Rethinking the public/virtual sphere: The problem with participation

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Abstract
Responding to the long-standing interest of new media scholars in online participation as a mechanism for political and cultural democracy and empowerment, this article elaborates a critique of online participation. It examines the ways in which online participation has been economized at a fundamental level – the level at which data is transmitted – and argues that this economization draws into question the viability of a public/virtual sphere paradigm. In the process, it implicates public/virtual sphere scholarship in the production of a mode of power – vital or productive power – which has been under-examined in new media scholarship.

Keywords
copyright, democracy, economy, participation, peer-to-peer, power, public sphere, virtual sphere

It would be an understatement to say, as Lincoln Dahlberg (2007: 828) did in this journal several years ago, that there has been much discussion about and research on the role of the internet in constituting a public sphere. Dahlberg’s statement does not capture the centrality of thought on the public sphere to new media scholarship. New Media & Society, for example, has published at least 40 articles with keywords that suggest the public sphere as a central theme.1 This count would be higher if it included articles in which the public sphere and its correlates (democracy, participation, etc.) surface as a justification for research or discussion without appearing in the keywords. The most frequently cited article in the journal is currently Zizi Papacharissi’s ‘The virtual sphere: The internet as public sphere’. More than an interest of scholars of new media, the public sphere is a preoccupation.

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In a recent issue of *New Media & Society*, David Beer draws into question the politics of participation which underlie scholarship of the virtual sphere. Following Scott Lash’s notion that power is vital, penetrating our ‘very being’ (2007: 59) rather than controlling it externally, Beer (2009: 999) argues that the ‘Web 2.0 bandwagon’ needs to be ‘counteracted’ with an understanding of how participation embeds users within relations of power, rather than (or perhaps in addition to) liberating them from power or empowering them. Building from this alternative account of power, Beer issues a call for criticism that ‘works out the commercial underpinnings, new hierarchies … and rules of engagement, as well as the powerplays that are occurring through and within Web 2.0 applications’ (2009: 999).

This article is a response to Beer’s call for criticism. In part, it attempts to work out some of the commercial underpinnings of contemporary cultural reproduction and distribution online, with the aim of providing a more detailed account of the ‘vital and intelligent power structures’ (Beer, 2009: 995) produced through online participation. The article proposes that online participation has been economized at a fundamental level – the level at which data is transmitted – and that this economization draws into question the viability of a public/virtual sphere paradigm. At the same time, the article attempts to fill in some of the back story absent from Beer’s analysis, describing the ways that internet participation ‘has become associated with … empowerment and liberation’ (2009: 986), an association not made explicit in Beer’s analysis. The article identifies and examines two dominant discourses through which this association is produced: scholarship critical of copyright (sometimes called the anti-copyright or copyleft movement) and scholarship of the public/virtual sphere. In examining these discourses, the article aims to contextualize its argument within already existing criticism and, importantly, to implicate anti-copyright and public/virtual sphere discourse in the production of vital power (to use Lash’s term). In short, the article aims to draw into question the ability of paradigms in new media scholarship to account for the mode of power endemic to digital networks, and to describe the political and economic arrangements bolstered, perhaps unintentionally, by public/virtual sphere and anti-copyright discourse’s call to participation.

### Revising copyright

Established in the USA in the late 18th century, copyright grants authors exclusive rights for the reproduction of their work for a period of time determined by law, while also granting the public ‘fair use’ rights to partially reproduce others’ works for the purposes of criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, or research. In separating rights of use from rights of reproduction, copyright was designed to balance the financial interests of authors with the interests of society at large, establishing a give-and-take: authors are permitted to build on others’ works, though any new work that results is exclusively their own to reproduce. This dynamic is thought to make possible the remuneration of authors, offering them a financial reward for their work as well as an incentive to continue producing, while also promoting cultural innovation.

