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1

Introduction: Tracing Radical Democracy and the Internet

Lincoln Dahlberg and Eugenia Siapera

Democracy, mass media, and the Internet

'Democracy' has become a universal signifier of political legitimacy. No major political programme or regime wants to be labelled undemocratic. However, the success of this signifier has far exceeded the success of actual democratic practice. Political systems throughout the world, including really existing democratic systems, are plagued by corruption, non-transparent decision-making processes, hierarchical power distribution, corporate influence over government and information flows, cynical public relations and consultation exercises, capitalist globalization, neo-imperialist coercion, and reactionary fundamentalisms. Moreover, the signifier 'democracy' has been used to legitimate all manner of anti-democratic actions, including state and private surveillance, harassment and silencing of critical voices, detentions without trial, neo-liberal policies, global corporate expansion, and outright neo-imperialist invasions and war. When these political conditions are combined with an ever-expanding consumer culture that promises private solutions to social problems, it is not surprising that many of the global middle classes, including those in so-called advanced democratic nations, are more interested in consumption than in politics. Meanwhile, for those trapped in grinding poverty, precarious labour, and existential uncertainty, the lack of time, energy, and resources clearly explains an absence of participation in democratic processes and a turn to otherworldly fundamentalist religions (Davis, 2004).

However, many 'progressive' civic groups and individuals continue to critique power in terms of democracy, demanding a say in decision-making on local, national, and global issues. By doing so, these groups are fighting for both democratic practice and a strong or radical

definition of what this practice means. Successful critique of the actions of those dominant interests operating in the name of democracy requires that the concept become not only a powerful signifier of legitimacy but that its meaning become (re-)articulated with liberty, equality, and solidarity.

Progressive social actors are not only engaging in the critique of undemocratic systems, but also lead the way in democratic practice. Social movements have been particularly attuned to fostering democratic practice outside state and corporate institutions. The anti-globalization or social justice movement is in particular creating autonomous public space for counter-hegemonic discourse to evolve and expand, to the extent of being able to pose significant resistance to dominant discourses and decision-making institutions.

In spite of all this, some scholars, such as Zygmunt Bauman (2002), believe that the current level of global collective action to renew democracy in both meaning and practice is insufficient to the task. The 'periodic outbursts of protest against eviction from decision making' is 'sorely inadequate' in the face of 'the human misery gestated in the new global ethical void' (p. 218). Bauman argues that

> Diffuse and sporadic 'anti-globalization' protests, however brave and dedicated, are a poor match for the concentrated might of the multinationals, cosseted, shielded and kept out of trouble day in, day out, by governments vying for Michelin stars of hospitality and by the heavily armed forces they command.
>
> (p. 217)

On any account, democratic forces face a huge struggle in (re-)defining democracy, (re-)politicizing populations, and instituting global democratic governance. Central to this struggle are mass media communication systems that largely constitute political signification processes globally. According to many critical scholars, these systems primarily serve dominant interests rather than the 'general public interest'. The subservience of the media to dominant interests has intensified today more than ever. Under the influence of neo-liberalism, media systems throughout the world have been rapidly undergoing commercialization, privatization, and de/re-regulation, and subsequently merging into global mega-media corporations. Critical theorists and political economists have soundly demonstrated how these developments have led to the capture of the media by powerful conservative interests, leading in turn to the marginalization of oppositional and less-resourced voices in the

central discursive arenas of liberal-capitalist societies (see Boggs, 2000; Curran, 2000; Gandy, 2002; Kellner, 2004; McChesney, 1999; Schiller, 1999). These critical commentators acknowledge that space for marginalized voices does open up through communicative practice and the polysemy of mass media messages. However, on the whole, political communities that debate and act reflexively are not being fostered. Rather, the mass media are seen as largely isolating individuals and channelling them to media spectacles, publicity stunts, consumer advice, and discourses legitimating dominant ideologies.

