

# 2013 Vol 13 Issue No. 1 — The Internet as Politicizing Instrument

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This issue of *Transformations* presents essays responding to Marcus Breen's recent book *Uprising: The Internet's Unintended Consequences*. Breen asks whether the Internet can become a politicising instrument for the new online proletariat – the individualised users isolated by the monitor screen. He asks "if the proletariat can use the Internet, is it freed from the moral and social constraints of the past that were imposed by conventional media and its regulation of the public space?" (32) This question raises further issues. Does this freedom translate into an emancipatory politics where the proletariat is able to pursue its own ends, or does it simply reproduce the power relation between the user-subject and the Internet and those who control and manage it. The articles in this issue respond in various ways to these questions.

Marcus Breen's own article "The Internet and Privatism: Reconstructing the Monitor Space" makes a case for privatism – the restriction of subjective life to isolated or privatised experience, especially in relation to the computer monitor – as the new modality of meaning making in the Internet era. Using approaches associated with cultural and media studies, the paper traces the way the Internet has influenced the shift in the culture towards values associated with the confluence of ideas around the private, best described by privatism.

Fidele Vlavo's article investigates the central discourses that have constructed the internet as a democratic and public environment removed from state and corporate control. The aim is to call attention to the issues that have limited the development of the internet as a tool for socio-political empowerment. The paper first retraces the early discursive constructions that insist on representing the internet as a decentralised and open structure. It also questions the role played by the digerati (or cyber elite) in the formulation of contradictory demands for public interests, self-governance, and entrepreneurial rights. Finally, it examines the emergence of two early virtual communities and their attempts to facilitate free speech and self-regulation. In the context of activists advocating freedom of expression and government institutions re-organizing legislation to control the Internet, the examination of these discourses provides a useful starting point for the (re)assessment of the potential of direct online mobilization.

Emit Snake-Being's article examines the limits of the Internet as a politicising instrument by showing how Internet users are subject to the controls of the search engine algorithm, managed by elite groups whose purpose is to reproduce themselves in terms of neo-liberal capitalism. Invoking recent political events in the Middle East and in London in which a wired proletariat sought to resist and overturn political authorities through Internet communication, Snake-Beings argues that such events are compromised by the fact that they owe their possibility to Internet providers and their commercial imperatives. Snake-Being's article, as well as most of the other articles in this issue, offers a timely reminder not only of the possibilities, but of the limits of the Internet as a politicising instrument for progressive, emancipatory politics.

Frances Shaw's paper concerns the way in which the logic of surveillance operates in contested sites in cities where live coverage of demonstrations against capitalism leads to confrontation between demonstrators and police. Through a detailed account of the "Occupy Sydney" demonstration in 2011, Shaw shows how both demonstrators and police engaged in tactics of surveillance and resistance to counter each other's power and authority. In an age of instant communication and global surveillance, freedom of movement and freedom from surveillance in public spaces is drawn into the logics of power mediated by mobile 'phones and computer based communication technology.

Karyl Ketchum's paper offers detailed analysis of two Internet sites to show how the proletarianisation of the Internet is gendered in terms of male interests. Picking up on Breen's argument that Internet proletarianisation leads to an open system that "supports both anything and anyone," she argues that, in the domain of online pornography, this new-found freedom turns out to be "the power of computer analytics to harness and hone the shifting meanings of white Western Enlightenment masculinities in new globalising postcolonial contexts, economies and geopolitical struggles." Furthermore, Ketchum shows how this default to male interests was also at work in American reporting of the Arab Spring revolutions in Egypt and other Middle Eastern countries. The YouTube video posted by a young Egyptian woman, Asmaa Mahfouz, which sparked the revolution in Egypt that eventually overthrew the Mubarak government, was not given due coverage by the Western media, so that "women like Mahfouz all but disappear from Western accounts of the Arab Spring."

Gustav Lidén and Katarina Giritli Nygren's paper addresses the challenges to the theories of the political sphere posed by a digital society. It is suggested that this is most evident at the intersection between understandings of technology, performativities, and politics that combines empirical closeness with abstract understandings of socio-political and cultural contexts. The paper exemplifies this by reporting on a study of online citizen dialogue in the

making, in this case concerning school planning in a Swedish municipality. Applying these theoretical perspectives to this case provides some key findings. The technological design is regarded as restricting the potential dialogue, as is outlined in different themes where the participants enact varying positions—taxpayers, citizen consumers, or local residents. The political analysis stresses a dialogue that lacks both polemic and public perspectives, and rather is characterized by the expression of different special interests. Together, these perspectives can provide the foundation for the development of applying theories in a digital society.