In recent years, media and legal scholars have drawn into question the validity and efficacy of copyright. At one end of the spectrum, scholars have critiqued the fundamental
assumptions underlying copyright: that creativity requires an economic incentive (Scherer, 2008), that piracy is antithetical to the economic interests of authors (Benkler, 2006: 426; Oberholziera and Strumpf, 2007), and that ‘the author’ is a universal figure rather than a product of copyright and its social context (Liang et al., 2004). At the other end of the spectrum, scholars have affirmed the assumptions underlying copyright, while drawing into question copyright’s ability to manage digital reproduction and distribution (Benkler, 2006; Lessig, 2002, 2004, 2008; Vaidhyanathan, 2001, 2004; Zittrain, 2008). These scholars argue that the efficacy of copyright depends on the possibility of separating acts of use from acts of reproduction, and that this possibility has been foreclosed by the internet insofar as it collapses the reproduction of data with its use (Vaidhyanathan, 2001: 152). Scholars who advocate for revising rather than eliminating copyright argue that digital network technologies’ conflation of reproduction and use has made it possible for content providers to control both these things, and that this increased control represents an abuse of copyright, encroaching on fair use and threatening to undermine the integrity of the public domain (‘the commons’) and, as a result, innovation and social progress.

Despite their differences, these positions – one radical and the other revisionist – are compatible and can be brought together (as in the documentary *Steal This Film II*) because they share the same long-term goal – the democratization of cultural production – as well as an opposition to the tactics used by the entertainment industry to curtail digital piracy. Whether through Creative Commons licensing or unfettered piracy, scholars and programmers critical of copyright aim to establish conditions that will democratize cultural production and empower the citizenry (or ‘netizenry’), transforming them from passive consumers of culture into producers of culture. They argue that relaxing or eliminating copyright restrictions serves these goals by facilitating the distribution of content through the internet, which in turn supports user participation (see Lessig, 2004: 9).

In the following section I will situate legal and media scholars’ efforts to democratize cultural production within the larger movement – sometimes called ‘digital utopianism’ – to realize the democratic potential of the internet’s decentralized architecture through nurturing the development of a public sphere online. After briefly describing this movement and the critiques made of it, I will elaborate my own critique.

The public/virtual sphere and its critics

While there are a number of differing conceptions of the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2007), for the present purposes I will assume a basic and widely shared definition: a site of social activity comprised of rational discourse which occasions the informal constitution of the public will. In new media scholarship, the development of a networked public sphere is framed as a migration or extension of an already existing public sphere to an online platform, a resuscitation of an ailing public sphere, and/or a first-time venture whose success has been made possible by the advent of digital network technologies. Media scholars’ interest in the public sphere is often articulated in opposition to political apathy, cynicism, disenfranchisement, consumerism, and increasing media concentration (see Benkler, 2006; Gil De Zúñiga et al., 2009; Goode, 2009; McChesney, 2004; Sweetser and Kaid, 2008; Zittrain, 2008). This opposition serves two purposes: it is descriptive of the corporatized conditions of media production, distribution, and consumption in which the
The internet has come of age and which place on it the burden of democratic rescue, and it is a cautionary tale of the cooptation of other communication technologies with unrealized democratic potential, particularly radio and television. Contextualized in this way, online participation, ‘amateur’ cultural production, and even piracy can be understood as forms of empowering and emancipating ‘weakly engaged viewers’ (Benkler, 2006: 13) from the mass media, whose villainy is four-fold: controlling public discourse, restricting the spread of culture, placing profits before people, and colluding with the state.

Many articles and books have addressed in detail the relationship of online practices to empowerment and democracy, pausing to examine the specificities of particular practices and analyze their participatory content. These analyses share a similar set of concerns, which have not changed substantially since Papacharissi (2002: 12) asked of the internet:

Can it promote rational discourse, thus producing the romanticized ideal of a public sphere envisioned by Habermas and others? Does it reflect several public spheres co-existing online, representing the collectives of diverse groups, as Fraser argued? Are online discussions dominated by elements of anarchy or accord, and do they foster democracy? Will the revolutionary potential of the internet be ultimately absorbed by a mass commercial culture?

Responding to the question of ‘whether the internet can recreate a public sphere that perhaps never was, foster several diverse public spheres, or simply become absorbed by a commercial culture’, Papacharissi (2002: 23) concludes that ‘so far, the internet presents a public space, but does not yet constitute a public sphere’. This conclusion suggests both the democratic potential of the internet and the work required to realize this potential, expressing a cautious optimism now prevalent in public/virtual sphere scholarship.

A number of influential critiques of public sphere scholarship have been made, which remain applicable to scholarship of the virtual sphere. Nancy Fraser (2007) places critiques of the public sphere into two categories: legitimacy critiques and efficacy critiques. Legitimacy critiques point to the public sphere’s lack of inclusiveness, particularly of groups historically excluded from institutions of power, while efficacy critiques point to the public’s inability to communicate its will to institutions, and to institutions’ inability to realize the public’s will. In short, most critics of the public sphere have either argued that it never truly existed, because social groups were excluded or their contributions were minimized, or that it does exist but has not been successful at institutionalizing the public will.

