

Scenes of Empowerment: Virtual Empowerment and Digital Divides

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Two questions have to a large extent motivated my work. The first: How is it that the Internet, a medium that turns every spectator into spectacle, how is it that such a compromising medium has been accepted and sold as empowering? The second: Why has “interactivity”—rigorously understood as the incessant and non-volitional exchange of information between machines—why has this compulsory and fundamentally public interchange become re-mapped as the voluntary exchange of information?

These two questions are key to understanding the disconnect between the four “layers” of digital media—hardware, software, interface, and extra-digital representation—, and are also central to grasping the singularity of what is often too glibly called “new” media. Rather than the more obvious differences between monitor and page, monitor and screen, the compromised boundary between viewing and being viewed, and the continual non-conscious exchange of information mark the differences between electronic and projected texts; between networked and non-networked contexts. They also expose the need for more expansive digital criticism, a form that engages non-visual and non-readable electronic interchanges. Consider, for instance, Microsoft’s Media Player. Whenever you play a local CD with it, it sends Microsoft information about the CD to which you are listening. Whenever you listen to or watch a real media file, it sends the site your “unique identifier.” You can, of course, choose to work “off-line” and request that media player not transmit your “unique identifier”, but this requires that you change two default settings, which are rather remarkably referred to as *your* preferences. It also

assumes that you've actually read the fine print in that window that appears when you—or your friendly neighbourhood IT person--installed the software. Of course, Microsoft, in advertising this product, does not emphasize its tracking mechanisms, but instead sells its product as empowering and user-friendly. So now, with one click of a mouse you can listen to both your CD and Internet-based radio stations. So now, you can automatically receive software updates and optimize your connection to remote sites.

Even when one does something as innocuous as browse a webpage, one's computer sends information, such as one's IP address, browser type, language preference, and hostname. All of this is invisible to the user, who views itself as in control, as zooming through the Information Superhighway. All this is invisible to the user, whose gaze is focused on the representations before it, rather than on the ways in which it too is represented and circulated. Rather than simply allowing people to exercise what Walter Benjamin once called their "legitimate claim to be reproduced" (232), the Internet also circulates their representations without their consent and without their knowledge.

Acknowledging vulnerability does not mean endorsing paranoid narratives of global surveillance. Focusing on corporate "cookies," which supposedly track our every online interactions, or on global spy systems, such as Echelon also mask the constant, non-volitional exchange of information that drives the system, drives Internet Protocol. Conceiving the Internet as an unfailing surveillant device is the obverse - not the opposite - of the Internet as agency-enhancing marketplace, for it too seeks to give purpose, to map as volitional and permanent what is essentially non-volitional, uncertain, and dependent on software. Conceiving of the Internet in this manner also obfuscates the ways in which the client-server model of the WWW, in which your computer receives

data from machines designated as servers, is an ideological construction. Every computer with an Ethernet card can serve information, and can also go into “promiscuous” mode and thus sniff packets in its vicinity. The fact that your computer only reads packets designated for your IP address is a software glitch. The Internet as Panopticon myth also screens the impossibility of storing, accessing and analyzing everything—if your Ethernet card did sniff and store all packets your hard drive would soon crash – that is, if your network is configured as a bus rather than star. This myth also conceals the ephemerality of information and the importance of software and local conditions in ways that belie people’s everyday experiences with computers. Indeed, it is remarkable how many people whose computers crash on a regular basis, whose floppies have become unreadable, whose emails disappear into the nether-nether world of the global network, honestly believe in a world-wide surveillance network in which no piece of data is ever lost, in which everything is stored for later viewing. In this sense, computer memory is an compensatoroy paradox. It is similarly remarkable how many people, who often cannot read files because they don’t have the right software, accept narratives about the “inherent nature” of the Internet that erase software’s significance and existence.

Software constantly mediates our interactions, and Althusser’s model of ideology seems to fit software perfectly. Software, or perhaps more precisely operating systems (OS), offer us an imaginary relationship to our hardware—we are not offered a representation of the motherboard or other electronic devices, but rather a relationship based on desktops, folders, files and recycling bins. We are offered an open picture within which to insert ourselves—a picture that is seemingly useless without our intervention. Without OS, of course, we would have no access to hardware, which is

essentially unrepresentable. As well, each operating system interpellates a “user”—calls it and offers it a name or image with which to recognize itself. So, mac users “think different,” UNIX/Linux users are free-ware open-source power geeks, and windows users, well windows users are mainstream, functionalist types. (Brown v. Princeton)

Importantly, OS limit what is visible and invisible, imaginable and unimaginable through the “choices” it offers us. For instance, UNIX allows for multiple desktops, something that neither mac or windows does—yet. As well, Microsoft allows you to trash their Internet explorer icon, but refuses to let you move it to another location. But you’re not necessarily aware of how software constantly constricts and creates you—in the guise of being “user-friendly”—unless you find yourself frustrated by their preferences, or if you use multiple operating systems or navigational software.

