

The Politics of Participation: Revisiting Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" in a Social Networking Context

ABSTRACT *It has become a truism that the Internet is, for better or worse, a democratizing technology. Amateur journalists find they have a voice that can challenge the major news reporting institutions, unsigned musicians have access to their audiences without needing connections in the industry, and for the first time almost anyone can try their hand at producing a film to share with the world. Plenty of ink has been spilled on the effect that these developments have on their respective institutions. In this essay, however, I argue first that there is a more wide-ranging, overall effect from mass participation in the creation and distribution of new media than is specifically and deeply political. Culturally, as we shift from being consumers of media to producers of and participants in new media, the idea of autonomy from significant capital and historically dominant institutions impacts our political consciousness. I argue that the trend of amateurism, self-determination, and industry restructuring in cultural arenas will inevitably spread to the political realm, given that the newest social networking tools have very effectively been used for political purposes (although not without resistance and backlash from existing institutions). This discussion is framed by Donna Haraway's classic "A Cyborg Manifesto," which sought to appropriate technological metaphors for resistance against "scary new networks" that she called "the informatics of domination."*

Donna Haraway first published "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Socialist Review* in 1985, and then reprinted it as a chapter in her book, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* in 1991. She wrote it as a "political myth" to inspire and guide socialist-feminist theory and practice in a postmodern era radically influenced by the "social relations of science and technology."

Two decades later, so much has changed in science, technology, politics, and society that I think it is worth revisiting this essay. As is often the case with the imaginative socio-political laboratory called science fiction (which is one aspect of her work, and the term is not meant pejoratively), our altered context gives new meaning to it rather than rendering it quaint. I am going to pay special attention to the section of her essay entitled "The Informatics of Domination," where she describes "scary new networks" that she claims have replaced the more traditional structures of hegemonic power. She says, "I argue for a politics rooted in claims about fundamental changes in the nature of class, race, and gender in an emerging system of world order analogous in its novelty and scope to that created by industrial capitalism," arguing that we are transitioning from "the comfortable old hierarchical dominations" to the "scary new networks" that she calls "the informatics of domination."¹

Some of those disturbing networks include Neo-imperialism, population control, and communications engineering—but these intimidating systems aren't meant to be seen as monoliths, nor does she present technology as automatically coercive. Haraway talks

about the social relations of science and technology in order to point out that we are not dealing with technological determinism; the interaction is much more dynamic than that. Rather than seeing our lives as determined and structured by technology that is beyond our control, she says that we need to see what sources of power we can find in that technology, and use it in creative and political ways.

Throughout the essay, Haraway stresses the need for political action as an urgent matter of survival, saying that "the need for unity of people trying to resist worldwide intensification of domination has never been more acute."² That need for unified resistance has only increased since 1985, and it has increased particularly intensely in the United States with the ongoing occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, the viciously cyclical "war on terror," and an increasingly severe economic crisis with repercussions felt all over the world.

Looking at the developments in communications technology of the past few years—from filesharing to blogs, wikis, and social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter—and the new social practices that are starting to emerge because of them, I will argue from a Marxist perspective (paralleling Haraway herself) that a visible flip side to the informatics of domination is emerging. A growing section of people in the industrialized world who experience civil and social disenfranchisement under capitalism, but who do have relatively privileged access to advanced technology, are developing their own "scary new networks" of resistance which I will term the informatics of dissent.

THE TYRANNY OF INFORMATION

Donna Haraway's claim that we can no longer easily point out institutional hierarchies and that we are experiencing post-industrial capitalism is certainly contestable, but there is no question that new methods of domination are at the disposal of those who would dominate in class society. These methods, rooted in science and technology, are what she refers to as informatics. Here she builds on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality. He was one of the first to describe how the control and management of information was becoming an indispensable tool for governments, corporations, armies, research facilities, factories, hospitals, schools, prisons, churches and a host of other institutions to inscribe social relations of power.³ From the immigrant worker who cannot get a hospital bed without "proper documentation," to the prisoner whose request to add a number to his calling list has been repeatedly "misfiled," to the lieutenant denied "conscientious objector" status (but his record shows that he requested it), to the older woman's rejected application for medical insurance due to her "preexisting conditions"—statistics, record-keeping, and advanced information systems today are marking new lines of prejudice and reasserting old ones in oppressive ways that deeply affect people's daily lives.