It is also worthwhile to note that virtual sphere scholarship has produced its own endemic critiques of the public sphere, which Yochai Benkler (2006) places into five categories: the Babel objection, ‘that information overload will lead to fragmentation of discourse, polarization, and the loss of political community’; the power law objection, that the internet is not truly decentralized because relatively few sites receive the majority of hits; the objection that the internet undermines the ability of the commercial mass media press to fulfill its ‘watchdog’ function; the objection that access to information through the internet can be controlled by authoritarian states; and the digital divide objection. Elsewhere in The Wealth of Networks Benkler references the ‘Bowling Alone’ objection (that online participation undermines, rather than enhances civic participation) and the quality objection (that amateur cultural production impoverishes, rather than enriches culture).
Less common, though more important for the present argument, are critiques that draw into question the assumptions underlying public sphere scholarship. These critiques do not address the conditions that make the public sphere possible, but rather the conditions of theorizing the public sphere as such. Along these lines, scholars have drawn into question the conception of power which underlies theories of the public sphere (Villa, 1992); the dependence of the idea of publicness on a Kantian separation of the transcendental and historical (Cheah, 1995) and on a ‘western universalizing discourse of liberal modernity’ (Willse, 2005: 175); and the ability of the subject- and nation-centered ‘modern western discourse of democracy’ to account for the ‘political agency of women in neocolonial societies’ (Clough, 2000: 126). Interestingly, these critiques have largely been ignored in scholarship of the virtual sphere – an oversight which merits a more detailed explanation than is possible here.

In addition, there are a number of critiques not formally directed at public sphere scholarship but which nonetheless draw into question its assumptions and biases. Cultural studies scholars, particularly those engaged in so-called reception theory, have long disputed the notion that cultural consumption is a passive process, proposing instead that consumption entails active processes of meaning-making. Furthermore, scholars have questioned the politics of participation in ways that suggest that ‘active’ production is as politically problematic as ‘passive’ consumption. Mark Andrejevic (2004: 28) has argued that interactivity does not empower users, but rather engages them in ‘the work of being watched’. Along similar lines, Brian Massumi has argued that participation is not a form of freedom from power, but rather a form of subjugation to power (Massumi interviewed by Mulder, 2007). Massumi inverts the assumption common to public sphere scholarship that the citizen/self precedes its cultural expression, suggesting instead that expression is a method of self-making, that is of making a self that is aligned with the interests and logic of the system:

According to Foucault, among the most invidious regimes of power are the ones that impose an imperative to participate, particularly if the imperative is to ‘truly’ or ‘authentically’ express yourself. You are constantly interpellated. You are under orders to be yourself – for the system. You have to reveal yourself for who you are. In fact, you become who you are in expressing yourself. You are viscerally exposed, like a prodded sea cucumber that spits its guts. (Mulder, 2007: 77)

From this perspective, power is not restrictive but productive. Far from liberating the passive consumer from control, participation may simply install control on a ‘deeper’ level under the guise of self-expression, calling to mind Lash’s (2007) theorization of power through the algorithm and Alexander Galloway’s (2004) theorization of protocological power.

In the sections that follow I aim to contribute to critiques which draw into question the assumptions underlying public/virtual sphere scholarship. In particular, I will draw into question assumptions about the relation of the public sphere to the economy. There are two primary ways in which this relation has been articulated. The first, ascribed to Habermas, proposes that the public sphere needs to be protected from economic interests. In this view, the public sphere is valued both for its independence from corrupting influences – the state and the economy, with their ties to exploitation, subjugation, inequality, alienation, and oppression – and for its ability to counteract and ultimately shape
these influences (see Fraser, 1990: 57). This view meshes with Benkler’s (2006: 34) argument, which similarly depends on the separability of the market, where individuals function to keep body and soul together, from the rest of society, where individuals try ‘to give meaning to their lives as individuals and social beings’.

