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Hi, Efrem.

Here's a copy of the paper I wrote on community computer networks & the barriers to their achieving real political change. It's kind of a working document, so any changes or comments are welcome. Enjoy, and I'll look forward to hearing from you with your list of example of political uses of the Internet.

Community Networks: Foundation for Cyberdemocracy  
or More Information Society Hype?

Computer-mediated communication has sparked a great interest in the last

few years, so much that it is difficult in this day and age to get beyond

the hype surrounding any computer-related technology. Critical thinking

about technological developments is therefore needed all the more, especially when such developments are branded as "revolutionary" in a political sense, as has happened with one of the new computer-related technologies, computer networking.

Networking has received much attention of late concerning its inherent ability to bridge space and time, and to "smash the pyramid" of

hierarchy through horizontal communications, and transform organizational

structure (Naisbitt 1982; Sproul & Kiesler 1992). Computer networking has

even provoked an up-and-coming grassroots political movement, one that claims to be laying the foundation for cyberdemocracy, a Jeffersonian-based

ideal "founded on the primacy of individual liberty and the commitment to

pluralism, diversity, and community" (Ogden 1994). In the United States

especially, many hold high hopes that "the way is open for the total overhaul of U.S. politics" based on computer networks and their power to

allow horizontal communication among all sectors of the population (Phillips

1995). This paper should serve to clarify the issues involved and to

reveal

the barriers to achieving such a radical change through technology.

#### Free-Nets and the NPTN: a Brief Background

In autumn, 1984, Dr. Tom Grundner of the Department of Family Medicine at

Case Western Reserve University, began an experiment. He established a

computer bulletin board system called "St. Silicon's Hospital and Information

Dispensary" to test the efficacy of using computers as a means of delivering general health information to the community. The

interactive

system was designed to let people call in using their home, school, or business computers, leave medically-related questions, and have them answered by a physician within 24 hours. The experiment proved so popular that it attracted the attention of the Information Systems Division

of AT&T and the Ohio Bell Telephone Company, who supported a larger project to expand and develop the concept.

Grundner used the donations to begin development of a multi-faceted system, designed to serve as a community information resource in areas as

diverse as law, medicine, education, arts, sciences, and government -- including free electronic mail services for the citizens of northeast Ohio. On July 16, 1986, his newly-named "Cleveland Free-Net" was established and

began to attract a huge following. Since then these non-profit systems

have spread to over 30 other cities, all through the efforts of volunteer

grassroots organizers, and now these formal organizing committees are currently at work in over 100 other locations. Grundner himself has continued his efforts by establishing the National Public

Telecomputing

Network (NPTN), which aims to be the CMC equivalent of the Corporation for

Public Broadcasting in the U.S. The NPTN has become the resource which

helps other Free-Nets start-up, but the setup itself is in the hands of a

local organizing committee made up entirely of volunteers.

While a member of the Toronto Free-Net claims that "Free-Net fever is

sweeping North America," the movement is by no means confined to one continent (Broadhead 1993). Recently, cities in other parts of the world

have caught the idea as well, and now Free-Nets have been established or

planned in Bayreuth and Erlangen, Germany; Wellington, New Zealand; Helsinki, Finland; and Quezon City, the Philippines, among others (Gray

1995). And despite their proliferation, Free-Nets are not the only model for community networks. Other community-based networks include the Community Memory Project in Santa Monica, California, and the Washington, D.C., community network. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus solely on the Free-Nets, which seem to be the most rhetorically political with their hopes for cyberdemocracy.

Compared frequently to public libraries, Free-Nets and other community networks have two main purposes: first, "to bring free, public access, community-based electronic information services" to their local areas, and second, "to provide community organizations with the means to disseminate information, and to encourage public discussion and education"

(Blue Sky). The first purpose addresses perceived inequalities in the production of and access to information; the second to a perceived lag in public discourse.

Much of the ideology which backs the NPTN comes directly from virtual communitarianism, a concept emphasizing a synergy of old-fashioned small-town neighborliness and the new information technologies, especially computer networks. Howard Rheingold defines virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (5). But while Rheingold refers to virtual communities' ability to unite people who are geographically separate, NPTN takes a different approach: community networks can also serve to enhance the sense of community in geographically-defined communities. This is a distinctly different use for computer networks, and one which seems to overlook one of the real benefits of CMC -- the ability to communicate without the normal barriers of space and time.

