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## Cooptation and Cooperation: Institutional Exemplars of Democratic Internet Technology

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### Recommended Citation

Pickard, V. (2008). Cooptation and Cooperation: Institutional Exemplars of Democratic Internet Technology. *New Media & Society*, 10 (4), 625-645. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444808093734>

Note: At the time of publication, author Victor Pickard was affiliated with the University of Illinois. Currently, he is a faculty member at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

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## Abstract

This article examines how online political groups are co-opting internet technology from commercial interests to amplify various cooperative processes. After formulating a framework for praxis-based democratic theories of technology, I select four internet-based groups as institutional exemplars for analysis: Democratic Underground, Free Republic, Indymedia, and Move On. These groups implement distinct types of democratic applications of internet technology and embody specific strands of democratic theory. I conclude by commenting on the direction of internet-based democratic practices, their political efficacy in terms of strategy and tactics, and how they figure within US political culture.

## Keywords

cyber activism, democratic theory, indymedia, internet activism, online political action, technology studies

## Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## Comments

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# Cooptation and cooperation: institutional exemplars of democratic internet technology

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## Abstract

This article examines how online political groups are co-opting internet technology from commercial interests to amplify various cooperative processes. After formulating a framework for praxis-based democratic theories of technology, I select four internet-based groups as institutional exemplars for analysis: Democratic Underground, Free Republic, Indymedia, and Move On. These groups implement distinct types of democratic applications of internet technology and embody specific strands of democratic theory. I conclude by commenting on the direction of internet-based democratic practices, their political efficacy in terms of strategy and tactics, and how they figure within US political culture.

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Debates about the commercialism currently infusing the internet bring together two bodies of otherwise disparate scholarship: internet activism and internet policy research. These literatures are united around a central paradox; as neoliberal logic increasingly structures the internet, new possibilities for resistance multiply. We see evidence for this resistance everywhere on the internet, from subversive hackers culture-jamming corporate symbols, to political blogs taking down public figures. With each new corporate website, there are new targets and new vulnerabilities. And yet, while each day witnesses the birth of new political blogs adding to a vibrant political discourse, evidence accumulates that our internet system is being restructured along corporate lines, from the privatization of internet culture to the corporate gate keeping of internet content. Hence, there are those who mourn the lost promise of the internet, and others who celebrate new democratic forms unleashed by the creative deployment of new internet technologies. This tension animates trenchant scholarship on either side of the equation. Indeed, many scholars agree with both analyses and merely differ over emphases. What often gets lost in the tradeoffs between stressing either internet structure or internet-enabled agency, however, is a synthesis that generates useful theoretical models clarifying how political groups operate within the interstices of an increasingly commercialized internet. In particular, the democratic theory embodied by these political actions is frequently neglected altogether in existing scholarship.

Despite commercial encroachment, internet technology has opened up political opportunities for participatory democracy and bottom-up political forms. This emerging repertoire ranges from radically democratic decision-making and open publishing by Indymedia, to activist groups like Move On using powerful email lists to mobilize large constituencies and raise campaign war chests for political candidates. Discursive incubators within political forums like Democratic Underground and Free Republic provide safe harbors for contentious political debate within what I am calling 'partisan public spheres'. Based on notions of re-appropriation, this study focuses on institutional exemplars that co-opt internet technology from commercial interests to facilitate and enable new forms of cooperation.

The following analysis examines how these groups are using internet technology toward a variety of democratic actions and political strategies. This analysis is needed for three reasons. First, though typologies of internet activism are proliferating, few look specifically at linkages between online praxis and democratic theory. Indeed, most democratic theory applied to the internet is associated with e-voting and political sphere formation, while there is a dearth of scholarship that typologizes internet activism according to various strands of democratic practice.

Second, all forms of online political action too often get collapsed into one category of cyber- or internet activism that fails to evaluate groups according to their political programs and organizational practices as opposed to a narrow focus on tactics, such as hactivism. And third, online political action on the internet is often misunderstood in terms of relating it to a larger context of macro-politics, such as electoral mobilization and social movements. My analysis aims to broaden and deepen our understanding of the intersection between democratic theory, uses of internet technology, and activist strategies. By grounding online political action in democratic theory, we move the discussion away from much of the current positive and negative hype, and allow for a more theoretically rich, nuanced appraisal.

## **THE TAMING OF THE INTERNET**

What was initially developed at the behest of military contractors, government agencies, and technocratic university groups with taxpayer-funded government subsidies has undergone another quiet metamorphosis. Beyond the utopian raves and dystopian rants that followed the heady 1990s rhetoric of internet triumphalism, few dispute that commercial forces have colonized the internet to increasingly dominate what was once hailed as an open domain. An accumulating body of political economic analysis and cultural critique suggests that as the fading heyday of dot com hysteria recedes into the distance, a more sobering appraisal of the internet has made its way into mainstream consciousness. While many of these critiques deal with the oft-mentioned 'digital divide' and focus on issues related to access, other critiques emphasize deeper systemic issues. Dan Schiller (1999) leveled one of the first critiques aimed at delineating the neoliberal shift in market expansion and political economic transition encompassing the internet, which he called 'Digital Capitalism'. Schiller noted that internet networks increasingly serve the aims of transnational corporations via strict privatization of content and unregulated transborder data flow. Other leading scholars make similar arguments that the public domain's digital commons are undergoing a kind of enclosure, impoverished by a proprietary logic driven by a copyright system run amok (Lessig, 2001a; Perelman, 2002).

