

Lecture- 14



II. PUBLIC DIGITAL SPACE: CONTESTED AND THREATENED

In my research I have come to regard the Internet as a space produced and marked through the software that gives it its features. There are significant implications attached to the fact that the leading Internet software design focus in the last few years has been the design of “firewalls” and, more recently, of so-called virtual business networks that operate over the Net via “tunnelling” and/or encryption. Both of these represent private appropriations of a public space. The rapid growth of this type of software and its use in the Internet does not necessarily strengthen the public-ness of the Net. This is especially significant if there is less production of software aimed at strengthening the public-ness of the Net. Further, this type of software also sets up the conditions for copyrighting, particularly the possibility of copyrighting use/access, including every single use/access. Much of the commercial potential and economic activities often attributed to the Internet, are actually part of private digital networks or firewalled (i.e. privatised) sites in the Internet, a subject I return to later. But even the currently far more limited world of commercial uses possible on the Net, as compared to private digital networks, can bring some problematic consequences to the democratic potential of the Net.

Although the Net as a space of distributed power can thrive even against growing commercialization, and today’s non-commercial uses still dominate the Internet, the race is on. Considerable resources are being allocated to invent ways of expanding electronic commerce, ensuring safety of payment transactions, and implementing copyrighting. These are not easy tasks. At last year’s Aspen Roundtable on Electronic Commerce, an annual event that brings together the CEOs of the main software and hardware firms as well as the key venture capitalists in the sector, it was once again established by these insiders that there are considerable limits to the medium and that it probably will always cater to a particular niche markets, with a few possible exceptions.

The Internet may continue to be a space for de-facto (i.e. not necessarily self-conscious) democratic practices. But it will be so partly as a form of resistance against overarching powers of the economy and of hierarchical power, rather than the space of unlimited freedom which is still part of its representation today in many milieux. The images we need to bring into this representation increasingly need to deal with contestation and resistance, rather than simply the romance of freedom and interconnectivity or the new frontier. In this regard the reawakened interest among non-commercial digital organizations and digital activists in open-source systems, notably Linux, is worth noting. We are seeing the rapid growth of a new generation of alternative organizations and of individuals knowledgeable about digital technologies who are working on the public dimensions and free access questions.

There is an incipient literature that enacts this negotiation. Among the more important is the ongoing work of the recently created collective Nettime (1997; Lovink 1998) formed by people who are very knowledgeable about the Internet, many of whom are Net activists, but at the same time critical of the romancing of the Net I described above.

One aspect important to the positive democracy effect of the Net, is that there has been a proliferation of non-commercial uses and users. Civil society, whether it be individuals or NGOs, is a very energetic presence in cyberspace. From struggles around human rights, the environment, and workers strikes around the world to genuinely trivial pursuits, the Net has emerged as a powerful medium for non-elites to communicate, support each other's struggles and create the equivalent of insider groups at scales going from the local to the global.

The political and civic potential of these trends is enormous. It offers the possibility for interested citizens to act in concert. Several authors have examined the possibility of enhancing democratic practices through the formation of communities on the Net and the possible role of governments in supporting them. The possibility of doing so transnationally at a time when a

growing set of issues are seen as escaping the bounds of national states makes this even more significant. We are also seeing a greater variety of subcultures on the Net in the last few years after being dominated by young white men, especially from the US. The growth of global corporate actors has also profoundly altered the role of government in the digital era, and, as a consequence has further raised the importance of civil society in electronic space as a force through which a multiplicity of public interests can, wittingly or not, resist the overwhelming influence of the new global corporate world.