FCJ-003 Internet Politics in an Information economy

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Introduction

The Internet, and information technology generally, is not separate from the social world in which it is embedded, neither does it fully determine that world. It may, however, allow modifications, intensifications or even subversions to occur. This paper will discuss some of the problems and paradoxes of the "Information economy" and its regimes of property; issues around the so-called hacker ethic and open source software; and some of the expectations which have been held for the Internet's role in fostering democratic politics. It is possible the idea of the "information economy" itself has a negative effect by suggesting a whole new range of property to be appropriated and kept from common use. The term "information" is not a concept which links things together because they are similar in the same way. It is an open and magical term, which may hide as much as it reveals. Its popularity may even suggest it serves some kind of existing social agenda. Even if the equally vague term "knowledge workers" does prove useful in analysis within this kind of framework, such people are not in a strong position relative to expanding corporate power, especially given problems with the volume and inaccuracy of data available to them. The Internet, though providing pathways for contact between subgroups, may not provide ideal pathways for discussion or organisation. [1]

It is suggested that property is a contested imaginary, growing out of systems of power and exchange. Initially the Internet seems to have run largely as a prestation economy, in which the exchange of "gifts" in return for recognition was a governing factor. Richard Barbrook (1999) argues that this implies a virtual democratic communism in actual practice — something which is unlikely. This prestation economy seems vulnerable to capitalist definitions of property operating within the model of an "information economy" in which the most important aspect of property is that it can be charged for. This capitalist property is created by fencing off information through extension of copyright and patent laws, or by concealment. Parts of the "hacker economy" still exist, and the struggle between the supporters of open and free software illustrates the way that information capitalism operates to diminish free exchange.

Hackers, or more generally "knowledge workers", are often considered to be a vital part of the new economy. Himanen (2001a), for example, with the approval of Manuel Castells (2001), suggests that Hackers are to the new Information Age and freedom what Max Weber's Protestants were to the Capitalist Age. This argument can be supported only by ignoring many features of the current period. Furthermore, in an information society, information may not be valued according to its accuracy, but according to its role in a pre-existent set of politicised, or marketing, biases. In which case certainty will drive out accuracy. Finally, there is nothing inherent in the use of the Internet for political discourse which guarantees a democratic or egalitarian result. The emerging structures of the "Information Age" may be largely anti-democratic, tending to what has been called 'Information Feudalism' reinforcing inequalities, with control of both media and content in the hands of a small minority. Control of information in the information society, is the equivalent of control of land in feudalism, with no State support for the relatively powerless (Drahos and Braithwaite, 2002). If so, then the Internet may be embedded within these tendencies rather than inherently opposed to them.

Instead of the upcoming triumph of a new economy, it is possible to see the forcible return of the old. To quote Steven Best and Douglas Kellner:

> Though ballooned out of proportion by the financial industries, the Internet boom represented a new economy lead by a young vanguard. The Bush II regime can be seen in many ways as a return to the old guard, the old extraction-based economy that sees economic advancement as a win-loss game best advanced through imperialist expansion. (2003)

Lawrence Lessig also warns that those who benefited under the "old regimes" are fighting to retain control over the new environment, and are likely winning (Lessig, 2001). There is no reason to assume the old order has lost or will lose — even if it may be slightly transformed.

It might even be possible to suggest that Information Technology enables the intensification of trends of classical capitalism as analysed by Marx, such as: globalisation of a particular culture; destruction of national industries; inflation of the size of particular cities; increasing inequality;

increasing monopolisation; making labour an appendage to the machine; freeing capital from local regulation; turning the State into a managing agent for the benefit of corporations; increasing the spread of directives and the control of land and people; turning all values into property or monetary exchange, and so on (Marshall, 2000). This resurgence of capitalism, and the extension of the corporate model into previously immune aspects of life, will be taken as the background social trend in what follows.

Information Economy

Nick Dyer-Witheford remarks that:

> On the eve of the twenty-first century the only revolution spoken of in advanced capitalism is the information revolution ... Along with a number of synonymous or associated terms — "postindustrialism", superindustrialism", "the technotronic society", "the wired society", "the control revolution", "high technology society", "the second industrial divide", "post-Fordism", "the globalization of technology"... [it] has come to define contemporary hopes and anxieties about the future. (1999: 16)

To theses terms we might add Castells' use of 'Network Society' and his preference for the term 'informational society' (Castells, 1996: 21). Castells defines the network society as 'a social structure made of information networks powered by information technologies characteristic of the informationalist paradigm' (Castells, 2001: 166). He is clearly discussing similar ideas.

The concept of the knowledge or information economy was probably introduced into general use by Peter Drucker or Alvin Toffler in the early '60s. [2] Most of the earlier scenarios were optimistic. Toffler's first book, *The Culture Consumers* (1964), suggested that we would primarily live by creating "culture", as we would all have so much leisure, and he was not alone in this hope of a regime of free creativity. Something else obviously happened.

The general idea first gained academic respectability in Daniel Bell's formulation of the 'Post-Industrial Society', dependent upon, and organised around, technical knowledge and knowledge workers — the 'major class'. Knowledge workers were said to act as an intermediary between the owners of capital and the workers, and acted to improve the standards of living for workers through the application of knowledge and planning within capitalism (Daniel Bell, 1976: 14-33, 374). Bell was later to drop the idea of the importance of government planning in line with the use of the "new information age" rhetoric to deregulate capitalism.

The idea of the knowledge or information worker is an important part of most information society formulations. Alvin Gouldner (1979) developed this idea into the 'New Class', a combination of intellectuals and technical intelligentsia, which often inhabited bureaucracies but were not simply bureaucrats and were functionally independent of capitalism. Views of the role of these knowledge workers varied. Gouldner, and Drucker tended to see them as potentially powerful (even as controlling capital) whereas Toffler saw them as fragmented, with few obvious common interests providing any organising points (Drucker, 1968: 276; Gouldner, 1979; Toffler, 1984: 38, 84, 114). Both views seem accurate. A very few managerial workers control large amounts of capital — although they must do so in the perceived interests of the shareholders — but most knowledge workers do not exert much power or cross industry organisation. In reality, only particular kinds of knowledge and connections count (Angell, 2000: 53ff). Later theorists such as Himanen and McKenzie Wark, tend to correlate knowledge workers with "hackers" and shall be discussed later.

According to Dyer-Witheford the first American book with the words information society in its title was published in 1978, although the US Government office of Telecommunication had published Mark Porat's The Information Economy the year before (1999: 20-1). In the eighties and nineties information society theory largely became entangled with deregulated capitalism (Drahos and Braithwaite, 2002). Some of the same theorists who supported deregulation also tended to predict social breakdown if deregulation was resisted. At best those who resisted were luddites and would be superseded. [3] It seems that the general theoretical boundaries of the analysis were established by the late 1980s and we can roughly summarise them as follows:

Main Points:

1. Knowledge or information is central to the "new economy" both to its organisation and to the production of wealth. Information is the society's raw material. Facticity is important.

