Old Freedoms and New Technologies: The Evolution of Community Networking

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Unparalleled in human experience, the Internet, or simply the Net, is the code word for the technosocial accident that gives large numbers of people the means by which they can speak for themselves in public. This is an ironical reversal of the historical social patterning of asymmetrical, centralizing communicating technologies that have molded all of the social relations of modern society. The problematic for this distributed communication capability will be manifest in struggles around the legitimacy of self-expression, assembly, and privacy, in all of their forms. However, unlike the mass mediated discourse where, as the “audience” object, we observed these externalized struggles by a narrower other, encounters with distributed media are palpable and subjective, and will be increasingly played out on the common terrain of local community. In initiating unconditional public access to the Net, community networks, or FreeNets, began the long process of blurring the distinction between the public and private terrain, of undoing that dichotomy that mass media technologies in this century have systematically rebuilt and fortified. Nudging along the process of democratic self-representation is the central issue for the Net, and the epochal project for community networks.

For the past few years, North American society has begun to say a lot on the distributed public media that we call the Internet, or simply the Net. And we have started to have a lot to say about what we’ve been saying. However, we haven’t quite heard what we’ve been saying. We haven’t heard because we are inexperienced in listening to each other this way. We are listening to the wrong things. Or, as Karl Popper once put it, we have been “like my dog, staring at my finger when I point to the door.” But we can be forgiven for our misplaced attention to the Net.

Since it was first observed that there just was not enough available bandwidth to let everybody send smoke signals or bang drums, we’ve been organizing and reorganizing to determine who would, and who would not, get their hands on the blankets and the drums—and the presses, the microphones, and the cameras. As we moved through a few millennia, successive public communication technologies either began as, or very quickly were made to conform to, the extreme send/receive imbalances that, somewhere along the line, we started calling the mass media, or simply the media.

It would be pedantic in the extreme to do more than note that these access restrictions now define all of the social relations of modern societies. Whole disciplines are organized around the understanding that all public and private institutions, all local and external spaces are bent by the constricted and compressed discourses of the mass media. Whether the analyses are celebratory or critical, whether their mass media interdependencies are made explicit or not, all analyses of modern society take the access constraints of the mass media as immutable. Public access to these media is simply not problematical. On the one hand, there are the media and, on the other, there are their audiences, consumers, constituents, and publics.

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Until very recently, there was no reason to imagine that questions would ever have to be asked about societies with abundant access to the means of media production, exhibition, distribution, and reproduction of cultural offerings. Suddenly, it is time to start imagining the questions. That is what the Internet is about.

Some usually astute observers, among them Internet Society President Vinton Cerf and Microsoft CEO Bill Gates, are predicting that the 20 million now on the Net is only the beginning. Cerf predicts 100 million by 1998 and Gates, in a recent interview, confided that his biggest mistake so far had been in underestimating the importance of the Internet. If they are right, if the hordes are going to start beating their drums in public, absolutely everything about the existing social order is about to be challenged. Not simply the mass media institutions, but all institutions. Everything is at stake.

[If they are wrong, if the Internet is only the latest gizmology, then there is nothing to get intellectually excited about. We’ve been there before. For, as exciting or as terrifying as the prospect of a tiny 500-channel universe may be, it is just mass media business as usual, albeit new and unusual business.]

Whether or not there will be 100 million or so people on the Internet by 1998 or so will depend, first, upon whether they want to be there and second, if they do, who will likely be trying to stop them, why will they be trying to stop them, and how will they be trying to stop them.

As to the question of whether they will want to be, the Internet growth figures are familiar to us all. Steeply up to the right and getting steeper. This should be more than enough evidence that, given a chance, people are eager to be there. Curiously, this inconceivable growth has occurred despite the equally familiar observations that the Internet is difficult to access, hard to use, slow to respond, and what is mostly to be found there is banal or otherwise offensive, and hopelessly disorganized.

This apparent contradiction of millions actively embracing cyberjunk cannot be resolved within the vocabulary of the mass media with their well-organized, familiar, marvelously honed content packages that are so quickly and effortlessly available. Dismissive statements about the potential of the Internet that are based on the quality and delivery of content cannot be resolved by debates about whether such statements are accurate or inaccurate. For some, judging the Internet by its content, the quality of its information, and the accuracy of its databases is relevant and for others it is not.