The potential for internet content discrimination has also increased, despite claims we are living in a post gatekeeper media environment. Way back in 2001 Lessig demonstrated how internet service providers were gradually imposing restrictions on content flows:

This control has already begun in the United States. ISPs running cable services have exercised their power to ban certain kinds of applications (specifically, those that enable peer-to-peer service). They have blocked particular content (advertising from competitors, for example) when that content was not consistent with their business model. The model for these providers is the model of cable television generally – controlling access and content to the cable providers' end. (Lessig: 2001b)

Many of these fears have been borne out by recent events, such as the 2005 *Brand X* Supreme Court decision and the FCC's subsequent ruling that internet network operators are no longer required to follow certain common carriage regulations. These decisions mark a radical break from historic foundations of US communications policy and may lead to profound changes to the internet's open architecture by removing 'net neutrality' provisions. This move has fomented a remarkably contentious debate between internet content providers and the public on one side, and network operators on the other. On an even more structural and global level, Mueller (2002) demonstrates how US interests dominate internet governance by laying claim to the domain-naming system (DNS). Mueller notes how this arrangement resulted from closed door discussions where contending elites struggled for control of the 'root', a central point of internet governance – an arrangement that prevails despite widespread global resistance (Pickard, 2007). Taken together, these trends suggest that well financed, corporate interests increasingly dominate

multiple layers of the internet. Focusing on these structural shifts, it is easy to lose sight of the vibrant political activism now flourishing on the internet.

### **POCKETS OF RESISTANCE**

Although grim structural critiques abound, there is an equally impressive body of scholarship arguing that the internet has transformed political processes by enabling previously marginalized voices to engage with electoral politics, thus reinvigorating civil society (Bennett, 2003; Bimber, 2003; Rushkoff, 2003). Indeed, the past decade has witnessed emergent forms of internet-based activism defined by network social structures (Castells, 1996) and participatory practices (Polletta, 2002). Internet strategies employed by many contemporary activists include the creative employment of hyperlinked websites, listservs and wikis used for exchanging information, mobilizing constituencies, and coordinating collective action (Melucci, 1996; Pickard, 2006b).

Instances of weaker forces using oppositional media to help overthrow more powerful oppressors are not new (Scott, 1985). For example, similar tactics were used, particularly via radio, in Algeria against the French in the late 1950s and in Iran against the Shah in the late 1970s (Mohammadi and Mohammadi, 1994). But the rate, size and spontaneity of current digital media-enabled activism arguably constitute a qualitative leap. Howard Rheingold (2002) refers to the spontaneous political action enabled by digital media as 'Smart Mobs'. These instantaneous collective actions, mediated through personal digital communications, are able to dethrone dictators and confound more centralized, top-down organizations. Such phenomena have been credited with a regime change in the Philippines, the WTO protests in Seattle, and a dramatic last-minute election turnaround in Spain. Rheingold contends that these actions are possible because the internet 'amplifies cooperation'.

Another compelling metaphor for pockets of resistance on the internet is Evans and Boyte's (1992) notion of 'free spaces', exemplified by African American church groups or community teach-ins where people politically organize. Adapting this concept to the internet, these spaces take the form of websites, blogs, listservs, chat rooms, or political forums that encourage public discourse, deliberation and other democratic practices. Similarly, Bey (1985) describes 'temporary autonomous zones' (TAZ) as spaces free from the logic of capitalism and hierarchy. Bey writes, 'The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the state, a guerilla operation which liberates an area, (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere ... before the state can crush it' (1985: 101). Fellow anarchist Murray Bookchin (1971) argues in *Post-Scarcity Society* that the traditional left has largely ignored the radical potential of a 'technology of abundance' and failed to use the oppressor's tools against him in an effort to co-opt and establish a liberatory technology.

### **TOWARDS A PRAXIS-BASED DEMOCRATIC THEORY OF INTERNET TECHNOLOGY**

In making sense of the florescence of democratic action within an increasingly undemocratic terrain, an analytical bridge between agency and structure, I argue, lies with a praxis-based democratic theory of technology that evaluates internet technology according to how it is used in advancing democratic practices. This approach does not ignore technological design biases or concerns with ownership and control, but rather further contextualizes how some political groups are using internet technology, and how these strategies embody particular democratic theories. Online activist groups are harnessing the potential of the internet to help democratize different areas of life to varying degrees. This article is most concerned with theories that help provide a framework describing, interpreting, and instructing models of democratic action exemplified by uses of internet technology.