2. The use of Information Technology is changing society — it is a shift at least comparable to that from Agrarian Society to Industrial Society. There is often a technologically determinist ring to the argument.

3. Knowledge workers, are central to this change — either as creative innovators or manipulators of symbols. They are forming an increasing percentage of the work force.

Subsidiary Points:

4. The local, or national, becomes opposed to, or challenged by, the Global. Ethnic and Religious identities can become more or less important.

5. Speed becomes of increasing importance, both in terms of production and distribution. The implication is that the system is responsive, flexible and able to reconfigure. People's experience of Time/Space is changing.

6. Capitalism is largely being "improved" (or as suggested above, intensified) by this change.

7. There are lengthening chains of interdependence, linkages through virtual networks not dependent upon place, class, time or identity, that are all facilitated by IT.

8. The transformation is generally positive with increases in democracy and freedom. Government and corporations are decentralised, and hierarchy diminishes.

9 .There is a shift from an economy based on exchange of goods to an economy based in speculation. [4]

Problems with the term "information"

There are well known problems with the term "information". One is that it is used for many different things with very different applications. It not only has a specialised meaning in mathematics, but is applied to useful instructions, data about anything, novels, plans, scientific research, financial projections, design specs for a product, PR spin, painting, sports trivia and so on. It might be argued that in contemporary society these things are considered equivalent — partly because they can all be transmuted into digital format, but also because of the move to evaluate everything by how much people or organisations are prepared to pay for them. This turns information into "product" which is valued by "appeal" rather than by accuracy.

As Jacques Vallee points out, data does not become information, or become useful, outside of a purpose, and it is the purpose that creates value (1982: 46). Socially valued purpose may be determined by already instituted power ratios and may be bent towards control. If the overriding value is corporate profit, then information contrary or apparently irrelevant, to profit will be devalued or perhaps even suppressed.

Information also marks a problem for classical economics, as perfect information is postulated in a functioning market. However, information itself provides direction in the market and thus becomes valuable and no longer evenly distributed. Prices don't simply reflect supply and demand but give messages about them. A declining share price gives the message the market is abandoning a company and the value of the company is thereby affected (See Drucker, 1993: 183ff.; Soros, 1994). Businessman Mark Porat argues that 'merchants live off imperfect information' (Burstein and Kline, 1995: 419). Concealment and special knowledge is part of the game, not openness.

Toffler argued that information was a difficult concept for capitalist economic theory because information is a potentially unlimited resource unlike labour, capital or land. A person's stock of information is not reduced by another possessing it and information is not consumed and destroyed but can generate more (1984: 21-2). Many others have said likewise. Wark, for example, argues that 'information need not be subject to the laws of scarcity at all. My possession of some information does not deprive you of it' (Christopher, 2002).

This constitutes a zone of friction.

Property, Distribution and Knowledge Workers

32 As "information" can supposedly be generated without limit, and without any obvious connection to "things", it becomes plausible to reintroduce the theory of eighteenth century British philosopher David Hume that Imagination creates property and value.

33 Property is established through Imagination firstly though its imaginal connection with other values such as pleasure, freedom or survival (Hume, 1888: 314), and secondly through the action of social laws (494) which depend upon the functions of the imagination for whatever appeal they have (505-13) and which 'vanish … upon a more accurate inspection into the subject' (527). Government and law exist to make or to justify the 'distinction of property and … the different ranks of men' (1888: 402). Hume also argues that the value of goods is not dependent upon labour, but on the valuation and imagination of the powerful. [5] Imagination is made real through custom and ritual. So any investigation of property has to look at modes of appropriation and reward and the ways that these are ritualised.

34 The legitimacy of information, in an information society, is guaranteed by the rituals of its (corporate) source, by their name and sigils, and their ability to use other names. Wealth, power, ritual and presence transform signals into Information and value.

35 Appropriation is affected by the politics of distribution as is shown in economists Robert Frank and Philip Cook's model of 'The Winner Take All Economy'. In this economy, due to the ease of replication, only the skills of a very few people are actually needed. Their recurrent example is that only the very best opera singers will have their cds bought in numbers. Publishing companies will remove their focus from middle selling authors to promote their best selling. This leads to a situation in which only a few people become really wealthy or successful. Frank and Cook assert that information technology is 'increasing leverage for the talents of those who occupy top positions, and correspondingly less room for others to find a lucrative niche' (1995: viii). The same is true of "star programmers" as opposed to "Microserfs" (Lessard and Baldwin, 2000). The rest of us get progressively devalued.

36 One criticism of Frank and Cook's model might be that they adhere too strongly to the idea that the successful is always "the best" — that is clearly not always the case. What succeeds is what succeeds, not what might be preferable. That cane toads wipe out native fauna is not an improvement. CEOs, despite the ideology, are often rewarded despite failure. As production heads for the intangible, it becomes more important for a company to give the right signals to its customers (often the shareholders, not the purchasers of its "goods"), and the salary paid to the CEO becomes a signal of their competence; it reassures shareholders that everything is being done. Celebration of success becomes a way of legitimating differential extractions.

37 As it is often alleged any human can make information then, in modern information capitalism, it is implied that those without money are immoral and unenlightened. Money makes human. The poor, by these lights, are sub-human. The best get more and are defined as the best by having more. As Kellner writes:

38 > those who celebrate the coming information society tend not to focus on what kind of society produces an information highway and multi-media cornucopia for its privileged denizens while denying others the basic necessities of life. (1994)

39 With the possibility of increasing inequality of wealth and control suggested by this factor alone (and the evidence is that inequality of wealth is increasing) there may also be a greater loss of political equality. [6]The wealthy can fund political parties, pay others to campaign in their interest, propagate messages more widely and so on. They are more *noticed*, and their words are heeded.

40 Knowledge workers not in this fortunate position have further problems. There are considerable demands upon the worker's time — they can be on demand via phone and email at all times and expected to respond to any "emergency" whatever the demands of their non work life — they are never truly away from work. The costs of administration have been shifted on to the worker, who has to fill in all the bureaucratic demands of the organisation, and this takes time away from dealing with a workload which has not diminished. The person is expected continually to retrain himself or herself for work, diminishing their time for interests in the wider world. These workers are insecure as work tends towards contracts and perpetual dismissal. Total flexibility is demanded from them to accommodate to the wishes of the employer and the system.

Communication systems mean that they have to compete against the whole world to work, in what is often thought as a downward spiral of wages. This is also some evidence that knowledge work is being continually deskilled by the movement of industrial methods into the office, which also means that the competition for work and the lowering of wages is more pronounced. The often praised "flattening" of organisations can increase centralised control by removing the buffering middle layer, which allowed flexibility of response and provided intermediate jobs: one is either an owner or a slave.