The second view, ascribed to Fraser, proposes that economic concerns not be ‘bracketed’ from the public sphere. This bracketing, Fraser (1990: 73) argues, ‘seeks to exclude some issues and interests from public debate by economizing them’. In opposition to public sphere scholarship that advocates for reinforced barriers between ‘political institutions that are supposed to instantiate relations of equality’ and ‘economic, cultural, and socio-sexual institutions that are premised on systemic relations of inequality’ – a solution which ‘usually works to the advantage of dominant relations of inequality’ – Fraser (1990: 65, 73) argues that economic and other ‘private’ concerns must be included for consideration in the public sphere in order to contest systems of dominance and subordination.

When brought to bear on questions of media, these two perspectives are not so much opposed as they are different in shade. For Habermas, the dominant and powerful interests of the mass media must be excluded from the public sphere, while for Fraser the subordinated and oppressed interests of under-represented groups must be included. In both accounts, democratic ideals are framed in opposition to the power of the mass media. The compatibility of these accounts is reflected in the political unity of new media research, which problematizes issues of economy almost exclusively in terms of access (i.e. who can produce) and content (i.e. what can be produced), whether through descriptions of ‘amateur’ media production, analyses of the digital divide, or critiques of the mass media’s failure to incorporate diverse and divergent perspectives. As Benkler (2006: 129) tellingly asks, ‘Who gets to say what, and to whom?’

In contrast, my argument takes inspiration from Andrejevic’s and Massumi’s indictment of the political underbelly of participation. Rather than focusing on how access and content are limited and restricted, I will focus on the economic productivity of participation; that is, how providing access and producing content fuels markets for networking services and infrastructure. Whereas the former arguments leave room for the possibility of a public sphere – if disenfranchised populations can be included and/or if economic interests can be held back from colonizing public space – I will argue that regardless of its content, the inherently economic quality of internet participation contributes to the production of a different and under-examined mode of power than is presumed in scholarship of the public/virtual sphere. The production of this problematic mode of power and its intimacy with relations of capital draws into question the possibility of a space for communicative exchange free of the interests of capital, and should compel new media scholars to cast a critical eye on efforts to increase user participation.

From exchange to transmission

The economic dynamic between internet users and networking services has been downplayed in new media scholarship through the false assertion that the transmission of data is free, or else too cheap to meter or matter (as in Anderson, 2009; Benkler, 2006; Currah, 2007; Kelly, 2008; Slater, 2000). This assertion stems from the observation that data is a
non-rivalrous resource – its consumption by one user does not preclude or inhibit its consumption by others. It is often assumed that because of this, digital networks operate in an absence of rivalry (as in Garcelon, 2009: 1310). This has prevented new media scholarship from accounting for the global effects of reproducing data for little cost.

What is often theorized as a removal or liberation of economic constraints limiting the spread of cultural content is more accurately a shift of economic constraints from relations of exchange to relations of transmission; from economically managing discrete units of culture to managing their flows on a massive scale. Put another way, transmission has begun to displace exchange as the primary form of managing economies of culture, and of collecting the value produced through cultural activity (incidentally problematizing the notion that commons-based peer production occurs outside of the market, as Benkler argues). To be precise, I am not referring to a shift in business strategies or models by content providers, though they have changed, but rather to an overall shift in the structural organization of economies of culture; the shrinking of one industry which opens up or expands another. Piecing together the history of this shift and the conditions it produces will bring into focus the economic character of online participation and its endemic mode of power (the reproduction of which is bolstered by anti-copyright and public/virtual scholarship), and, indirectly, the limitations of a public/virtual sphere paradigm.

While a number of developments propel the shift to organizing economies of culture around relations of transmission – most notably the decoupling of content providers from internet service providers (Rayport, 1999), and the spread of broadband access – the key development was the advent of peer-to-peer networks, beginning with the release of Napster in 1999. Peer-to-peer networks facilitate the reproduction and distribution of data without concern for copyrights, having been made largely immune to legal attack and other forms of juridical governance through their technical protocols, which minimize centralized (and legally-vulnerable) network functions. Reproduced and distributed through networks resistant to legal and technical attack, cultural content could no longer easily be managed economically in the same way as rivalrous cultural commodities (i.e. through copyright), sending the entertainment industry into a well-documented and ongoing state of crisis (Alderman, 2001).