In this vein, Feenberg offers a useful 'critical theory of technology' that encourages instrumental values with openings for fundamental change. He asserts, 'The degradation of labor, education and the environment is rooted not in technology per se but in the antidemocratic values that govern technological development. Reforms that ignore this fact will fail' (1991: 3). Building

on Braverman's critique of deskilling labor practices, Feenberg shifts the debate from oppressive technology and unequal wealth distribution to the corresponding problem of unfair power distribution in the workplace. Echoing anarcho-syndicalist notions of worker ownership and control, Feenberg argues for a renewed socialism, one that distances itself as much from the Soviet model as from Western capitalism. Feenberg's focus on the factory may seem narrow, but the notion of democratizing the practices surrounding technological systems focuses attention on how organizational decisions are made and technology is used. This theory is reflected in the praxis of some internet-based Indymedia activists (discussed below) who implement democratic decision-making in their use of software, design of website architecture, and selection of content. Feenberg's social constructionist notion of a 'technical code' characterizes the underlying designs, but more importantly, the uses of technology as inscribed by social values. For example, Indymedia activists' commitment to radical democracy is inscribed in their application of internet technology in terms of openness, decentralization and interactivity. Feenberg allows for the 'potentiality' of technology. That is, he depicts the nature of technology as open-ended and malleable, creating political opportunities for progressive social change.

Similarly, Dyer-Witford (1999) sees technology as a tool that can be used towards potential liberation. Taking a traditional Marxist view, he is careful to enumerate the ways in which internet technology worsens social inequities in terms of labor practices, mal-distributed wealth, and state surveillance activities. Yet, he also allows for a more hopeful picture. Among several other proposals, he advocates the creation of a 'communications commons', and the 'financing of a multiplicity of decentralized but collectively or cooperatively operated media outlets, licensed on the basis of commitment to encouraging participatory involvement in all levels of their activity' in order to 'more fully [release] the democratic and participatory potential of digital technologies' (1999: 204-5).

Hamelink (2000) advocates for human rights according to a coherent set of principles for an ethical internet policy program that calls for a redistribution of 'information capital' via the internet. Hamelink's reliance on established codes such as the 'right to communicate' outlined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is useful for advancing the discussion on democratizing cyberspace. Specifically, Hamelink focuses on codified principles that already enjoy a certain level of international consensus, such as the 'People's Communication Charter', which states that: 'All people are entitled to participate in communication and in making decisions about communication within and between societies'. Like Dyer-Witford, Hamelink highlights communication rights as the basis for policies ensuring all people can actively and equitably participate in all communication processes. He makes the case for a right to communicate because:

Around the world old and new forms of state and commercial censorship are rampant; they not only threaten the independence of conventional mass media but also the right to communicate through new channels like the Internet. Universal access ... means little in the absence of adequate public space where information, opinions and ideas can be freely exchanged and debated. State censorship and providers' self-censoring of social debate, copyright rules, laws on business defamation are all complex matters where rules need to be defined not to hinder, but to support political debate. (2000: 179)

Hamelink's critical approach to technology, like the others described above, works towards constructing an alternative normative model that reflects an ethical commitment to democratizing technology in general and the internet in particular. The following looks at how several groups embody these visions by using the internet to achieve political objectives via various types of democratic action. Without losing sight of important systemic critiques, the remainder of this article looks at democratic and political uses of the internet.

## **PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

Recent years have witnessed a small but growing body of literature on online political action and cyberactivism (McCaughey and Ayers, 2003; Meikle, 2002) and alternative media (Atton, 2002; Hamilton, 2000). Some studies have begun exploring the ways that new digital media are providing alternatives to and challenging mainstream politics and media (Bruns, 2005; Gillmor, 2004), while others have begun to ring the alarm bells on the commercial threats to a relatively open internet (Atton, 2004; Meikle, 2002). Though several good collections on internet-based political action and alternative media have come out in recent years (Couldry and Curran, 2003; Opel and Pompper, 2003; Van De Donk et al., 2004), much of this work focuses on tactics and not the political program or democratic theory manifest in particular forms of online organization. In other words, though much of this literature helps bring into focus both the larger contexts within which alternative digital media are produced and the institutional practices buttressing technological innovations, rarely discussed is the democratic theory behind internet activism.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Democratic theory has been used to explain political behavior in both national level politics and within small groups and organizations. However, rarely do analyses of internet-based political action attempt to explore linkages between the two levels. Researchers often treat the micro level of democratic practice as an example of prefigurative politics that are meant to reflect idealistic visions of society, while macro level politics are considered more strategic. Like Polletta (2002), I problematize this dichotomy by assuming the prefigurative *is* strategic. Thus, in understanding how various activist and political groups operate online, it is useful to situate them in a democratic theoretical framework to bring into focus both ideological and strategic values manifest in their implementation of internet technology. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive survey of the entire expanse of democratic theoretical variants, but I will sketch a few significant strands below. In general, liberal democratic theories associated with Habermasian public spheres have been an increasingly popular focus in recent decades, leading to considerable attention being given to deliberative forums.

