

# The degree zero of politics: virtual cultures and virtual social movements

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Good evening and thanks for coming to this presentation. The paper I will be reading tonight is a short extract from a book I am completing for Pluto Press provisionally entitled *Network culture: the cultural politics of cybernetic communications*. More specifically, the paper is loosely based on the last chapter of the book, which discusses the emergence of network-organised forms of political protests. An earlier version of this chapter was published in *Virtual Globalisation*, a collection of essays edited by David Holmes for the Routledge Advances in Sociology series. There are a few things that I should mention in order to explain the specific focus of this paper. A substantial part of the research material at the basis of the book is Internet-derived. In particular, I have used mailing lists as an entry point, and specifically a group of mailing lists that has historically been crucial to the “internal” debate on the cultural politics of cybernetic communications. The main lists I followed are *nettime* and *syndicate*, but I have also hopped in and out of several other lists, some of them short lived, some more enduring. What these lists have in common is that they are specifically concerned with the cultural and political uses of the medium. I am interested in how cybernetic communications in a networked mode has been conceptualised and debated in some of these clusters of communication, these mailing lists, but also websites and other printed publications that are specifically concerned with the cultural politics of cybernetic communications.

Mainly, however, I have chosen, mailing lists as an entry-point. I think that mailing lists are crucial constituent moments within the development of virtual social movements. Within mailing lists the generalised connectivity that opposes the users to the magmatic abundance of Internet material starts acquiring a certain type of organisation, although, as appropriate to a “space of flows”, a fluid one. Mailing lists organise the use (the actualisation) of Internet material by coupling the circulation of information with the circulation of interpretation and evaluation. They are one of the most powerful ways through which the confusing, dizzying abundance of information and data on the Internet is organised and filtered to singular Internet users.

A brief description might contribute to clarify the issue. Mailing lists, of which exist different types on the Internet, are inherently temporary: they might run for a long time, but the decision to stop them can be taken at any time. They are usually focused on specific topics, accepting subscribers either on a limited or unlimited basis. Mailing lists might go through very active phases and then die out; or be regular, limited updates streaming through one’s e-mail account; they might

be moderated or unmoderated; mainly dedicated to spread information or to discuss specific topics; local, national or global. Crossposting across mailing lists is common, so that a network of messages and communication runs continuously among different users, changing according to the time and topicality. For example the cross-posting between American and Western European lists with Eastern Europe increased exponentially during the Kosovo War creating what McKenzie Wark has called “a new web of witnessing”, but many of the more politicised mailing lists are consistently crossed by messages from South America or the Far East.

Mailing lists are also important, alternative search engines, directing participants towards selected web-sites for in-depth reports or video- and audio-streaming in the occasion of specific events. Those participants who are more actively involved might supplement their online conversations by meeting face-to-face in regular or occasional meetings; or use mobile or fixed telephony to set up meetings or organise demonstrations. Participants to these exchanges might be individuals who are relatively disconnected from the majority of the other subscribers or might move within physical networks where regular face-to-face contact cements a group belonging. That is they might or might not belong to local or global groups; they might feed information or mostly just absorb it; they might be organisers of specific events or only occasional participants. However, mailing lists should not be seen in isolation but as part of a larger matrix of communication that includes the use of web-sites, mobile telephones, audio and video-streaming, tapes, leafleting, publishing and so on.

Mailing lists present virtual social movements with the possibility to continuously formulate and reformulate the types of problems they wish to address on the basis of collectively produced information. They connect individuals and groups to each other but also disconnect them from the totality of Internet users in order to focus on specific issues. They introduce users to a variety of opinions and information whilst also filtering and re-arranging for them the chaotic abundance of available information on the Internet.

What is the status of this online material in the context of my research? One thing I am concerned not to do is to look at the results of this work of monitoring, reading and participating simply in terms of “discursive constructions”. The notion of discourse, in fact, as it has become widely used within some sectors of cultural studies, implies that reality is constructed by and through language. Language is understood as a signifying system, or a system of signs, that divides and orders the world of objects for human understanding and activity. From this perspective, then, all linguistic expression is a mediation that constructs different types of reality. It could appear to some, then, as the best obvious strategy to deal with this material.

However, I have chosen to use this material in a different way, not as a representation but as the production of a cultural and political practice which is not limited to the reproduction of signs. This is part of an effort throughout the book to produce a non-representational and non-representative analysis of the Internet. This rejection of a representational method of cultural analysis does not aim to produce an unmediated truth on Internet cultures. On the contrary it is about the conscious choice of looking at Internet debates at the level of a specific

cultural and political engagement with the medium, the types of communication that it enables and its relationship with the larger cultural context of late capitalist societies. In this sense, I am interested in how the Internet materialises what Pierre Lévy has described as a “collective intelligence” and Paolo Virno, following Marx a “general intellect”, a collective assemblage of bodies and machines where connectivity implies the release of a surplus value of potential.