This positioning or interpellation of “users,” however, happens in front of the television set and in the cinema, amongst other places. You don’t have to be online in order to imagine yourself as a user—indeed, the “hype” around the Internet, from science fiction pre-visions to block buster films—reveals the ways in which one usually imagines oneself as a user before one actually engages the Internet. Thus, analyzing the Internet both on- and off-line is key to understanding how much energy, work, code and money is needed to sustain and create our present notions of the Internet. Our present notion of the Internet as a marketplace of ideas and commodities, of the Internet as controlled by user mouse-clicks, notions that belie the ways in which internet protocol, software design and government regulations relentlessly democratize and privatize publicity. In my book project, *Sexuality in the Age of Fiber Optics*, I argue that this expansion of publicity is experienced as and negotiated through sexuality. For instance, initial attempts to regulate

the Internet focused on online pornography and basically divided online contact into the “good,” the non-intrusive and the bad, the pornographic. Dividing contact in this manner displaced the invasiveness of the Internet from its structure to its content, and created a norm/ideal of mouse-clicking as a form of affirmative action, of online communications as civil interchange, as the simple exchange of ideas. In this ideal, people actually read their email, and post their ideas, wait patiently for a deliberate response, and then perhaps post again. This ideal thus marks as abnormal the common practices of flaming, spamming, stalking and simply ignoring one’s email.

For the rest of this talk, I want to focus on the centrality of race to the formation of something we may call a “user.” It is precisely when trying to understand how something like inter-activity works, that questions of race, technology and utopia become central. Indeed, Race has been and still is central to conceptualizing cyberspace as a dystopian or utopian space or time. Foundational cyberpunk pre-visions, from William Gibson’s 1984 *Neuromancer* to Neal Stephenson’s 1993 *Snow Crash*, use “Asian” “African” and “half-breed” characters to create seductively dystopian near futures. In order to sell sunnier ones, advertisements, from MCI’s 1997 “Anthem” to Cisco Systems’ 1998-9 “Empowering the Internet Generation” series, feature variously “raced” humans who extol the benefits of global telecommunications networks, which they are portrayed as already “ready for” or using. These corporate “scenes of empowerment,” which frame users as “super-agents,” exploit the nostalgia for a never-realized bourgeois public sphere that underlies much cyberpunk longing to escape one’s flesh. No doubt, given the recent dot.com meltdown, these “speaking others” will be replaced by images of security and powerful white male voice-overs. However, to give you a sense of these scenes of

empowerment, I'd like to show you MCI's 1997 aptly named "Anthem" commercial, which essentially cemented this advertising trend.

[MCI commercial]

By picturing electronic text as enabling racial - and indeed gender and age - passing, telecommunications companies take what could be considered drawbacks to "empowering" communications, namely duplicity and unverifiability, and spin them into features that enable "free" and agency-enhancing communications. It is not that someone could be lying to you, or that you cannot be sure who someone is, but that you can transcend the physical limitations of your own body. This spin positions viewers/would be users as speakers, which screens the fact that most people "lurk" rather than post and the fact that lurkers "speak" non-volitionally.

Most importantly, this re-writing of the Internet as emancipating naturalizes racism. The logic framing MCI's commercial reduces to: what *they* can't see can't hurt *you*. Since race, gender, age and infirmities are only skin-deep (or so this logic goes), moving to a text-based medium makes them—and thus the discrimination that *stems from them*—disappear. Although "no race" rather than "no racism" unwittingly leaves open the possibility of racism without "race," this formulation effectively conceals individual and institutional responsibility for discrimination, since it posits discrimination as a problem that the discriminated must solve. The message is not even: "do not discriminate." It is: "get online if you want to avoid being discriminated against."

