

The New Politics of the New Media

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There is no doubt that terms like 'new media' and 'web 2.0' have become buzzwords in social and cultural studies. When we say something is a 'buzzword', we imply that things have been taken for granted and remain unthought-of. Remaining unthought-of means that what is 'new' is perceived as contiguous to the 'old', or even constituted by the old. Given the close association between social movements and the media, the demand for a new form of politics is no longer novel; nevertheless, it remains a key question. At issue is the efficacy and potential of the new media. If the new media is going to open up something, then what is that thing?

A most popular debate is the reopening of a 'public sphere' either in a Habermasian sense or a post-Habermasian sense, by tracking the discussions involving socio-political activities in newsgroups, forums and blogs (Poster 2001). Among these discussions, a popular theme is: to what extent can these grassroots movements be represented? The question of representation can be traced back to its origin in the 18th-century Enlightenment age in both epistemological and political senses. Reason is perceived to be a capacity for representation (Colebrook 2005: 7). To some extent, these kinds of research consciously or unconsciously constitute a continuation of the unfinished Enlightenment project: a demand for representation is immanent to this new form of politics. In these kinds of research, there is a methodological concern that the conclusions are always deduced from the empirical observation and analysis of the content of online discussions. Moreover, the efficacy of the technology itself is determined by a specific temporal and spatial setting.

This raises a further question: To what extent do we understand the internet technology? Understanding the 'what' and 'how' of internet technology helps us distinguish between the ontological and epistemological dimensions of the internet and the new politics (or 'internet praxis'). At the heart of questioning the 'how' of internet praxis is the idea that the internet simply provides unlimited space for expression. If the 'new media' remains an extension of the 'old media', then the scope of the 'new politics' is very limited indeed.

Here I propose an ontological understanding of the internet technology and its relation to the new politics. I want to emphasize two points. First, the internet cannot be conceived simply as an extension of the old media. We must conceive the new media in terms other than as mere representation. Or to take the argument a step further, we have to rethink internet-driven politics in a non-representative way. Second, the internet cannot be thought of in simply instrumental terms. Instead, we have to understand that there is an embodiment of politics in the internet which is coherent and intrinsic to its structure. In other words, the internet should not be only viewed as a tool for communication; it cannot be separated from the content and expression of the politics therein.

Without resorting to a totalizing theory of the internet, I attempt here to associate the network protocol and semantic web with the concepts of the Deleuzian 'smooth plane' and 'nomadology'. With the 'smooth plane' we can find another form of resistance which is not limited by representation. What is more, we can explore the power of the internet through 'what it is' instead of 'how it works'.

Critique of Representation

Re-representation is one of the characteristics of modernism, as Colebrook points out in his exploration of the dominance of representation in classical epistemology and politics. In epistemology, the world has to be represented in order to be understood. In politics, each individual represents himself or herself as an effect of self-consciousness and rationality, and the unification of these rational individuals gives rise to representational democracy' (Colebrook 2005: 3). At a pragmatic level, as Hardt and Negri inform us, nowadays the crisis of representation has reached an extreme point, since there are misrepresentations, monopolies and manipulations in the media. In addition, many protests have not even been represented in the national media, and this lack or impossibility of representation renders it impotent (Hardt and Negri 2005: 271–73).

The idea of representation has been seriously criticized by Martin Heidegger in the early 20th century and this critique has been taken up by the poststructuralists at a metaphysical level. According to Heidegger, metaphysics in the western tradition, from the very beginning, has presupposed a unification of thought and being, which is best demonstrated by Parmenides' fragment: 'For the same perceiving (thinking) as being' (Heidegger 1969). In this 'same' there is a 'belonging together' which is understood as the unification

of thought and being, under the rubric of 'identity'.¹ Things are represented through their identities in an abstract manner, and this representation at the same time conceals the Truth from us.