Faced with this situation, where "human beings, like any other component or subsystem, must be localized in a system architecture whose basic modes of operation are probabilistic, statistical," and "No objects, spaces or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in common

language," Haraway proposes a break from an obsolescent 1960's-style identity-centered politics in order to embrace multiplicity. The figure of the cyborg is both a metaphor and role model for resistance within this evolving paradigm.

THE TRANSGRESSIVE CYBORG

Transgressing boundaries is essential to Donna Haraway's conception of the cyborg. She says, "A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction."⁴ At first it may seem abstract to think of a person—if the cyborg is meant to be the model for a new, posthuman kind of person—who is at once organic and mechanical, artificial and natural, real and fictional. When the boundaries are blurred between the "natural" and "artificial" parts of what makes us human, it becomes much harder to take "nature" for granted, and a whole array of assumptions are undermined.

One may start to question some other things he or she has taken for granted, like the law. For example, one may ask, "If I want to communicate something about who I am to somebody, and I want to do it by sharing music, why does the law tell me that I can't? Where does the law come from? How did it get to be this way?" An answer like, "This is the way things are because this is the way things have always been," is a fiction that will no longer fly. Our lived experience in sharing music proves that things do not stay the way they have always been, and laws are not unshakable, eternal truths; we have simply shaped our behavior to accommodate

them—until now, when they no longer fit our lived experience.

So, social reality is based partly on real experience and partly on a story, a fiction, which we are told about our lives and our history and "the way things are." Haraway's cyborg metaphor highlights the simultaneity of seeming contradictions between what is artificial and natural, mechanical (or electrical) and organic, fictional and real, and invites us to take "pleasure in the confusion of boundaries" while taking "responsibility in their construction" (original emphasis).⁵ The point is not to rip apart every distinction so that everything becomes an anarchic jumbled mess devoid of any discernible meaning; it is to see the laws and boundaries that do exist as lines that have been drawn with particular agendas in mind, and then to decide where we might erase or redraw the lines ourselves. Drawing these lines is an inherently political act, and "A Cyborg Manifesto" is Haraway's way of speaking politics to pomo.

QUANTITY INTO QUALITY: MUSIC AND TECHNOLOGY FOR RECREATION, THEN RESISTANCE

In the example of sharing music, everyday mp3 users had no political agenda in mind when they resisted copyright protection measures and transgressed the law by utilizing peer-to-peer file sharing networks. Here, the dialectical law of transformation from quantity into quality applies. What began as simple pleasure in playing with the new possibilities opened up by the newly accessible technology of file sharing developed into heated debates over ownership, production, and distribution, and then a more serious fight over intellectual property rights and the rights

of users to share information. Centuries-old economic questions about profit and the means of production intersected with newly complicated tensions between American Constitutional guarantees concerning both the free exchange of information and the right to personal property. Class interests were revealed in the division between those who saw music as information to be shared, and those who saw music as property to be protected. I argue that class interests distinguished the two sides, and not the differences between creators and consumers, because very often musicians who were not in a privileged position within the industry would take up the position that music should be shared freely. Without contracts with major labels, these artists would benefit from exposure to a wider audience through file sharing, and actually see an increase in their record sales and concert ticket sales as a result.⁶

A simple technology, peer-to-peer file sharing, opened up a huge public discussion about law and economics—two areas, like politics, that regular people had for a long time been largely content to leave to the professionals, without questioning the structures that were in place. People began to question those structures while actually circumventing and undermining them in practice, and this was dangerous for the lawmakers and industry leaders.⁷

Marshall McLuhan's formulation that "the medium is the message" has become a truism, but it applies concretely here at two levels. Even more significant than the message implied in the content of the file sharing exchange: that music is really information, is the powerful message embedded in the act of

the exchange itself: “I can do this myself.” It is that message of autonomy which will have further repercussions than the basic economic one about production and exchange. It is a distinctly political message, and it is bound to have political consequences.

