

Electronic Counterpower and Collective Action



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The founders of America knew well about factions and structured the Constitution to balance them, so that none would have unfair control over the political process. But we now have a conservative political faction that has colluded with the owners of mass media to influence the beliefs of voters. Some of the owners are part of the political faction. As one result, for example, polls show that a majority, or close to it, of Americans still believe that weapons of mass destruction were discovered in Iraq and that Iraqis were the hijackers on September 11. At the same time, media ownership has consolidated, financially contributing immensely to the conservative faction, and is given preferential economic treatment by that faction (chapter 30). As a result, we have a vicious circle of corruption and influence that subverts the right of American citizens to be informed. The process is extremely dangerous to democracy.

One way to begin to reverse this dangerous process is to fulfill the potential of what Eli Pariser (chapter 31) calls “multilateral communications.” My phrase is “many-to-many media.” Such media can be utilized to advocate for and organize around the foreign, economic, domestic, and media policy alternatives set out in this book.

Because the potential of Internet-based media to offer a significant counterpower to corporate mass media has only recently begun to be demonstrated, it is not yet clear whether Internet media will pose a significant challenge. But I think it can. Technically, every desktop and now every pocket that has an Internet-enabled device is potentially a globally reachable printing press, broadcasting station, place of assembly, and organizing tool. That has enormous potential power.

However, knowledge about how to use this potential effectively has been slow to catch on. The potential has been there for quite awhile. It is only recently that we have begun to see movements like MoveOn.org, and Mediareform.net organize and mobilize counterpower and collective action with skill and demonstrable impact. We are beginning to see acceleration in the evolution of the technologies, the power they possess, and the methodologies for using that power.

I see three arenas for potential leverage: alternative news media, the public sphere, and collective action. I want to concentrate on collective action, so I'm going to move quickly through the first two areas. But I think, in the long term, the first two also are very important.

ALTERNATIVE NEWS MEDIA

Alternative news sources to the mass media, to what people see on television and hear on the radio and read in the newspapers, have been touted for quite awhile. But now we are seeing millions of people circulating stories personally via e-mail, broadcasting stories via weblogs, and even reporting from the streets via mobile blogging. In some parts of the world, we're seeing a kind of citizen journalism emerging. There is something called *Ohmynews* in Korea that's a little bit like citizen journalism.

A weblog, of course, is simply a web page that a person can easily update and publish to the world. Weblogs (or "blogs") lower the barrier to publishing on the web. There are over a million blogs now. That number probably will reach into the tens of millions soon, through mass efforts by AOL and Google to expand the phenomenon.

The simplicity of weblogging technology is important. When you make a particular medium or technology a little simpler to use, sometimes you can have a dramatic effect. For example, the Internet was around for a while before the web came along, with the web giving it a visual interface. You could do everything that you can now do on the web, more or less, with the Internet, but you had to kind of be a computer geek and enter arcane commands. Now you can point and click. The mass media still reach most people most of the time and are the most effective way of getting a message across. Yet for a long time mass media were the only source, and now this is no longer the case.

In corporate mainstream media, the priority is on stories that maximize profits and returns to stockholders. Bloggers are not motivated by profits. In no small part, they are motivated by their political beliefs.

Bloggers also have the potential to become a movement of fact checkers, millions of people who can go out, do the research and legwork on mass media stories, and expose lies and propaganda. A good example of how this could work is Ambassador Joseph Wilson's disclosure that there were no African uranium sales to Iraq (chapter 14). There were many people in the intelligence community who knew that stories of such sales were lies. Had the blogging community been better organized on such an issue, as might be possible in the future, Ambassador Wilson could have been assisted in his disclosures, in response to which his wife was revealed by conservatives as a Central Intelligence Agency agent, thereby compromising American intelligence operations against terrorism.

The constant barrage of propaganda on talk radio, talk television, and the mass media can be countered, to some degree, by the formulation of “rapid-reaction weblogging teams.” If effectively mobilized to detect and fight back against propaganda, weblogging could affect national media and national policy.

As alternative, more democratized, web-based media begin to compete with corporate mass media, there are problems to face. An obvious dilemma is quality control. How to sort out misinformation and disinformation? This is a problem consumers of mass media (including the *New York Times*) also face. Can alternative media create quality controls that would better solve the problem and so generate an advantage compared to mass media?