However framed, this offer to abandon or trade-in one's always-already-violated body is tantalizing, and MCI's vision of the Internet supports those who argue against the adequacy of formal equality—and we are in an extremely odd moment when corporations

such as MCI take on left wing critiques of the public sphere in order to sell their products. For the “marketplace of ideas” to work as Michael Warner has argued, “the validity of what you say in public bears a negative relation to your person. What you say [carries] force not because of who you are but despite who you are.” MCI’s relentless focus on these people’s bodies—or more precisely their body parts—shows that this principle of negativity is itself negated by “the humiliating positivity of the particular” in “real” life—or more precisely real life as portrayed by MCI on TV. And it’s important to underscore the importance of televisual, commercial representation here. In this type of representation, the power behind “no race, no genders, no age, no infirmities” stems from having these raced, gendered, aged and infirm persons speak. This positive relation to their bodies, rather than interfering with their speech, grounds it. As well, their physical particularities mark them as generic and interchangeable—it’s important that marked persons speak, but any person would suffice.

This logic of objectification, of reducing persons to their markers of difference, adheres to the logic of pornotroping. Hortense Spillers, in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” uses this term to explain the captive body. Most simply, pornotroping reduces a person to flesh, and then displays this flesh for the pleasure of the viewing subject/body. To bring out the differences between the captive and the “people,” Spillers distinguishes between body and flesh, culture and cultural vestibularity (458). Flesh serves as an entryway to a culture: in order for subjects to become cultured, they must pass through flesh (as vestibule). To be flesh, then, is to be open to fissures, scars and other markings. Whereas the body in public is shielded by private protections, flesh is outside the prophylaxis offered by the Fourth and Fourteenth Amendments. There is no distance

between public and private, no smooth surface to keep them separate. To be flesh is to be not quite human. In Giorgio Agamben's term, it is to be homo sacer: to be bare life. It is not simply, then, that some have had access to disembodiment and others have not, but rather that some have never had a body—in the sense of an integrated whole whose skin is seamless and unmarked—from which to abstract in the first place.

MCI's commercial does not perform the extreme violence enacted on the captive slave as discussed by Spillers, but its cuts and flesh follow in the trajectory of what Saidya Hartman has called "scenes of subjection." Scenes of subjection, from brutal scenes of whippings to happy portrayals of singing slaves, Hartman argues, express the brutality of slavery in "the forms of subjectivity and circumscribed humanity imputed to the enslaved."<sup>1</sup> Analyzing graphic portrayals of atrocious beatings, she argues the brutality contained within them was second only to the abolitionist demands that the suffering of slavery "be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body."<sup>2</sup> Hartman also argues that these scenes call for a form of empathy in which difference is obliterated, in which the self replaces the other, in which the white self imagines itself as a black beaten slave. The degradation of the other, then, becomes a moment for self-reflection, rather than an event one witnesses. The forced "happy scenes of slavery" similarly envision blacks "fundamentally as vehicles for white enjoyment."<sup>3</sup> Hartman then argues that these scenes of subjection underlie liberal U.S. post-slavery's doctrine of equality and exclusion, equal but separate. MCI's commercial similarly insists on the

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<sup>1</sup> *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford UP, New York and Oxford 1997, 6.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

inadequacy of these raced others and displays them for the pleasure of the television viewer/consumer. It also similarly insists on an Internet that is separate but equal and this doctrine of equality and exclusion is most forcefully revealed in MCI's shot of the "empowered black male" (figure 1).

[play and pause]

In this shot, three windows are in play: the "real" window, the television screen and the computer screen. Each window enables a different kind of empowerment. The "real" window enables the black male to survey the concrete beneath him and thus signals that he has made it to the top—or near the top—of a corporation. Rather than surveying the landscape he has conquered, however, he first gazes into the computer screen, implying that the virtual is more important than the physical. Privileged above these windows, however, is the television screen. The viewers look down on the black male who moves from looking at the computer screen to looking up at them, which reassures them that "equality" will not lead to their demotion. Instead, these others will be content with the empowerment offered, even if the offer is only good on the Internet. Through this shot and the concluding shots in which the initially slightly defiant speakers get happier, MCI tames the already tame defiance of "there is no race," by making these "persons" desire nothing more than to trade their flesh for better unmarked bodies on the Internet. This neatly separates the contradiction so succinctly encapsulated by Lauren Berlant, that "the nation holds out a promise of emancipation and a pornographic culture both." MCI's answer is: be pornographic in real life, but be emancipated online; be objectified and displayed in real life, but resist objectification by becoming text – just like MCI's logo - online.

Not accidentally, there is only one image of an able-bodied, non-“ethnic” white man. The picture of domesticity, he flashes on the screen quickly as he hovers over his small daughter on whom the camera focuses (Figures 2.6 and 2.7).

