

De-tooling Technology: networked computing as an environment, purpose and medium for social action

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Introductory remarks

First of all, may I express my thanks to the organisers for the opportunity to speak today, to welcome you to Making Links conference for 2009. It is an honour, especially for someone comfortably institutionalised with the academy, to be in the presence of people who make good things happen in the world while, I must confess, I watch from the sidelines, observing when I can, but too often spending my time fighting the email wars that have replaced democratic staff meetings in the business of university bureaucratic politics. This is not, of course, as trivial a point as I make it sound; this rueful reflection on the consequence of my everyday Internet use (and I do mean every day) probably reminds us of the value of meeting here, and not just in cyberspace

But in truth it is also useful to be outside, observing and reflecting. In my brief presentation today, based on this outside position, I hope to provide something of a framework of ideas by which to consider the ways social action and technology can work together. First, I will suggest that there is a tension between the publicly liberating possibilities of networked computing and the insistent exploitative ends to which they also seem to be turned in pursuit of private profit. This tension reminds us of the necessity of privileging human relations above the technical means by which, often, we make and sustain relationships whether intimate, professional and/or political. I will then argue that technology is not a tool (or at least not only a tool), but also the environment within which social action can – perhaps must – occur; the purpose, often, for that social action; and very often a medium for personal expression.

A contrast: technology for social action and for capitalism

There is no question that networked computing technologies have made life a great deal easier for those members of advanced societies seeking to achieve changes in our world that lead to a more just, equitable and humane society: what we can term social action. The very existence of this conference, first held in 2004, is testament to the value which emerges in the pursuit of equality and improvement at “the intersection of social action and IT” (*Making Links*, n.d.). This value is now very apparent to us – surrounded as we are by the outcomes of some forty years of computer networking, outcome that would amaze (and probably bemuse) the early pioneers of the Internet whose 40th birthday it is this year.

I do not need to tell you in detail what those advantages are: the excellent papers which will be presented at the conference will do a far better job, more practically and with more detail, than I can do in my short time here. Put simply, though, networked computing dramatically reduces the costs – mostly in time, but also in money – of one of the core functions of social action which is to collect, consider and disseminate information necessary to the development of greater real knowledge (real as in lived and understood)

about the challenges our societies face. Networked computing also extends the reach and impact of social action beyond the necessarily limited (if also empowering) places in physical space we create for such action, reaching into the everyday places in which people live their lives.

Networked computing, fundamentally, is about the 'packets' whose existence defines the packet-switched network that is the Internet. Technically, the Internet works because no single 'thing' is ever transmitted across its infrastructure: instead, it sends tiny fragments, with instructions on how those fragments make up a whole. Metaphorically, too, the Internet works because it enables a form of distributed engagement with the world. Every benefit the Internet brings (and indeed its disadvantages) can be understood in these terms: we no longer need 'assemble' in one place, at one time, with all the costs involved: we can operate in multitudes and in many places all at once, even to the point where who 'we' are can become vague.

But, even in much earlier times when such possibilities were more vision than reality, this value was also clear. For this year is also the 20th birthday of Pegasus, the first national public Internet service provider in Australia (Peter, 1999). And Pegasus was the Australian component of the Association for Progressive Communications, whose mission throughout the 1980s was to harness the then still-emerging possibilities of networked computing to support global action for peace, environmental protection, labour rights and other socially progressive causes (see *APC*, n.d.).

For much of the 1990s, the emergence of the Internet into more general society, in forms usable in simple ways and by many people, was hoped to be, and often claimed to be, transforming our political lives. Networks, especially when more widely available, were seen as liberating individuals and the movements which they form, the communities to which they belong from the stifling influence of structured political communication in representative democracy and the deadening conservatism of the mainstream news media. The capacity of the Internet to enable exchanges of information outside of the authorised circuits of communication, and to create opportunities for shared experiences without physical co-presence, promised so very much. Whether one's particular views tended to support the general organisation of liberal democratic politics or oppose, the Internet was going to make things different (see for example, articles in the collections by Dutton, 1996; Loader, 1997; Smith and Kollock, 1999).

And indeed the Internet has made things very different, but not quite in the way some people imagined, hoped and in some cases worked very hard to achieve. The Internet was going to make the media much less powerful: now I can get all of my Foxtel subscription television programming over the network. The Internet was meant to connect people with their political representatives: now politicians astutely bombard us with emails and status updates. The Internet was meant to build deeply committed movements and communities over space and time: now Facebook sells the idea that 'friending' people is a competition to see who can get the most. The Internet was meant to hold corporations accountable: now they monitor Twitter 24/7 and manage their brands and reputations even more efficiently.