The rhetoric surrounding Free-Nets is formidable, and much of it relates to this twist, as Grundner himself notes:

"Our progress will not be measured by the number of on-ramps, but by the quantity and quality of the off-ramps, the number of LOCAL systems we can build, with LOCAL people, using LOCAL resources, to meet LOCAL needs. It will not be measured by the number of college graduates we can bring on-line, but by the number of blue-collar workers and their families we can bring on-line. It will not be measured by the number of people who can access the card catalog

at the University of Paris, but by the number of people who can find out what's going on at their kids' school, or get information about the latest flu bug which is going around their community." This emphasis on the local aspects of computing may be coming at an important time, for worries abound concerning the future of the Internet, assumed by most to be the foundation for any kind of Information Infrastructure. Some, especially frequent users of the Net and small commercial service providers, fear that the exponential growth in the Internet will necessitate metered charges for its use, and this would make the addressing of information gaps increasingly costly (Dennis 1995). Others point to the frequent delays in Net-based traffic these days caused by rapidly increasing numbers of users and current bandwidth limits, implying that high infrastructural costs will be associated with the future growth of the Internet.

Local networks like the community networks are based on providing information to an immediate area, with access to but no emphasis on broader networking like the Internet. Internet traffic is then confined to a smaller area, and demands on high-priced infrastructure are reduced. And the very concept of Free-Nets reduces the likelihood of metered charges, because Free-Nets see access to information as a right, not a market-driven privilege. If a strong consensus could be built in favor of this perception, the future development of an information infrastructure would surely take on a more egalitarian quality than the current jockeying for position of the major telecommunications and computer-related companies.

In addition to its technical contribution to communications, computer networking holds possible political benefits, and the Free-Nets have been quick to point to these benefits as justification for their establishment. Tom Athanasiou, one of the founders of the Community Memory Project in California a full decade before the Free-Net Movement, notes that community-based computer networks "could provide for the elimination of the distinction between producers and consumers of information, encourage public conversations and, by virtue of being embedded within community social institutions, empower rather than pacify their users" (198?).

Karyn Wichers, associated with NPTN, is one of many who sees political potential within such horizontal communications:

"First, Free-Nets provide a forum where politics as spectacle may

be

reduced because the opportunity for politicians to use pseudo-events to gain positive public attention for themselves is greatly lessened...

Second, Free-Nets concentrate more on issues and first-hand information. On a Free-Net, there is no mediator between the information and the public."

As this line of thinking goes, people who have direct access to information are less likely to be manipulated and more likely to participate effectively in the political process. Here lies the heart of the call for cyberdemocracy.

But democracy entails the participation of at least broad sections of the population, and this has been one of the major criticisms of any computer-related political tool. NPTN tries to address this as well.

NPTN combines community-based networking with a desire to solve the problem of what Barbara Wellington Hall calls "electronic silencing" and

what many have referred to as "information gaps." Massachusetts Democratic Representative Ed Markey goes so far as to claim "information apartheid" (Ratan 1995). These critics claim that computer networks will

never solve the divisive problems of communities because certain groups, notably those who cannot use or afford computers, will be absent from any community which forms in cyberspace.

Many disagree with the need for intervention in the spreading of computer-mediated communication, arguing that "those who raise the spectre

of widening gaps... appear to assume a discontinuity in the historical trend" (Compaine 1986). And although such faith in historical progress

seems to be a common failing of those promoting computer-mediated communication, many of the critics of intervention point out correctly that information gaps are not very well understood.

Are information gaps primarily defined as a lack of network access, of computer-related skills, or some combination of the two? If access is the question, then indeed Free-Nets seem to be making attempts to address it. Most if not all community networks install computers with network access in public spaces such as post offices, libraries, and grocery stores,

with the goal of allowing access to people who do not own or have the

use

of computers otherwise. Whether these publicly-accessible computers promote broader participation is, however, another question.