Gilles Deleuze proposes a similar critique of representation and identity, but in a more political way. According to Deleuze, identity is the rationale of essence. To 'represent', means to 'identify' and 'interpret'. This abstraction privileges essence and identity, rather than difference. In politics, representative democracy and social movements share the same logic of unification, in the name of someone or something which totalizes the mass. Representation always reduces beings into sameness through resemblance, and at the same time suppresses their singularities. This presupposed representation constructs an epistemic violence to these singularities. Within this framework of representation, 'difference' is 'being different from others'. In other words, 'difference' is always the negation of the others, according to the classical mould. Deleuze proposes that 'difference' should not be taken as passive and negative, instead it should be affirmative. 'Difference' is different from itself, and it is a 'becoming' or, in Nietzsche's term, the 'eternal recurrence'. For example, in feminism, what has been criticized within representation theory is that the identity of woman is seen to be a negation of man's, whereas in a Deleuzian sense, to be a woman is to be affirmative.

Deleuze's critique of transcendence and signification brings the idea of resistance into immanence. Singularity or difference is against collectivity and unification, which reduce all political acts to mere representations. So how can we make sense of a social movement without any transcendental notion of representation and unification? Deleuze frequently refers to the May 1968 socio-political movement in the west to demonstrate this alternative form of praxis.² The movement does not intend to replace the regime with another form of representation, nor is it organized under a specific name or purpose. Instead, it is characterized by what Deleuze and Guattari call 'lines of flight'.

The 'line of flight' is a central theme of Deleuze's micropolitics. Deleuze distinguishes between three kind of lines, namely, the supple line of interlaced codes and territories, which refers to the primitive segmentarity of tribes; the rigid line 'with a concentricity of circles in resonance, and generalized overcoding', which corresponds to state apparatus or empire; the line of flight 'marked by quanta and defined by decoding and deterritorialization', which refers to the

war machine (Deleuze 2002). The line of flight provides the momentum to escape totalization. At the same time, the fate of the war machines either connects and escapes the black hole of the totalized state, or is absorbed by the black hole. This depends on the speed of the escape, which in turn is determined by the momentum of its motion and the space for positive acceleration.

The concept of 'lines of flight' does not mean that the power of resistance is atomized and rendered impotent. Rather, we can find here a different kind of 'collectivity'. This new form of 'collective force' does not imply internalization, which is associated with the 'organismic' metaphor—that is, parts of the body are organized according to a deterministic structure. Instead, it is characterized by 'exteriorities' (De Landa 2006: 9). In a conversation with Antonio Negri, Deleuze emphasizes the idea of 'composition' against 'organization' (Deleuze 1995). This exteriority is the linkage between different singularities which does not subordinate them to any transcendental structure. This theme is further explored in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's notion of 'multitude', which is borrowed from Spinoza. 'Multitude' is opposed to the Hobbesian notion of 'people' in the way that it is not subordinated to representation or unity (Virno 2003). For Negri, 'multitude' is the possibility of resistance to the globalized empire. The concept of a 'line of flight' is a nomadic one, according to Deleuze, since it is never fixed within a location. Instead, it performs constant deterritorialization and reterritorialization. For a nomadic movement, there is also a demand for a 'smooth plane', which facilitates the continual passage, rapid movement and acceleration of the 'lines of flights'. This new cartography is what I attempt now to map on the internet.

What is a Rhizome?

The history of the internet, pertaining to Paul Baran from the RAND Cooperation and Donald Davies from Britain's National Physics Lab, has been described by various authors like Manuel Castells (2002), Tiziana Terranova (2004) and Janet Abbate. And I am not going to repeat the details of their narratives in this short chapter. Instead, I will only highlight a few important points and focus on the history of the design principles of the DARPA internet protocol in the early 1960s.³

Before the invention of the ARPANET (founded by the U.S. Department of Defense), the core idea was the construction of a *distributed system* containing many switching nodes linking to

each other, with a redundancy in linkages ensuring the service of connections to users (Abbate 2000: 11). The files to be sent over the network were divided into small packets (called datagram), which travelled on the network from the sender and were received and reassembled in the receiver's machine. This mechanism was called 'packet switching'. Abbate quotes Baran (1964) that in this system, 'there is no central control; only a simple local routing policy is performed at each node, yet the overall system adapts' (ibid.: 13).