It is easy to draw these distinctions and sound sceptical. I simply hope that, from them, we are reminded of the humility we need when we invest our desire to change the world into technologies through which to achieve that goal. It might even be fair to say that *more* was probably changed by the very earliest connections made between activists and community members through simple technologies, and with a very clear and common purpose, than through the more extensive, socially generalised distribution of far more sophisticated networked connectivity in the 1990s and into this century. A few crucial emails, winging their way across Pegasus's networks to fight environmental damage; the circulation among NGOs of one electronic copy of a key UN report: perhaps these made more difference, in relative terms, in the 1980s and early 1990s, than any number of websites, forums and communities now. The humble difference which networked computing makes is just as important: perhaps too it is more sustainable.

The contrast of the hopeful 1990s and the clicking, linking, online everywhere 2000s, might also lead us to the conclusion that social action might actually be better off with much less reliance on computers (a view long held by some green activists: see Pickerill, 2003). It is not, however, the view I hold. Rather, what it tells us is that social action is by definition at the margins of the everyday world it seeks to change. (If it were not at the margins, working *for* the marginal, the ignored, the repressed, would it be so valuable?). Once the productive, economical advantages of the Internet become mainstream, then the weight of investment, resources, opportunity found in that mainstream of society inevitably overwhelms the capacity of those fighting for change, with limited resources and much to do, to determine what the Internet is and how it is used. Technology, thus, is not the answer, at least not these days, because networked computing is thoroughly embedded within the systems of exploitation and control through which capitalist economies do their work. As Michele Willson (2006) has argued, in such circumstances, it is all too easy for people to be 'technically' together, linked or bound in relationships which are thinned out by the mediation of technologies whose contemporary economic worth is all about reducing the time and cost involved in people actually doing things together, face-to-face. Now I am not one to say we should return therefore retreat from the auto-telling machine to the queue in the bank, or that lines of students waiting hours to enrol at university is better than their doing online. But we should pause and consider how networked computing gives us one freedom, one cost saving, only at the expense of something else.

In its thorough-going adoption by society and its key institutions, networked computing serves to amplify, extend, or create new opportunities for profiting from *savings* made in human time (and, in the end, isn't that what capitalism has always been about, as Thompson's (1967) famous article on time and industrial labour suggests?). Where those savings thereby enrich our human relationships, we profit; where they attenuate the relationships which make us who we are, substituting attention to information itself, rather than the people expressed through that information, we lose. To avoid such losses, I would argue that we must 'de-tool' technology, in the sense that, the more we treat as a tool – something to be picked up and put down – the more likely it is that we will see its advantages in terms of our *own* savings in time, and forget the cost at which those savings are achieved. When we treat technology as a tool, it treats us in the same way: for as much as we 'use' technology, it also uses us, for its efficiencies and effectiveness come from the way humans become the objects of technological processes.

Mark Poster (2001) once wrote that the Internet is more like Germany than a hammer; using a hammer does not make you 'a hammer'; but living in Germany makes you, more or less, German. This much-used idea, first published in 1995, reflects the way that, in those days, the Internet *was* like a distinctive place or space, not contiguous with any specific country or society and thus could, very much, become the basis for human self-identification. Indeed the liberatory potential of the Internet in those times was expressed through such sentiments. I have long favoured and used Poster's idea. Now, however, I think its day is done, for the Internet is what we have: societies (and increasingly this includes even quite disadvantaged nations) have woven the Internet through everyday life, everywhere and everything such that no particular distinctive identity can emerge from it. In these conditions, in fact, it is all too easy for using the Internet to make *us* the tool – the object of productive outcomes for someone else. Poster was keen to emphasise the way the new online communications “instantiate new forms of interaction and which pose the question of new kinds of relations of power between participants.” (Poster, 2001: 177) However now the answer to that question is not so positive as it might have seemed: the power relations now enable domination to occur precisely because we, like technology, are tools within the sprawling complexity of an Internet that is shaped by Google and its data-mining and exploitation of much online activity, and not by the Usenet, MOOs, and lists that Poster (and many of us from that time) found so inspiring (see for example a critique of the claims to 'liberty' in Web 2.0 discourse in Allen, 2009).

So if technology ought not to be a tool, how can we 'de-tool' the Internet, and yet still have ideas about how we can benefit from it? The answer is that networked computing is part of the environment within which social action can occur; is often – and perhaps should be more often – the purpose of social action; and it is a medium through which expression of self and belief can occur. Even while we adopt and exploit the Internet's tremendous utility to communicate, share and collaborate, we should not lose sight of these more substantial ways in which it makes and shapes our lives.

