Stuck in Cyberspace: Introduction
by Chelsea Palmer, 2015

The following thesis explores the increasing ubiquity of modern information and communication technologies across the globe. Probing varied aspects and consequences of the invention and widespread adoption of computers and the Internet, this thesis presents the beginning of a synthesized theoretical framework to to conceptualize the shifts in social power that surround these new technologies. Unlike a traditional participant-based research thesis, the intention is not to prove a singular hypothesis or reach a concrete answer to a research problem. Rather, the expectation is that the complex tensions of power and agency in the present age will be thoroughly explored, with recommendations provided for further investigation and discussion.

This exploratory endeavour is accomplished through the production of essays which highlight concrete examples of cultural negotiation related to information & communication technology [ICT] adoption. The implications of such a project are as open-ended as the implications of contemporary technological growth itself. However, the primary intended outcome is to encourage a more informal and creative approach to establishing and defending academic theory. Analysis in the age of the Internet inevitably mimics some of the Internet's own defining qualities, including adaptability, fluidity, and a rejection of claims to objective truth. The necessity of such an adaptation follows the same patterns of innovation and creative growth that is addressed in the literature review of this thesis, and will demand an accompanying shift away from some of the traditions of academia.

Significance of Topic of Study

Widespread advances in technology, industry and economy have always been accompanied by a parallel evolution of societal epistemes. The rise of computer and Internet culture have served as the newest iteration of such previous epistemic shifts as the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions (Winner, 1994; Halcli & Webster, 2000; Castells, 2004). In the past few decades alone, technological development has had wide-ranging effects across personal, relational and collective levels of human life. By 2013, 37.9% of the global population was using the Internet, and an estimated three billion users will be online before the end of 2015 (Kende, 2014). The growth of cell phone usage in the Global South has progressed at an even faster pace, and cell phones are the primary source of Internet access for the majority of the global population (Panagakos & Horst, 2006; Brown & Marsden,

2013).

The rise in Internet access has been paired with a relational shift in how communities engage and communicate. The rise of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter have rapidly blurred the traditional boundaries between public and private spheres of communication (Bakardjieva, 2005; Reilly, 2013). Widespread opportunities for global visibility, both for creative and political purposes, have allowed for a radical shift in media production and the immediate dissemination of local news (Brighenti, 2007; Meyers, 2012). Additionally, online tools and platforms enhance the organizing capabilities and widespread engagement of activist movements (Rosenau & Johnson, 2002; Pickard, 2006; AlSayyad & Guvenc, 2013; Valenzuela, 2013).

Finally, at the personal level, the ubiquity of technological devices and the increasing alteration of human environments has had a significant impact on citizens of the Global North who are immersed in ICT landscapes. As patterns of communication and interaction shifted, so have individuals' experiences of both the fluidity of space and the immediacy of time (Castells, 2004; Crang, Crosbie & Graham, 2006; Ling, 2012; Moshe, 2012). The reliance on technological devices and omnipresent online connectivity has altered human relationships, while creating new norms of daily behavior and expected routines (Winner, 1994). Ultimately, the rise of computer technologies and the Internet have produced visible effects from the level of global governance, to the realm of community interaction, all the way to daily human behaviour.

Personal Interest in Subject

My personal interest in this topic derives from my standpoint as a member of the generation which has straddled the rise of widespread adoption of the Internet, and its accompanying practices of constant connectivity. Additionally, following my undergraduate degree, I gained increasing awareness of the underlying processes of computer use and the associated activism around free and open access to ICT resources. In particular, I was stirred into action after the suicide of the young Internet activist Aaron Swartz in 2013, who was facing federal criminal charges for accessing and openly distributing academic articles (Murnane, 2014). This incident raised many questions about the existing legislation around copyright law, and connected directly to activist concerns about limitations on open information sharing and fair use.