What I aim to do in the book is to follow the features of these practices and engage with them at a conceptual level, relating them to issues debated in cultural and media studies. This means that within this paper I will not attempt an all-encompassing analysis of contemporary networked social movements. I will rather concentrate on those parts of these cultural and political practices that seem to be concerned more specifically with the media and their role in the constitution of different types of political cultures.

## **Old Media/New Media**

I will start with mainstream media, and television, then. In discussions about the potential of the Internet for a new type of cultural politics and new types of political participation, I have found an insistent and virulent rejection of the world of mainstream media, and in particular of television. This rejection of television spans even the ideological barriers that still oppose different groups with different types of investment in the medium. In 1994, Howard Rheingold articulated this rejection clearly in his bestseller *The Virtual Community*, denouncing the “commercial mass media, led by broadcast television, [who] have polluted with barrages of flashy, phony, often violent imagery a public sphere that once included a large component of reading, writing, and rational discourse.” These sentiments were widely shared among early net-pioneers who thought about the Internet as the anti-television, a medium potentially capable of establishing a true realm of communicative action free from corporate control and the mediation of established entertainment conglomerates.

This point was also reiterated with a strong note of caution by the droves of media activists that quite early on, latched on to the political potential of the new medium. Media activists have always been very wary of the easy enthusiasm of early Internet debate, in as much as they bore the scars of the limited impact of cable TV, another participatory medium at whose door many hopes had been laid in the eighties. The postings of these veterans of the media wars are full of warnings about the capacity of capitalist culture to absorb dissent and recuperate within itself new technological and cultural spaces. Their comments can often be heard on these mailing lists, recapitulating for younger users the disillusionment with the notion that a medium is inherently revolutionary or that political struggle can be conducted simply through the production of signs of dissent. Still, in spite of their reservations, they too insist on the centrality of computer-mediated communication in relation to new forms of social struggle. Whatever their level of enthusiasm for the new medium, a strong opposition to mainstream media is common among networked activists. The opposition is especially foregrounded at every instance of mass mobilisation. In this sense, the antagonism between “old media” and “new media” is not simply a discursive device that is meant to mark a break and provide the new with an identity. On the contrary, networked social

movements live the interface with mainstream media as a confrontation between two incompatible modes of communication. In this sense, the encounter between the Net and the Set manifests itself again and again as a conflict between two different types of cultural forces, the culture of representation and the spectacle and the culture of participation and virtuality.

As I mentioned before, this dynamic becomes very evident during the moments of mass political protests, more recently during the series of demonstrations that took place all around the globe between 1999 and 2001. I observed more closely in particular the protests of Seattle and those of Genoa. It is not by chance that in both cases it was the Indymedia movement of independent news reporting that came to the fore. The Indymedia movement is an attempt to establish an “open” and “direct” way of reporting news. It was started in Seattle at the end 1999 as an alternative to what was perceived as the biased coverage of mainstream media. The Indymedia movement has grown in the last two years, with more sites springing up in location other than the United States. During the days of the protest, both the indymedia sites and the mailing lists were filled with accusations against the capacity of television and the mainstream press to obliterate both the real issues of police brutality and the larger context for the protests. On the other side, even potentially sympathetic mainstream media, such as *The Guardian* or *Channel 4* in Britain, were puzzled. What kind of movement was a movement with no signs and no consensus? This relationship of “incommunicability” between these two types of media culture should not be seen as an indisputable fact. I am not claiming here, although this claim can be found in a large number of postings, that mainstream media, and especially television, can be limited to their function of ideological state apparatuses or/even to that of producers of interchangeable signs of reality. Personally I think that the hostility of virtual social movements to television is justified by the latter’s coverage of the events, but I do not think that this coverage exhausts the potential of television itself. In a way, the original mass media have played an important part in engendering the cultural and social affinities between different groups that enable us today to have such movements at all (from the spectacle of Tien Na Men to the global youth cultures of *MTV*). That is virtual social movements would not exist without the process of cultural globalisation to which media such as television have been crucial.