Mark Poster has suggested that increased surveillance mechanisms allow workers to survey management equally, but he gives no evidence for this rather unlikely bi-structuring (Poster, 2002). The Law in Australia and the US seems to allow employers to read and ban workers for the content of their emails (Lowe, 2003: 1). ISPs may be held responsible for the contents of Web sites which a corporation considers defamatory, thus not encouraging the distribution of criticism. Existent and external power is not irrelevant in politics. [7]

If information is important, then uncovering hidden information (not just plans, or replications of a product but also information about people) becomes even more economically important. Commercially sponsored hacker raids on other corporations are part of net folklore (cf Ruskoff ,1994: 31-2). This almost certainly diminishes the freedom of "knowledge workers", or of the supposed "creators". Any knowledgeable employee has the potential to cost a corporation huge amounts of money, either through carelessness, though going public, or through selling information to a competitor. Therefore, internal surveillance increases the more internal openness *might* occur. Frequently, knowledge workers have written into their contracts that after leaving their current employment they cannot work in a similar field. This has the potential to render their knowledge/experience of less benefit to them and render them more vulnerable to market fluctuations and the increasingly temporary nature of employment.

None of these features would automatically increase democratisation. At best they leave the worker harried, rushed and exhausted. This forces focus on competitive survival, not on creative, or participatory, politics and free exchange.

The rulers of industrial economies, which may have been threatened with Revolution, saw that the provision of wages which enabled people to purchase consumer goods, and the participation of people in the State, enabled the continuance of their own power and prosperity. The information economy seems to remove the necessity of practical common ground between the controllers of capital and the majority of the population.

Creation of Property

As costs of replication decrease, the current dominant corporations have moved to protect the prices charged and their profit margin, by creating information scarcity, or by hindering information exchange or reproduction via patenting or copyright. Lester Thurow writes that: 'the days of the low-cost sharing of private knowledge are over' and that:

> The Industrial Revolution began with an enclosure movement that abolished common land in England. The world now needs a socially managed enclosure movement for intellectual property rights or it will witness a scramble among the powerful to grab valuable pieces of intellectual property, just as the powerful grabbed the common lands of England three centuries ago. (Schiller, 1999: 77)

Microsoft, for example, through its subsidiary Corbis has 'effectively acquired the rights to the photographic record of history' (Hallacy, 2000). British Telecom recently attempted to claim ownership of the idea of "web links" and demanded tribute. They lost in law, but in theory Xerox, as the probable originator, could make the same demand legally.

The public domain, in all forms, is continually encroached upon:

> Patents are increasingly stretched out to cover "ideas" that twenty years ago all scholars would have agreed were unpatentable: the so-called business method patents, which cover such "inventions" as auctions or accounting methods, are an obvious example. Most troubling of all are the attempts to introduce intellectual property rights over mere compilations of facts ... stretched interpretations of novelty and nonobviousness allow intellectual property rights to move closer and closer to the underlying datalayer. (Boyle, 2002: 16)

In the information economy "creativity" has become a magical term used to carve out property from social and collaborative (or mixed) processes so as to justify ownership although it is usually not the creator who owns but their employer, replicating the capitalist appropriation of labour generally. Corporations may require workers to generate patents, but those patents do not belong to the inventors. James Boyle writes:

51 > [I]nformation presents special [social and conceptual] problems and the discourse of authorship seems to solve its problems ... The author stands between the public and private realms, giving new ideas to the society at large and being granted in return a limited right of private property in the artefact he or she has created. (Boyle, 1996: xii)

52 A constructed Corporate Author became legitimated as a point of origin, almost at the moment that theory pronounced the death of the author. The claim suppresses both the claims of sources, groupwork, and audience. It could be suggested that assertions that web pages are inherently without authors because they are hypertext (Poster, 2002) act in favour of corporate ownership and the diminishment of writer's rights.

53 This extension of copyright clashes with the ethos of free exchange which developed via the Internet when there were large sections of traffic outside corporate influence. It particularly clashes with the easy exchange of solutions to technical problems which allowed the Net's construction (Lessig, 2001; King et al., 1997: 26ff; Schiller, 1999: 10). The Net and the Web may only be able to work through the ease of making copies at various storage points and transmission nodes — memory replication is at the heart of computer functioning. It is conceivable that a stringent application of copyright could interfere with this transmission. As we shall see, many original denizens of the Internet objected strongly, although without much effect, to commercial incursion, and continue to champion "open source" software as part of this tradition of free exchange. Such an extension of copyright also clashes with creativity in general as "information products" are often based on fragments of other information products (Boyle, 2002: 19). For example, Shakespeare's plays are based on earlier sources, earlier forms, and often use earlier phrases. Any information product is embedded in some kind of history and system of other products and schemas.

54 As most products are part of a system, companies fight over standards, partly to keep people who purchase part of a system, locked within that system, and partly to gain a time lead over their competition, and to be able to charge royalties to those who decide to use, or add to, their established system (Toffler, 1990: 130). The volume of the adoption of a system makes that system more attractive as more products are made for it. Thus, given that the Windows market is at least 10 times the Apple Mac market, a company writing Windows software has only to get 10% of the Windows market to sell as many items as if they cornered the whole of the Mac market. Under the requirements of capitalism, people have more profit incentive to write for Windows and variation is diminished. This trend to monopoly can also extend to companies, and so the number of organisations making computers or writing software diminishes (Philipson, 2001). When standards are not set by market power, they are set by a relatively few individuals, in committees, trading benefits to their company or organisation, and building in resistances to certain types of change.

55 This uniformity in software intensifies replication issues. People (particularly in poorer countries) find that the cost of purchasing the goods they need is prohibitive compared to the cost of replicating them. As a result the US has threatened trade wars against Asian countries such as Thailand. While accepting human rights violations in China, the US threatened to revoke Chinese trade privileges over copyright (Toffler, 1990: 329-30, 469). It appears corporations still need States to enforce the laws that make their operations possible. That States appear not to use this leverage to gain concessions from corporations is interesting.

56 In this set up, even natural phenomena get turned into property — although this is not new. Europeans have turned land into exclusive property for a long time. Courts say that if genes were not patentable then there would be no research. They assume appropriation drives knowledge, and so Courts have granted copyright to the discoverers, or first users, of naturally occurring genes and viruses. In a case in Australia in 1996, the company whose researchers discovered the Hepatitis C virus and which produces tests for that virus went to court to prevent another company from releasing cheaper and different tests for the same virus on the grounds that they have copyright on the virus. Despite the human genome project being publicly funded, various

companies have claimed patents on various strips of the DNA. One company, Genetic Technologies, claims to own 95% of all the DNA of every creature on the planet and requires researchers to pay a license fee to research its property (Smith, 2003: 4).