Against these pessimistic assessments of the mass media, there has been much excitement about the possibility of the Internet supporting, advancing, and enhancing autonomous and democratic public spaces. Through e-mail, Web pages, Weblogs, open publishing/editing systems, peer-to-peer connections, Webcasting, podcasting, and other interactive, relatively low cost, and (somewhat) globally accessible computer networked communications, the Internet is seen as providing space for the free flow of information, open debate of problems, and the formation of rational-critical public opinion, all of which enable citizen scrutiny of power and input into decision-making (Kahn & Kellner, 2005; Kellner, 2004; Hauben & Hauben, 1997; Papacharissi, 2002; Rheingold, 1993).

But this strongly democratic vision of the Internet enabling public interaction and contestation of power has largely been sidelined in mainstream Internet-democracy rhetoric and practice. Instead, a liberal-consumer model of politics that valorizes the individual as a self-seeking utility maximizer choosing between an array of political options has become the standard for much e-democracy thinking and practice globally. This liberal model of e-democracy developed first in the United States. It was preceded there by a zealous cyber-libertarianism. Cyber-libertarians follow a fanatically anti-government version of the liberal-consumer model of politics. Any government initiative in relation to the Internet is seen as interference in the individual liberties that cyberspace is believed to deliver naturally. Through its mythological non-hierarchical network of free information flows, the Internet is seen as offering a perfect 'marketplace of ideas', a space for information exchange and individual decision-making free of bureaucracy, administrative power, and other restrictions (bodily, geographical, cultural) of 'real' space (Barlow, 1996; Dyson et al., 1994; Gates, 1999; Grossman, 1995; Keyworth, 1997; Toffler & Toffler, 1994). Democracy here is equated with the liberty of individuals to satisfy private interests. 'Life in cyberspace', Mitchell Kapor (1993) proclaimed, is 'founded on the primacy of individual liberty'. For George Keyworth (1997) 'cyberspace is

the culture and society of people who are individually empowered by digital connection'. John Perry Barlow (1996) polemicized against government attempts to 'ward off the virus of liberty', declaring cyberspace a place of undistorted expression where 'we are forming our own Social Contract' based on 'enlightened self-interest'. The Internet here is understood as a utopian place free of all power structures and constraints on individuals, constituted by autonomous individual interactions.

Cyber-libertarian rhetoric was at its strongest in the mid-1990s, when it gained support from Internet enthusiasts opposed to government plans to censor online communications and to build a separate 'information superhighway'. However, by the late 1990s cyber-libertarians had lost much of their focus of resistance. The United States government had abandoned its superhighway plans, floundered in its censorship attempts, and had allowed commercial interests to buy up cyberspace. Moreover, the overblown technologically determinist utopianism of the cyber-libertarian rhetoric did not spread to, nor convince, either the mainstream Internet population or powerful corporate interests, both of which came online in numbers from the late 1990s. After this time, Internet politics became 'normalized': dominant forms of offline politics became dominant online (Davis, 1999; Resnick & Margolis, 2000). Consequently, the liberal-consumer model of politics that is hegemonic in offline democratic politics now dominates online public-oriented spaces.

In this consumer model the Internet is understood to be the most powerful communications medium yet for providing individuals with information on competing political positions and the means for registering their choices (e-voting, petitions, e-mail, polls). Concurrently, competing political interests are seen as being given a relatively cheap and effective medium for organizing their supporters and selling themselves. In contrast to the interactive and spatial understandings of the strong democratic and cyber-libertarian visions, the Internet here is assumed to be simply an information conduit for pre-constituted instrumental selves to transmit and transact through.

This liberal-consumer understanding of democratic practice is now promoted in many non-government Internet-politics initiatives. From the mid- to late 1990s in the United States, 'independent' (from government) Internet-politics initiatives developed that focused upon providing election information and the means for voters to interact directly with public officials (providing opinion polls, petitions, and systems to send messages to elected officials). Examples of such projects that continue to operate successfully include Democracy Network (democracynet.org), Project Vote Smart (vote-smart.org), The California

Online Voter Guide (calvoter.org), Politics.com, Speakout.com, and Vote.com. While these projects vary in emphasis, they all promote a consumer model of democratic politics, providing individuals with the information to make strategic choices on all available political options and the means of registering these choices. At the same time, they provide competing interests with a platform on which to display their positions.