For those for whom it is not, the Internet is less about information or content, and more about relations. For the mass media, it is always just the opposite. The mass media are almost pure content, the relationship a rigidly frozen nontransaction that insulates the few content producers or information providers from their audiences. This is how we experience and understand the mass media. If it were not so, we would not call them the mass media. Five hundred or 5000 more unswitched, asymmetrical, “smart” channels will not change that.

It is, on the other hand, impossible to understand much about the Internet’s appeal by analyzing its content. The Internet is mostly about people finding their voice, speaking for themselves in a public way, and the content that carries this new relationship is of separate, even secondary, importance. The Internet is about people saying “Here I am and there you are.” Even the expression of disagreement and hostility, the “flames” as they are called, at least says, “You exist. I may disagree with you, or even dislike you, but you do exist.” Mass media do not confirm existence, and cannot. The market audience exists, but the reader, listener, or viewer does not.

This is not to argue that the content of the Internet is irrelevant. The content defines the relationship. People not only want to represent themselves, they ordinarily want to
present themselves as well as they can. It would be cynical in the extreme to devalue these representations, the texts, the exhibited cultural products of tens of millions. It is rather to argue that the relational aspects of the transactions qualify and define the content in ways that need to be understood if the Internet it to be comprehended.

Whatever the reason for millions speaking publicly, this condition was not part of the mass media problematic. It is unreasonable to think that merely tinkering with paradigms grounded in technologies of restricted access will permit a rich interrogation of the range of social relations provided for by technologies of unrestricted access.

This call for a vocabulary that directly addresses the centrality of distributed public media is not a suggestion that paradigms that centrally situate mass media are somehow of less importance than they once were. If anything, their questions of access, production, and representation are more critical, and even more challenging, than they were before distributed media raised the complexity of social relations. However, an expanded universe of mass media discourse that merely attempts to overlay distributed public networks upon the structured relationships of a mass mediated society, will lead us to misunderstand a society evolving with distributed public media.

It is well understood that all social institutions have their relative certainties made possible by the centralizing power of the technologies of mass communication. The relative certainties that accompany attenuated access to the means of symbolic production are welded into the fabric of all institutional policies and practices. Assuming, then, that access to the means of cultural expression will be increasingly distributed, it follows that all of the institutions of modern society will be threatened or at least inconvenience by this development. While expressions like “public involvement” and “participative democracy” are imbedded in our rhetorical traditions, their unquestionable acceptability has always been conditional upon their equally unquestionable nonattainability. The technologies of mass communication always ensured that involvement and participation would not be overdone.

When the institutions that rose to power in the wake of the industrial revolution began to speak of the “information revolution” they only meant to digitize the modern industrial state. This nonrevolution was Phase II of the old boys’ operation, another remodeling of the modern apparatus. The “Information Highway” is the updated code word for the modern retrofit. This was not supposed to be about a technological adventure that would reconfigure social relations or blur the well-constructed boundaries between the public and the private ground. This was supposed to be about a 500-channel, not a 100,000,000-channel universe.

The becoming Internet, this decentered polity, is an accident that happens to expand the locus of direct, self-mediated, daily political involvement. Those who previously had to make themselves presentable to the agencies of mass communication technologies in order to be represented by the technologies have begun to publicly represent themselves. What was previously local, domestic, idiosyncratic, and private can, for the first time, become external and public. This is an abrupt reversal of the mass media’s progressive appropriation of the idiosyncratic and private for their own institutional purposes.

Since this reversal was unimaginable, no contingency plans had been imagined for dealing with it. But, to the extent that the expansion of the public ground challenges become identified for any segment of the established order, these challenges will be met. It is axiomatic that the Internet and, by extension, public community networks can expect massive pressure to diminish or eliminate the identified destabilizing influences that these distributed media exert. If the Internet, with its changed relations of production and related exigencies, is signaling a coming Accidental Revolution, the contests and the casualties will be enormous.
The skirmishes, battles, and wars have already begun. All of these encounters are around the legitimacy of public self-expression, assembly, examination, and privacy. These are the problematic of distributed public media, not of the mass media. Beyond our noting that they were lamentably unimportant, the concerns relating to freedom of speech were not central to a mass mediated society. Our familiarity with freedom of speech was almost entirely vicarious, abstracted from the mass media accounts of their own experiences and the performances of their own legal departments. The mass media tested the limits of those freedoms for the speechless public.