Following the success of peer-to-peer networks, digital content exhibits a viral character, a proclivity to replicate seemingly without limits; or rather, content expresses the viral character which had been contained through copyright. While it is still possible after this juncture to make digital content behave as a commodity, as when an individual copyrighted song is sold through an online music retailer, such forms are clunky, provisional, difficult to establish and maintain, and require too much scaffolding to be sustained, making good on Stewart Brand’s (1988) frequently cited proclamation that ‘information wants to be free’. Or as Chris Anderson (2009: 97, 229) elaborates, ‘information wants to be free in the same way that life wants to spread and water wants to run downhill’, leading him to conclude later that ‘anything of value in digital form will eventually be pirated and then freely distributed’.

In circumventing prior forms of legal/technical control and realizing the viral character of digital content, peer-to-peer networks were responsible for a dramatic increase in the quantities of data transmitted through the internet (Odlyzko, 2003). Not all of this
traffic was peer-to-peer activity, although peer-to-peer traffic remains the largest percentage of total internet traffic (Ipoque, 2009; Leyden, 2002). More to the point, peer-to-peer networks did two things: they established new conditions for cultural consumption, namely the condition that content which used to be purchased is now free (see Anderson, 2009: 142) and in so doing they catalyzed a shift in habits of cultural consumption, beginning to tip the scales from offline to online consumption. These developments not only dealt a blow to industries invested in serving content in commodity form, but occasioned economic investment in networking services and infrastructure. Put another way, peer-to-peer technologies are disruptive, but not universally (see Anderson, 2009: 131; Latzer, 2009: 613).

With the accelerated growth of peer-to-peer traffic and other forms of bandwidth-intensive transmission on the web, many internet service providers (ISPs) have recently grown dissatisfied with providing users with unlimited access for a flat fee, though this model served them well in the late 1990s, and have begun to consider and experiment with tiered pricing models (Lowry, 2009). Such experiments are symptomatic of a larger conflict now permeating economies of culture online, a conflict between the economic value produced for content providers when users consume content and/or participate and the value produced for ISPs when users are chaste with their content consumption. This conflict is evidenced in the lukewarm financial success of popular online content providers. YouTube, for example, spent approximately $300 million on bandwidth in 2009 (Spangler, 2009), and has been unprofitable since its acquisition by Google in 2006 (Helft, 2009b; The Associated Press, 2009). YouTube’s fortunes will likely soon change, however, as it engineers methods to match video content with advertisements in the way that Google – YouTube’s parent company – does with its AdWords and AdSense programs (Helft, 2009a). Better stated, it is the conflict between the value produced for content providers through consumption/participation and the value produced for ISPs through chaste network use which has led companies like YouTube to innovate methods of generating revenue, whether through algorithm-enhanced advertising, proprietary high-speed infrastructure, or otherwise (see Hansell, 2007; Ingersoll and Kelly, 2010).

Underlying the conflict between the economic value produced for content providers and the value produced for ISPs is a new and politically problematic dynamic between users, content providers, and networking interests, in which on a systemic level the traffic generated by users and content providers through various forms of participation is used to generate revenue for, and occasion future investment in networking services and infrastructure. This dynamic emerges in part as a function of the political-economic organization of the internet, that is, the way in which the transmission of data is managed through a system of technical protocols rather than government licensing, making bandwidth a rivalrous resource. Unlike pre-internet television, for example, which aligns the interests of producers and broadcasters of television content (insofar as they both profit from increased use of television), ISPs generally want to keep use down insofar as internet users do not (yet) pay for increased use, while content providers generally want to keep use up, since use carries with it users’ value-rich attention.

According to networking industry advocates, increasing levels of internet use will soon compromise the integrity of existing infrastructure; a claim whose proximity to calls for investment and tiered pricing schemes is suggestive of the networking
industry’s current profitability. In a presentation given at the Web 2.0 conference in 2009, Juniper Networks’ CEO Kevin Johnson reported that in 2008 over 800 petabytes per month were transmitted through the internet, and that the volume of internet traffic will increase 27 fold over the next decade. While the cost-per-bit-transmitted continues to decline as transmission gets more efficient, Johnson argues that use is currently growing at a faster rate than infrastructure is innovated; he predicts that the economics of the internet will ‘break’ in 2015. Claims like Johnson’s struck a chord in the public imagination, with news organizations, bloggers, and pundits chiming in with their own provocative facts and figures (see BBC News, 2008; Lohr, 2008).