This distributed network has been frequently compared with what Deleuze and Guattari term 'rhizome'. Deleuze and Guattari use 'rhizome' to distinguish an organization structure which, although it contains similar elements, is significantly different from a tree. A tree usually has roots, and siblings and children extend from each of its nodes. Different tree diagrams are popular in the research of network topology, language, taxonomy, and artificial intelligence. Tree diagrams are often used to represent a certain hierarchy of data which facilitates operations like node search, addition and subtraction.

For Deleuze and Guattari, a tree is explicitly a hierarchical and stratified structure, which is closely related to despotism. A rhizome, in contrast, is an open and decentralized structure, and reducible neither to the 'One nor the multiple' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 8). It composes the plane of consistency; it is an assemblage against totality and essentialism. In other words, a rhizome is a cartography which does not follow any predefined structure; a rhizome is immanent to itself, as in the case of a map being a map at its own disposal.

Basically, there are six principles guiding the definition of the rhizome by Deleuze and Guattari: connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, rupture, cartography, and decalcomania (Marks 2006: 195).

So what is the relationship between this rhizome and the internet? Deleuzian scholar John Marks proposes that the six principles of the rhizome are closely related to the internet by looking at what the internet appears to be (ibid.). Alexander Galloway (2004) compares the network as rhizome in its original articulation mainly based on Paul Baran's graphical explanation of a distributed network. Nevertheless, these explanations are limited to the correlation of metaphor and imagination, instead of looking plainly at the network itself.

Instead of comparing the properties of a distributed network, I will point out the three crucial points which technically give the

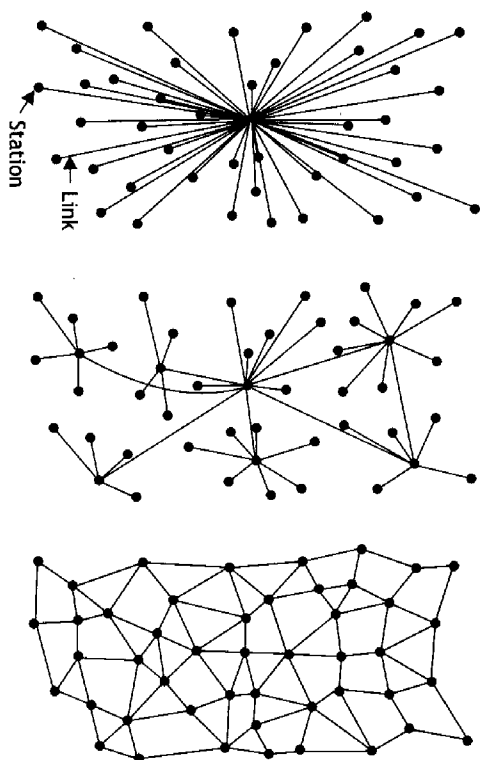


Figure 7.1: Paul Baran's Concept of Three Forms of Network in His 1964 Essay

internet its rhizomatic capacity: connectivity, decentralization and inclusiveness. Only through tracing its principles of design can we compare its consistency with the rhizome coined by Deleuze and Guattari. So here I will briefly consider the history of the network design.

How to Make a Rhizome

The internet protocol suite, TCP/IP was first proposed in 1973 by Vinton Cerf and Robert Kahn, funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), and then widely used in military and commercial systems (Clark 1988). The introduction of the TCP/IP protocol, responding to problems generated by the ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) brings forth today's internet.⁴ The development of the protocol is a never-ending process, and its complexity cannot be reduced to its military origin. Several principles are followed along in the design of the network architecture. As David Clark notes, the fundamental goal of the internet is to connect together the ARPANET with the ARPA packet radio network.⁵ Besides this goal, there are second-level goals; Clark (1988) lists them into seven points:

1. Internet communication must continue despite loss of networks or gateways.⁶
2. The internet must support multiple types of communication service.
3. The internet architecture must accommodate a variety of networks.
4. The internet architecture must permit distributed management of its resources.
5. The internet architecture must be cost effective.
6. The internet architecture must permit host attachment with a lower level of effort.
7. The resources used in the internet architecture must be accountable.