We are now in the beginning stages of defining the legitimacy of self-expression for ourselves. This represents a new set of concerns about the circumstance and substance of distributed media texts in all of their modes, the bases of how it comes to happen that people “speak” publicly, and what it is that they “say.” The idea of “assembly” and how it will happen that groups come to occupy territory and how they are distributed globally and locally assumes original importance, as decisions get made about what “virtual communities” will be, and where they will situate. The privacy puzzles about the availability and use of all those sophisticated watching, listening, storing, sifting, and intrusive devices are a humbling reminder of just how much our reach has exceeded our understanding of these technologies. How these matters are resolved will shape the distributed media and decide their social relevance.

Community networks are contributing a broader distribution of voices as these puzzles begin to get worked out on the distributed media themselves, rather than only in the exclusive enclaves of special interests. This must continue and expand or the awakening of public self-representation will be short-lived. It would be wise to assume that there are not yet any “rights,” or that the old freedoms that were often hard won by the mass media are now enshrined and will automatically transfer to distributed public media.

Situating Community Networks

Bruce Sterling observed in the Afterword to his earlier work The Hacker Crackdown, “Three years in cyberspace is like thirty years anywhere real.” So it is easy to forget that way back in November 1991 the Canadian public had no access to the Internet and there were almost no signs that the public would ever have any access.

The steepness, even then, of that now overly familiar Internet growth curve was entirely attributable to new users from within their formal institutional settings. The universities, research institutes of the telecommunication giants, and a few government departments had the Internet as their private preserve and they tightly controlled access to it, often denying entry to even their own. This control existed, even although the administrations of these institutions were still marvelously unaware of what was going on in their basements. Though unintentional, the Internet was still a well-kept secret, its threat to the status quo still largely unrecognized.

The commercial online services were busily avoiding the Internet, still building the firewalls around their own proprietary networks. Their fees were so high, and their services so meager, that they were providing little incentive for the general public to even begin to experiment with their narrow networking offerings.

The recurring telco dream of local metered service was a constant reminder that the Canadian public might never experience the Internet. Failure of poorly conceived commercial network services like Bell Canada’s “Alex” and Australia Telecom’s “Discovery” had convinced the telcos that not even the business community was ready for network services.
The Canadian Network for the Advancement of Research, Industry and Education (CANARIE), as its name implied, betrayed no awareness that there might be people in this country. Even by the end of 1992 when CANARIE released its business and marketing plans, the hundreds of written pages devoted to its vision made almost no reference to the Internet, and carefully avoided the "public" as serious participants in what the partners had in mind for the country.7

These are but a few isolated examples of the evidence that the Internet had either not yet penetrated the collective institutional consciousness or was enjoying a brief period of benign neglect. For those who had experienced the Internet and begun to internalize even a small amount of what was happening, the general inattention seemed amazing, even eerie.

One thing was very clear. With no public or private restrictive policies in place, if there was ever a brief moment when it might be possible to unleash the Internet in Canada, to really unconditionally distribute this distributed capability to the Canadian public, it was 1991. (The National Capital FreeNet and the Victoria Free-Net were not actually unleashed until late 1992, but the idea was developing in the autumn of 1991.)8

The full stories of how the first Canadian community networks managed to uncage the Internet should probably be told some day. These stories need to be told to fill in the historical record, and to preempt any misconceptions that the development was simply blind luck or simply technology running its inevitable course. For now, it is enough to say that the FreeNet initiative in Canada was understood and intended from the very beginning as political action.

For the founders of the National Capital FreeNet, it was understood from the first that the relatively narrow and concrete act of having electronic mail and Usenet newsgroups available, and at their real cost to the community, would ensure widespread acceptance, and that the acceptance rate would be stunning. It was also understood that once these were made freely available, it would be difficult to take global electronic mail away, or to introduce it at the leisurely rate and higher tariffs that are customary with market driven services.

More importantly, it was understood that the inclusionary ideals and vocabulary of the FreeNet would both protect and sustain the initiative after the private sector realized that a public market for networked services was being created for them.

The National Capital FreeNet was an imagined public space, a dumb platform where all individuals, groups, and organizations could represent themselves, where conflict and controversy could occur as the manifestation of conflict and controversy already occurring within the community. As a public space, no one, and certainly no group or institution, would be held responsible for another's ideology, moral standards, expectations, or motivations. On the other hand, each person or organization would be accountable for themselves. Such a space could be constructed only by the community acting as a community, and not by any public or private organization acting on behalf of the community. At least that was the idea in 1991.