[play rest of commercial]

As he types on the computer, his small daughter watches and, later in the commercial (“where minds, doors and lives open up”), his small daughter takes over the keyboard and we see only his hands, which surround her. In all these shots, this white male ignores the audience. Rather than declaring that there is no race, gender, age or infirmities, he is raceless, genderless, ageless, and infirmity-free. He is, perhaps, the very person typing those messages to us.

As construed by MCI, then, the Internet offers us the limited opportunity to *pass* as this *fictional* unmarked white male. Represented only as text, the corporate disembodied trademark promises to move us from being marked to being untraceable and unremarkable. That is, if trademarks have traditionally, as Lauren Berlant argues, offered consumers a prosthetic body, a body to take on in public, yet still a body immersed in commodity culture, MCI offers a prosthetic identity that mimics *the original*, *unrepresentable* prosthetic identity (the fact that MCI must visualize this white male, even if only to show him ignoring the audience, reveals the impossibility of “pure textuality,” of pure mastery, as well as the privilege still inherent in this place-holding position). Through its play of regularly consumable yet unsatisfactory bodies, through its textual traces and through this fleeting white male placeholder, MCI merges the “equality” that stems of mass consumption with the supposed subject of the bourgeois public sphere, who writes and argues rather than merely consumes and who leaves only

textual traces. So, if Habermas condemns the laws of the market for destroying rational-critical debate by replacing it with consumption, MCI offers a way to *buy* oneself back into the realm of rational-critical “debate,” which is now re-defined as a *marketplace of ideas*.<sup>4</sup> It allows the Internet to seem empowering by conflating racial and technological empowerment, and by re-writing the goals of the civil rights movement from the eradication of discrimination to the eradication of physical markers of difference.

Now, it is important to keep in mind the fact that “Anthem” represented and still represents a virtual state of affairs, not only in terms of what “only words” actually enables, but also in terms of user demographics. In 1997, the Internet was not populated by the demographic this commercial portrays. *Falling through the Net II*, a US government report analyzing telecommunications use in 1997, reveals that White households were more than twice as likely (40.8%) to own a computer than Black (19.3%) or Hispanic (19.4%) households. In 2000, although blacks and Hispanic households had a much higher percentage increase in computer ownership, the real number disparity between Whites and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders households versus Blacks and Hispanics grew, which clearly shows the continuing effects of historical inequalities. If all groups increase at a steady rate, the “unwired” races will never catch up—and these figures don’t even address differences in types of access.

Countering corporate scenes of empowerment with “digital divide” statistics, however, is hardly an effective strategy, especially given that corporations such as Cisco

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<sup>4</sup> See Habermas’ “Chapter 19: The Blurred Blueprint: Developmental Pathways in the Disintegration of the Bourgeois Public Sphere,” *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into the Category of Bourgeois Society*, Thomas Burger (trans), MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1991.

Systems run ads in which people of color all around the world happily offer statistics about future Internet usage, while at the same time devoting corporate energy and charity towards battling the digital divide. Moreover, viewing this disconnect as discrediting these scenes of empowerment mis-reads the purpose of this commercial and commercials of this genre. The purpose of these corporate scenes of empowerment is not to get more racially-marked people on the Internet: after all, these “others” urge viewers to enter their utopia. The purpose of these commercials is to convince people that the Internet is a safe and happy place. In 1997, the debate over cyberporn saturated public dialogue; 1998 marked the beginning of the e-commerce revolution. This is not to say that everyone who viewed the commercial instantly believed that the Internet was a virtually realized utopia, nor that this commercial single-handedly changed public perception of the Internet. This is to say that it helped move the terms of public debate about the Net. After the Net as Racial Utopia explosion, the debate became: “to what extent does the Internet allow for democratic exchange and equality?” rather than, “to what extent is the Internet a pornographic badlands?” Needless to say, questioning the Internet’s status as a utopia is more inductive to commercial transactions than questioning its status as a lawless frontier.