The lip service Free-Nets pay to community participation has yet to be substantiated. After a detailed study of participation in Free-Nets, MIT

graduate student Anne Beamish wrote:

It is not that networks prohibit anyone from joining -- to the contrary, they strongly encourage everyone to join. But, from the limited number of surveys taken so far, it is clear that a broad cross-section of the community is not participating.

In fact, the greatest users of community networks seem to be professionals

who have high degrees of computer literacy and typing skills.

Free-Nets

have far to go in establishing broad constituencies that could be politically

mobilized, and thus do not yet achieve their first goal.

If, however, information gaps are related to skills, Free-Nets should

be evaluated in terms of their accessibility by all. One of their claims is to

make computer expertise irrelevant to being able to access and use the system: "since Free-Nets are so user friendly, any first time user can get

the information they require" (Wichers 1993). But no software can actually

encourage someone to approach a computer if the computer itself is unknown. The NPTN must include some additional types of training if it is

ever to provoke greater participation, but any campaign for computer literacy must undergo a thorough examination, for, as Theodore Roszak writes, its meaning is far from clear:

What is computer literacy? The original meaning of th phrase had to do with teaching programming - mainly in BASIC, the simplest and most widely used of the high-level computer languages. But by the late 1970s, doubts had arisen.... As programming slipped out of the curriculum, computer literacy became more and more of an educational chimera. (49-50)

Clarification of the concept is the first step towards successful training.

#### Barriers to Political Mobilization in

Cyberspace

I have argued thus far that the concepts of both computer literacy and information gaps are ill-defined, and have received little critical thinking.

Even beyond these concepts, however, the Free-Net movement has neglected

to ask some other important questions that will make a large impact on their sustainability.

A clear definition of information gaps still leaves critical thinking one

step shor: the proponents of Free-Nets assume that the information and communication which takes place in cyberspace are important enough to necessitate access for all, but this is by no means the case. At this point, the political discourse which takes place on community networks is prohibited on several fronts from being the critical discourse necessary for "cyberdemocracy".

First of all, computer networks' revolutionary potential are limited by the forms of discourse which occur there. Just as computer-mediated communication allows for horizontal flows of information and decreases the importance of time and place, it has limitations. Perhaps the greatest of these is its tendency to promote immediate responses, often emotional and lacking clear thought. Often computer discussions are dominated by a few with greater eagerness while many "lurkers" (those who read but do not post messages to a discussion) hold their opinions back. One of the solutions to these problems, allowing a moderator to determine which messages are posted to an entire group, also raises questions of censorship.

A lack of informational context allows the possibility of easy manipulation by users as well as moderators, and it typically narrows discussion to a very present-oriented paradigm. In cyberspace "last year is ancient history... - a major strike against the negative feedback capacity of new information technologies" (Hall 1994). Because people can join a discussion under pseudonyms and without revealing intentions, critical thinking becomes more difficult, and threads of discussion are open to easy manipulation by those who have interests in side-tracking the issues at hand. Misinformation is easily spread.

Second, many political and economic powers have little interest in involving themselves in revolutionary media. If the citizen users of Free-Nets have no interaction with government officials or trans-national companies, little cyber-discourse is unlikely to influence policies. In spite of the rhetoric about increasing public discussion, democratic participation and access to government officials, it is surprising how rarely this occurs.

While some powers-that-be stand to lose ground from the politicization of community networks, other stand to gain much from their implementation. The large number of networking being achieved by NPTN

will certainly have financial beneficiaries. For one, the forces which sell

computers are full-force behind the Free-Net movement, just as they were

behind the placement of personal computers in schools in the 1980s, a movement that left many unused (or at least under-used) computers in the

corner of the classroom (Roszak 60-1). One of the most-often-quoted writers of the community network, Steve Cisler, works for Apple Computers,

and Apple has been one of the big sponsors of the movement thus far. In

pure financial considerations, why establish a community network instead of

a common bulletin board system (BBS), which would be cheaper?

An issue related to commercial stakes in the Free-Net movement is technological dependency -- once (if) such community networks become important tools in both informational and communicative aspects, who will

continue to pay for their continual upgrading? With the power of computers doubling every two years, and the continuing rise in demands from more powerful software, older computers can quickly become irrelevant.