I am more interested, then, in how this hostility is related more than to the medium of television itself to a larger rejection of “spectacular” and “representative” politics, and a return to a “degree zero” in relation to the question: where does power (puissance or posse) come from? And how should power, defined as the expression of a collective will from below, be expressed as a political/cultural practice? In this sense, the puzzlement of TV journalists at a “movement with no signs” is an acknowledgment of this cultural and political divergence. Should politics be about the rational debate between a limited multiplicity of clearly articulated perspectives that confront each other in the nominally “neutral” public sphere which television (ideally) sets itself up to be? Or should politics be about the emergence of singularised and yet collective levels of engagement with practice, taking place below and above the level of representative, mediated communication (between electors and MPs or between audiences and producers)? In this sense, then, this rejection can also be seen as a rejection of a whole notion of “counter-hegemonic” politics, that is the notion that a coalition of social classes should be able to find its identity under the sign of a single or hegemonic signifier. Thus if

some posters join mainstream media in accusing the movement of its incapacity to produce a coherent position that can be unequivocally conveyed through the powerful megaphone of mainstream media, others reject the notion that such a unity is needed or justified. Problems of definition and labelling in fact haunt these debates in many ways. Calls for political unity under a single signifier are regularly opposed by those claiming that this unrepresentable diversity is the strength of such movements. The political content of networked social movements, then, should be found not only in the specific proposals that are put forwards, but also in (as Nik put it in one of his postings) “the endless wealth of examples of 'theory-in-practice', that is the autonomous, anti-hierarchical, and networked protest affinity groups - from their decision making structures to the carnival they introduce into the protests and revolutionary actions.” Nik concludes, in a tone that should be familiar to us by now: “There is a difference between having alternatives and having the mass of status quo media acknowledge them.” The alternatives, then, are identified not only with “concrete proposals”, but also with the mode of communication and organisation itself, as it spills in and out of the actual use of network technologies as such.

## **Virtuality and constituent power**

I would like to start this last part of the talk with two quotes, one by the Critical Art Ensemble and another by Austin-based sociologist Harry Cleaver. The Critical Art Ensemble are a collective of radical artists and activists who have widely published on the subject and who also maintain a large Internet presence, as posters and activists. Harry Cleaver is the author of *Reading Capital Politically*, and a well known theorist of social movements from an “autonomist” perspective. Both essays were widely circulated in the network of mailing lists. These two quotes are meant to provide a bridge to outline the main argument of this paper: that networked social movements can be accurately called “virtual” because they express a return to the “virtuality” of collective politics, a return to a degree zero of politics which insistently asks the question: where does power come from? And how should it express itself?

In a posting entitled “Electronic Civil Disobedience, Simulation, and the Public Sphere”, the CAE re-propose the thesis that the spectacle of mass disobedience, that worked well in the sixties, is no longer an adequate vector for spreading political dissent. Mainstream media are said to be bankrolled and supported by capitalist organisations and the saturation of our visual culture is said to have reached such a point that it hardly registers anything. (Unless, that is, one is willing to defy the simulation machine by going to the extremes of symbolic and material violence of which September 11 was a clear instance.) The only available vector for the production of a different cultural politics lies for the CAE in the constitution of “decentralised flows of micro-organisations” that challenge network societies on their own space (cyberspace). The absence of a unitary purpose is, then an advantage: “conflicts arising from the diversity of the cells would function as a strength rather than a weakness; this diversity would produce a dialogue between a variety of becomings that would resist bureaucratic structures as well as provide a space for happy accidents and breakthrough inventions”.

Harry Cleaver has similarly described the features of virtual activism as constituting what he calls a “hydrosphere”, a fluid space “changing constantly and only momentarily forming those solidified moments we call ‘organizations’. Such moments are constantly eroded by the shifting currents surrounding them so that they are repeatedly melted back into the flow itself.” He prefers the notion of a “hydrosphere” to that of the net in as much as the latter seems to him to be more appropriate to global organisations such as the NGOs that rely on stable nodes organised with a view to act on specific issues. Virtual social movements, on the other hand, seem to him to exceed the network because of the intrinsic mobility of their elements, connected together by a multiplicity of communication channels, converging and diverging in mobile configurations.

What seems to me to be interesting in these statements is not so much that they provide *the* answer to the virtual activists' attempt to formulate the features of a non-spectacularised and non-representational politics. It seems to me rather that they point at an attempt to engage the nature of the “plane of composition” of political activity, that is to initiate a return to a “degree zero” of politics as such. I would like to suggest that this return to this “degree zero” can be also understood as a virtualisation. Pierre Lévy, following Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, has described “virtualisation” as follows:

Virtualisation is not a derealization (the transformation of reality into a collection of possibles) but a change of identity, a displacement of the center of ontological gravity of the object considered. Rather than being defined principally through its actuality (a solution), the entity now finds its essential consistency within a problematic field. The virtualization of a given entity consists in determining the general questions to which it responds, in mutating the entity in the direction of this question and redefining the initial actuality as the response to a specific question. (Pierre Lévy, *Becoming Virtual*, 26)