Further, corporations have no problem with the “digital divide” because they use the disparity between potential and actual empowerment in order to insinuate themselves as “the solution.” By defining racial equality via technology as the “ideal,” they argue for the increased adoption of technology until such racial (consumer) equality is reached. Maintaining disparity enables them to have an unending “mandate”. If you look carefully at rhetoric about the digital divide—provided by corporations,

governments, and the United Nations—what becomes clear is that these agencies view equitable consumer access, selling state-owned telecommunications networks and developing digital sweatshops in the developing world as the solution. Moreover, most solutions to the digital divide within the US concentrate on giving raced others access to the Internet—not to the tools and skills needed to transform it. They focus on producing websites that are attractive to middle-income people of color with credit cards. So, whereas commercials such as MCI insist on the irrelevance race, corporate solutions to the digital divide re-introduce race through their advocacy of racially-marked websites—and indeed race is proliferating on the Internet, not disappearing.

This proliferation of race as a consumer category is not necessarily a good thing, not only because it elides class, but also because the emphasis on race or ethnicity as a consumer category leads to difference as a category to be consumed as well. It encourages one to celebrate, or to identify with another race by indulging in what one perceives are the same pleasures, where an idea of authentic or cultural consumption grounds the “ethnicity” of these pleasures. The most banal and prevalent example of this is multi-culturalism as a form of “taste-testing” (i.e. honey lets eat Chinese tonight). The most extraordinary of example of this is A&E’s portrayal of Jeffrey Dalmer as a “multi-cultural” mass murderer, because he killed and feasted on people of color. And this idea of consuming what the other consumes, or literally consuming the other, leads to the increasing presence of “racial” categories as pornographic ones. Race has not disappeared on the Internet, but rather become entrenched as a pornographic category. Since computers in general tend to reduce everything to a database category, race has become a database category in which the other is displayed and looked at in ways that

reinforce notions of user control. Indeed it's easier to get pornographic websites through a search on asian+woman, than a search on pornography.

[do search—google. Pornography v. asian+woman]

These “asian” pornsites are directed at those wishing to “pass” as authentic ethnic subjects through “fetish” or “exotic” desires. For instance, the introduction to [www.asiannudes.com](http://www.asiannudes.com) encourages surfers to become samurai taking these gorgeous asian women displayed in complete submission before them. The idea is to make them feel as though they are all-powerful samurai, all powerful users - spectators rather than spectacles. This open invitation to “become samurai” reveals the mediated nature of identification, since Asians too must pass as samurai. Clearly, “passing as a samurai” is different than passing as an invisible white male, but both require concurrent identification and mis-recognition, as well as the objectification of others. If pornography in general, as Linda Williams has argued, has been linked to the “frenzy of the visible” - the increasing desire to “see” and “know” - these websites reveal the link between pornography and authentic ethnic knowledge.

Although pornographic websites' content, such as webcams and “interactive sessions” in which models follow your commands may be directed at making its viewers seem all-powerful, pornography's elucidation of visceral responses - the ways that pornography moves its viewers - hardly enables “super-control” over one's own body. As well, porn sites' structures are usually anything but empowering. They re-write browser defaults through javascripts, so that new windows open when you try to close them, so that the back button takes you to another porn site. They also collect IP information and track their visitors. This disparity between a “user's” perceived and

actual level of control seems greatest in pornography sites, and in commercial sites in general. It is precisely in order to compensate for the ways in which interactivity breaches the “self” that dreams of super-agency emerge.

The fact that racial categories are also pornographic database categories, however, does not mean that all references to race on the Internet are racist, or that all pornography simply re-inforces racism, or that passing always succeeds. It does mean that effective anti-racist uses of the Internet must refuse both the commodification and erasure of race. Anti-racist uses of the internet must erode the relationship between spectacle and spectator buttressed by mainstream uses of the web by making interactivity visible and by creating critical literacy. The UK- and Jamaica-based “digital collective,” Mongrel, produce software that exemplifies such an engagement. Their search engine *Natural Selection*, for instance, ties anti-racist websites to racist searches.

[show natural selection]

If the user as super-agent construct depends on the objectification and representation of others, *Natural Selection* attacks the reliability and authenticity of such representations. As Harwood explain, if we can get to the point where most people think the information they access on the web is faked, then we’ll be getting somewhere.

The sites that Mongrel offer are not simply anti-racist. Users should also be prepared, in some cases, to be confronted with pornographic images that expose the thin line between white supremacist fetishism and gay pornography, to listen to White Supremacist punk spliced together with Black Nationalist rap, and to be interrogated by javascripts alerts. In order to make race “hard to consume” the websites catalogued in the *Natural Selection* database do not allow for the “distance” needed for a liberal or color-blind subject to emerge. They also refuse to offer authentic images of “others” as a way

to counter racist stereotypes that are perpetuated online – they refuse to confess their “truth” to the user for its edification. For instance, Dimela Yekwai’s “anti-viral” site juxtaposes the words of “Venus-Fly-Killer” next to the racist words of “Bombarded-Images.” Yekwai uses javascript alerts, which interrupt the user and highlight “responsibility,” highlight the ways in which the call of the other precedes the “user” or self.

