should not displace our attention from the ways that political change demands much, much more than networked communication and the way that the medium itself can and does provide a barrier against action on the ground. As the Dean campaign also demonstrates, without organized, mobilized action on the ground, without responses to and from caucus attendees in Iowa, for example, Internet politics remains precisely that – a politics of and through new media, and that's all.

The last operation of the technological fetish follows from the previous ones: foreclosure. As I have suggested, the political purchase of the technological fetish is given in advance; it is immediate, presumed, understood. File sharing *is* political. A website *is* political. Blogging *is* political. But this very immediacy rests on something else, on a prior exclusion. And, what is excluded is the possibility of politicization proper. Consider this breathless proclamation from Geert Lovink and Florian Schneider:

The revolution of our age should come as no surprise. It has been announced for a long time. It is anticipated in the advantage of the open source idea over archaic terms of property. It is based on the steady decline of the traditional client-server architecture and the phenomenal rise of peer-to-peer technologies. It is practiced already on a daily basis: the overwhelming success of open standards, free software and file-sharing tools shows a glimpse of the triumph of a code that will transform knowledge-production into a world-writable mode. Today revolution means the wikification of the world; it means creating many different versions of worlds, which everyone can read, write, edit and execute. (Lovink and Schneider 2003; cf. King 2004)

Saying that "revolution means the wikification" of the world employs an illegitimate short circuit. More specifically, it relies on an ontologization such that the political nature of the world is produced by particular technological practices. Struggle, conflict and context vanish, immediately and magically. Or, they are foreclosed, eliminated in advance so as to create a space for the utopian celebration of open source.

To ontologize the political is to collapse the very symbolic space necessary for politicization, a space between an object and its representation, its ability to stand for something beyond itself. The power of the technological fetish stems from this foreclosure of the political. Bluntly put, a condition of possibility for asserting the immediately political character of something web radio or open-source code, say, is not simply the disavowal of other political struggles; rather, it relies on the prior exclusion of the antagonistic conditions of emergence of web radio and open source, of their embeddedness within the brutalities of global capital, of their dependence for existence on racialized violence and division. Technologies can and should be politicized. They should be made to represent something beyond themselves in the service of a struggle against something beyond themselves. Only such a treatment will avoid fetishization.

THE FANTASY OF WHOLENESS: A GLOBAL ZERO INSTITUTION

Thus far I've discussed the foreclosure of the political in communicative capitalism in terms of the fantasy of abundance accompanying the reformatting of messages as contributions and the fantasy of participation accompanying the technology fetishism. These fantasies give people the sense that our actions online are politically significant, that they make a difference. I turn now to the fantasy of wholeness further animating networked communications. This fantasy furthers our sense that our contributions to circulating content matter by locating them in the most significant of possible spaces – the global. To be sure, I am not arguing that the world serves as a space for

communicative capitalism analogous to the one the nation provided for industrial capitalism. On the contrary, my argument is that the space of communicative capitalism is the Internet and that networked communications materialize specific fantasies of unity and wholeness as the global. The fantasies in turn secure networked transactions as the Real of global capitalism.

To explain why, I draw from Zizek's elucidation of a concept introduced by Claude Levi-Strauss, the zero institution (Zizek 2001: 221–3). A zero institution is an empty signifier. It has no determinate meaning but instead signifies the presence of meaning. It is an institution with no positive function – all it does is signify institutionality as such (as opposed to chaos for example). As originally developed by Levi-Strauss, the concept of the zero institution helps explain how people with radically different descriptions of their collectivity nevertheless understand themselves as members of the same tribe. To the Levi-Straussian idea Zizek adds insight into how both the nation and sexual difference function as zero institutions. The nation designates the unity of society in the face of radical antagonism, the irreconcilable divisions and struggles between classes; sexual difference, in contrast, suggests difference as such, a zero level of absolute difference that will always be filled in and overdetermined by contextually given differences.

In light of the nation's failing capacity to stand symbolically for institutionality, the Internet has emerged as the zero institution of communicative capitalism. It enables myriad constituencies to understand themselves as part of the same global structure even as they radically disagree, fail to co-link, and inhabit fragmented and disconnected network spaces. The Internet is not a wide-open space, with nodes and links to nodes distributed in random fashion such that any one site is equally likely to get hits as any other site. This open, smooth, virtual world of endless and equal opportunity is a fantasy. In fact, as Albert-Laszlo Barabasi's research on directness in scale-free networks makes clear, the World Wide Web is broken into four major "continents" with their own navigational requirements (Barabasi 2003: 161–78). Following links on one continent may never link a user to another continent; likewise, following links in one direction does not mean that a user can retrace links back to her starting point. So despite the fact that its very architecture (like all directed networks) entails fragmentation into separate spaces, the Internet presents itself as the unity and fullness of the global. Here the global is imagined and realized. More than a means through which communicative capitalism intensifies its hold and produces its world, the Internet functions as a particularly powerful zero institution insofar as it is animated by the fantasy of global unity.