Another problem is literacy in how to consume and create alternative news. The level of literacy presently is low and unevenly distributed. But this can be remedied, as I will discuss below.

Potentially the greatest problem is monopoly ownership and government surveillance. The same power and corporate elite who control mainstream media could try to neutralize the democratizing effect of blogging. Control and censorship of the Internet is possible—one can imagine new provisions in a new Patriot Act. Here is where the advocacy spearheaded by Robert McChesney and John Nichols (chapter 30) is essential. The heat must be kept on the Federal Communications Commission, for example, and the scope of citizen regulatory concern must be ever-widened and enhanced.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The second arena for potential leverage is the public sphere. By the public sphere, I mean public debate on the issues. As Robert McChesney and John Nichols have described, public discourse has been eroded severely by the mass media. Very few people have the power to dictate what very many people see, hear, and believe is happening in the world. But the public sphere is very much alive in chat rooms, listservs, message boards, and weblogs—particularly in weblogs where people of different political stripes link to those with whom they disagree. We are seeing at least some kind of two-way traffic between people or factions who hold very different views. Although the discussions online about political issues are extremely lively, they are very undisciplined and subject to disruption, particularly because the nature of the medium masks the kind of intentionality that is conveyed by body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions. Incivility can often swamp these discussions.

The art of political debate among citizens has been debased, but it certainly is not dead. Online media are a place where political debate can happen now and in the future. But, again, literacy about the way to argue online and the importance of civility in the public sphere is not widespread or evenly distributed.

COLLECTIVE ACTION: DEMONSTRATIONS

I wrote *Smart Mobs* because I noticed, worldwide, that we are reaching a kind of threshold. That threshold has been reached before—with the printing press, telephone, television, and other technologies that have enabled people to organize collective action in ways and on scales not previously possible. I see this as a convergence of the availability of computation. Today's threshold is based on the availability of mobile telephones. There are many more mobile telephones than personal computers in the world, and there will be more still in the future. Increasingly, those mobile phones are linked to the Internet. So we're seeing a convergence of mobile media, computation, and the Internet. In the long run, this is a significant hybrid, and collective action is one of its unique characteristics.

In terms of alternatives to policy since September 11, the best examples of mobile communications occurred as part of the worldwide demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq. As with the mobile communication swarming tactics during the Seattle anti-World Trade Organization demonstrations in 1999, the self-organizing capabilities of the Internet and the mobile phone allowed demonstrators against the war in Iraq to assemble quickly and well. We saw an advance in the literacy of the users. For example, the BBC set up a web site in which people could, from their telephones, take pictures of the huge demonstrations in London and elsewhere. The photos were sent to the BBC, which then posted them. This was, literally, street-level reporting, the beginning of an alternative to CNN. With the price of high-quality digital video dropping, I think we have the possibility of anti-American demonstration videos and Rodney King beating videos made everywhere and then streamed to the Internet.

Earlier, in Manila, the presidency of Joseph Estrada was accused of corruption. There were hearings in the Philippine legislature. Everyone in the Philippines watched on television, much as the Watergate hearings were watched in America. When some legislators associated with Estrada shut down the hearings, tens of thousands of people hit the streets, all of them wearing black. Within a couple of days, millions of people demonstrated in the same place that the demonstrations against the Marcos regime had happened. All of this was organized by text messaging. People sent text messages to friends, who then forwarded the text message to everyone in their telephone address books. The message went out, "Go to Esda [the name of the square where people gathered] and wear black." Tens of millions of messages circulated. There is potential, of course, again, for misinformation and disinformation in this sphere and for demonstrations that are not peaceful and not democratic. But this one was peaceful, it was democratic, and it did strongly contribute to the fall of the Estrada regime.

In Venezuela, during the coup against Hugo Chavez and the countercoup, the organizers of the first coup had the mass media on their side. According to my in-

formants, every twenty minutes television and radio would announce: “Go demonstrate.” The counterdemonstrators, the pro-Chavez demonstrators, had only their mobile telephones, text messages, and e-mail to organize, and they did so effectively.

In terms of demonstrations, we are seeing a classic arms race between authorities and demonstrators. News is being transmitted that you can’t find in mainstream media. That news may come from primary sources on the street. It may come from media outside the United States, which may well have a different point of view than American media, as Julian Borger reminds us in chapter 19. The point is that a real alternative now exists.