THE AMATEURS’ REVOLUTION

The disruption in the economy of media production in the music industry paved the way for amateur writers, photographers, artists and filmmakers to share their work online for free. Being able to say “Look what I found!” and having the ability to instantly share a song or picture or story was a fundamental step toward “Look what I made!” Increased access to low-cost or free production tools and Internet distribution laid the groundwork for the notion that regular people can take over privileged, professional domains and make them their own.

In his book, *Here Comes Everyone, The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, Clay Shirky describes what happened when people could suddenly publish anything they wanted online for free. Professional categories were called into question as regular people started reporting news and posting photos, challenging longstanding distinctions between who and who was not “a journalist.” Shirky describes an explosion of “mass amateurization” as people tried out skills that may have been cost-prohibitive for them to experiment with before.

The ability to produce work and publish it for free with web tools like Blogger for writing and Flickr for photography was a revolutionary change in communications technology that had an enormous impact on for-profit professional institutions that were

in the same business of publishing media. Shirky describes the revolutionary nature of the change it in this way:

The hallmark of revolution is that the goals of the revolutionaries cannot be contained by the institutional structure of the existing society. As a result, either the revolutionaries are put down, or some of those institutions are altered, replaced, or destroyed. We are plainly witnessing a restructuring of the media businesses, because whatever else they do, all businesses rely on the managing of information for two audiences—employees and the world. The increase in the power of both individuals and groups, outside traditional organizational structures, is unprecedented. Many institutions we rely on today will not survive this change without significant alteration, and the more an institution or industry relies on information as its core product, the greater and more complete the change will be.⁸

These businesses that are being “altered, replaced, or destroyed,” are only some of the first institutions that we can expect to be affected by “mass amateurization.” If technological developments and the resultant changes in social relations tend to shift consciousness first culturally (thinking in terms of behavior, like sharing music with friends becoming normalized), then economically (thinking in terms of production, ownership, and distribution), and then finally politically (thinking in terms of laws, rights, autonomy, and power), then we might anticipate that the alteration, replacement, or destruction of institutions will not be limited to businesses alone. But how can political institutions be affected by technological advancement in

and increased access to the tools of cultural production (writing, music, photography, video, etc.)?

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF SOCIAL NETWORKING INTO POLITICAL ORGANIZING

Not so long ago, it was very easy to picture exactly what Haraway was talking about when she said, “Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the differences between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.” “Frighteningly inert” cannot fail to bring to mind the person who lives his life almost entirely online, so that no matter where in “cyberspace” he might be traveling or how many people he might be connecting with, his physical reality still consists of sitting alone in front of a computer.

At the time when the term “cyberspace” was still in use, roughly the late 1990s, life and activity on the Internet was still considered by many to be completely virtual—a simulation of social life, and not a real one. There was fear that computers were making us more and more isolated, at the same time that they provided new ways of communicating with people we might never have met “in real life.” (See Robert D. Putnam, 2001, for a full discussion of the isolating and socializing effects of the Internet). Now we have a generation of people who have grown up using the Internet, and we have experienced an explosion of social networking tools like MySpace and Facebook that are designed specifically to enhance communication and relationships between

people. For them, there is far less distinction between life online and “real” life—both are real.¹⁰

Haraway wrote that “science and technology provide fresh sources of power” before these online social networks existed, and now that MySpace and Facebook have been used to organize effective mass protests, we have some concrete evidence that she was right.¹¹ In 2006, over 100,000 students, many of whom had never been involved in activism before, boycotted class on May 1st to participate in “a day without an immigrant” to protest anti-immigration legislation in California, in response to a call that went out on MySpace.¹² In April and May of 2008, massive strikes were called to express outrage over the food shortages in Egypt using Facebook. Esraa Abdel Fattah, one of those “cyberactivists,” was arrested for creating the Facebook page promoting the strike on April 6, prompting an intervention from Amnesty International.¹³