Established communications corporations and new media companies have replicated the consumer model in their 'political' content and interactive offerings (Dahlberg, 2005). 'Old media' corporate news sites extend the offerings of individualized information services, attempting to capture the attention of users for their patrons, the advertisers. The new corporate portals like Yahoo, AOL, MSN, etc., offer some news and information, but are dominated by consumer services, marketing, and privatized practices, encouraging participants to perform as private, strategic actors. News items are kept brief and tend to promote consumer identities; news can often be found written as consumer advice, with stories sponsored by businesses that offer solutions to problems presented.

The consumer model has also been embraced by local and national government e-democracy initiatives. This is hardly surprising since most 'democratic' governments already embrace liberal-consumer frameworks that provide individual citizens with information on available options, periodic voting rights, forms of direct submission to elected representatives, and service delivery. The Internet's technologies that facilitate debate and enable contestation of power are either ignored or sidelined. Rather, the Internet is employed by governments to simply provide electronic equivalents of their offline services: online information, electronic forms for making submissions and completing transactions, formulaic replies to e-mail, and in some cases electronic voting. In mainstream liberal political discourse, which structures the various information society and e-democracy policies of liberal democracies and supranational organizations such as the EU, these developments are seen as very positive for democracy as they improve the efficiency of the liberal-democratic system.

In contrast, critical political economists and other media scholars are sceptical of, and oppositional to, these liberal visions and practices (Barney, 2000; Fortier, 2001; McChesney, 1999; 2002; Napoli, 1998; Schiller, 1999). They see this consumer model as advancing and legitimizing a very limited notion of democracy, one that fails to provide for meaningful participation and adequate contestation of power. As such, it supports dominant status quo discourses and power relations.

These scholars also see the consumer model as largely ignoring political and economic factors that inhibit democratic practice. Critical political economists point to the limits placed upon e-democracy by state surveillance (rapidly increasing after '9/11') and control, and by the massive inequalities in resources to participate online – the fact that most of the world's population do not even have access to electricity, let alone the skills and equipment required to go online. Of course, mainstream liberal commentary does at times highlight these factors as problems limiting online participation. Most significantly, the vocabulary of 'the digital divide' has entered government policy. However, such commentary normally only yields superficial amelioration strategies, rather than leading to an interrogation of the socio-political systems that maintain domination and exclusion. Moreover, mainstream liberal commentary rarely turns a critical focus on the corporate colonization of online communication – in fact, much liberal-democratic government policy supports the extension of corporate interests online as an answer to digital inequalities. In contrast, critical scholars show that, when not simply turning cyberspace into a shopping mall, this colonization promotes dominant discourses and instrumental politics.

Thus, despite the democratic potentials and practices of the Internet and the hopes and claims of many Internet-democracy enthusiasts, critical scholars argue that a consumer model of politics has gained dominance online, a model that contributes to the reproduction of hierarchical power relations. Alternative, progressive, or radical positions and practices are systematically marginalized or totally excluded. The benefactors and beneficiaries of much e-democracy initiative are the already powerful. Critical scholars argue that the problem here is deeply entrenched. They argue that without fundamental changes in the present hierarchically structured social, economic, and political systems, a failure of the Internet to facilitate democracy is just as predictable as the failure of the mass media to do the same.

Despite the pessimistic conclusions of this generalized systemic analysis, 'radical democrats' of various persuasions believe that the Internet continues to provide space for 'radical democratic practice', including resistance to the dominant relations of power that are structuring the Internet to reproduce status quo social relations. Through the Internet's various technologies of communications and interaction, marginalized groups are able to develop counter-discourses (including practices and cultures) that can challenge and resist domination. But before we discuss radical democracy and the Internet further, we must explore what is meant by the former term.