Right now, this is very uncontrolled, emergent behavior, the result of many millions of people using these tools in terms of photos, videos, and words.

COLLECTIVE ACTION: ELECTIONS

Demonstrations are the most dramatic form of collective action, but the use of these technologies in the electoral process is more important. Campaign aides already can be seen with a Blackberry two-way e-mail device in one hand and a cell phone in the other hand. To me, that begins to signify a sophisticated use of the technology to coordinate get-out-the-vote strategies and tactics. Certainly, in the days and hours before an election, the ability to effectively mobilize and deploy get-out-the-vote forces in the streets is very important. Up-to-date information that you can broadcast and update via the Internet is important, as is the availability of that information, at the right time and in the right place, through mobile telephones.

In the election in Korea not long ago, the man who eventually won, now President Roh, was behind in the polls a few days before the vote. Roh’s supporters turned to *Ohmynews*, a kind of citizen news. People submit stories through the Internet and then vote on which stories are placed prominently. It is very popular with the young cyber generation, who were demonstrating against the American presence in Korea. Using *Ohmynews*, the Internet, and text messaging, they organized a get-out-the-vote surge in the last couple of days that made the difference. The organizers were the first people the new president thanked after he was elected.

In America, MoveOn.org also has organized major breakthroughs, as Eli Pariser has discussed in chapter 31, and I would hope that MoveOn.org can build on mobile communications for collective, elective action in the future.

In addition, we also have seen the political campaigns demonstrate the use of MeetUp.com. That is a classic example of collective action. MeetUp.com is a web site where people who want to can meet face to face around a particular interest or issue. Even if they don’t know each other or know who each other are, they can meet. Some candidates have used MeetUp.com to self-organize face-to-face meetings of their supporters. Campaigns also have used the web to collect donations from individuals—small

donations from many people used in support of grassroots insurgency. When this fundraising proved successful, the mass media picked it up.

As they now exist, the two major political parties in America already have centralized organizing, plus a kind of hierarchical, decentralized organizing. But a self-organized, decentralized organizing is something new, and it has a lot of potential for giving voices to people who are not necessarily represented by the voices of the orthodoxy.

In addition, there are sites that I have not seen used as much as, say, MeetUp.com. There's Upoc.com. You can use Upoc.com to get people to sign up for the equivalent of a listserv, or a mailing list for mobile phones. I predict that somebody—I think Jerry Falwell is a good candidate for the first person—is going to organize his constituency so that he can get them into an Upoc.com-type list. He then will send out volumes of text messages organizing people to call and fax Congress around a particular issue on the eve of votes. I haven't really seen lobbying on a mass scale using mobile telephones yet. Americans are just beginning to take up texting the way they have elsewhere in the world. But I think we will soon see much more widespread use of text messages on mobile phones.

Spamming millions of people is not as effective, by far, as getting every one of your constituents to send a message on an issue to every one of the people in their address books—that is, to everyone in their social network. It's something that can't be used too often, but it is a potential untapped power.

I think the critical uncertainty in using these media for collective action is education. How can you trust the messages that you've received? How can you know whether to trust a group that wants you to join?

A MULTITUDE OF CITIZEN JOURNALISTS AND ACTIVISTS

We need to facilitate a multitude of citizen journalist-activists. Local and national nonprofit institutions need to train citizens in investigative journalism, fact checking, blogging technology, mobile phone technology linked to the Internet, the *Ohmynews* model in Korea, collective action, the organization of peaceful demonstrations, the organization of election campaigns, and the implementation of get-out-the-vote drives for citizens who support the kinds of alternative policies in this book. How-to handbooks for best practices need development and electronic distribution. More services are necessary that enable more people to form groups on-line. Nationwide, face-to-face workshops need to proliferate and systematically teach people how to use the electronic tools available. Those tools should be integrated into ongoing, populist face-to-face meetings, like Jim Hightower's Rolling Thunder Tour (chapter 35) and the Wellstone forums discussed by Jeff Faux (chapter 20).

Hybrid technology and enlightened policy, based on the lessons of science and history, must synthesize. Existing successful venues of protest and action like MoveOn.org and Mediareform.net must spearhead a drive to prevent corporate media and the American conservative power elite from blocking such a synthesis of technology, democracy, policy, and grassroots action. All of these strategies can be implemented inexpensively to create change.

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