Networked social movements can thus be defined as “virtual” not because they operate within a “virtual” that is technologically mediated, disembodied, less-than-real context. They are rather virtual in the sense described by Lévy, they ask the question of where power comes from as if returning to a degree zero. Degree zero does not imply a ground, that is an origin, but a full potentiality, like that of the the cytoplasmic egg, that needs to be actualised, to find its expression. They are engaged with the venerable and old question of the nature of “constituent power”. This is the question to which historically all grassroots movements return at every instances of a “crisis” of governmentality. In this case, the crisis of governmentality is related to the uneven unfolding of processes of cultural, economic and political globalisation, of which the Internet itself has been a carrier. As usual with this type of things, we are not in the presence of an absolute break, but of an “eternal return”. Since every return implies a difference, however, I would argue that this difference, in this case is also inflected by the medium, by the collective engagement with the medium as the plane in which a collective cultural politics of the twenty-first century unfolds. I would like now for a moment to return to academic discussions of the cultural potential of cybernetic communication in a networked mode. In the *Rise of the Network Society*, Manuel Castells has argued that computer-mediated communications interacts with cultural globalisation at two levels: at one level, it produces a common time-space continuum, that by its nature is characterised by an extreme form of time-space compression. He has argued that in network society, the constraints of time disappear, thus engendering a timeless time, while at the same time the solidity of space and its

borders are undermined by flows (of capital, signs, and people). At the same time, however, he also argues that the constitution of such a timeless space of flows causes a severance of the link between the wired minorities and the disconnected majorities. Thus computer-mediated communication potentially both connects (a minority) and disconnects (this minority from the majority of impoverished inhabitants of this planet). How does this influential understanding of cybernetic communication relate to the crisis that I have described and its subsequent return to the question: where does power come from? And how should it express itself? In one sense, the potentially timeless space of flows is forcefully re-connected, at the level of debates and practices, to the supposedly disconnected and excluded world of locality. Thus virtual social movements keep injecting the passions of the local and supposedly disconnected into the timeless and disconnected global. From the banal form of the cross-posting of petitions and alerts, to the continuous circulation of information about local struggles (from Colombia to Zimbabwe), virtual social movements continuously re-connect that which is separated (by space, time, limited information in the mainstream media etc). But there is also another side to this process. This other side is expressed by the relation of these movements to the virtual plane of computer-mediated communications as such, a virtual plane that expresses a potential of the medium to become, rather than simply to be and produce effects. The virtual plane that these collective debates explore in their attempts to formulate such answers is again and again that of the medium itself, the Internet understood not as a fixed technological medium, but as a mode of communications that is activated by a technical machine.

If the degree zero of politics, as Sylvie Lotynger put it in a different context, is “the desire to allow differences to deepen at the base without synthesising them from above, to stress similar attitudes without imposing a general line, to allow points to co-exist side by side”, then how is this desire actualised within a medium that permits it at a technical level? After all, isn't the Internet the medium of the ultimate disappearance of the mass, the political subject of modernity? If there is a mass on the Internet, as David Teztloff has put it, it is “scattered across the multiple nodes of the Net”.

I am not implying here that the Internet embodies this degree zero of politics or that as a medium it allows the regeneration of a public sphere or any such like. What I am arguing is that these groups' engagement with the medium is informed by an intuition. The intuition is that such degree zero, as it can be glimpsed at some level through the Internet itself, is not some kind of easy utopia, where differences are allowed to co-exist or go their separate ways if they want to. On the contrary, it is the ways in which the Internet allows such processes to take place that reveals the hard work that such scattering implies. This scattering, this tendency to disconnect and separate, coupled with that of connecting and joining, presents different possible lines of actualisation: it can produce virtual ghettos, amplify solipsism, reproduce old forms of power and so on. However, it also offers the potential for the production of a different type of politics, where the capacity to connect and disconnect is used productively as a kind of degree zero to which it is important to return and relate to. Such capacity in fact is in itself not so much neutral as not immediately given. Connectivity allows for difficult or easy communications, for long term commitments and fleeting affairs, it is crossed by conflicts, gives no guarantees of success and possesses a weird kind of memory, collective, fleeting and yet durable. It demands then a sustained effort.

To conclude this brief excursion, I would like to suggest that this collective production of a cultural practice is worthy of rigorous engagement by those of us who work in the scholarly traditions of the university. This rigorous engagement implies not only an obvious caution about simplistically celebratory claims. As scholars, we are almost genetically endowed with exceptionally long and structured memories and we know that things are never simple. On the other hand, I also think that we can learn a few things from the collective intelligence of these virtual social movements. After all they are also an experiment in, among many other things, the collective production of an ethical globalisation, culturally, politically, and economically. And we are in some need of it.