What is radical in radical democracy?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'radical' as 'going to the root or origin; touching or acting upon what is essential and fundamental'. Coupled with democracy, 'radical' points to a return to the origins of the 'democratic revolution', beyond the limits that have been placed upon it by the major modern political articulations of democracy, most prominently liberal democracy and previously the Soviet and Chinese communist models. Here we are referring to a return to the classical understanding of democracy, which involves the twin imaginaries of equality and liberty for all in the political process of ruling and being ruled.[1] Radical democracy can then be defined as the type of democracy that signals an ongoing concern with conceptualizing and realizing equality and liberty. There are two requirements involved here. First, radical democracy is concerned with the radical extension of equality and liberty. Second, this concern is ongoing: radical democracy does not entail the dogmatic assertion of a set of fixed criteria, but involves a reflexive process by which democracy is understood as unfinished, continuously re-thinking itself. As such, the adjective radical signifies a radical uncertainty and questioning. This formulation of radical democracy leads to two important questions: who is doing the reflecting upon the imaginaries of equality and liberty? And whose equality and liberty are we thinking of? This brings to the fore the issue of the community, demos, or ultimately, the subject of (radical) democracy. Reflecting upon equality and liberty, therefore, necessarily involves thinking about the subject of democracy and the formation of the demos, whose identity is determined through this process of reflection and its outcomes.

As such, only those positions that involve an ongoing reflection on the conceptualization and realization of equality, liberty, and democratic community can be understood as radically democratic. We can therefore discount the liberal aggregative-representative models that dominate existing democratic nation-states because they focus upon only one interpretation of liberty, the negative liberty of the absence of constraints on individual private freedom (Berlin, 1969). This focus reduces community to the aggregate of individual utility maximizers and overlooks positive liberty (the extension of socio-political equality). Moreover, the assumption in such liberal models, that individual strategic decision-making is the natural state of being, displaces reflection on the limits of such models and precludes serious consideration of alternative and more radically democratic systems.

This formal discussion of radical democracy allows for the development of a classificatory scheme that differentiates between an array of radical democratic positions in terms of how they understand the conceptualization and realization of equality, liberty, and democratic community. The importance of examining different conceptualizations is that they lead us to different ways of thinking about technology, society, economy, and politics and hence to different forms of 'praxis' or ways of actualizing radical democracy. Here we will distinguish between three significant conceptualizations or radical imaginaries. Following existing terminologies, we can label these as deliberative, agonistic, and autonomist. Any in-depth discussion of these radical democratic imaginaries (including of particular formulations, linkages, critiques, and alternatives) and their relationship to the Internet is left to the contributions within this book. Here we must limit ourselves to a brief outline of these strands of radical democracy.

The deliberative democratic strand is perhaps the most widely known position of the three, and is arguably enjoying the most recognition within both academic and non-academic circles. The deliberative democratic position, whose most prominent advocate to date has been Jürgen Habermas (1996), revolves around the idea that political problems (that is, problems concerning the organization of life in common) can be resolved through the force of the better argument: through people coming together and deliberating upon the best way to resolve particular disputes. Political community is therefore based upon communicative reason: the critical reflexive process of coming to the most reasonable solution (consensus) to a common problem, in contrast to the pre-deliberative, individual-strategic reasoning of liberalism. Although Habermas accepts that different communities are bound by different cultures, ethics, and so on, he argues that communicative reason offers the means by which we can arbitrate between opposing ethics and interests. Moreover, communicative reason leads to power being both held accountable to and legitimated by deliberative based public opinion. This deliberation is established through appropriate procedures that seek to institute equal and free participation. Equality and liberty are at once the premises of the deliberative public sphere and central to its focus. Deliberations presuppose free and equal participation, and hence procedures that attempt to ensure this. At the same time, given power relations, participating in actual rational-critical deliberations should lead to the questioning of any limitations on equality and liberty in a deliberative situation.