Three ways to think about technology

Environment

The Internet is, to some extent, still a place distinct from every other space in which humans live, work, play and generally inhabit their lives. We cannot say there is *no* difference between the Internet and the rest of the world, but it is hardly the case that the Internet is an alternative virtual reality anymore. Such places do exist – *Second Life*, *World of Warcraft*, even to this day, chat rooms – but they exist as imaginative alternatives whose connections to the world away from the Internet as still there. More to the point, so much of what we used to do, still do, and will continue to do 'offline' – banking, shopping, information seeking, communicating – is now also done, in varying degrees, via the Internet, that networked computing now occupies the same kinds of places as we find in the physical world, at the same time. Indeed, it can even be argued that the 'virtual realities' online are themselves inspired by such 'places away from reality' found in the physical world as well. Thus, while every person varies in their degree of connectivity and engagement with the Internet, as a social phenomenon in its own right, the Internet is now interwoven with

human life such that it is part of our environment just as surely as the trees, roads, buildings, sea and sky. As such, it is part of the environment in which politics, work, business, play and socialising is done. There is no escaping the Internet (for even if we refuse to connect, this so identifies us as different that we have 'connected' with it; and even if we cannot connect, this identifies us as 'outside' that which most people – over seven million households by last count (ABS, 2009)).

It is not just the extent of connectivity, either. So much information, communication and other forms of exchange now occur (or can occur if we are connected) through the Internet that no form of social action can, realistically, step away from the Internet, except as a deliberate move to emphasise particular aspects or purposes of that action. In an environment, too, we see how people occupy the space, make them places and give character to it. Thus, if only at a metaphorical level, seeing networked computing as 'environment' refocuses our attention on what people are doing there. Simply 'doing something with technology' no longer makes a difference: everyone is doing that. Thus we need to connect with what everyone is doing with that technology and understanding how human lives are lived online. For example, the success of online campaigns, most obviously Obama's presidential campaign in the United States, was built on spreading his 'presence' throughout the diverse places of the Internet and utilising its many transactional channels – video sharing, financial systems, Facebook status updates, and so on, becoming part of the 'digital ecosystem' which thrives in that environment (see Hill, 2009).

Purpose

Social action *for* networked justice – whether that is overcoming the digital divide, fighting inappropriate online activities, promoting digital literacy, or any one of many socially just interventions in the pervasive environment – has always been associated with activist or other progressive uses of the Internet. Once activist and community leaders had themselves started to realise the potential and significance of being connected, they often put efforts into building and extending that connectivity (famously, the community networking movement in the 1990s in the USA – e.g. Uncapher, 1999). Research has shown that significant secondary benefits – community awareness, volunteerism, a sense of pride and hope in life, knowledge of how to be involved in social change – can come from projects and activities which focus on getting people online, or building their online abilities and skills (for example, Powell, 2008; see also Lacey, 2005). Thus for two key reasons, a technological focus for social action is significant. First there remains a continuing need to overcome the digital divide which, though expressed more now in terms of the skills and abilities of users rather than absolute connectivity, continues to act as a marker of social division between those more able to benefit from society and those excluded. Social action to promote effective use of the Internet by the less advantaged remains a critical component of social justice; perhaps now this need can be linked to specific kinds of online engagement rather than general 'connectedness' (the work of Hargittai is important here, see for example Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008). Yet social action whose purpose is to promote, extend or otherwise focus on the uses of networked technology remains important also for its capacity to teach people what can be done to change the world, in concert with others. Technologies have their own purposes: but effective action with technology reinstates

human needs and requirements as the motivations for our interactions through and by networked computing.

Medium

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we see how networked computing is all about our human selves when we observe the extraordinary array of self expression found through both original content creation, mash-ups and remixes of existing content, or even just the circulation of information about other content. While commonly associated with Web 2.0 and social media (Allen, 2009; Allen, 2008), such self expression has always been a part of the Internet: it has just taken some years for the systems to develop, and our societies to value, these forms of expression. Such self-expression is vital because it creates the conditions by which people can find and connect with others of similar views, forming the kinds of collaborative arrangements which sustain longer-term social change. It can also empower individuals to have agency in a world increasingly ordered for them by consumer capitalism (see Toews, 2009). Social action that views networked computing as a medium for the self to have a voice – emphasising listening to those voices, giving them an audience – is perhaps the most powerful way for the technology to become the means for human engagement, rather than an end in itself.

Conclusion

I hope you will be able to fill in the blank canvas which these ideas ‘frame’ during the rest of the conference. I apologise that I am not able to do more with them at this stage: for me they are a work in progress which I trust will be useful to you. In the end, we inevitably invest in the Internet considerable hopes for achieving change for the better, living as we do in a world in which, it seems, the only way to think ‘the future’, to imagine reaching it, is through technologies either now or soon to be. Undoubtedly, the Internet “can assist people seeking progressive social change...as a means of change alongside other forces” (McCaughey and Ayers, 2003: 2); the evidence is there, from more than 20 years of such endeavours. However, as we look forwards, I think the emphasis must be on ways to make necessary partnerships between technology and humanity. I trust that by suggesting the Internet is not a tool, but is an environment within which complex digital ecologies involving activist components flourish, can and often should be the purpose of our programs of change, and is ultimately a medium in which to grow the cultures of human self expression, I have gone some way to exploring how we might make those partnerships successful and, thus, our efforts to change the world.

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