Moreover, Clark (1988) reminds the readers that 'it is important to understand that these goals are in order of importance, and entirely different network architecture would result if the order were changed'. Initially, the net was designed for military use, so not surprisingly, the first principle focuses on the survivability of the net. In this case, the tree diagram fails and cannot be applied, since the loss of one child may fragment the whole network. That is also why the decentralized topology of the datagram network is put into use.

A distributed network does not refer to a predefined point-to-point relation, but a dynamic of connections governed by probabilities. As long as there is a network, the route can be recalculated and the datagram can be transmitted. This dynamic is what Deleuze calls mathematical functions, which generate different values by evaluating different inputs. Several of the principles (2, 3, 6) that Clark lists focus on the inclusiveness of the network, for example, services, terminals and hosts. That means different entities can be plugged into the network and thereby extend the network and expand its heterogeneity. This ontological structure given to the internet coincides with what Hardt and Negri perceive in *Empire*:

Network power must be distinguished from other purely expansionist and imperialist forms of expansion. The fundamental difference is that the expansiveness of the immanent concept of sovereignty is inclusive, not exclusive. In other words, when it expands, this new sovereignty doesn't annex or destroy the other pioneers it faces but on the contrary opens itself to them, including them in the network (quoted by Terranova 2004: 62).

This inclusiveness or openness is also ensured by the effort to minimize the mechanism between different entities on the network and by setting in place a small number of rules. This is also specified in the early document of the Request for Comments (RFC): 'the [internet's] architectural principles, aim to provide a framework for creating co-operation and standards, as a small "spanning set" of rules that generates a large, varied and evolving space of technology' (ibid.: 56).

This minimization of rules produces the 'best effort' network, which means that there is no guarantee on the transmission of the packet. When a datagram travels from one end to the other, there is no third party involved in the control of the flow. One has to keep in mind here that the routers are not counted as third parties. This is particularly significant in the famous 'end-to-end arguments' in the design of the internet, which were first articulated in the early 1980s (Clark 2001).

The 'end-to-end' arguments distinguish the roles of the core of the network and application software. Here the elements 'in' the network and the element 'attached to' or 'on' the network are significantly different. The former refers to the pure mechanical control of the network protocol, while the latter refers to the functional utilization of the network protocol. The 'end-to-end' arguments suggest that specific application-level functions usually cannot, and preferably should not be built into the lower levels of the system—the core of the network, since:

the function in question can completely and correctly be implemented only with the knowledge and help of the application standing at the endpoints of the communications system. Therefore, providing that questioned function as a feature of the communications system itself is not possible (sometimes an incomplete version of the function provided by the communication system may be useful as a performance enhancement). (Saltzer et al. 1984)

This principle excludes third parties from getting involved in the control of the flow of the datagram. The relationship between point and point is maintained through simple routing algorithm. The responsibility of maintaining the transmission consistency mainly falls on the application software. Also, the user is free to choose whatever application he/she likes.

Besides the connection function of the machines, the humanly recognizable and operable contents are crucial to the construction of

a smooth plane. Without referring to the history of the development of the World Wide Web, I look at a popular topic nowadays: the semantic web. The semantic web is a concept proposed by Tim Berners-Lee, James Hendler and Ora Lassila in 2001. The core idea of the semantic web is to propose adding semantic information to the content of the web pages. The machine can recognize the semantic information according to a set of shared vocabularies. Under the semantic web, the W3C proposes RDF (Resource Definition Framework) which is based on a simple subject-predicate-object grammar to represent the metadata (broadly, metadata is defined as data about data). In fact, the original idea of using taxonomy for knowledge representation was criticized recently due to the emergence of folksonomy or tagging, which characterizes the idea of making order out of chaos through chaos. Here, I am not going to explore the difference between folksonomies and taxonomies used in knowledge representation. Instead, I wish to discuss the idea of a frictionless web and the effort devoted in developing the metadata standard like Dublin Core, SIOC, FOAF, etc. and even folksonomy. The semantic web is a vision which allows data, including data of individuals (FOAF), to be aggregated through an exteriority instead of direct linking. One of the most obvious examples is the aggregation of news through RSS feed which is an XML file based on the RDF framework to enhance self-discovery and data harvesting.