The agonistic perspective, most commonly associated with the work of Chantal Mouffe (2000a, 2000b; and Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, 1987),

takes a different and often opposing view to the deliberative one. Its starting premise is the radical instability of the social conceived as primarily antagonistic. People are deeply embedded in different communities, and they hold passionate attachments to conceptions of the common good which they cannot and should not give up (Mouffe, 2005). Relations and identities within and between communities are politically and historically constituted and understood as 'radically contingent', that is, not formed on a fundamental class relationship or any other identity or classification such as 'race', but rather as a result of a complex set of articulations existing on a given socio-historical horizon. The subject cannot be conceived of as a unitary and rational agent as in liberalism and liberal democracy: rather we all occupy different socially constituted subject positions. Communities are plural and relations between them are not just marked by incommensurabilities but are often antagonistic: but rather than rejecting or, worse, suppressing this antagonism, the agonistic position considers it as fundamental to politics and its dynamism. Indeed, the domain of 'the political' (ontological level) is understood as primarily antagonistic, leading to 'politics' (ontic level) being characterized by dissent and division – consensus cannot ever be fully 'achieved', agreements are contingent and strategically formed, and any talk of total consensus is dangerous as it equates with the end of politics (Mouffe, 2000a). Power is, in these terms, the exercise of hegemony, that is, the temporary fixing of the meaning of social relations. Equality and liberty do not refer to any transcendental values, laws of nature, or linguistically embedded pre-suppositions, but rather to a set of 'empty signifiers' which have acquired meaning due to specific historical situations and struggles.[2] The political project of agonistic radical democracy is, in these terms, to create a hegemony, an alliance between different struggles that are constructed as equivalent, which can then extend the meaning of equality and liberty to a wider range of social relations. This movement would involve the occupation, albeit temporarily, of the space of the universal by a particular political content, which although universalist in intent, can never capture the complete and elusive 'wholeness' of the social. Political participation is then understood as participation in these struggles from different subject positions; the new social movements present a particularly apt illustration of agonistic radical democratic struggles because they engage in political struggle to reclaim and extend the meanings and practices around freedom and equality.

The autonomist strand, steeped in left-communist and critical Marxist traditions, is developed more comprehensively and more recently in the

work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004), with earlier theorists, most notably Cornelius Castoriadis (1991, 1997) and Claude Lefort (1986)[3] also situated as part of this strand. Perhaps the most significant point of divergence between this and the two strands described above is to do with community. Rather than being a collection of rational individuals, rational discursive publics, or a set of strategically articulated and antagonistic groups, community is theorized in autonomism as pure power: constituent power or *potenza* in Negri (1999), instituting power or the social-historical in Castoriadis (1997). This is not to imply that there is no power in the repressive or dominating sense: indeed, constituted power, or *potere*, represents the dominating elements of what was at one point constituent power. The agent of constituent power, the 'community' itself, is theorized as 'the multitude' to reflect first its irreducible plurality and second to mark its difference from previous theorizations, such as 'the people', 'the masses', or 'the working class'. The multitude can reclaim its constituent power through actively discovering and creating commonalities. The notion of the multitude as both irreducible plurality and constituent power of the common points to the autonomist understanding of equality and liberty: individual liberty is found in the multitude as the container (and originator) of singularities; social liberty (or freedom) is found in restoring to the multitude its autonomy, creativity, and constituent power; finally, equality is catered for, at least insofar as the multitude is an all-inclusive formation incorporating all forms of life (and more broadly all forms of social production).

The creative and imaginative aspects of politics are central to the autonomist accounts of both Negri and Castoriadis and, as a consequence, the separations between the domains of politics, society, the economy, and culture are actively questioned. In other words, 'the political' is conceptualized as a productive 'biopolitics' that poses all aspects of life as political questions. This opens up the possibility of an active and ongoing critique against capitalism and the politico-institutional frameworks that support it. Participation in this case reflects not only equality as part of the multitude but also as part of the struggles of the multitude against capitalism and the political formations it supports;[4] as such, it is significantly broadened, as it spans all these domains. The project of the multitude is democracy itself, an ongoing adventure (Lefort, 1986) that must restore the creative force belonging to all of us. And this reclaiming of the multitude's power necessarily involves the formulation of an adequate response to capitalism. The formulation of critical responses to capitalism and its associated institutional

frameworks point to a crucial aspect of radical democracy: the critique of the limits placed upon interpretations of equality, liberty, and community by crystallized, or sedimented, politico-economic forms.

