

*Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics*

*Control and Freedom* responds to the questions: How has the Internet, a medium that thrives on control, been accepted as a mass medium of freedom? Why is freedom increasingly indistinguishable from paranoid control? This book contends that the Internet's emergence as a mass medium—its concurrent “democratization” and “privatization” of publicity and surveillance—is symptomatic of, and essential to, the remapping of public and private spheres brought about by the end of the Cold War. This remapping responds to the failure of deterrence, to the failures of traditional notions and practices of discipline and liberty. This crisis in power is often experienced as, and explained through, sexuality and race, from U.S. legislation on Internet pornography to commercial dotcom tactics that have conflated technological with racial empowerment. The separation between private versus public, which (as John Stuart Mill and Jurgen Habermas have argued) grounds liberal democracy and markets, is mutating into closed versus open, and control is being remapped as freedom. This remapping, and the paranoia it engenders, stems from the desire to solve political problems technologically.

Methodologically, *Control and Freedom* engages all four layers of new media—hardware, software, interface and extra-medial representation (the representation of new media in other media and new media's role in larger economic and cultural systems)—in its analysis, for the Internet cannot be reduced to its users' experiences, its interface, or its protocol. Thus, this book seeks to bridge the gap between media archaeology (which focuses on questions of hardware and software) and critical media studies (which focuses on users' experiences and the role of mass media within society). It also resists post-dotcom meltdown trends in new media studies to deny the importance of cyberspace—and all the utopian promises it implies—to the Internet. The Internet was produced and sold through unfulfillable promises and utopian rhetoric that portrayed it as “theory come true”—as *the* ideal capitalist marketplace, as *the* bourgeois public sphere, as embodying Judith Butler's theories of sexuality as performativity, or Jacques Lacan's theories of fragmented identities. This book examines, rather than dismiss as misguided, these promises and rhetoric in order to understand how the Internet emerged as a mass medium to solve the problems of all other mass media. This book thus also attempts to ‘think theory’ after fiber optics, rather than revealing how electronic communications conform to or epitomize older theoretical concepts. The formal literalization of theory—the uncanny parallels between the Internet and these other theories—does not mean that they have come true, but rather points elsewhere. For instance, the fact that the Internet does offer online spaces in which one's personal identity is not automatically revealed and yet discrimination is still rampant, if not accentuated, in them means that theories of racial discrimination need to be revisited. Focusing on similarities can thus blind us to important epistemological and political changes.

Through fiber optic networks—through light coursing through glass tubes—*Control and Freedom* engages the rich philosophical tradition of light as a figure for knowledge, clarification, surveillance and discipline, in order to argue that fiber optic networks physically instantiate, and thus shatter, Enlightenment. The exposure enabled by and constitutive of the Internet—the glare of fiber optic networks—and not the illusory

promise of individual empowerment, grounds the Internet as a democratic medium. The Internet's intrusive interactivity—the ways it involves us and our machines in dialogues that we cannot entirely control, the ways it makes every client a server—grounds the Internet's democratic potential. This democratic potential, however, is placed constantly at risk through the conflation of control with freedom.

The extended Introduction outlines the questions driving this book, as well as its theoretical and methodological interventions. The next section, Interlude, draws out the uncanny similarities between Daniel Paul Schreber's paranoid hallucinations of 1903 and the high-speed networks of 2003. Schreber's system—a communications network, which confuses "pictured men" with real ones, consisting of light rays and a "writing down system" that records everything—foreshadows our current fiber optic technologies. This foreshadowing of networks and paranoid reactions to them, this interlude argues, does not all mean that we are Schreber. If Schreber's paranoia stemmed from his realization that the liberties are built on a grid of disciplines—that the promises of formal equality are regularly subverted by disciplinary practices—ours blinds us to the transformation of discipline and liberty to control and freedom. The rest of the book elaborates upon this.

Chapter one addresses the discontinuities between the Internet as TCP/IP, the Internet as popularly conceived of as "cyberspace," and William Gibson's fictional "cyberspace." Arguing that the Internet has little to nothing in common with cybernetics or Gibson's fiction, it contends that cyberspace's power stems from the ways it plays with notions of place and space. Cyberspace maps the Internet as a perfect frontier, as a Foucauldian heterotopia. Cyberspace has also enabled certain critical thinkers to theorize users as ideal, unobserved spectators, as flâneurs. However, in order to operate, the Internet turns every spectator into a spectacle: users are more like gawkers—viewers who become spectacles through their accentuated viewing—rather than flâneurs. Users are used as they use. In its analysis of TCP/IP, it argues that the public/private binary has been supplanted by open/closed. The increasing privatization of space and networks is responsible for this supplanting and poses the most significant challenge to liberal democracy today.

