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Role of New Media —
From Peer-to-Peer to Protest

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Introduction

What does the concept of ‘new’ mean in relation to the technologies that encompass new media? Similar to the path of preceding technologies, new media has permeated many different social, political, and economic realms, transforming the way we carry out daily life. However, the emergence of new media has given rise to a set of assumptions surrounding technological advancement that overlook historical dimensions and ways of thinking about new technology. More specifically, the ‘newness’ of new media carries with it a renewed sense of optimism about technology and its ability to drive social change, revive political landscapes, and foster economic prosperity. One of the aims of this volume is to enlarge this dialogue by further illustrating the depth and scope of issues surrounding new media and the contexts in which new media technologies function.

The juxtaposition of new media and traditional media provides a useful point of analysis. New media is a broadly used term to describe digital communication technologies, with the most obvious and significant example being the

Internet. New media technologies are characterized by their dynamic, interactive capabilities, whereas forms of traditional or 'old' media are defined by their static, unidirectional nature. Traditional media include print mediums such as newspapers, magazines, and books, as well as film and television unless enhanced by digital or interactive technologies (Manovich, 2003). What also fundamentally distinguishes new media from old media is the ideologically loaded concept of 'new' – the perceived notion of social progress commonly attached to new technology.

Indeed, it is important to consider the ideological foundations of the term 'new' in new media. Martin Lister and Jon Dovey (2009) discuss the connotations of 'new' as derived from the modernist belief in social progress delivered by technology, particularly in Western societies. These long-standing beliefs are clearly reinstated in new media technologies as we continue to invest in them. However, this technological determinist approach, as discussed extensively by Leo Marx and Merritt Roe Smith (1994) can be problematic when we do not contextualize the emergence of new media technologies or the surrounding environments in which they function. Social, political, and economic factors must be considered when thinking about new media, its emergence, impacts, potential capabilities and limitations.

The purpose of this volume is to explore the complexities and wide range of issues surrounding new media. When we investigate new media in a variety of contexts, the positive and the adverse affects of new technologies become more apparent. Revealing the depth of issues surrounding new media also provides a wider, more holistic framework that allows us to analyze new media from a critical perspective. To begin doing this, we can examine the very theme of this issue: access, participation, and democratization in the new media landscape. These expressions are more commonly used in conjunction with each other, but what do they really mean in the context of new media?

At its most basic, access refers to the fact that a growing portion of the population has means to the Internet, or is in close proximity to the Internet with relatively low barriers to entry. Access also suggests that individuals can obtain many of the technical skills necessary to participate in various online or computer-based activities, leading to an overall increase in social and political involvement. However, concerns over the digital divide are still prominent, as many individuals do not have basic access to digital technologies or the Internet. In fact, despite attempts to broaden access, and the growing belief that Internet access should be a basic human right, many groups worldwide have been outright restricted from using the Internet in range of different political contexts. Exploring the dynamics of access and control here is central to this issue.

Participation is also a widely used term, especially in the context of new media technologies that enable peer-to-peer file sharing, and encourage users to actively create and distribute content. This participation is believed to have widened social spheres and revitalized political communication, addressing many problems associated with traditional media. Henry Jenkins (2006) was one of the forerunners to conceptualize this cultural shift and contrasts the benefits of new media with traditional culture industries. However, as a corollary to access, we must remember to ask, who is participating? What does participation require for the end-user? While participation is shown to have positive affects on the sharing of knowledge and the formation of online communities, who else may be benefitting from this participation?

Against the backdrop of recent events in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt, democratization is also a word more frequently bandied about by a myriad of groups, from media activists and journalists to academics and government. The intensification of Internet-based activism in the Middle East, along with the tactical use of digital technologies in strengthening civil society have illuminated the potential for

new media to serve as a valuable democratic tool. Through the lens of Western media, websites like Facebook and Twitter have been subject to conversations about the democratizing effect of social media in particular. While it is important to consider how the Internet may contribute to building stronger democracies, it is necessary to reflect on the circumstances under which new media technologies may be accessed and utilized or restricted and banned.

In light of the many popular discussions surrounding new media, our issue begins by looking at the potential for video games to serve as an effective platform for social change. T.J. Lavender's article, "Video Games as Change Agents — The Case of Homeless: It's No Game", explores the role of video games in changing social attitudes towards homeless people. In recent years, video games have become an increasingly popular tool for social activists to raise awareness about a variety of social causes, ranging from anti-smoking to the prevention of animal cruelty. While Lavender clearly believes in the potential for video games to impact social attitudes, he points to the fact that little has been done to examine their impact.