Radical democracy and the Internet: Four themes

It is within the context of these three radical democracy imaginaries that we locate our reflection on the Internet, broadly conceived.[5] Communication is central to all radical democracy imaginaries, theories, and practices. And Internet communication has emerged as an important means of furthering the depth and breadth of democracy, and extending understandings and practices of political equality, liberty, and community. This relationship between radical democracy and the Internet is the focus of this book. The collection interrogates the relationship along four inter-related lines or themes: radical democratic theory, online community, the communicative contestation of power relations, and the systemic structuring of the Internet.

First, the Internet encourages the interrogation and development of radical democratic theory. Contributors advance and interrogate a range of radical democratic theories that relate in various ways to the three imaginaries discussed above. These include those that emphasize debate and participation (Hands, Downey), those that argue we must theorize the normative role of conflict as an essential part of any democracy (Dahlberg, Dahlgren, Jordan), and those that point to and critically explore a more materialist and communal basis for democracy (Dyer-Witheford). While Habermas and Mouffe, and Negri to a lesser extent, are central figures in the discussion, other representatives of different radical democratic traditions are critically drawn on by contributors, including Dewey and Debord (Kahn & Kellner), Castoriadis (Siapera), de Certeau (Franklin), Foucault (Poster), Žižek (Dean), and Arendt (Barney).

The second broad area of interrogation in this collection is the question of how the Internet operates not only as a conduit of communication but also as constitutive of alternative political communities, new subject positions, new possibilities for acting in concert, and ultimately radical new democratic cultures that challenge dominant political assumptions. Here contributors discuss the practices afforded by distributive, open, collaborative systems (blogs, wikis, file-sharing, and the various technologies of hactivism), as compared to more centralized, proprietary, mass-consumer-oriented Internet technologies (see in particular Jordan, Kahn & Kellner, Poster). The emerging communities are

contingent and often loose and ad hoc, but nevertheless converge around specific issues such as globalization and social injustice (see in particular Dahlgren, Kahn & Kellner), post-colonialism (Franklin), Islam (Siapera), freedom of communication (Jordan), music (Poster), neo-fascism (Dahlberg, Kahn & Kellner) and war (ibid.). Herein lies the possibility of thinking another world is possible, and the basis for theorizing radical democratic community.

Third, contributors examine the way in which the Internet directly strengthens the voice of alternative, marginalized, or otherwise oppressed groups, by supporting the contestation of dominant discourses and power structures. How this takes place is discussed in a number of ways: activism within cyberspace through an array of hactivist strategies either aimed at disrupting the online communications of anti-democratic forces or at altering the Internet's infrastructure to increase online communicative freedom (Jordan); online critical publicity that communicates 'alternative' perspectives and interrogates power (Dahlberg, Hands, Franklin); and Internet-based organizing of offline actions against domination, especially with respect to the anti-globalism or global social justice movement (Dahlgren, Kahn & Kellner). Contributors refer to the importance of the Internet's distributed communications supporting the articulation, development, and mobilization of counter-discourses and identities prior to these actions (see, for instance, Franklin on post-colonial positions, and Siapera on Muslim voices). This discussion includes consideration of reactionary, anti-democratic identities that contest dominant discourses, as many 'alternative' ideological struggles are far from progressive (Dahlberg, Downey, Kahn & Kellner, Siapera).

Our reflections on these practices once more feed into the radical democratic theorizing in theme one. For many of the contributors here, some form of critical publicity and/or emphasis on activism, both online and offline, emerges as central to radical democratic theory. Critical publicity is aimed at generating alternative responses and new voices, while also questioning existing power arrangements and hierarchies. As such, it clearly overlaps with the emphasis on activism, which contributors generally theorize as involving the combination of symbolic and material resources in contesting power, while *democratic* activism is specifically conceptualized in terms of the realization of equality, liberty, and community.