For the purposes of the present argument, it is unimportant whether concerns about an impending ‘exaflood’ – the popular term used to describe transmission overload – are justified. What is important are the political and economic forces these concerns set in motion; the changes in law and policy, the provision of public subsidies, the innovation of business models, the mobilization of investment funds. To be certain, these changes have not been ignored in new media scholarship, which typically understands the political and economic changes lobbied for and instituted by the networking industry and justified by increasing volumes of internet traffic as threats to net neutrality – that is, the principle of network non-discrimination. However, even while proponents of net neutrality oppose discriminatory network practices, they rarely oppose the privatization of network services. Rather, they oppose business practices that limit or restrict network access. Like scholars critical of copyright and scholars of the public/virtual sphere, the position articulated by proponents of net neutrality ultimately supports the transmission of increasing amounts of data, insofar as transmission is linked with participation. This link imposes a political limit on these discourses; even while they hold in check the financial aspirations of the networking industry, they work to sustain its economic base – the participation of users.

Furthermore, it is possible that holding in check the networking industry through policy will serve to prevent it from realizing its short-term economic interests at the cost of its long-term interests, thereby sustaining it into the future. Even if unintentional, this confluence of interests resigns advocates of online participation to bolstering subtle but pervasive political and economic arrangements which draw into question the viability of a public/virtual sphere paradigm, among other factors theorized by critics of the public sphere referenced above. The problem is not simply that participation is lucrative, but that the symbiotic relationship between the networking industry and advocates of the public/virtual sphere has masked the forces, interests, and dynamics which underlie the transition from exchange to transmission, as well as helping to normalize problematic political and economic assumptions in public/virtual sphere scholarship.

**The cost of participation**

On the internet there is no ‘debating and deliberating’ that is not also ‘buying and selling’ (to use Fraser’s terms); participation is a commercial act. Every instance of participation involves a transfer of data which has been economized, driving the profitability and viability of the networking industry and of internet-based companies like Google that cover infrastructure costs though innovative advertising, ‘freemium’ business models,
and other methods. As Anderson (2009: 124) writes of Google, ‘The only thing that limits Google’s growth is the pace of growth of the Web itself. So most of its other products are designed … to simply extend internet usage, from free wireless access to free storage’. Put another way, the more time people spend online, the more money Google makes (Anderson, 2009: 125). Even Benkler (2006: 52), in his argument that commons-based peer production transpires outside of the market, proposes that internet usage – in the conceptually problematic guise of ‘individual human capacities’ – has ‘become the economic core of our information and cultural production’.

The extent to which the networking industry and companies like Google profit from, and therefore seek to extend internet participation should give pause to scholars of the public/virtual sphere, if for no other reason than the long-standing indifference of the profit motive to the values linked to participation in public/virtual sphere scholarship: individual autonomy, democracy, freedom, justice, and community. Put another way, what is now a marriage of convenience between participation and profit could easily be otherwise, as Google’s four-year acquiescence to and participation in China’s censorship policies illustrates (see Vaidhyanathan, 2010). The problematic nature of this relation has been masked by the currently symbiotic relation between participation and profit, in conjunction with the normalization of participation politics in new media scholarship. Even when public/virtual sphere scholarship acknowledges the market’s destructive tendencies, as in its emphasis on policy as a way to direct and temper market forces, it often works to sustain the market with all its attendant problems. In light of recent initiatives and transformations around issues of transmission, such as the National Broadband Plan announced by the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) in March of 2010, the federal ruling against net neutrality handed down in April 2010, and Google’s plans to lay cable for new high-speed networks, this is an opportune moment for new media scholars to reexamine the formulations of power and economy which subtend their commitments, and to question the role of new media scholarship in furthering these commitments in its dealings with the state and commercial interests (as through research institutes like the Berkman Center for Internet & Society).

That said, the argument that the economic character of internet participation forecloses the possibility of a public/virtual sphere might strike some as insufficiently compelling. After all, if the economic character of participation does not influence or effect the content of participation or who participates, what does it matter? Conversely, if one starts to draw into question the political viability of participation which inadvertently sustains this or that industry, what will we be left with? Furthermore, what are our alternatives? If the internet were nationalized, would that not just shift power from the private sector to the state? (In this light, Benkler’s proposed solution of a user-maintained commons-based infrastructure should be taken seriously, notwithstanding the critique that follows). Considering the relationship between access to the internet and access to education and employment, is it not just as problematic to suggest that users – especially those from disenfranchised populations – log off permanently?