One of the real advantages of computer networking - access to information - can also serve as one of its major pitfalls. Theodore Roszak's

main complaint against information age tools is what he calls a "data glut,"

the overwhelming amount of information available on computer networks, much of it irrelevant for never having any type of quality check before

being posted. Roszak goes so far as to argue that this can serve as a form of social control, drowning people in a sea of information so that

important issues become obscured, and he is not alone in this realization.

Barbara Wellington Hall agrees: "more information alone is not a substitute for the development of critical or compassionate faculties. Data

may reveal the existence of injustice, but data alone rarely generate the

political will either to make difficult trade-offs or to discover creative

solutions to perennial problems" (124). Here the critique goes beyond the

tendencies within the medium itself, because how people use the medium is

invariably the bottom line which reveals its revolutionary potential: "the

most important information resources on the Internet are not stored in digital formats on a hard disk, but reside in the minds of the citizens who



exchange electronic mail" (Nader 1994).

At this point in the life of CMC, community networks are indeed used to connect people for political causes, but they are used far more often for other purposes. The number one requested category on YAHOO, a commercial Internet index, is erotica. Here computer networks seem to be following the same communication model that television and radio have followed -- entertainment. Some media critics see the same possibility of "entertaining ourselves to death," as with mass media news and talkshows, both of which could be a meaningful place for political discussion (Postman). Let us not forget that many of the same things being said now about computer-mediated communication were said in the beginning of the television and radio "revolutions:"

For the first time in human history we have available to us the ability to communicate simultaneously with millions of our fellowmen,

to furnish entertainment, instruction, widening vision of national problems and national events. (Herbert Hoover 1924, qtd. in Lappin 1995).

If Free-Nets and other community networks are successful at reaching people from all walks of life, even if it is only in the former "First World,"

how can they influence the on-line discourse so that it at least includes

public, politically-oriented discussion and avoid this entertainment bias?

This is a question which must be explored further in order to keep community networks from being just another communal gossip column.

Another fundamental question which has not yet been answered satisfactorily concerns the model of implementation which computer-mediated

communication will follow. Will it follow the private development model of

radio and television or the public development model of the telephone and

electricity? Free-Nets seem to push it in the direction of television and

radio, with the support of business as primary support, but it also combines the models, with its insistence on free public access and government support. The difference is that the Free-Nets have started as

grassroots movements, which then push both business and government to get involved. Is it then a new model for technological implementation?

Community networks could also serve to supplant real meeting places,

and convince people of a cyber-reality when real issues are obscured.

Jean Baudrillard's concept of "hyper-reality" certainly applies to community networks, and his concept disallows the possibility of a "real" (i.e., non-mediated community). If this is the case...

Many barriers, therefore, exist to any establishment of cyberspace as public space -- commercial or governmental dominance, technological dependency, data glut, surveillance techniques, or entertainment.

These uses of cyberspace do not promote cyberdemocracy, which should be characterized by citizens' forces free of governmental or commercial control,

and which must have a meaningful discourse on political and economic issues. The distractions of cyberspace are easily established, already

dominant, and take far less effort than maintaining the meaningful public

discussion of issues which is the heart of a democratic culture. In a master's thesis for MIT, Anne Beamish finds that:

All of this is not to say that CMC cannot serve as the vehicle for a

restoration of public discourse, but that the barriers to that discourse are

many and varied, and that even the Free-Nets, which in principle support

the foundation of that discourse, have a larger task than they imagine.

Finally, we must keep in mind that virtual reality can never replace reality, and that virtual communities will never replace real communities.

One might ask, as Howard Rheingold does, "whether the suburbanized, urban-decayed, paved and malled environment of modern America is a necessary condition for the proliferation of virtual communities." (225). If

so, then maybe the "underdeveloped" world is better off without Free-Nets.

Maybe we all are, but where technophilia is rampant, it is time to question

the hype and make some real effort to establish cyberdemocracy.

Armand

Mattelart notes that information technology "is the one area invested with

those beliefs and myths that so easily mistake technical revolution for a

revolution in social relations," (27) and Dr. Grundner and the NPTN would

be wise to see their task as serving the latter cause more than the former.

If its foundations are not laid soon, then community networks are bound to continue their growth while failing to meet their real goals, and cyberdemocracy will be just what it is now -- a utopian myth relegated to science fiction novels and idealist papers like this one.\*  
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