The next chapter takes on the question of the Internet and democracy through an analysis of the "Great Internet Sex Panic of 1995," online pornography, and the U.S. Federal and Supreme Court decisions on the Communications Decency Act. It contends that the "discovery" of online pornography and the government's attempts to regulate it in the mid- to late-1990s were necessary conditions for dot-com mania (at the most basic level, the government's endorsement of credit card validation as sufficient safe harbor from prosecution made commercial pornographers seem socially responsible, rather than greedy, for charging for information that *should* be free. As many commentators have noted, the success of commercial pornographers post-CDA was crucial to convincing corporate America and consumers that credit card transactions over the Internet were viable). In the debate over cyberporn, Internet interactions were divided into the good and the bad based on content: pornographic content was invasive; almost all other content enlightening. Electronic contact, however, cannot be so sequestered

because the risk of exposure underlies all electronic exchanges. Again, this exposure grounds, rather than subverts, the Internet's democratic potential.

To understand how such a vulnerable medium was sold as empowering, Chapter three examines narratives the Internet as a form of racial empowerment: in the late 1990s, almost all television commercials by Internet-related companies featured happy people of color; Bill Gates argued that the Internet enabled an "equity" not found elsewhere. By contrasting MCI's "Anthem" commercial with United Nations documents on the digital divide, this chapter argues that these commercials were not directed at getting more people of color online, but rather at convincing the general television viewer (of shows like CNN's *Moneyline*) that the Internet was a happy multi-cultural space, not a pornographic badlands. This chapter also investigates the logic of "passing" at the heart of this conflation of technological with racial empowerment, for this promise of equality is based on the claim that the Internet supposedly allows users to "pass" as the fictional whole and complete subject of the bourgeois public sphere. That is, it transforms the desire to be free from discrimination by people of color into a desire to be free from their very bodies. The logic of passing, this chapter argues, also paradoxically grounds the prevalence of race as an online pornographic category. This chapter ends by considering work by the digital collective *Mongrel*, which refuses both to commodify and to erase race. Their work questions the effectiveness and desirability of passing and pushes the democratic potential of the Internet.

In response to the question of cyberspace raised in chapter two, chapter four explores the impact of cyberpunk to the Internet and to postmodern efforts to "cognitively map" the world (attempts to represent the increasingly unrepresentable relationship between individual subjects and the ensemble of society's structures as a whole). American and cyberpunk fiction and *anime* originated the desire for cyberspace, rather than cyberspace as commonly understood today, by making electronic spaces comprehensible and pleasurable through the orientalizing—the exoticizing and eroticizing—of others and other spaces (In William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*, "Ninsei" and cyberspace are conflated; in Mamoru Oshii's *anime Ghost in the Shell*, Hong Kong and its denizens are emblematic of information networks). Cyberpunk's global vision—its force as a cognitive map—stems from its conflation of racial otherness with localness. Through close readings of *Neuromancer* and *Ghost in the Shell*, this chapter investigates the ways in which narratives of and on cyberspace seek to manage and engage interactivity. High-tech Orientalism is not simply a mode of domination, but a way of dealing with—of enjoying—perceived vulnerability (*Neuromancer* was written during the 1980s, when the U.S. was in recession and the Japanese economy booming; *Ghost In the Shell* was released the mid-1990s, when Japan was in recession and China's economic future prospects overwhelming).

The fifth chapter concludes the book by clarifying control-freedom and linking it to the rise of a generalized paranoia. It revisits the commercials addressed in Chapter Three in order to expose the paranoia driving them (it's not just, hurry up and get online because

the Internet is such a wonderful space, but hurry up and get online because all these other people are already there, perhaps using this technology to their advantage). After elaborating on the relationship between paranoia and technology (paranoia is essential to proper data backup and to producing search terms necessary for pre-emptive action), it then moves to a closer analysis of freedom-control through a reading of face recognition technology and webcams. Against the current conflation of freedom with safety, it argues, with Jean Luc Nancy, that freedom is an experience we all share and that it cannot be controlled—it cannot be reduced to the free movement of a commodity within a marketplace. To do so is to destroy the very freedom one claims to be protecting. Lastly, it contends that the changing role of race exemplifies our experience of control-freedom as sexuality.