Predicated on deliberative forms of democracy, public spheres can be described as public spaces between the state and market where private individuals publicly deliberate, form opinions, and begin strategic plans to effect change in electoral politics and society in general. These spaces range from coffee shops to chat rooms, and provide opportunities for people to organize around pressing social issues. The quality of an online space as a public sphere can be assessed by the following: the presence or absence of access in terms of inclusivity; recognition in terms of formal discourse space; and deliberation in terms of dialogue and resolved differences across different positions (Bennett et al., 2004; Ferec et al., 2002; Habermas, 1989).

Whether actual deliberation occurs within specific online spaces is an ongoing debate in the cyberculture literature. Sunstein (2001) and even Habermas (2006) himself has suggested that online spaces can encourage fragmentation instead of the society-wide deliberation required for a healthy polity. Other scholars take issue with the tendency to uphold one normative public sphere model and biased norms of deliberation (Benhabib, 1992; Young, 2000). Fraser modifies Habermas's original formulation to allow for multiple overlapping public spheres, maintaining that marginalized groups often create their own spaces, which she refers to as 'subaltern public spheres'. Fraser defines these spaces as 'parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (1992: 122–3).

Liberal pluralism is another useful democratic theory for examining online political action. Pluralistic democracy rests on the liberal notion of setting aside space for competing interests and viewpoints. Although Robert Dahl (1967), a chief progenitor of this theory, allows that the political battlefield is far from even, he sees American society as being essentially characterized by dispersed power. Using a democratic continuum, in subsequent work he situates American society as a polyarchy (1971) defined by inclusion, public contestation, voting, lobbying and a

plurality of voices. This model is more liberal than radical; though it calls for a pluralistic society, the people's voices are often mediated through spokespersons. More representative than participatory, this process can devolve into a 'competitive elitist' democracy where public input goes unsolicited and the public interest is ignored. According to proponents, liberal pluralism at its best, when power is more equally distributed, can help maintain a robust deliberative society based on inclusion and democratization.

Other democratic theories take on more radical forms based on anarchic and participatory democratic action. Participatory democracy is a form of often contentious politics founded on direct forms of democratic practice instead of representative, elite-mediated democracy. First popularized by the new left (the term was coined by the Students for a Democratic Society), Benjamin Barber (1984) equates 'politics in a participatory mode' with what he calls 'Strong Democracy'. Barber calls for a community-based decision-making apparatus, arguing that, on the whole, fewer mistakes are made when the public makes decisions. He writes, 'Active citizens govern themselves directly [in participatory democracy], not necessarily at every level and in every instance, but frequently enough and in particular when basic policies are being decided and when significant power is being deployed' (1984: 150). Polletta traces participatory democracy's lineage from early labor organizers and continuing through the decades to include contemporary global justice activists. Since it often seeks to reach consensus-based decisions, participatory democracy represents a more radical practice than deliberation. Indeed, depending on degree, some theorists call such politics 'radical participatory democracy' (Polletta, 2002).

The concept of radical democracy is perhaps most associated with Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) work, which established a framework for radical cultural politics based on a post-structuralist position that conceptualizes power and resistance in ways not in line with traditional Marxism. My earlier work suggested that this framework can be used to examine online radical political action, though class, state power, and electoral mobilization are still crucial sites of struggle (Pickard, 2006a, 2006b). Epstein (1996) offers a cautionary note that radical democracy should not be equated with post-structuralism and that any left project must still work towards a kind of democratic socialism. In later work, Epstein (2001) associates contemporary global justice activism with anarchic sensibilities.

Several well-known critiques have been leveled against participatory democracy. Not unlike critiques of the public sphere model, one indictment against the participatory democracy model is that it inadvertently masks informal hierarchies and other subtle power structures that help perpetuate classism, racism, and sexism. Hauptmann (2001) suggests that radical participatory democracy was attempted during the 1960s to no avail and that deliberative democrats should distance themselves from such positions. Yet, as Polletta shows, there is compelling evidence that participatory democratic practices can work not only as a high-principled allegiance to upholding purist democratic ideals, but also as a strategic method to help optimize creativity, distribute leadership, and foster group solidarity.

I explicate these threads in the following analysis to help address several key research questions: How are political groups using internet technology in innovative ways to practice various kinds of democratic practice while attempting to effect social change? What democratic theory does their praxis manifest? What are the strengths and weaknesses with each model? Such a democratic theoretical framework promises to bring into focus specific political attributes and thereby render explicit what hitherto had been merely implicit in much of the activist and academic literature.

## **SITE SELECTION AND METHODS**

Studying online political groups led me to see emergent patterns in how they embody specific strands of democratic theory. After sketching the characteristics of these categories, I sought out prime institutional exemplars for particular kinds of democratic action. Hence, I have deliberately chosen online groups representing various types of democratic applications of internet



technology: Democratic Underground, Free Republic, Indymedia, and Move On. Initially, I also included Slash Dot as a participatory model, but found that their organizing, though demonstrably non-hierarchical and democratic, did not aim to effect change in the larger political culture. In selecting sites, I also considered the fact that each group has been active in US politics for at least six years, and particularly engaged in political events around the 2004 US elections (although Indymedia is a global institution, my focus is admittedly US-centric).