These are just two examples showing how social networking can develop into political networking. I would also point out how crucial it is for hardened social justice advocates and activists to embrace communications technology the way the young people organizing these protests did. It was something that seemed to come naturally to them without a lot of experience in political organizing, and it shows how battle-weary activists entrenched in old organizational methods and casual new users of communications technology could learn a lot from each other. Just because the capability to call a protest is there technologically, it does not mean that users will always make good political decisions or sustain their activity in

the most productive way. Technology isn't a substitute for politics, but it is a powerful tool that young people in the early stages of their political development can demonstrate how to use effectively. Reciprocally, mature activists can infuse new political struggles with well-articulated politics that are grounded in history and theory, along with tested strategies and tactics to prevent a dilettantish approach to activism. This combination of serious ideological argument with an almost playful ease in managing real and virtual networks is what I believe Haraway had in mind when she put forth the cyborg as an "ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism" who would demonstrate how to resist ruling class domination in a digital age.¹⁴

THE TERROR OF MOBILITY

Given the choice and the tools, most people want to be connected to others. Once they no longer have to make a choice between being connected to certain people while chained to a desk at home, and being connected to others while out in the world, it appears that people will choose to be out in the world while remaining plugged in. As our devices become more mobile, we are no longer at home alone in front of a machine when we're connected to others online. We can receive email on our mobile phones and post words or pictures to websites from them. We can send single-line updates called "tweets" about what we are doing at the moment (which is not "sitting at a computer") via Twitter, and people may read those updates on their Twitter web page or on Facebook, receive them in a text message on their cell phone, or get them in an email online or on their phone. With

changes in our communications technology that integrate them into the more active and involved way we want to live, we are much less "frighteningly inert" than we used to be. But if we've left our desktops and moved out into the streets without giving up instant access to information and mass communication, this can be seen as a threat to those who would preserve "order" and "stability." And it is.

On October 16, 2008, the U.S. Army released a report warning that Twitter could be used for terrorism.¹⁵ Did they give evidence in the report that it had been used for terrorism? Not at all. Their concern rather, was that activists protesting the Republican National Convention had organized themselves using it, and that during the July earthquake in Los Angeles, people using Twitter had been able to report what was happening many times faster than any news media.¹⁶ The real threat was the implication that people could "do it themselves." They could organize themselves independently into a collective in order to make themselves visible to the public and let their voices be heard, and they could report news faster than the official news sources were able to and with detailed, real-time accuracy.

Twitter, as well as text messaging, which was used in January 2001 to quickly organize a massive protest of over a million people in the Philippines to demand the resignation of president Joseph Estrada (Rafael, 78), are communications technologies with a different purpose and much different content than peer-to-peer file sharing of digital music, but the underlying message is the same: "I can do it myself" and even further than that, in spite of laws and governments, "We can do it ourselves, and they can't stop us." This is the other side of the informatics

of domination. When regular people are able to resist dominant networks or find a new kind of freedom within them by using communications tools and information systems in unintended ways for their own emancipatory purposes, I call this the informatics of dissent.

Just in the past several months we've seen how these networks can be put to use for the interests of everyday working people. From Barack Obama's election campaign in 2008 to the hundreds of thousands of people who marched on Washington, DC to demand full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people on October 11, 2009, social networking tools have played a major role in bringing together real-life, locally organized, grassroots activist networks that have been able to win some of their demands. This has given people a taste of what it feels like to have some political power, and has emboldened them to push for more. Of course, in a class society there is always a backlash when the ruling class is threatened by the momentum and sense of victory of a subordinate class.

The Recording Industry Association of America fought back by filing lawsuits against hundreds of people, targeting college students in particular, demanding thousands of dollars in damages for the music they "stole" (Schwartz). Likewise, when it comes to political organizing that threatens the ruling class establishment, those institutions also fight back using the force of the law. The *New York Times* recently reported that on October 1, 2009, "F.B.I. agents descended on a house in Jackson Heights, Queens, and spent 16 hours searching it. The most likely reason for the raid: a man who lived there had helped

coordinate communications among protesters at the Group of 20 summit in Pittsburgh." Simply for his use of communications technology, a 41-year-old social worker, Elliot Madison, was charged with "hindering apprehension or prosecution, criminal use of a communication facility and possession of instruments of crime." The *Times* article goes on to explain:

American protesters first made wide-spread use of mass text messages in New York, during the 2004 Republican National Convention, when hundreds of people used a system called TXTmob to share information. Messages, sent as events unfolded, allowed demonstrators and others to react quickly to word of arrests, police mobilizations and roving rallies. Mass texting has since become a valued tool among protesters, particularly at large-scale demonstrations.