These are difficult questions, and they point to an important debate that has largely been absent in new media scholarship. In partial response, the current argument suggests that at the very least, the reorganization of economies of culture around relations of transmission complicates the politics of participation in all its guises, insofar as participation
is not simply a form of exercising or resisting power but of channeling or submitting to power, the power of information. In order to theorize this power and its implications, I will turn to works by Michel Foucault, Richard Dienst, and Patricia Ticineto Clough.

Foucault (1997) argues that modern societies are characterized by a form of power different from the sovereign power of putting subjects to death or letting them live. Rather, modern societies produce and circulate power primarily by managing the life and health of citizens, both as subjects/individuals and, importantly, as populations. So while Benkler (2006: 362) argues that ‘the “nature” of individuals changes over time’, fixing the concept of the individual as an ahistorical constant, Foucault’s argument suggests instead that individuation is a social, historical process. From this perspective, death can be considered a release from power. As Foucault (1997: 248) writes, ‘Death becomes, insofar as it is the end of life, the term, the limit, or the end of power too’. Foucault termed this new form of power biopower.

Scientific understandings, calculations, and manipulations of information have long been central to the production and circulation of biopower. As media scholar Tiziana Terranova (2004: 28) notes, ‘The question of information was posed first of all in the context of statistics of “populations”’. Over the course of the 20th century, the relation of information to biopower grew increasingly intimate, as life itself came to be understood in informational terms, occasioning political intervention at the molecular and cellular levels of bodies and populations of bodies (Thacker, 2003). Just as life is now understood, in part, in terms of information, the transmission economy theorized above suggests that information now exhibits a sort of liveliness – expressing data’s viral character – in its centrality to social, cultural, political, economic, and even biological life. To be cut off from or refuse information invokes a sort of death. As the faceless, enigmatic representative of the League of Noble Peers states in *Steal This Film II* (2007), ‘We all produce information now, we all reproduce information, we all distribute it. We can’t stop ourselves. It’s like breathing. We’ll do it as long as we’re alive, and when we stop doing it we’ll be dead.’

This pronouncement is meant to oppose commercial interests that seek to limit or restrict flows of information, whether through legal or other means. Regardless of the legitimacy of its cause, this position inadvertently fortifies the centrality of information to social, cultural, political, economic, and biological life. The problematic nature of this dynamic becomes more apparent when one inverts the phrase ‘when we stop doing it we’ll be dead’ to ‘we’ll die when we stop doing it’. As death is the limit or end to biopower, informational death is the limit or end to what we might call infopower – the power to make live and to manage liveliness through enmeshment in digital networks.

Though somewhat unorthodox in new media scholarship, the argument presented here is consonant with a shift in contemporary social theory away from politics of representation and towards politics of affect (Clough, 2008), or put another way: from questions of content and meaning to questions of form and ontology. Ironically, this shift in social theory was already articulated in relation to television, a medium whose primary political mode is often assumed in media scholarship to be representational, insofar as television seemingly allows programmers to manage, manipulate, and determine viewers’ thoughts, feelings, and overall sense of reality through carefully produced programming. Media theorist Richard Dienst (1994) offers an alternative framework, arguing that
the qualities of television as a machine are at least as politically important as its programming. As Patricia Ticineto Clough (2000: 96) writes (citing Dienst’s argument):

Television, as part of an expanded and intensified teletechnology, is not to be viewed as a vehicle of ideology in the domain of consumption. Television does not just support a worldwide market economy. It brings the world market wherever it goes; therefore, television represents the transnationalization of capital and globalization.

From this perspective, what is represented through television is less important than the simple fact that it is always on – a fact which foreshadows the extended or intensified ubiquity of the internet.

Through its ubiquity, Dienst argues, television turns its audiences into workers working at watching. Television transforms into labor the ‘free’ time audiences spend watching television, establishing conditions which allow television networks to harness the socially productive power of audiences’ free time, even while it appears as if television itself (not audiences’ viewing power) is the source of this productivity. Aiding this illusion, television audiences relinquish their free time willingly, seemingly unaware of the productive power of their viewing. As Dienst (1994: 179) writes, ‘The peculiar property of watching television is that time enters into a cycle of value without being treated as a commodity by those who spend it’. In this way, Dienst politicizes the more common formulation that attention is a ‘real economic good’ (Benkler, 2006: 74).