57 However, information is only one of many types of property. The old economy has not disappeared and shapes the "new". Although George Gilder and Newt Gingrich proclaimed the 'overthrow of matter' (Dyson et al., 1992), they still wanted the material substrata of the information age, and the power it supposedly no longer brings, to belong firmly in corporate, not public, hands. Indeed, control of wires and air waves seems to be a vital part of corporate strategy for the future. This could reasonably be supposed to fit in with increased possibility of corporate control of content and to affect possibilities of use (Marshall, 2001: 82-6).

Factuality in an Information Economy

58 The problem of 'data smog', or information overload (Shenk, 1977) affects facticity. Peter Varian and Hal Lyman estimate that in 2002 five exabytes of information were created. This is 'equivalent in size to the information contained in half a million new libraries the size of the Library of Congress print collections' (Lyman and Varian, 2003). Even the amount of email, knowledge workers have to deal with and filter, in addition to existing work, has been found to add to stress (AAP, 2003: 5; Wright, 2003: 6). Finding all relevant data amidst this volume is probably impossible — selecting the relevant information is extremely hard. Pre-existent bias creeps in. Even if search engines are not configured to bring up sponsoring organisations and suppress critical organisations, issues of authority, of being noticed or selected are not simply overcome. Major organisations tend to have the authority of their brand, a lone writer has to do far more work to have their views noticed and relayed beyond a small group, however accurate their thought.

59 In a situation of informational profusion, marketing may be more important than accuracy, in disseminating information. The leading strategies become dominant over the means of dissemination, convincing people that certain types of information are preferable, building a reputation in the market for good information, and provision of an attractive market for information.

60 Academic and artistic discourse seems to be marginalised when not supporting the dominant order, illustrated by, for example, the apparent effort to remove post-colonialist theory from US universities as "anti-American" (Subcommittee on Select Education). The same may be true of science as shown by the exclusion of warnings of global warming from official reports (Campbell, 2003: 19).

61 The more that information becomes a commodity, then the less accurate it may become. There are several complementary reasons for this:

62 1. Information as commodity is defined by its appeal to a market,

whether that market be readers or disseminators, which means that accuracy is not its primary characteristic.

63 2. As the market value of information depends on scarcity, information

providers will have incentive for hiding what they know, or restricting access, by issuing inaccurate, or covering, information (assuming people cannot be prevented from using that information otherwise). This result may be limited by growing distrust of a disseminator, but it is not clear how great an impedance this will be if all major information sources act in the same way.

64 3. Information refers to other information. For example share prices

give messages about the value and functionality of a company as well as act as measures of that value. Thus there is further imperative to hide deleterious information or produce spurious information in order to gain market advantage. One may be the first to know the "real" relation between a company and its value or make a company valuable by giving out selective information.

65 4. Value is largely subjective in the first place. Hence there is more

interest in creating a subjective sense of value, or lack of value, amongst "those who matter", than there is in any impartial reckoning — assuming impartiality was possible.

66 5. As gross inequality increases, so does the pressure towards violence

or distortion of reality. In which case, there is a large degree of "social utility" in maintaining inaccuracy. Propagating a more accurate view of reality might be exceedingly difficult and acting on it might encounter all kinds of resistances.

67 There is no reason that a society should not collapse under the weight of its own "self deception" or inaccuracies, if the forces reinforcing the inaccuracies are more influential than the forces leading towards embrace of accuracy. The Soviet Union might be an example.

68 Dissemination of this kind of falsity can be blamed on increasing corporate control of the media, decreasing numbers of media owners, cronyism between corporate controllers and political figures, decreasing security of employment for reporters, fear of bringing bad news to superiors. [8] Or, if you are right wing, on a "liberal intelligentsia" occupying positions of power in the media (e.g. Kohn, 2003; Goldberg, 2003). [9] Such factors may be part of a temporary structure of media personnel, however it more probably is related to the kinds of pressure, mentioned above, which lead to trading in inaccuracy and more particularly in expressions of absolute certainty. People only rarely seem to read books with politics different to their own — preferring to stay with their own certainties.

69 It might be that in an environment of near instantaneous transmission it becomes near impossible to allow time for the suspensions of certainty which allow creative explorations of options. Indeed, whether it was in the interests of those with certainty or not (and human beings often seem convinced by certainty and repetition), certainty will tend to drive out creativity because it is easier to replicate — it tends to be shorter with less prevarication. The culture of the TV sound bite is well known, as are the complaints about it from "print journalists". Instead of complexity we are delivered a summary certainty. If certainty is easier to replicate, then it will also be easier to find. And thus it might tend to veil problems with a particular political position, reinforcing that position and thus allowing developments, and propagation, from that false certainty.

70 Right wing commentators in the US frequently argued that the Clinton Administration was bedevilled with "spin". With the arrival of Bush Jr. such allegations have not ceased, with assertions that this US administration relies on lies and deceit from the "theft" of an election, to the aims of its economic policies, to war on Iraq (see Kellner, 2002; Corn, 2003; Conason, 2003). It is well known that the current Prime Minister of Australia is likewise given to "not being told" of "facts" which contradict his inclinations.

71 With the war on Iraq, which seems to have been under consideration from the days after September 11, the time could have been used for careful planning of the aftermath, but was instead used in reiterating certainties about how easy it would be to impose democracy and how all Iraqis would welcome a US presence. It seems the resistance took the proposers of the war by surprise. Similarly, if the presence of "Weapons of Mass Destruction" was known as a lie to the Bush Administration, then we could have expected that they would make the lie good, by planting such weapons. Instead it appears they were surprised by the Weapon's absence. Certainty had driven out accuracy. In which case, we can propose that certainty and inaccuracy are not just propaganda, but enmesh the operations of the modern State and its political system, and that this may have to do with the mode of information itself.

72 In an information economy, at a certain level, bad information which fits in with previous biases, or the needs of PR, drives out good information which challenges them. This is in keeping with the argument that an information economy tends to be targeted at marketing, or controlling and keeping the customer, rather than "real utility".

73 This suggests that a democracy based on accuracy of information as a determination of action would be unlikely. It is more likely that fragmentation into particular uncommunicative certainties would result. Something which largely seems to be the case in actual Internet based discussions of politics.

Prestation Economy

74 If, as is implied by Hume, conceptions of property and ownership are arbitrary and can vary between societies, then it is useful to consider other forms of economy such as "prestation", or gift economies — especially as the traditional behaviours of Internet users have frequently been compared to such economies (Barbrook, 1998, 1999; Raymond, 1999). In such economies, people give gifts to others, which are evaluated by others, and which usually carry some level of obligation

to give gifts or recognition in return. This translates into status but not into exclusive fixed ownership or accumulation. Status must be constantly recycled or re-earned. It is fairly unstable. Capitalism usually destroys prestation economies, as recycling profit back to relatives or others prevents the accumulation of capital.