Police and government officials appear to be increasingly aware of such methods of communication. In 2008, for instance, the New York City Law Department issued a subpoena seeking information from the graduate student who created the code for TXTmob. Still, Mr. Madison, who was released on bail shortly after his arrest, may be among the first to be charged criminally while sending information electronically to protesters about the police.¹⁷

Scare tactics, isolating and punishing single individuals in order to make an example of them, and erosion of basic civil liberties are all maneuvers the ruling class resorts to when they are faced with a more connected, unified, and confident mass of people who are willing to fight for what they want, whether it's the right to share music; the right to publicly assemble in protest of war, exploitation, and

environmental destruction; or the right to be treated as equal citizens in the eyes of the law within a (decreasingly) homophobic society. Fortunately, because people are so linked to one another and so adept at exchanging and distributing media online, these attacks become public very quickly even when not reported by the mainstream news. As a result, rather than silencing the individual under attack, it can often be the case that ordinary people become more aware that there is a serious clash between ruling class interests and their own, and they are galvanized to keep fighting back.

CONCLUSION

Haraway was right when she said that “science and technology provide fresh sources of power,” and “that we need fresh sources of analysis and political action.”¹⁸ In the decades after she wrote this, we have found these fresh sources in our networking tools which establish relationships and affinity groups that cross old boundaries and rewrite rules. Her cyborg has come to life in the young (and not so young!) people who aren’t afraid of science and technology but, on the contrary, expect that technology will conform to their needs as users rather than anticipating that it will impose deterministic agendas on them. They are incredibly flexible and mobile, adapting to new contexts in both real and virtual space, and very often a combination of the two. They are comfortable with themselves as processes and performers instead of products, as creators as well as consumers (however amateur their creations may be), and they manage complex social networks that can be adapted to personal or political use as needed. They have become accustomed to

actively participating in communities, both online and on the ground, and the experience of being participatory, creative, collaborative, and contributing members of their networks has helped to shape their political views: they see themselves as potentially powerful agents of social change. A “politics of participation” has begun to mobilize masses of “amateurs” who never used to think of themselves as being political at all. Capitalism’s “informatics of domination” has produced its own gravediggers—the communities and networks of communications-savvy “cyborgs” who listen when their tools tell them, “We can do it ourselves.”

ENDNOTES

- 1 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Re-invention of Nature* (London: Free Association Press, 1991), 161.
- 2 *Ibid*, 154.
- 3 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 315.
- 4 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Re-invention of Nature* (London: Free Association Press, 1991), 149.
- 5 *Ibid*, 150.
- 6 Jonathan Krim, “Artists Break With Industry On File Sharing.” *Washington Post*. March 1, 2005, E05.
- 7 For a full discussion on this topic, see Lawrence Lessig, *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World* (New York: Random House, 2001).
- 8 Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2008), 107.
- 9 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Re-invention of Nature* (London: Free Association Press, 1991), 152.
- 10 Crispin Thurlow, Laura B. Lengel, and Alice Tomic, *Computer Mediated Communication: Social Interaction and the Internet* (London: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2004), 105.
- 11 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Re-invention of Nature* (London: Free Association Press, 1991), 165.
- 12 Ari Melber, “MySpace, MyPolitics, and Immigration Protests.” *Huffington Post*. May 30, 2006.
- 13 Mirium Fam, “Egyptian Political Dissent Unites Through Facebook: Activists Make Use of New Technology Across Arab World.” *Wall Street Journal*. May 5, 2008.
- 14 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Re-invention of Nature* (London: Free Association Press, 1991), 149.
- 15 Steven Musil, “U.S. Army Warns of Twittering Terrorists.” CNET News. October 26, 2008.
- 16 *Ibid*.
- 17 Colin Moynihan, “Arrest Puts Focus on Protesters’ Texting.” *New York Times*. October 5, 2009.
- 18 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Re-invention of Nature* (London: Free Association Press, 1991), 165.