My approach in analyzing these groups can best be described as 'grounded theory', which assumes that theory emerges from data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In this kind of research, comparative analyses are often the method of choice in generating a list of salient properties among cases to be organized into discrete categories. Although I did not practice strict ethnography with long-term immersion and detailed field notes, my qualitative methods draw from participant observations with online document analysis periodically taking place over the last four to six years. I first became acquainted with Indymedia in October 2000 when I began volunteering for the Seattle Independent Media Center. I continue to be semi-active with the Urbana-Champaign IMC and observe the websites and listservs of both IMCs. I began monitoring Democratic Underground within weeks after it began during the contested 2000 US presidential election and continue to do so on an almost daily basis. I have been on Move On's email list since August 2002 and have collected several hundred emails as well as participated in several Move On organized events. In the Fall of 2002, I also began examining Free Republic on a regular basis. Although I aim to be as objective as possible in my observations, it is important that I position myself reflexively and acknowledge my engagement with progressive politics. Nevertheless, I critically examine each model based on its effectiveness, while taking note of tensions between what they profess to do, and what they actually succeed in doing. By including the conservative Free Republic, I am demonstrating that these theories and practices apply to groups across the political spectrum.

With each case, I briefly examined the group's history, decision-making processes, mission statements, and what kinds of democratic action each web-based organization facilitated. I link these actions to the implicit democratic theories that gird and inform each model. As I describe each group I refer to relatively recent political actions, then briefly discuss their online actions, and conclude with a critical analysis of their internet-based democratic practices. By linking praxis with emergent theory, this analysis follows Glaser and Strauss's methodology for qualitative research.

## **DEMOCRATIC UNDERGROUND AND FREE REPUBLIC AS PARTISAN PUBLIC SPHERES**

### **Democratic underground**

Inspired by Fraser, I term online political forums as 'partisan public spheres'. The website Democratic Underground is a prime example of this model. Just as the perceived excesses of the Clinton presidency helped spawn a network of conservative websites, the contested 2000 election and subsequent policies of George W. Bush has arguably led to a similar phenomenon on the liberal side of the spectrum. On their website, Democratic Underground founders claim 'Democratic Underground was founded on Inauguration Day, January 20, 2001, to protest the illegitimate presidency of George W. Bush and to provide a resource for the exchange and dissemination of liberal and progressive ideas'. Democratic Underground is largely discourse-focused, but concrete actions emerge, such as launching political candidacies, exchanging political information, and organizing around particular issues. Part news source, part discussion board, Democratic Underground enjoys a lively rivalry with the conservative Free Republic. Although directed toward different partisan ends, they serve similar functions as political news forums that aggregate news stories for community members to discuss. These conversations produce meandering threads of dialogue open to any member to join.

However, not anyone can be a member. Those entrants failing the ideological litmus test with inappropriate comments are unceremoniously booted from the site. On Democratic

Underground this action sometimes occurs after someone writes, 'Freep alert!' and alerts the volunteer moderator who bars the offending person from the site. After removal, all traces of the interloper are erased. In place of the name lies the phrase 'Name removed' and replacing the offensive comment is the phrase 'Deleted message' and a link to a set of discussion forum rules, which in turn links to a further detailed page with more information including the following statement:

We ban conservative disruptors who are opposed to the broad goals of this website. If you think overall that George W. Bush is doing a swell job, or if you wish to see Republicans win, or if you are generally supportive of conservative ideals, please do not register to post, as you will likely be banned.  
([http://www.democraticunderground.com/forums/rules\\_detailed.html](http://www.democraticunderground.com/forums/rules_detailed.html))

As the familiar analogy goes, these sites resemble the Athenian Agora where one had to be a male, non-slave citizen of Athens to partake in public dialogue.

Glaring exclusions notwithstanding, these forums allow for a wide range of opinion within parameters roughly dictated by party ideology. Especially during past election seasons, there have been raging debates between members broadly dictated by positions held by, for example, Naderites and 'Nader haters', Clark supporters and 'Deaniacs'. Originally, a member's number of posts was listed next to the user name, serving as a kind of default status symbol. This feature was later modified so that people are given numbers until they reach 1000 posts after which it reads '1000 plus'. Although not representing an ideal speech situation, the deliberation unfolding within Democratic Underground roughly follows a deliberative model outlined by Fraser that allows for members' discursive identity-formation within certain ideological bounds.

### **Free republic**

Begun in 1997 by a reclusive conservative in California, Free Republic bills itself as 'an online gathering place for independent, grass-roots conservatism on the web'. Like Democratic Underground, membership is free, though donations are periodically solicited. On the site, Free Republic members (self-labeled 'freepers') can get links to news sources in both major and minor publications, as well as enter discussion threads. In the past, Free Republic members have politically organized 'freeps', such as anti-Clinton gatherings and rallies in support of the US military and George W. Bush. With tens of thousands of members, Free Republic has organized chapters across the country and has become increasingly savvy at getting its messages into mainstream media – a terrain that freepers generally regard as hostile towards conservative ideas.