In response to this lack of research, Lavender created a video game, *Homeless: It's No Game*¹, employing an experimental methodology to quantify how effective video games are in changing social attitudes. This approach involved comparing the effect that video games versus traditional text narratives had in changing social attitudes towards homelessness. Lavender finds that his video game had a measurable positive persuasive effect on respondent's attitudes towards homelessness. Although he tempers his findings by suggesting that factors other than video games play a role in changing social attitudes towards homelessness,

¹ Available to view at <http://www.wetcoastgames.ca/homeless-its-no-game>

his essay makes it clear that video games do have the power to make strong and persistent impacts.

In addition to video games as an important tool of new media for social activism, online communities have also formed around many social and political causes. In her article, "Houses that Cry: Online Civic Participation in Post-Communist Romania", Laura Visan details the role that activism through online communities has played in post-Communist reconstruction in Romania. She examines the instrumental role of an online project, Houses that Cry, in the preservation of historical monuments in Bucharest. Using a theoretical framework couched in notions of civic participation and active citizenship, Visan details how a group of student architects were able to utilize an online community database to raise public awareness about the demolition of patrimony monuments. This online community transcended virtual boundaries by calling attention to the issue in public spaces, with the end goal of enacting legislation to protect these endangered historical buildings.

While Visan's research illustrates the value of shared knowledge among online communities, it is also crucial to explore the environments in which online communities gather. With the proliferation of social media sites that encourage creating and sharing, "Participatory Culture and the Hidden Costs of Sharing" explores this cultural trend, but investigates the potential harms of divulging vast amounts of personal information. The realities of online marketing, monitoring, and in some cases, disciplinary action of online activity are explored, pointing to the relationship between user-generated content applications and the gathering of large amounts of personal data. This information, collected through popular sites like Facebook, Myspace, and YouTube, is in turn being used in ways often unknown to the user. Using a theoretical framework of new media, power and participation, the benefits of participatory culture are not denounced, but rather, examined more closely in light of these growing issues of privacy and surveillance.

Similarly, Jaspreet Sandhu's essay, "A Burmese Case Study: Far from Inherent—Democracy, and the Internet", speaks to notions of access and control. In particular, her research shows how governments are able to use new media technologies in ways that restrict civil liberties. She details online activism during the Saffron Revolution of 2007, analyzing the effects of this activism on the Burmese population. Sandhu argues that Internet access is not widespread enough in Burma to be considered a democratizing agent, and points to the fact that a significant portion of the Burmese population lacks any kind of access to the Internet or had their access blocked by the government during the period of political turmoil. Further, she explains that only a small cross-section of the Burmese population had the technological capabilities to circumvent government censorship. This argument is extended, claiming that online activism, and more widely the Internet, is structured by class. She concludes by stating that socio-economic barriers and state intervention impede democratic visions of the Internet.

As we can see, Visan's research points to the political potential of online communities in Post-communist Romania, while Sandhu clearly questions the ability of new media technologies to reach and empower civil society as a whole. In our final piece, "Forever Blowing Bubbles: Deflating Web 2.0", Evan Lewis also examines the democratic potential of the Internet, and criticizes claims that Web 2.0 is a democratizing force. Stemming from the contentious work of Andrew Keen (2007), he argues that Web 2.0 is actually cultivating hyper individualism and eroding the role of experts within society. Furthermore, online discussions are segmented and compartmentalized because they predominantly occur between likeminded individuals, shrinking the scope of constructive debate. Based on the belief that business plans are being created around the democratizing hype of Web 2.0, he argues that Web 2.0 and its democratic tendencies are an unprofitable trend that will soon fall out of favour.

In particular, Lewis draws a close comparison between the rise of Web 2.0 and the dot-com bubble of early 1990s. He points to the heavy investment in Web 2.0 applications and companies with little to no return on the investment as a clear sign of Web 2.0's fleeting nature. To further enforce this point, he focuses on the abysmal profit returns that Web 2.0 giants like Facebook and YouTube have produced based on their main stream of Web 2.0 revenue, web-based advertising. His essay represents a stark divergence from those who believe in the potential of the Internet and it brings attention to an important point: Web 2.0 and the participatory culture that flows from it is a business at its core. Lewis concludes that without reasonable rates of profitability, free access to user-generated Web 2.0 will not be sustainable nor experience much longevity.

One of the core obstacles in reflecting on the role of new media is that "most people in modern societies have become habituated to the seeming power of advancing technology (and its products) to change the way they live. For them, indeed, the steady growth of that power is just another self-evident feature of modern life" (Marx and Roe Smith, 1994). In other words, while the development of new technology may seem an integral and natural part of life, the cultural, socio-economic, political, and ideological forces that impact the development and trajectory of new technology must always be considered. If we do not evaluate the impacts of technology this way, then we will continue to perpetuate a myopic understanding of new media. This volume offers a snapshot of some of the contending issues and ideas that surround the topic of access, participation, and democratization in the new media landscape, and remind us that it is important to continually ask wider questions about how we perceive the new technologies that shape our lives and the lives of those around us.

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