75 It needs to be emphasised, against writers like Barbrook, that a prestation economy is not necessarily harmonious or self sustaining — potlatch is hostile exchange which became out of control and destructive of the societies it emerged within. [10] Prestation economies can also link people who have never met and never will meet in vast cycles or networks of exchange which can be disrupted at many points. It is not obvious why academics should have a romantic view of the gift economy. Nowadays their prestations are compulsory if they want to keep their jobs or gain promotion (ability to teach can be irrelevant). Papers can be fiercely rejected by others, the demands to present can mean that papers get given before they are ready. The person who can write fast has an advantage over those who prefer to be more considered. Academics may act to support their own friends and followers and reduce prestations by enemies or strangers and so on. Prestations are embedded within fields of power and contestation, and are not independent of them. Such economies can be both competitive and unstable, or even act counter to some of the needs of people, and are thus vulnerable to certain types of collapse. Both features are the case with prestation economies on the Internet.

76 Prestation economies can recognise intertwined ownership. Thus when Malinowski describes the case of ownership for canoes in the Trobriand Islands prestation economy, although he specifically states that a canoe will have an owner, ownership of a canoe is complex as are the claims that people may have to use a particular canoe.

77 > Ownership ... is defined by the manner in which the object is made, used and regarded by the group of men who produced it and enjoy its possession... in using the craft every joint owner has a right to a certain place in it and to certain duties, privileges and benefits associated with it ... it is the sum of duties, privileges and mutualities which bind the joint owners to the object and to each other. (Malinowski, 1926: 19-20)

78 Likewise, in an email list, mails are public prestations, they are given freely, they are not “for sale”, there is no fixed value which calls for immediate return, the author’s stack of gifts is not diminished by someone else using them, nor is any status amidst the group which was gained by the prestation lost if another uses them elsewhere. Indeed, to some extent the reverse might happen. It is also exceedingly difficult to maintain, or accumulate anything, which we might call Capital and equally difficult to dissipate any accumulation.

79 In much email parts of the “property” of others is overtly embedded within the “property” of the current writer and contributes to making its final form or even its existence. A form of group ownership is constructed through almost every mail which makes the exchange. We might say, that like the Trobriand canoe, these mails only existent because of a web of connections and contributions.

80 If Internet societies originally held that, or behave in such a way as to function as if, information was a matter of prestation then attempts to model information as “property for sale or to be owned” destroys these models and the society changes, as surely as tribal or prestation based societies changed under capitalism. Intertwined mail, forwards and accounts of other writings, even references to web sites, become subject to the demands of ownership and copyright. A person on the Internet discussion list that I study wrote:

81 > Some one has suggested that I copyright that thing that wrote itself last night, and this reopens an old thought-box. We discussed this, here, a long time ago, and it was my opinion that if I posted something to the List, it was a ‘gift’ (something like that....). Well, somebody seems to be thinking $$, here, and suddenly I ain’t so pure and generous any more. How does one copyright something retroactively? I mean — it would burn my butt if somebody *else* made money from my sweat without my permission ..... ;). (Rose Mulvale, 1996; ellipses in original)

82 It has also been the case that over the time between 1994 and the present day (late 2003) that members of this list have become far more concerned about the “ownership” of the words they submit to the list, often on the grounds that they make their living through their words. The idea that a mailing list is a public domain seems to be becoming less common than it was. Therefore the model of the information society/economy with its emphasis on confined intellectual property,

may in itself be hostile to these traditions of free exchange, in that it changes the ways people who use this model can behave, from the "inside" as it were.

83 It changes messages from prestation to property.

84 The prestation economy can also be co-opted by the use of gifts which bind people to a system — an example being the ubiquitous cds which give access to the Internet through a particular company only.

85 This kind of economy resembles that of the construction of the original Internet software, as people did not appropriate it for themselves, but gave it freely in exchange for the recognition of a peer group. It became what Lessig (2001) has called a creative commons, and the effect of this can be seen in the rapidity with which the Internet was developed and in the rapid adaptation of technically proficient hacks.

Free Software and Open Source

86 As is customary in Internet discussions there is a great deal of heat about the difference between these two types of software licences. In both cases a main idea is that the source code of software should be available, and users should be able to modify or improve that software.

87 Richard Stallman is usually considered to be the guru of the free software movement. He makes plain he is not talking about 'free' in terms of 'free product' but in terms of 'freely modifiable', 'freely usable' and 'freely transferable'. Source code should not be secret, and these conditions should be passed on to all subsequent users of the software (Gnu 1). People could still retain copyright over their code to stop others making it propriety software, and must not use patents (Gnu 2). It appears that the default under US law is not that something is public domain, but that it is privately owned. His model is essentially that of western science — the open distribution and criticism of work. Stallman argues that:

> 88 The US Constitution says that copyright exists "to promote the progress of science". When copyright impedes the progress of science, science must push copyright out of the way. (Richard Stallman, 2001)

89 Open source supporters, such as Bruce Parens and Eric Raymond, seem to be a lot less insistent on the lack of secrecy or the transmission of "freedoms". All that they require is that the source code be made available — you are not forced to pass on the rights you had. In some cases, under an open source licence the modifications made to the program can become the exclusive property of the vendor of the program. In other words, open source allows appropriation of common work and some companies may only make a part of their software open source.

90 Raymond argues that open source and post-industrial capitalism are natural allies, and that making something open source increases the detection of errors and promotes reliability — however efficiency under capitalism is not the same as openness, as has been argued above. Raymond's ease would seem to depend on the assumption that our society will always choose the survival, and possibly the maximal happiness, option. There is no necessity for this.

91 Raymond then argues that a prestation economy can only function when people are free of the constraints of survival (1999). This is not exactly true as many prestation economies function to distribute goods necessary for survival in fairly harsh conditions, but it probably is true that capitalism tends to prevent prestation economies acting as the major mechanism of survival. The prestation economies of the Internet depend on people being able to survive externally of the exchange. The more that people working in universities, for example, come to depend upon corporate support, and the more they have to earn funds (survival) by selling ideas or the products of ideas, the less this will be the case. To a large extent the prestation economy of the Internet came into being only because of State support — of the technical corporate sector and the universities. The more the State is rolled back from this kind of support the less it will be able to function that way.

92 Whatever the case, the open source license with less insistence on "freedom" (other than getting free labour on your product), is certainly more successful with business, as it allows appropriation of work in the public domain and retains capitalist property rights.