Free Republic reached a degree of notoriety just prior to the 2004 elections when members picked up a story from a blogger named 'Buckhead'. Quickly responding to Dan Rather's *60 Minutes* segment featuring incriminating documents that called into question George W. Bush's National Guard service, Buckhead made a strong case that these papers were falsified. Free Republic picked up the story and publicized the countervailing evidence. Within 72 hours a spontaneous mobilization in Free Republic conversation threads did much to bring about CBS's full repudiation of the story in a scandal now known as 'Rathergate' – a scandal that ultimately helped end Dan Rather's career. Whether this action contributed to democracy is debatable, but this event is indicative of recent collective political actions originating in such news forums, amplified throughout the blogosphere, and leading to the downfall of public figures. In other words, these actions demonstrate that such online deliberative spaces can act as discursive incubators that breed political action.

I include Free Republic to show that these democratic practices are not just ideologically dictated. Free Republic embodies deliberative democratic values described by Fraser's model for discursive politics. The democratic ideal behind the formation of such a group is consistent with liberal pluralism – in this case, enhancing the voice of a constituency defined by conservative

issues. This allows them to better participate in the political arena or marketplace of ideas that comprises pluralistic society. Similar to Democratic Underground, there are ideological and discursive bounds policed by moderators. For example, some conservative bloggers have claimed that a number of people were banned from Free Republic for expressing views on immigration that differed from the Bush administration's. Nevertheless, there is still a relatively wide range of debate from differing viewpoints, pitting libertarians against social conservatives and neoconservatives against paleoconservatives. The question of whether the growing power of these sites evidences a fragmentation of the polity or a strengthening of an identity/issue group is one worth considering, and segues into a liberal pluralistic model of internet political action.

### **MOVE ON AS A PLURALIST DEMOCRATIC MODEL**

Groups like Move On demonstrate how the internet can facilitate and amplify pluralistic processes by making it easier for people to organize and promote their interests in the political arena. Increasingly an important power broker in left-liberal politics, Move On represents the pluralistic democratic ideal by giving voice to a previously underrepresented constituency and entering the fray against competing interests vying to influence particular policies. Move On was formed in 1998 by a wealthy dot com Berkeley couple as a campaign focused on convincing the US congress to drop impeachment proceedings against President Clinton. It has since undergone several incarnations. Before the 2004 elections it morphed from an anti-war organization to one that promotes a wide array of progressive candidates and causes. Describing itself as 'democracy in action', Move On uses its email list to facilitate house parties, distribute muckraking documentaries, critique mainstream media, raise money for hard-hitting commercials, and to promote a host of other activities aimed at supporting progressive causes. Boasting over three million members, in recent years Move On has generated, often in days or even hours, online anti-war petitions with hundreds of thousands of names, raised millions of dollars for pro-peace politicians, and launched primetime television and radio commercials.

Indeed, Move On has taken the organizing power of the internet to an entirely new level with creative strategies, such as facilitating candlelight vigils and virtual marches on Washington. Move On became a major player leading up to the 2004 election in bolstering Howard Dean's anti-war presidential candidacy, and later generating an impressive on-the-ground political operation. Inspired by Rheingold's 'Smart Mobs', Move On initiated their 'vote mobs' program to coordinate hundreds of voter registration drives that, along with the software 'vote multiplier', helped turn out the youth vote on campuses across the US. More recently, Move On organized 'Dessert Parties' to kick off political organizing for the 2006 elections and a campaign called 'Call for Change'. Move On claims its members contributed over 27 million dollars to candidates and seven million calls to voters during the 2006 midterm elections.

### **INDYMEDIA AS A RADICAL PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRATIC MODEL**

The November 1999 World Trade Organization protests, a series of events known as 'The Battle of Seattle', left an enduring institutional legacy in the form of the Independent Media Center (IMC, or popularly referred to as 'Indymedia'). The IMC model can be described as an interactive news website, a rapidly expanding global network and a radical democratic organization replicated in over 150 sites (as of July 2006) across six continents (Pickard, 2006a). Originating within the Global Justice Movement, IMC history goes back further to the media democracy movement of the 1990s. Future historians may even trace continuities with the short-lived efforts of anarchist news collectives in 1960s France or as far back as the Spanish Civil War (J. Lawson, personal communication, 13 March 2002). Dan Merkle, an IMC founding member, stresses that, although seemingly spontaneous, 'the independent media movement had been building for years and the IMC project was a reflection of the hard work of many organizations and individuals' (personal communication, 28 March 2002). Alternative media groups like Paper Tiger, Free Speech TV, and Accion Zapatista, served as influences and, in some cases, even provided crucial resources.