At this point, we can perceive the internet as what Deleuze calls a smooth plane at the communication level. A smooth plane stands for the freedom of communication/movement. The Deleuzian smooth plane is the nomadic space developed by the war machine, which is the opposite of the striated plane or sedentary space controlled by the state apparatus (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 524). The smooth plane of the internet, as we considered before, is a network constituted by different nodes with multiple dimensions, without being striated by any third party in the protocol level. In this sense, the network opposes the wiretapping of the state, as well as the flow control of the capitalists. This ontological structure of the internet explains why theorists following the footsteps of Deleuze and Guattari perceive the internet to possess great potential of resistance against the state's transcendental power, and thus leads to the revival of the nomads, or in Hardt and Negri's term, the 'multitudes'.⁷ This does not mean that a rhizome is going to save the world. De Landa sharply points out that 'demonizing decentralization and glorifying decentralization as the solution to all our problems would be wrong'.

My only point is that the decentralization in this case opens up more possibilities for public action.

Conclusion

So how can we relate the internet to the new politics? Up to this point we may say that the internet seems to have the same properties as a rhizome in the Deleuzian sense—but so what? Doesn't that simply mean that the relationship between the internet and politics is purely metaphorical? As I emphasized at the beginning we have to recognize that this new politics cannot be separated from the internet. One of the most frequently illustrated examples is the 1999 protest in the Seattle WTO meeting, where different groups of people aggregated through the internet without being subordinate to an organization or an authoritative name. This new form of resistance is characterized by aggregation and dispersion. One point we have to keep in mind is that these people were not using the internet to collect other members; rather, they were brought together by the internet. This difference has been ignored.

So what I propose here is that, with the internet, we encounter the possibility of a new form of politics which is not regulated by organization or representation. This was significant in the 1999 Seattle protest, but we should not take this aggregation as random voices; they had different voices, but they came to be a chorus. In countries in which censorship remains strict, the rhizomatic structure of the net allows resistance to grow and transcend the hegemonic structures.

A recent example was in 2007, when a Chinese blogger, 'Zoula', raised money from his blog for his investigation of several social issues in China. The information he provided was in sharp contrast to what was reported by the Chinese mainstream media. Unsurprisingly, Zoula's blog has been censored by the Chinese government, and direct access to the blog is banned. Nevertheless, readers can still access the metadata feed through feed readers.

The network is characterized by a maximum speed of light: the distributed nodes of the network also mutate the number of routes of escape. When the state tries to block a TCP packet from one computer to the other, it nevertheless fails to count every possible route of escape. The network makes micropolitics possible, since it maximizes the capacity for connection. This, for Deleuze, indicates 'the way decoded and deterritorialized flows boost one another; accelerate their shared escapes, and augment or stroke their quanta' (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 243). At this point, I want to emphasize

again the point that the new politics should be immanent to the structure of the internet. The possibility of creating a movement prior to representation and organization should be taken seriously in the age of ubiquitous media. Finally, this form of movement should be immanent to resistance against the empire of hegemony.

Notes

1. Heidegger proposes another reading of 'belonging together' which doesn't imply any unification of beings, instead it is the comportment of Dasein to the world.
2. Deleuze takes the May 1968 event as one of the examples of this movement, as he states in *Dialogues II* (2002): 'May 1968 was an explosion of such a molecular line, an irruption of the Amazon, a frontier which traced its unexpected line, drawing along the segments like torn off blocks which have lost their bearings.'
3. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (USA), which developed ARPANET.
4. According to Janet Abbate (2000), there are two questions the TCP/IP model responds to: 'what was the best design for a universal host protocol that would work on unreliable networks such as the PRNET and not only on reliable ones such as the ARPANET? And how should the networks be attached to one another?'
5. From 1981 to 1989, David Clark acted as chief protocol architect in the development of the internet, and chaired the Internet Activities Board, which later became the Internet Architecture Board. Recently, Clark published a number of articles defending the end-to-end argument, since more and more players in the market try to make the network controllable. There is no space to elaborate his arguments here, but it definitely deserves attention from cultural theorists.
6. Gateways are a layer of internet packet switches.
7. Hardt and Negri (2005) give examples like the Zapatista movement and the 1999 Seattle's anti-globalization movement to demonstrate the network form of organization and power.

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