93 Open source proponents often accuse Stallman of being too idealistic and point out that their techniques have been much more successful in selling the idea to the corporate world. IBM, for

example, now actively promotes the open source operating system Linux. Others accuse Stallman, who does appear to hold left wing political positions, of being communist — something he repeatedly denies, but it shows the vehemence with which the possibilities of changing the role of intellectual property can be denounced. Stallman himself alleges that discussions of ethics and freedom make people uncomfortable and is not acceptable to business (Stallman, 2000). As Lessig writes:

94 > Microsoft has waged a war against the GPL [[General Public Licence]], warning whoever will listen that the GPL is a "dangerous" license. The dangers it names, however, are largely illusory. Others object to the "coercion" in GPL's insistence that modified versions are also free. But a condition is not coercion. If it is not coercion for Microsoft to refuse to permit users to distribute modified versions of its product Office without paying it (presumably) millions, then it is not coercion when the GPL insists that modified versions of free software be free too. (Lessig, 2002)

95 Certain types of compulsion can be promoted as the freedoms of free enterprise — the flexibility demanded of workers is not applied to corporate property, which fits in with the general capitalist view of extending the grip on property. We have seen recently in the free trade negotiations with the US that extension of copyright was not seen as a restriction of trade but health regulations were (Cochrane, 2003: 1). Furthermore, it seems from SCO's recent attempts to sue IBM for 3 billion dollars over allegations that IBM's version of Linux includes propriety code that a war is on over this issue (Philipson, 2003).

Hacker Ethic

96 As already mentioned, the public domain of the Internet, outside the widespread and already existing commercial networks, was constructed largely through the sharing of information between programmers, often without much regard for secrecy or the conventions of capitalist property. The method of calling for Request for Comments (RFCs) encapsulated this kind of informal organisation based on technical prowess and socially evaluated solutions to problems. This openness was also true of the software, browser and application, which led to the World Wide Web (Berners-Lee, 1999). Raymond suggests that most software (95%) is essentially not written for sale and is in house and open to programmers within the company (1999). In other words, some kind of openness and support is behind most programming. Such an approach to software might be called part of the "hacker ethic".

97 This could be seen as extended to almost all workers in the "information economy". For example, Wark says 'I think everyone who actually creates "intellectual property" could consider themselves part of the same class — the hacker class — and as having convergent interests' (Christopher, 2002). Wark does recognise the potential conflict of interest between such workers and corporate ownership of their product. He calls the corporate sector the vectoralist class — but it is unclear what this adds to anything other than veiling — after all the vectoralist class and the corporate class are very much the same people. Perhaps Wark uses "Capitalist" to mean "Industrial Capitalist"? Wark praises "hackers" as the new class:

98 > Hacker knowledge implies, in its practice, a politics of free information, free learning, the gift of the result to a network of peers. Hacker knowledge also implies an ethics of knowledge subject to the claims of public interest and free from subordination to commodity production. Hacker knowledge is knowledge that expresses the virtuality of nature, by adding to it, fully aware of the bounty and danger. (Wark, *Hacker Manifesto 2.0*)

99 In a recent book Himanen has attempted to rewrite Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism for the Information Age* (1958), and suggest that, as the "Protestant ethic" was important for the development of capitalism so the "hacker ethic" will determine the new age to come. The hacker ethic is described as being self-consciously about passionate, freely organised work, and the cooperation of individuals in free ways to produce new goods (Himanen, 2001a: vii, 3-7). The hacker ethic is also held to be egalitarian and in favour of free communication and privacy (54, 99). This new conglomeration of ideals is supposed to produce a new society expressing those kinds of features.

100 There seem several problems with such a set of propositions. Firstly, it seems to totally misread Weber. Secondly, Himanen can only make his argument by asserting that many features of the information society have nothing to do with the world hackers live in.

101

To deal with the first point first. Weber never argued that Protestants believed in hard work and therefore produced capitalism. Weber's argument, to simplify it, was that capitalism was helped to develop its particular forms through the unintended consequences of certain Protestant ideals, which drove people in directions they might not have otherwise gone. It is the unintended consequences that have effect, not the conscious ones (Weber, 1958). So to analyse the effect of hackers we must look at their actual behaviours and driving values, and consider what kinds of unintended consequences they might have.

102 For example, somewhat oddly, in the debate about the book on Slashdot.org (which, if anywhere, is the home of those who wish to be the programming elite), there was great preoccupation with the meaning of the word "hacker". There was continuing indignation that "others" could not understand that "hacker" meant 'nifty programmer' or the equivalent, not 'person who breaks into computers' (Slashdot 1, Slashdot 2).

103 However, if a word is taken by everyone else to mean something then, if you actually want to communicate, why not use another word? What is wrong with the "programmer ethic", or the "nerd ethic"? Levy's Hackers, which slashdotters frequently claim to be a good book, shows the ambiguity of the word was there from the start. Levy writes that "hack" 'may have been suggested by ancient MIT lingo — the word "hack" had long been used to describe the elaborate college pranks that MIT students would regularly devise' (1994: 23ff). In normal speech, to "hack something apart" is to demolish something crudely, to "hack something together" is to assemble something ingeniously but crudely. The OED gives "hacked" as contemporary US slang meaning 'annoyed or frustrated (ie "hacked off")'. Then the OED quotes Byte magazine as deriving the term from a Yiddish expression meaning someone who makes furniture with an axe — this bit of folk etymology seems unlikely, but it still maintains the edgy violence of the word.

104 The inability of large numbers of slashdotter's to accept the current normal meaning of the word, suggests that hackers are either often fairly inflexible, or have a tendency to disregard the uses of those who are not also hackers.

105 Hence, there has to be some suspicion of the egalitarianism of the hacker ethic. As a technical egalitarianism, it may only encourage the equality of "those who know what they are doing", and this might be a fairly limited subset of human activities: programming, fighting (in abstract), gaming, doing hard science, writing SF or fantasy perhaps. The rest of the world can go hang, while this particular elite gets on with the job.

106 Illustrating these different perceptions Hardy (1996) sees the initial ARPANET community as village-like and informal in its customs, but Vallee, who had contact with it, writes it was:

> 107 guarded by the puffery of high priests, the sanctity of passwords and confidential phone numbers, the ARPA Network thinks of itself as the very exclusive province of a few geniuses. (Vallee, 1982: 116)

108 Perhaps both reactions are possible and compatible. It has one appearance when viewed internally and another when viewed externally.

109 In an interview in *alphabetstreet*, Himanen stresses the difference between the hacker ethic and the Protestant ethic in respect to work:

> 110 The Protestant work ethic teaches us that no matter what your work consists of you should see it as your most important duty in life … In opposition to that, hackers devote their lives to doing something that is their passion, i.e., something that they find intrinsically interesting, exciting and joyous. They do something in which they can be creative, realize themselves, and constantly grow. This is totally different from the Protestant ethic (2001a).

111 In other words, Himanen sees devoting your life to work while being miserable as the Protestant ethic, while devoting your life to work and enjoying it as the hacker ethic. In both cases the vocation and the obsession are there. Both could fit with the features of the information society that we have discussed. We might argue that the Protestant Ethic at least suggests that there are things outside work (even holy and special things), whereas this seems beyond the hacker ethic entirely, you work whenever you can. No rest, no leisure, no contemplation. Life is a Regime of Total Work. In his book, Himanen tries to distinguish information age total work from hacker work, but he can only do this by ignoring the conditions that most knowledge workers live in (see Lessard and Baldwin). No one denies the elite have freedoms.