According to longtime media activist, Dee Dee Halleck, 'Many different streams came together: the video activist community, microradio pirates, the computer hacker/code writers, the 'zine makers, and the punk music world' (2002: 417–18).

Jeff Perlstein (2000), one of the original Indymedia founders and a veteran activist for independent media projects maintains that the original idea for Indymedia had been to use media, especially the internet, as an activist tool for community self-expression, particularly underrepresented communities. Perlstein (2000) states 'we couldn't just let CNN and CBS be the ones to tell these stories ... so we needed to develop our own alternatives and our alternative networks ... a community-based people's newsroom'. Indeed, the objective to wrest control of information from commercial media – to 'become the media' based on radical democratic principles – was the driving force behind Indymedia (Perlstein, 2001). Ironically, it was largely the result of Yahoo linking to their website that led to Indymedia receiving 1.5 million hits by the end of the week of the WTO protests – more than CNN (Rinaldo, 2000).

Though it is important not to over-generalize in describing the sprawling and diverse IMC global network, there is a remarkable uniformity in the Indymedia ethos reflected in a common website design, a commitment to organizational processes such as consensus-based decision-making, and other radical democratic practices laid out in a common 'charter' called the 'principles of unity'. Characterized by its 'Be the Media' slogan, Indymedia's user-driven news productions, collective editing and open source practices place it in the vanguard for implementing technical strategies for amplifying democratic processes. As an innovative web-based communications model, Indymedia utilizes a special type of 'open-publishing' software allowing anyone with internet access to post their own news stories for immediate upload onto the website as part of the newswire. An example of this radical democratic ethos manifest in other digital media was in full display when Indymedia activists organized protests around the 2004 Republican National Convention. The New York Independent Media Center set up an automated information line that activists could call 24 hours a day to hear breaking news from Indymedia, access a calendar of events, and listen to a live streaming broadcast (Scahill, 2004).

Technologically, Indymedia's radical democratic model is further evidenced by their reliance on open source, open publishing, and wikis. Open publishing guidelines allow users to contribute original content or to comment on other postings. This interactivity is based on a transparent editorial process that encourages readers to get involved. Open publishing and wikis allow information to be corrected and supplemented faster and more efficiently. As described on a web page linked to the IMC site, open publishing is 'an essential element of the Indymedia project that allows independent journalists and publications to publish the news they gather instantaneously on a globally accessible web site'. Indeed, the slogan, 'be the media' is indicative of the design features and underlying values of the IMC site.

## **IMPLICATIONS AND ANALYSIS**

Table 1 illustrates each site in terms of its model, repertoire and associated democratic theory. These are not perfect categories, but roughly indicate the democratic actions enabled by the internet and the values underlying these actions. Each group's model exhibits strengths and weaknesses. Indymedia, for example, with its radical non-proprietary logic of open publishing and open source, is the institution most counter-hegemonic towards neoliberal logic. However, many Indymedia organizations remain hamstrung to some extent by members' intense focus on process-related issues and distrust toward electoral politics that may limit their efficacy in the national political arena. In theory, it would not require much coordination for US-based Independent Media Centers to engage in media policy interventions, but their strict adherence to radical democratic principles makes effective coordination very difficult except in ad hoc protest situations. Separating Indymedia's social movement building from an electoral strategy will most likely prevent it from becoming a major force in the US political landscape. However, there are signs that this limitation may begin to change. In 2004 a US-focused IMC site was launched,

representing a strategic recentralization that may lead to concerted political action in the US. For example, some IMCs are participating in a national movement against Wal-Mart's anti-labor policies.

**Table 1 Models of digital democracy**

SITE	MODEL	CHARACTERISTICS/REPertoire	DEMOCRATIC THEORY
Indymedia	Interactive news site	Open publishing, open source	Radical democracy
Move on	Grassroots mobilization hub	3 Million-plus mailing list, organizing, fundraising	Pluralistic democracy
Democratic underground	Political forum	Political news, conversation threads, announcements	Deliberative democracy
Free republic	Political forum	Political news, conversation threads, coordinate protests	Deliberative democracy

Critical analyses of Indymedia seem to be on the rise. Past scholarship established Indymedia as a radical democratic prototype (Downing, 2003; Kidd, 2003; Pickard, 2006a), but rarely is Indymedia placed in conversation with other models within a comparative analysis. Indymedia's adherence to radical democratic principles, enabled by the internet, is unprecedented, but also fraught with inherent tensions that raise questions about long-term network sustainability (Pickard, 2006b). Furthermore, recent research suggests that the global network may be far less active and cohesive than appearances would suggest (Coopman, 2006). Nevertheless, Indymedia's global reach and radical participatory democracy makes it one of the more significant models to emerge from the internet. Though some IMCs (like the one in Urbana) flourish and others (like the flagship Seattle IMC) struggle, Indymedia does not qualify as a failed experiment.