- virus that she protects against, as her spinning head “accompanies” us through our travels is racist information.
- These alerts leave no way to say no. Y

Yekwai’s alerts thus make the site interactive, but in a way that belies interactivity as user-controlled.

They have also produced a version of Photoshop 1.0 that replaces the “normal” color groupings with race and class-based groupings.

[show photoshop] – rework actions

They used this software to create, *National Heritage*, takes on the racism as a global national heritage. Describing it as an “abortion” on “cyber-civilization,” it wages “info-war against the racially-exclusive, US west coast eutopian nonsense” and seeks to take the “future” away from those “who left us out of the past”

(<http://www.mongrelx.org/Project/projects.html>). Using images created for the *Colour Separation* campaign, *National Heritage* offers users seemingly stereotypical or representative racial specimens that are in fact amalgamations of numerous “friends” of Mongrel. Through fabrications of “people that never existed,” then, Mongrel tries to insist on historical and economic context. By exposing the duplicity central to digital

imaging, they seek to expose the duplicity central to racial stereotyping. Through this project, Mongrel attacks the premise of stable others, or shows that such constructions can only be fabrications.

Mongrel's projects highlight the fact that the pornographizing of difference does not close the possibility of the Internet as a public sphere, as a new, more-open means for textual communication with others. It offers us a point from which to begin an analysis of the Internet as a rigorously public medium. To begin this analysis, though, we must refuse the binary opposition between intrusive and non-intrusive content, refuse the myth of pornographic images as simply intrusive and unread. We must also explore the consequences and possibilities behind "only words"—especially since text, rather than receding with the emergence of online images, is proliferating and because images are read, not simply absorbed. "Only words," rather than meaning only minds or ideas, means vulnerability and exposure. As Tom Keenan puts it, "Language gives no stable ground to humanity, makes no room for our signs and representations. If we do so, if we make images and express ourselves, we do so only at the risk of the selves we so desperately long to present and represent."

Publicity stems from language, stems from the breach between seeing and being seen, of representing and being represented. Publicity is an enabling violence. If the Internet does allow for disembodied communications, perhaps it is because speaking disembodies us—or rather undermines the fiction of an embodied subject. The metaphor of the marketplace seeks to contain publicity by reducing all contact to the buying and selling of ideas, as though one merely consumes and is never consumed by words, as though we always buy and sell and are never bought and sold. Information does not

zoom off a webpage and then park itself in your brain—electronic texts are read.

Moreover, unread electronic texts still have a function.

Take, for instance, Electronic Disturbance Theatre's use of Electronic Disobedience. Their software, floodnet, allows groups of users to effectively tie-up servers, so they can no longer serve webpages—it takes advantage of the fact that most servers cannot handle many simultaneous requests. They first unleashed their software during a “virtual sit-in” on the U.S. and Mexican Government's site in response to the military suppression of the Zapatistas. After a similar attack was unveiled on CNN.com and Yahoo.com, such acts no longer qualify as civil disobedience and are criminal offenses. a of consequence the Internet going “public” by being sold to private corporations. Regardless, such acts reveal how communication works on the Internet in ways that belie the marketplace of ideas or commodities. Indeed, the sheer number of email messages to U.S. representatives during the 1998-9 President Clinton impeachment debate guaranteed that they would never be read—not only were many of them dismissed as repetitive, they often crashed email servers. Regardless, they still registered—they still counted as interactions between self and other.

In short, the Internet is indeed a public space not because it allows individuals to finally become disembodied minds and exchange ideas as rational subjects, but rather because it allows individuals to speak in a space that is fundamentally indeterminate. Fiber optic networks threaten an infinite open circle of the representable—they threaten to break the glass so that nothing screens the subject from the circulation of words images. Instead of only celebrities being caught the glare of publicity, the average citizen finds him or herself blinded and harassed. Fiber optic networks literalize enlightenment

and others' words, transported as light—indeed translated into light and shooting through glass tubes—invade us. They engage all acts enlightening—all types of light streaming from a window—from the relentless light of surveillance, to the blinding light of harassment, to the artificial light needed for self-contemplation or self-reflection.

Thank you.