112

The hacker attitude to power is also quite strange. Apart from denying they are interested in power, while insisting that everyone else use their tools and their words, they seem unlikely to be able to recognise power, or resist power that is not of the type that they use. Levy reports that the supposedly free wheeling Hackers, who resisted locked doors, accepted security when faced with the anti-war protests which might disrupt their work (1994: 130-33). Similarly some of the Hacker "Community" seem to have rushed to help the FBI and CIA find ways of spying upon the general populace after September 11 (Ryle, 2003: 25-30).

113 In the light of this, it is not strange that Himanen, in the same interview, can argue that the Internet 'was not built by corporations and governments but by some passionate individuals who shared their creations freely with others'(2001b). This is a remarkable omission. The Internet was a result of a complex series of interactions between governments, academic bodies, the military, corporations, technicians and programmers. All of these groups had different objectives and interests. Remove one of them and things might have been considerably different, but no one of them was completely determinate of the outcome. The fact that hackers can proclaim they built the Internet all by themselves, emphasises the ease with which they can overlook the rest of society, which perhaps does not indicate a democratic attitude.

114 Himanen considers that the copyrighting of everything is a problem, but seems to think that because this is inefficient it will eventually fall down.

115 > If you make some great technological innovation, you must open it enough to get others join in within six months or otherwise you are left alone with outdated technology. So even if you just want to win the competition, the best strategy for your greedy goals is not closedness but openness. (2001b)

116 This has not been the case for Microsoft, but Himanen is suggesting political action is never necessary, leave it to the market (which simply means leave it to the powerful). But what if the copyright holders don't care, or do not see that openness is good for them (as when the patenting of natural phenomena is allowed because without it there would be no investment, or little profit), and everything collapses because no one can innovate?

117 Similarly the demands of the market may shape the long term behaviour of Hackers rather than the other way round. As Himanen points out Bill Gates was once a hacker, and so was Steve Jobs (2001a: 56). The Winner Take All model suggests that it is only an elite few hackers who will have the freedom and creative power that he celebrates, the rest will work with increasing demands on time, increasing surveillance, and increasing Taylorisation.

118 It is not clear how hacker concerns for freedom of information and privacy actually mesh up. Perhaps again it translates into privacy for those who know how, and openness for everyone else. I've heard programmers express total incomprehension about privacy fears, because we can all easily use PGP if it worries us. Here the "hacker" that they don't wish to know about surfaces again — the person who "liberates" information about you, without your consent. Again a fairly steep divide is suggested in practice between those who are programmers or those who can afford programmers, and everyone else. Is the "hacker ethic", then, a potential slaveowner's ethic? 'Others can do the other work we need to survive, ours is the work of citizens'.

119 In contrast to Himanen's arguments about freedom of information and the hacker ethic, we have argued that the birth of the information age is connected with the reestablishment of restrictions on the flow of information in science and in art through copyright, and the introduction of the copyrighting of naturally occurring phenomena like genes.

120 As we all know, universities and research institutes, which have previously been the home of this kind of free exchange of ideas are being remodelled on corporate lines, and becoming more dependent on corporations. Ideas which are generated in universities frequently become the property of the corporations who contribute some sponsorship to the projects, and they can no longer be freely circulated or even, in some cases, divulged. A monolithic ideology of corporatism, in which corporate business procedures are the only ways of organising, can be seen to be replacing any idea, or practice, that perhaps different kinds of organisation need different types of organising.

121

It is also not the case that the sharing of information between hackers is the same as providing information for everyone else. Often elites share things while unintentionally (at best) keeping them secret from others.

The Internet and Politics

122 The Internet has frequently been seen as potential transformer of politics. Often it has been seen as an anarchy. However, as any human group will seek order and convention in order to resolve communicative ambiguity, any anarchy is potentially an order evolving through conflict, rhetoric and action. In that sense, and in the sense that online communities do not often intersect with prevention of offline survival, Internet societies are largely free of permanent imposition. However this may not scale up to *offline* politics as is often argued — orders of magnitude with the involvement of location and survival may change things.

123 In the faceless world of pure text (or "pure mind"), it has been often held that an argument would stand or fall by its own virtues rather than by the social markers of those who enunciated it. Similarly, many have argued that Totalitarian States could not survive the coming of the Internet as information would be freely available and censorship (of the "truth") would not be viable. In other words the Internet has often been seen as a democratising force providing good information.

124 More subtly, Poster suggests that the Internet is 'underdetermined' because it is open, does 'not direct agents into clear paths', and encourages 'social construction and cultural creation'. It is 'overdetermined in the sense of being structured through multiple contradictory practices but is also underdetermined in the sense that it remains an invitation to a new imaginary' (Poster, 2001: 18). The Internet is transgressive because it enables instantaneous many to many communications, dislocates communication from the space of the nation, and accelerates 'postmodern' subjectivities (16).

125 However, Best and Kellner (2003) suggest that the experience of postmodern themes (entropy, chaos, indeterminacy, contingency, simulation, and hyperreality) could be a product of a society not in formation but in disintegration. It might also seem that this position is easily co-opted by the Corporate Right — no need to make any social change, or work for a fairer distribution of the proceeds of groupwork, let's just provide everyone with a computer.

126 More seriously, the idea that the Internet might encourage multiplicity might be inaccurate, more a way to sell postmodernism than a description of what happens. My own research of online subjectivity suggested that people were far more concerned about determining the real authenticity of the other, or uncovering their "truth", than they were in allowing them to play with multiple identities. Any observed multiplicity was regarded as an addition to a person's real nature, not real in itself — it was often regarded as automatically deceitful in some sense. Thus people quested for bodily information (particularly "correct gender"), and assumed that a person's words had one real meaning, which was easy to obtain, and that people could be inserted into fairly straightforward categories such as 'male' or 'female', 'Democrat' or 'Republican' etc.

127 Poster adds that there is 'the possibility of developing a level of global interconnectedness that is outside the aegis of both the nation-state and the transnational corporation' (Poster, 2001: 118). Leaving aside the issue of whether this actually gives any potential for further democracy as opposed to warring extremisms, the corporate or State sectors may have more power to regulate imaginings and interconnectedness than he assumes. It may be that the configuration allowed by the Internet is not that beneficial either, as revealed in actual usage. We cannot assume that interconnectedness produces dialogue. Communication is difficult and fraught with danger. Not all communication is *good* communication or particularly beneficial (Marshall, 2002).