Fourth, contributors consider the ways in which particular political, economic, and cultural conditions and power relations (especially global capitalism) effect and affect the actualization, as well as the very constitution, of radical democratic imaginaries through the Internet.

For a start, we must always keep in mind the structural inequalities that exclude much of the world's population from simply getting connected to the Internet, let alone from going online on an equal participative basis with others (see in particular Downey's contribution). The closest many of the world's population come to participating in cyberspace is as assembly line labourers or computer parts recyclers. However, in the context of the corporate domination of cyberspace we must ask to what extent calls for universal access simply act as promotional vehicles for capitalist ideology; that is, as calls for the further insertion of all peoples and aspects of life into an instrumentalist consumer culture, resulting in the further commodification of self and the stripping of cultural wealth and diversity (see Barney's contribution). 'Techno- or communicative capitalism' is such an effectively hegemonic system that it can even appropriate the Internet's seemingly 'alternative' practices based on decentralized and distributed networks (see Dean's critique). We see this happening in the case of peer-to-peer and community networking systems; as for example in the takeover of the celebrated community social software system MySpace by Murdoch's News Corp (see Barney). Hence, as well as deploying the Internet to fight for democracy, there needs to be a politics of technology that will fight for a democratic Internet! The Internet is not *essentially* democratic: rather, as acknowledged throughout the book, it is a contested terrain. As well as democratic communities and movements, anti-democratic forces – conservative, totalitarian, patriarchal, fundamentalist, militaristic/terrorist and, in particular, capitalist – all seek to control and deploy the Internet for their own ends through a range of hegemonic strategies. In contrast to such politics, and in order to contribute to the opposition to these reactionary forces, this book focuses attention upon the liberatory potential of the various theories and practices of radical democracy as they are articulated with the Internet.

Through critical explorations of these four overlapping themes, this book aims to advance thinking and practices on what can be done to develop radical democratic cultures through networked systems. We do not aim to provide a total coverage of theoretical and empirical issues. Rather, the aim is for the book to be a significant contribution to moving the field in a 'progressive' direction, not just through the particular theorizations of contributors, but by provocation. Accordingly, we invite readers to find points of disagreement and agitation that will motivate them to engage with these contributions, and thus stimulate the ongoing process of re-orienting and developing Internet debates and practices in radical democratic directions.

Notes

We wish to thank Josh Dahlberg, Joss Hands, and Sean Phelan for their helpful comments on this introduction.

1. See, for instance, Aristotle's *Politics* (Book VI, 1317b, p. 144): 'The basis of a democratic state is liberty; […] One principle of liberty is for all to rule and be ruled in turn, and indeed democratic justice is the application of numerical not proportionate equality; […] Every citizen, it is said, must have equality […] This, then, is one note of liberty which all democrats affirm to be the principle of their state. Another is that a man should live as he likes. This, they say, is the privilege of a freeman, since, on the other hand, not to live as a man likes is the mark of a slave. This is the second characteristic of democracy, whence has arisen the claim of men to be ruled by none, if possible, or, if this is impossible, to rule and be ruled in turns; and so it contributes to the freedom based upon equality.'
2. See, for instance, Laclau & Mouffe (1987) and the chapter on 'Hegemony and Radical Democracy' in Laclau & Mouffe (1985), in which they locate the project of radical democracy as part of the democratic revolution more broadly conceived.
3. Autonomist radical democracy is understood here as a broader category that includes those authors concerned with the question of democracy from the perspective of autonomy – as such it incorporates, but is not limited to, the Italian autonomia movement associated with Negri, Virno, Tronti, and others. For more details, see the collection by Virno & Hardt (1996).
4. Hardt & Negri (2000) have famously theorized the current expanding and deterritorialized political power or sovereignty as Empire.
5. The term 'Internet' is here being used interchangeably with Net, cyberspace, Web as a metaphor for digital networked communications more generally.

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