There have been many signs, as described above, that Internet culture is irrevocably changing

the landscape of global society, and that this topic is therefore crucial to contemporary theory. However, the conceptual martyrdom of a fellow academic activist, with criminal charges exceeding those placed upon violent offenders, solidified my personal dedication to exploring issues of power and agency in the Internet age. Aaron Swartz's vision of open information and education for all human beings is shared by so many, and highlights the crucial precipice for ensuring equitable access to these resources at the global level.

Statement of Purpose

This thesis explores how an interdisciplinary conceptual analysis of the historical and contemporary development of information and communications technology can clarify the interdependence of technology and cultural practices, especially as they impact the complex fluidity of social power.

Assumptions & Limitations

The primary assumption of this thesis is that interdisciplinary theory can be effectively applied to analyze current events, even without a component of traditional participant-based research. Traditionally, informal theoretical work does not stand on its own merit in psychology or the hard sciences, where research validity is considered "an indication of accuracy in terms of the extent to which a research conclusion corresponds with reality" (MacBurney & White, 2010, p. 173). In contrast to participant-based research, philosophical inquiry is often viewed as a mere foundational framework for more concrete qualitative or quantitative study (Babbie, 2005). This project addresses this limitation of perceived academic relevance through its broad but thorough incorporation of references to the research and statistics of pre-existing interdisciplinary sources. The test of validity in such an undertaking does not fall along traditional scientific measures, but instead is produced in "an analysis that can only achieve a status of validity from the community of readers" (Poster, 1989, p. 141). This argument takes for granted the constructivist principle that writing and reading are themselves inherently valuable source of meaning-making (MacBurney & White, 2010).

Additionally, this project's unique structure, and central focus on the rapidly developing contemporary sphere, requires an even more radical departure from conventional concepts of research validity. The traditional narrow focus on a small body of peer-reviewed literature is assumed to be an aspect of an inherent and problematic bias in academia, and therefore it is purposely disregarded as a

symptom of the long-standing fracture between theoretical analysis and the cultural context which it has addressed.

This thesis takes for granted the assumption that informal "artifacts" from contemporary Internet culture are an ideal source for hermeneutical interpretation of the present age as an ever-shifting "text" in itself. Thus, the contemporary sources that are invoked for the body of the thesis essays include opinion pieces, academic speeches, videos, and contemporary news articles. The supposed limitation of incorporating non-standardized sources is utilized as a strength, making the thesis more accessible to a wide range of readers, while acknowledging that rigid peer-reviewed sources serve an important role in more formal research inquiries than this one.

On a more traditional academic level, this thesis builds upon the assumption that critical theory, at its core, creates an interdisciplinary context for understanding the relationship between human discourse and societal practices. Following Poster (1989), this thesis is further focused by the capability for "poststructuralist theory, thus far perhaps largely unexplored [...] to clarify a social order increasingly characterized by electronically mediated language constellations" (p. 7). Writers who were broadly labelled as poststructuralist thinkers, such as Michel Foucault, characteristically rejected theoretical attempts to present interpretive perspectives regarding causation or even meaningful correlation, designating such efforts as overly reductive (Poster, 1989). However, interpretation and the pursuit of cause-and-effect relationships are natural elements of human thought, and can only be mitigated, rather than eliminated.

In one sense, this abstract poststructuralist reflexivity is invaluable to this project's aim of addressing multiple perspectives on each topic without arguing for conclusive outcomes. However, it is difficult to stay loyal to poststructuralist skepticism regarding notions of truth and meaning, while surveying opinions and commentary provided by contemporary media sources. Community Psychology has always been a value-laden and idealistic field, driven by concerns of social justice above all else. In contrast, Michel Foucault declared his academic intentions to be largely apolitical, and instead tried to analyze human history from a neutral perspective. Both Community Psychology and Foucauldian theory have shared a fixation on systems rather than individuals, and a preoccupation with the complexity and centrality of power in society. Therefore, these disparate approaches to academic analysis can provide a surprisingly thorough and balanced view of the current state of technological culture.