128 Even a limited experience of Internet discussion groups shows that when political issues are invoked, groups tend to polarise, erupt into flame and abuse, and break apart with the loss of those who feel in the minority position. In addition, discussions evoking controversy can result in an inhibition of the issues in order to preserve peace and to avoid flooding the group "space" with a volume of messages greater than members can handle. It is rare to get discussion moving towards a position informed by all sides — it is much more common to see existing positions move further apart. Partly this problem arises from the ease of separation (no one has to cooperate), and partly it arises because the issue of who says something is important to how the message is interpreted.

129

Communication is always ambiguous, always a matter of interpretation, being resolved by the ways the message is given context, and this context involves identifying the participants. Online, when the only identity markers are widespread clichés or generalisations, and exceptions to the clichés can be unperceived, these markers may take on a strength even greater than they have offline, irrespective of their relevance to the discussion. In effect, the markers of class, social position, race, gender and political ideology become ways of providing context for interpretation, as are, perhaps in different ways, the effects of education, personal style and amount of time that a person has free to participate. Even if it is proposed that online people's presentation of their race/ethnicity or gender can be fluid, this does not imply the categories themselves are fluid. It may be that the common denial of the effects of these markers tends to give them more influence. If you argue that you are disadvantaged by such a marker, it tends to produce strident denials by those on the more favourable side of the divide, and the deniers become even less likely to listen to the person's arguments. I have witnessed this on many occasions, particularly around the effects of gender and race, even in places where you might expect people to hold leftish political views. [11]

130 Furthermore, the power basis of a society is not circumvented, as power still legitimates arguments, has greater possibility of physical retaliation, and allows greater spread and repetition of messages. Besides, Internet groups are not without power hierarchies. A power base can provide income for people to spread propaganda and to organise others to respond. Thus, corporations can sue dissenting websites or their ISPs, or plant messages disguised as discussion or recommendation. They can also start up discussion groups and pay people to both propagandise and entertain, and remove those who object too strongly. Groups can organise to protest against media who they feel distort their position, and the more power those groups have offline, the more this power will translate into suppression of discussion.

131 Message boards run by media organisations to facilitate political debate, can tend to ban topics or arguments they consider unsuitable as happened with the New York Times in the days after Sept 11 2001 (Bressers, 2003: 16). The more that maintaining the return rate of posters, or the 'community', is important, the more debate may tend to be suppressed — either voluntarily or by fiat.

132 We might define power ratios in terms of the ease of activation of particular pathways of response. In which case the established order will always tend to be dominant unless new pathways can be established (particularly if outside of the ken of the dominant order) or if older pathways become less stable, less efficient, or disrupted. In the case of the Internet it looks, at this moment, as if the Internet is strengthening the proclivities of corporate dominance faster than it might increase possible alternatives. Perhaps the only resistance, however disastrous, might be in fundamentalisms, which give an even stronger sense of group identity.

Conclusion

133 Partly the idea that the Internet increases democracy is supported by the idea that information is a good thing, but information is only "good" when it is as accurate as it can be, easy to recognise and easy to find. As I have argued, this is not the case. Validation often depends on some kind of existent authority, which depends on the power system. People with one set of views tend to accept reports supporting those views and be less concerned about the validity of these sources than they would be of opposing views — partly because they fit in with presuppositions, but partly because repetition counts as truth. The polarisation occurring in Internet debate is likely to heighten this acceptance and dismissal. Again the ultimate tendency would be to support the existing powers. Most cases in which these existing powers have been affected tend to be in those issues concerning engineering and technical competency in which a decisive and limited market has objected strenuously to a particular technical failing (such as the inaccurate arithmetic in one Intel processor) or support the spread of Linux. This effect does not seem to have translated, at this moment, into more widespread politics.

134 Although the Internet has been used with some effect to organise the movement for social justice and the anti-war movement in the US, it has not been able to compensate for either the type, or lack, of publicity given to its actions in the wider media. Those who know are those who already know. The easily organised mass protests against the War in Iraq did not stop people apparently supporting their governments and the war, when it formally began.

135

To some extent the lack of democratising effect with the Internet is to be expected as we live in a society of increasing inequality in power and wealth, in which the basis of that wealth is threatened by economic and social collapse, terrorism and ecological catastrophe. The response of the modern State has been to become more stringent in its regulations of lower classes, and less inclusive of them. This represents a change from the historic patterns of increasing inclusion, moving to attempt to compensate for power differences.

136 It is to be expected that the Internet would be largely immersed in this culture. This does not mean that it cannot become something other merely that it has many obstacles to overcome and is not inherently, of itself, radical. These obstacles include the political weakness of knowledge workers in the work place; the expansion of corporate power through extension of property regimes; the vulnerability of creative commons and free exchange to this expansion; the profusion of inaccurate data; and the ineffectiveness of the current ways of organising communication on the net to produce discussion.

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Notes

[1] This essay is grows out of my ethnography of an Internet mailing list and, what might be called, practical day to day politics.

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[2] Drucker attributes the term 'knowledge industry' to Fritz Machlup in 1962 (Drucker 1968: 263). It might be possible to suggest that business, or management, oriented writers have found the information society idea, extremely attractive — much more so than most academic ideas.

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[3] For example, Angell (2001), Dale Davidson, David and Rees-Mogg, William (1993, 1997). The number of business books saying the future is in the information economy is almost endless. The same kind of view seems to be taken by Castells who treats deregulation favourably (2001: 168, 172-3).

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[4] Summary based on Dyer-Witheford (1999: 22-6), Castells (1996: 61-2, 135, 154-5, 164, 217, 268). Nearly all of these points were made by Toffler in (1980).

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[5] In his explicitly economic essays Hume portrays the value of commodities as a complex interaction between 1) the quantity and type of the medium of exchange, 2) the labour "stored" in the product, and 3) the valuation of that labour by those dominant in that society. See 'Of Commerce', 'Of Money', 'Of Interest', 'Of Refinement in the Arts', in Hume (1987).

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[6] Much has been written about this, but for an interesting attempt to relate inequalities to geography and power within and between countries, see Beaverstock et al who write: 'These figures lead to the staggering conclusion that the top 0.25% of the world's population owns as much wealth as the other 99.75%'.

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[7] Poster himself quotes Scot on VOODOO, an automatic email monitor, which 'even discouraged irony and sarcasm', and Miller on Yahoo's attempt to regulate users.

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[8] Bagdikian (2000) and Alger (2000) argue that the media is now largely controlled by 10-12 international media corporations and this restricts the type of comment available. The same

columns get run in different newspapers. However Compaine, and Gomery (2000) argue there is more diversity and niche marketing.

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[9] The rightist commentators mentioned above, tend to focus on specific incidents and never ask how reports which might favour a more leftist, or critical, position might also not appear or be relegated to minor status.

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[10] The anthropological data and analysis of prestation economies is extensive. See Marshall (2000: chapter 9) for some analysis in the context of the Internet — especially in terms of existential issues.

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[11] See the discussions of Internet politics in action in Marshall (2000) especially chapters 10 and 11.

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