Just a few years later, the Net situation has changed dramatically. Although still expensive, commercial Internet access is readily available, and community networks like the National Capital FreeNet soon will not be needed, or even wanted, as Internet access points. Community networks will have to become the vital, local public spaces they originally promised to be.

Just calling the facility a community network does not make it one. The label does not ensure an unconditional public terrain where the whole community can celebrate its commonalities and diversities, and work through its differences. In 1991, there was not much urgency to focus on these ideals. Access to the existing and emerging Internet ser-
vices, and at no involuntary cost, was enough to ensure a community network's success. It was not then understood by the community networks that this powerful Internet access lever would slip away so quickly.

Community networks must now understand that they must be community networks. This means that they cannot be financed or run for the community by one or another institution. Although networks run by such organizations as universities, hospitals, telephone companies, or governments often do not charge a fee, and always provide an array of valuable services, these are not the criteria by which community network can be usefully defined.

Community networks run by other organizations are always conditionally invested with the values, missions, mandates, policies and procedures, and other constraints necessarily imposed by the host institutions, and therefore cannot ever provide a public terrain. No institution has a primary mandate to provide a public space where public opinion can be under construction. When freedom of expression is a secondary add-on, it is just that, and will be encouraged only so long as it is not in conflict with what the institution is primarily about.

Today's youthful community networks are better than they have any right to be this soon and are still our best hope, maybe our only hope, for a more participative, more self-representative democracy. It is too bad that they will have to mature so quickly if they are to reach adulthood. While they are still critical Internet access points, still the bridge between the vast diversity of the Internet and the more homogeneous organic community, they must take that opportunity to learn how to celebrate the vast diversity that is also the local community. The local community is where people live their social and political lives and that is where differences must be publicly worked through. This is most important where the differences are the most acute and where the latitudes of tolerance are the narrowest. Community networks must be up to letting everyone speak, as painful as this will be for some, some of the time.

Children, and others unequipped to make safe judgments when encountering the most extreme clashes of values, opinions, and advocacy, must be protected from these conflicts, but the community network cannot be their guardian. The family, the school, the place of worship, and other societal structures are their guardians.

Finally, and most importantly, the part-time, short-term stewards of the community networks, usually called the "board," must understand that the public terrain is not their institution, and not their moral preserve. The construction of quasi-commercial community networks is a betrayal of their original promise of becoming a public terrain. As community networks develop and mature, they are becoming more exclusionary, more restrictive, more like any other organization. They begin to see themselves as providing something for the community, rather than as caretakers of a space created by the community. This needs to be reversed. We have no need for Public Sphere, Inc. A commitment to defending and expanding the public ground will determine whether community networks will survive more than a few more years and, what is more, whether their survival will be a matter of importance.

Notes

1. Popper made the statement at a public lecture at Michigan State University in the mid-1960s. Ironically, he was arguing that the then popular social science translations of the electrical engineering "information theory" model were misguided attempts to understand social communication by what he termed "bucket theories," where the transactions are comprehended only as buckets of content, devoid of any human consideration.
2. Written testimony to U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Science, Space, and Technology, 23 March 1993. When asked what he thought about the reliability of Cerf's estimate of 100 million Internet users by 1998, Gerry Miller, Chairman of CA*net, the nonprofit company that manages and operates the Canadian Internet backbone network, responded wryly, "Try 100 million hosts." While Miller might not have meant that literally, it was clear that he felt Cerf's earlier estimate to now be a significant underestimate of expected Internet growth. Private conversation, Ottawa, November 1994.


4. An explication of framing human communication as the inevitable interplay of content and relational components of symbolic transaction was provided by Paul Watzlawick, Janet Beavin, and Don Jackson in *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. This 1967 monograph has attracted little attention from media scholars and other social theorists, probably because the unidirectional producer/consumer relationship between the mass media and their audiences is fixed, thereby eliminating or greatly inhibiting the metacomunication interplay.


6. For example, undergraduate students in most programs at most Canadian universities could not get computer accounts in 1991. Also, many of the first cohort of National Capital FreeNet subscribers were federal civil servants from departments and ministries where Internet access was available, but only to a selected few.


8. The National Capital FreeNet was inspired by the Cleveland Free-Net, founded in 1986 by Tom Grundner at Case Western Reserve University. "Free-Net" is a registered servicemark of the National Public Telecomputing Network.