As Dienst argues that television audiences unintentionally work at watching, we might see internet users as working at watching and, importantly, at participating/transmitting data. If television expands the ‘working day’ of cultural consumption, increasing the hours of our waking lives which can be made to produce value, the internet revolutionizes and extends the working day of consumption, supplementing audience’s consumption with a participatory element which makes it more efficient, more productive of value. From this perspective, to be passive, to refuse, or to be refused participation does not simply express political apathy or disenfranchisement, or cede power to the mass media, or undermine democratic systems of cultural production, but also denies the networking industry its workforce, and ‘infopower’ its lifeblood: users.

Moving forward, scholars of the public/virtual sphere must rethink the politics of participation in ways that recognize the vital power produced through participation. In the conclusion of his article, Beer (2009: 999, 1000) argues that we do not yet understand ‘how the material infrastructures of Web 2.0 play out in the lives of individual users, how the software constrains and enables, how it formulates hierarchies, shapes the things people encounter, and so on’, and that we need to explore in detail how ‘power through the algorithm’ operates in the incorporation of Web 2.0 applications ‘into users’ lives’. The ‘creative, bespoke and surreptitious forms of resistance’ he imagines possible are correspondingly linked to ‘individual agents’. While complementary to Beer’s critique, the argument presented here suggests that vital power does not simply affect users and their lives from outside, but is constitutive of the user and its life, not to mention the liveliness of the data it generates and which often exceeds its boundaries – points which Beer recognizes despite inferring the possibility of a self/user not ‘penetrated’ by power. Put another way, online participation does not express and affect a pre-existing self (user,
agent, etc.) but rather is a form of self-making and self-unmaking, processes obscured by
the naturalization of the self/user in public/virtual sphere scholarship, despite a tradition
in media and cultural studies of questioning the integrity of the self/user, as in the scholar-
ship of Clough, Donna Haraway, Gilles Deleuze, Eugene Thacker, and Mark Hansen.

Beer’s proposed research agenda might thus be reframed: we need to explore further
how online participation circumscribes a self, its data, and their liveliness, and to account for
the political and economic arrangements established and bolstered through these circum-
scriptions, as in the analysis above of the transformation to an economy of transmission.
This might still be done through examining the objects Beer identifies – the creation,
materiality, and uses of applications and software – though with a sensitivity towards the
ways in which the user/self is implicated in the production of vital power, not as its object
but as part and parcel of its ideological proposition that freedom, autonomy, community,
justice, and (often forgotten) pleasure be the impetus for and reward of participation. In
addition, there is much to be gained from supplementing this work with a focus on the
broader, cumulative, and unintended political and economic effects of increasing participa-
tion, which may be less legible at the scale of software and applications, as is the transfor-
mation to an economy of transmission. Resistance, if the concept holds, might be located in
forms of action or inaction other than participation and ascribed to units other than the self or
its life, as Ulises Mejias (2007) has proposed with his concept of the paranodal and Galloway
and Thacker (2007) with their concepts of the antiweb and exceptional topologies.

In addition to moving forward in these ways, and in perhaps in order to do so, public/
virtual scholars must engage in critical self-examination, recognizing the ways in which
public/virtual sphere discourse often participates in the reproduction of problematic
arrangements and relations of power and economy, and forging ties with lines of critical
inquiry currently at the periphery of new media research, for example scholarship on
immaterial labor, affect economies, and critiques of neoliberalism. This work might
entail drawing into question the ‘unconscious’ of new media research, as Clough has
done of ethnography and autoethnography in the social sciences. As Clough (1998: xxv)
links the authorizing narrative logic of ethnography to the oedipal logic of narrativity, so
too might new media scholars treat their own ‘psychic investment in certain imaginaries,
certain fictions, certain scenarios, certain writing technologies’. A good place to start this
treatment would be Andrejevic’s (2004: 26) argument that the promise of interactive
liberation ‘resonates with the desires of a mythical past’. Lastly, as mentioned above,
there is an urgent need for research which critically examines new media scholarship’s
relation to state and economic interests, and reflects on the effects of this relation on the
field. Shifting research priorities in these ways could set the stage for re-imagining forms
of action and inaction that work to recognize, transform, and displace problematic
arrangements and relations of power and economy, whether through a politics of refusal,
negotiated complicity, or otherwise, bringing new media scholarship closer to actualiz-
ing the values it espouses.

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Notes


2 BitTorrent traffic alone comprises half of total global internet usage by some estimates (Stone, 2008).

References


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