The Internet provides an imaginary site of action and belonging. Celebrated for its freedoms and lack of boundaries, this imagined totality serves as a kind of presencing of the global. On the one hand the Internet imagines, stages and enacts the "global" of global

capital. But on the other this global is nothing like the "world" – as if such an entity were possible, as if one could designate an objective reality undisturbed by the external perspective observing it or a fully consistent essential totality unruptured by antagonism (Zizek 2002: 181).

The oscillations in the 1990s debate over the character of the Internet can clarify this point. In the debate, Internet users appeared either as engaged citizens eager to participate in electronic town halls and regularly communicate with their elected representatives, or they appeared as web-surfing waste-of-lives in dark, dirty rooms downloading porn, betting on obscure Internet stocks or collecting evidence of the US government's work with extraterrestrials at Area 51 (Dean 1997). In other versions of this same matrix, users were either innocent children or dreadful war-game playing teenage boys. Good interactions were on Amazon. Bad interactions were underground and involved drugs, kiddie porn, LSD and plutonium. These familiar oscillations remind us that the Net has always been particular and that struggles over regulating the Internet have been struggles over what kind of particularity would and should be installed. Rather than multiply far-reaching, engaging and accessible, the Internet has been constituted in and through conflict over specific practices and subjectivities. Not everything goes.

We might even say that those who want to clean up the Internet, who want to get rid of or zone the porn and the gambling, who want to centralize, rationalize and organize commercial transactions in ways more beneficial to established corporations than to small, local businesses, express as a difference on the Internet what is actually the starker difference between societies traversed and mediated through electronic communications and financial networks and those more reliant on social, interpersonal and extra-legal networks. As Ernesto Laclau argues, the division between the social and the non-social, or between society and what is other to it, external and threatening, can only be expressed as a difference internal to society (Laclau 1996: 38). If capital today traverses the globe, how can the difference between us and them be expressed? The oscillations in the Internet debate suggest that the difference is between those who are sexualized, undisciplined, violent, irrational, lazy, excessive and extreme on the one hand, and those who are civilized, mainstream, hard-working, balanced and normal on the other. Put in psychoanalytic terms, the other on the Internet is the Real other – not the other I imagine as like me and not the symbolic other to be recognized and respected through abstract norms and rights. That the other is Real brings home the fact that the effort to clean up the Internet was more than a battle of images and involved more than gambling and porn. The image of the Internet works as a fantasy of a global unity. Whatever disrupts this unity cannot be part of the global.

The particularity of the fantasies of the global animating the Internet is striking. For example, Richard Rogers' research on linking

practices on the World Wide Web brings out the Web's localism and provincialism. In his account of the Dutch food safety debate, Rogers notes "little in the way of 'web dialogue' or linkage outside of small Dutch 'food movement'" (Rogers 2002). Critics of personalized news as well as of the sheltered world of AOL click on a similar problem – the way the world on the Web is shrunken into a very specific image of the global (Patelis 2000). How would fringe culture fans of blogs on incunabula.org or ollapodrida.org come into contact with sites providing Koranic instruction to modern Muslims – even if there were no language problems? And, why would they bother? Why should they? Indeed, as a number of commentators have worried for a while now, opportunities to customize the news and announcements one reads – not to mention the already undigestible amount of information available on topics in which one is deeply interested – contribute to the segmentation and isolation of users within bubbles of opinions with which they already agree.

The particularity of these fantasies of the global is important because this is the global that networked communications produce. Our networked interactions produce our specific worlds as the global of global capital. They create the expectations and effects of communicative capitalism, expectations and effects that necessarily vary according to one's context. And, precisely because the global is whatever specific communities or exchanges imagine it to be, anything outside the experience or comprehension of these communities either does not exist or is an inhuman, otherworldly alien threat that must be annihilated. So, if everything is out there on the Internet, anything I fail to encounter – or can't imagine encountering – isn't simply excluded (everything is already there), it is foreclosed. Admitting or accessing what is foreclosed destroys the very order produced through foreclosure. Thus, the imagined unity of the global, a fantasy filled in by the particularities of specific contexts, is one where there is no politics; there is already agreement. Circulating content can't effect change in this sort of world – it is already complete. The only alternative is the Real that ruptures my world, that is to say the evil other I cannot imagine sharing a world with. The very fantasy of a global that makes my networked interactions vital and important results in a world closed to politics on the one hand, and threatened by evil on the other.