Move On has been much more effective in terms of electoral efficacy by channeling the discontent of a large progressive constituency in the US. However, it is also fraught with recurring tensions. There are signs that members suffer what may be called 'email fatigue' from the frequent calls to action from Move On organizers. Groups like Move On also attract criticism for fueling a kind of arms race with expensive political commercials. During the 2004 election cycle, Move On's political action committee spent over 20 million dollars on political advertising. As a kind of pressure group, Move On is modeled after and operates within a liberal pluralistic scheme. Thus, it can be assumed that although an effective player within the current system, effecting radical change is not a major objective for the Move On model. One study inspired by Mark Warner's work compared Move On to a 'discursive counterpublic', based on it being a virtual community, discursively based, and oppositional, especially in its anti-war campaigns (Gallo, 2003).

Move On can be characterized as a 'grassroots mobilizing organization'. It allows for opinions to percolate up from its 'Action Forums', but primarily works in a top-down fashion. This may seem surprising given its democratic rhetoric and the fact that its successful campaigns rely on wide participation from thousands of members. Indeed, its slogan 'Democracy in Action'

deserves to be interrogated to ascertain exactly what vision of democracy it practices. Unlike Indymedia, Move On devotes less energy to prefigurative politics or a larger radical vision of fundamentally overhauling existing sociopolitical arrangements and power structures. Instead, Move On channels considerable resources towards advancing particular issues largely defined by electoral processes.

Free Republic could also qualify as a grassroots-mobilizing hub, considering its involvement with organizing mass protests. Beyond noting Free Republic and Democratic Underground's success in actualizing tactical campaigns from initial discursive formations within partisan public spheres, an important point worth highlighting is that online democracy and political action does not belong solely to the province of the digital left. Though communication scholars tend to characterize the blogosphere and internet activism in general as a progressive domain, there is compelling evidence that despite being arguably a progressive means of communication, significant sectors of the blogosphere are largely dominated by conservative players (Hargittai et al., 2008). Furthermore, we must recall the aforementioned critiques, such as how public spheres can be too exclusionary and governed by an unspoken bourgeois norm of politeness that precludes some important matters from being discussed (Benhabib, 1992).

## **CONCLUSION**

In recent years all levels of the internet have become increasingly commercialized. Yet, activist groups are co-opting the internet from this commercial onslaught to practice cooperative democratic norms that are, in some cases, radical and unprecedented. The tension between internet agency and structure creates a complex interplay. With this tension as a backdrop, I have offered a preliminary comparative analysis of how online political groups exemplify different democratic ideals. A theoretical framework of praxis-based technology illuminates these internet-based political and democratic actions by situating technology in a socially constructed and therefore open-ended human context. Thus, potentials for an emancipatory technology are indeed possible, but only if the processes surrounding them are radically democratized, including increased access to these technologies for traditionally marginalized groups – a persisting inequity often neglected by the hype surrounding internet activism and the blogosphere.

Despite a recent flourishing of internet activism scholarship, closer analyses are needed. Beyond the perennial need for collecting more thick description on how these groups operate online, researchers may ask a number of theoretical questions: Will the political and cultural significance of these groups be superseded by the blogosphere? The advent of Indymedia, for example, was a kind of proto-collective blog. We must also ask: Are these models sustainable for the long term? If so, do these groups evidence a re-invigorated polity, or are we witnessing a greater fragmentation and gradual shrilling of political discourse? And finally, has the mainstreaming of cyberactivism and what might be seen as an increasing 'banality of the internet' rendered these questions less pressing for internet researchers? One potentially rich case study bringing many of these threads together would focus on the debate raging around the principles of net neutrality, which conveniently combines a study of internet policy and internet activism focused on threats to an open internet architecture (Meinrath and Pickard, 2008).

To summarize, although some scholars now dismiss the revolutionary potential of the internet, there is convincing evidence that the internet continues to increase the potential for a variety of democratic practices. The case studies analyzed above suggest that, especially in the case of Indymedia, the internet amplifies even the most radical democratic forms. Without listservs, hyperlinks, internet relay chat and open source internet technology, the radical democracy of Indymedia would not be possible. Further, without the uniformity of its web-based communications model, there would be far less cohesion within the network. To a lesser, but no less significant extent, this holds true for the other cases. For the political forums, the internet creates space for like-minded ideological actors to deliberate and organize. For Move On, the

internet creates an opportunity to harness the collective energies of a previously neglected political constituency via an enormous email list.

These gains, however, need to be considered next to internet policy-dictated realities that see a greater potential for worsening gate keeping, digital divides, and privatized internet culture. Meikle (2002) and others recognized these trends several years ago. In considering technological innovations, questions also persist as to what are web exclusive properties and what are merely old techniques adapted to the internet. Though the quantifiable impact of the internet on contemporary activism and political culture may still be debatable, an increasing reliance on web-based strategies, networks structures and democratic organizational communications constitutes a qualitative leap. This leap suggests that internet technology remains a possible locus for democratic, even radical, potential. However, internet technology is not a magical, self-generating terrain. There are impending policies, such as the end of net neutrality provisions, that would irreparably damage this potential. These policies demand our serious attention.

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