FCJMesh-002 On Networked Utopias and Speculative Futures 2/3

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This is the second of three rejoinders commissioned from the Authors ofIssue 20 Networked Utopias and Speculative Futures ahead of a launch and workshop based on the issue, the forthcoming 'Trolls CFP', and the future of publishing.

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Andrew authored FCJ-145 Temporal Utopianism and Global Information Networks Common Utopias.

When I talk to students' about the influence of new media technologies on our lives, I ask them to think about the motor car. In any of the countries that I have taught, thousands of people per year are killed in accidents and a further unknown number suffer the effects of pollution and the dislocation that the car brings. At the same time, the motor car also gives people the freedom to do things they might otherwise not do or that would take up too much of their time.

What, you might ask, has this to do with utopianism and new media technologies? My answer is that we must think of the influence of new media technologies in the same way that we do the motor car. No technology, including the motor car, is uniformly good or bad. In this, I agree with Wilken's (190) citing of El Hamamsy's (2011: 463) comment on the Arab Spring that technologies can be simultaneously used for repression and for resistance. But that need not deter activists from seeking to use technology to bring about progressive change; less progressive forces will continue to use the same technology for more malign ends regardless. This paradox is recognised by Loustau and Davis (136) who reported that Montreal activists' need to be visible in order to make their protest more effective also made them more vulnerable to government surveillance.

Mejias's (204) view is that activism should not take place on sites or through channels where capitalism is strong: "Instead, liberation technology seems to posit a worldview whereby technologies that emerge in the context of capitalism (precisely at places like Stanford) can be used by those wishing to challenge capitalism itself". In this view, a more credible way of bringing about progressive change would be to create new spaces free of the depredations of global capitalism. A number of ways in which this might be carried out are explored in this special issue, whether it be throughKnouf's hactivism (61),Frodsham's (89) locative media or DiSalvo's speculative design (109-121). Frodsham (91) seeks to foreground locative media's radical potential by conceptualising utopia "as a catalyst rather than end". In this sense, this type of virtual reality can create an alternative model to the present order rather than offer a definitive solution (Frodsham: 95). Given that viable alternatives to global neo-liberalism are thin on the ground, if locative media enables us to break this conceptual logjam then it will have provided a valuable service.

That said, all the contributors (myself included) to the issue found it difficult to present a credible, progressive alternative to the present global political arrangements. I think there are two reasons for this. The first is that even after four years' of the global financial crisis global capitalism seems scarcely less formidable than it was before the crisis unfolded. The second is that for all the criticism of global neo-liberalism, the most oft-cited alternatives, are, dare one say it, utopian forms of communism or anarchism which, to paraphraseBallard, Joyce and Muller's (8) editorial, encourage an endless deferring of utopia as an excuse for not engaging in any political action at all. But this approach does not rule out speculation on a better progressive future and it should be possible to fashion a social democratic alternative to the present order. This might not seem especially utopian: however, as most of the contributors have indicated, thinking of utopia as a 'blueprint' for a perfect society is flawed. Wilken's(197) recapitulation of Levitas's (1990) argument that only politics cantransform utopian desire into hope demonstrates that there is no alternative to the long hard slog of activism.

While many of the papers in this issue present credible arguments for the radical potential of the spaces created by new media technologies, like Meijas (204) andO'Dwyer & Doyle's(13) I am sceptical that these can somehow evade the pervasive control of global capitalism. As I argued in my paper, it is the *speed* of new media technologies that provides the best way of evading this control, if only temporarily. This is why tactical media, done properly, has such radical potential. To

be most effective, though, it must be in the service of political ideas similarly adaptable but which retain core, progressive ideals. This could, then, suggest a role for the 'spatial', in the guise of some of the experimental political initiatives that many of these papers so eloquently describe. But, as Meijas argues as well, it also means tackling the global communication network itself, especially where it enables elites to move at a faster pace than the vast majority of the citizens of this planet.

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