CONCLUSION

A Lacanian commonplace is that a letter always arrives at its destination. What does this mean with respect to networked communications? It means that a letter, a message, in communicative capitalism is not really sent. There is no response because there is no arrival. There is just the contribution to circulating content.

Many readers will likely disagree. Some may say that the line I draw between politics as circulating content and politics as governance makes no sense. Dot.orgs, dot.coms, and dot.govs are all clearly

interconnected and intertwined in their personnel, policies and positions. But, to the extent that they are interconnected, identifying any impact on these networks by critical opponents becomes all the more difficult.

Other readers might bring up the successes of MoveOn (www. moveon.org). From its early push to have Congress censure Bill Clinton and "move on," to its presence as a critical force against the Iraq war, to recent efforts to prevent George W. Bush from acquiring a second term, MoveOn has become a presence in mainstream American politics and boasts over two million members worldwide. In addition to circulating petitions and arranging e-mails and faxes to members of Congress, one of MoveOn's best actions was a virtual sit-in: over 200,000 of us called into Washington, DC at scheduled times on the same day, shutting down phone lines into the capital for hours. In early 2004, MoveOn sponsored an ad contest: the winning ad would be shown on a major television network during the Super Bowl football game. The ad was great – but CBS refused to broadcast it.

As I see it, far from being evidence against my argument, MoveOn exemplifies technology fetishism and confirms my account of the foreclosure of the political. MoveOn's campaigns director, Eli Pariser, says that the organization is "opt-in, it's decentralized, you do it from your home" (Boyd 2003: 14). No one has to remain committed or be bothered with boring meetings. Andrew Boyd, in a positive appraisal of the group, writes that "MoveOn's strength lies . . . in providing a home for busy people who may not want to be a part of a chapter-based organization with regular meetings . . . By combining a nimble entrepreneurial style with a strong ethic of listening to its members – via online postings and straw polls – MoveOn has built a responsive, populist and relatively democratic virtual community" (Ibid.: 16). Busy people can think they are active – the technology will act for them, alleviating their guilt while assuring them that nothing will change too much. The responsive, relatively democratic virtual community won't place too many (actually any) demands on them, fully aware that its democracy is the democracy of communicative capitalism – opinions will circulate, views will be expressed, information will be accessed. By sending an e-mail, signing a petition, responding to an article on a blog, people can feel political. And that feeling feeds communicative capitalism insofar as it leaves behind the time-consuming, incremental and risky efforts of politics. MoveOn likes to emphasize that it abstains from ideology, from division. While I find this disingenuous on the surface – MoveOn's politics are progressive, anti-war, left-democratic – this sort of non-position strikes me as precisely that disavowal of the political I've been describing: it is a refusal to take a stand, to venture into the dangerous terrain of politicization.

Perhaps one can find better reasons to disagree with me when one looks at alternative politics, that is when one focuses on the role

of the Internet in mass mobilizations, in connecting activists from all over the world and in providing an independent media source. The February 15, 2003 mobilization of ten million people worldwide to protest the Bush administration's push against Iraq is perhaps the most striking example, but one might also mention MoveOn's March 16, 2003 candlelight vigil, an action involving over a million people in 130 countries. Such uses of the Internet are vitally important for political activists – especially given the increasingly all-pervasive reach of corporate-controlled media. Through them, activists establish social connections to one another – even if not to those outside their circles. But this does not answer the question of whether such instances of intense social meaning will drive larger organizational efforts and contribute to the formation of political solidarities with more duration. Thus, I remain convinced that the strongest argument for the political impact of new technologies proceeds in precisely the opposite direction, that is to say in the direction of post-politics. Even as globally networked communications provide tools and terrains of struggle, they make political change more difficult – and more necessary – than ever before. To this extent, politics in the sense of working to change current conditions may well require breaking with and through the fantasies attaching us to communicative capitalism.

NOTES
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1. A thorough historical analysis of the contribution would spell out the steps involved in the uncoupling of messages from responses. Such an analysis would draw out the ways that responses to the broadly cast messages of television programs were configured as attention and measured in terms of ratings. Nielsen families, in other words, responded for the rest of us. Yet, as work in cultural studies, media and communications has repeatedly emphasized, ratings are not responses and provide little insight into the actual responses of viewers. These actual responses, we can say, are uncoupled from the broadcast message and incorporated into other circuits of communication.
2. I am grateful to Drazen Pantic for sending me a link to this site.
3. Special thanks to Auke Towslager for this url and many others on blogspace.

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