

When Users Push Back: Oppositional New Media and Community

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Abstract. The progressive privatization of Internet infrastructure in the U.S. throughout the 1990s fostered the resurgence of a mass media-style "pipeline" model of online content distribution favored by the media and entertainment industries. Nonetheless, and despite various attempts at suppression by corporations and law enforcement, a diverse community of artists, activists and citizens has found the Web and related technologies to be effective media for expressing their ideas and interests. In this paper *oppositional new media* are examined as a means of response and resistance to a popular culture that many groups regard as dominated by consumerism, political apathy and cultural and economic oppression. Cases are presented to illustrate key genres of oppositional new media, including the responses of mainstream corporate, government and law-enforcement authorities. The paper concludes with an overview of characteristics of oppositional new media and their implications for establishing and maintaining community.

Prologue: The Internet and 1990s Media Ecology

"Once upon a time there were the mass media, and they were wicked, of course, and there was a guilty party. Then there were the virtuous voices that accused the criminals. And Art (ah, what luck!) offered alternatives, for those who were not prisoners of the mass media.

"Well, it's all over. We have to start again from the beginning, asking one another what's going on."

Umberto Eco, "The Multiplication of the Media" (1986: 150)

"Revolution has to be reinvented, that's all."

Guy Debord, "Instructions for Taking up Arms" (1981 [1961]: 63)

When the World Wide Web and browser technologies were introduced in the U.S. in the early 1990s, technology advocates believed they had the potential to expand Internet use beyond the ranks of elite academic, government and private-sector corporate users. Observers like Stewart Brand and Howard Rheingold, among others, predicted that relatively inexpensive client-server architecture would at last give "ordinary" or "marginal" communities and groups a powerful mediated voice that would allow them to extend their ideas and influence in ways that the few-to-many, top-down, content-distribution model of mass media had prevented. Groups like the Well in Sausalito, California and Berkeley's Community Memory, with their roots in the 1960s counter-culture, embodied the early ideals of empowerment and participation, in Rheingold's famous phrase, of "homesteading on the electronic frontier" (1993).

In fact, Web browsers and the rapid accumulation of Web-based content did help boost hardware and software sales and subscriptions to Internet service providers in the 1990s, particularly among home users. But it wasn't just the availability of content that drew novice users: MUDs and MOOs flourished, chatrooms proliferated, and email was rediscovered to be the fabled "killer app" for personal and leisure uses as well as in the workplace. New opportunities for interpersonal communication, as much as mainstream media content repackaged for the Web, attracted people to the Internet who had never thought of using computers before. Some observers predicted the end of mass media, as Web browsing, chatrooms, email and games began to draw audiences away from broadcast and cable television, radio and theatrical movies.

Meanwhile, the traditional media industries looked at browsers and the World Wide Web and saw a new frontier of a different sort, one of advertising, distribution and sales. They rapidly recast themselves as "content industries," whether their products were books, periodicals, movies, recorded music, or any other format. They collaborated with software firms to repackage or bundle their products with other kinds of "software." As the decade went on, they built alliances with telecommunications firms to gain greater control over the new media infrastructure, particularly the "final mile" of cable or telephone wire into the home. They anticipated a surge of demand for entertainment content delivery that would require major increases in bandwidth.

Throughout the 1990s the conglomerate media-telecoms-computing firms lobbied the U.S. Congress, the Justice Department, the Federal Communications Commission, and any other agencies where they could wield influence, to shape a

more advantageous legal and regulatory environment. The Federal government obliged, in the form of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), and the Bono Copyright Term Extension Act, among other legislation. The Clinton administration appointed FCC commissioners who ushered in a market-oriented era of media deregulation. In the name of reducing restrictions on corporate "speech" (a movement begun under Presidents Reagan and Bush), media ownership constraints were substantially weakened, and equal-time and must-carry rules were abandoned.

At the same time, in the prevailing rush toward privatization, the "property" metaphor swept every corner of the media, computing and telecommunications industries. The radio frequency spectrum -- formerly considered a scarce natural resource and therefore a public good -- was redefined as an over-abundant commodity and important segments were put up for auction. Internet service providers (ISPs) such as AOL eschewed longstanding service models from telephony, postal mail, or publishing. Instead, they claimed both the systems they operated and the messages they carried (e.g., subscribers' email) as their private property and subject to monitoring and control.

Meanwhile, in what copyright scholar Jessica Litman tagged the "intellectual property epidemic" (1994), intellectual property rights were extended to entirely new types of information (including previously-exempted facts like mathematical algorithms, sequences of genetic code, or the "click" of a computer mouse to order merchandise online), and for unprecedented periods of time. New "anti-circumvention" provisions of the DMCA prohibited the creation or use of any new technology that might conceivably be used to infringe intellectual property rights -- whether the technology is actually used that way or not (see the *Hacker Quarterly* case, below).

The dot-com collapse at the end of the decade led to a precipitous shake-out of smaller enterprises and start-ups across the media, telecoms and computing industries. In many cases their assets were sold to the larger surviving firms, thus further concentrating ownership into a handful of global-scale companies. In this climate, worries about personal privacy became widespread in the U.S. and prompted cover stories by major news magazines, horror stories about identity theft and telemarketing abuses in the popular media, consumer protests, and the proposal of new legislation.

But those worries were forgotten in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Shortly thereafter, initiatives like the Patriot Act gave the U.S. government sweeping new powers to withhold and control public information and to monitor the movement, activities and communications of citizens.

Now, a few years into the new century, it would seem that (to paraphrase Mark Twain) the death of the centralized, industrial-style mass media model has been widely exaggerated. After the initial shock of the Internet challenge to existing markets, media industries have responded by attempting to extend the mass

content delivery model to online content "consumption." They have vigorously fought any distribution scheme or technology -- peer-to-peer computing being the most vivid example -- that threatens its gatekeeping, rent-extracting role in the distribution and circulation of information in whatever form.

Though a glut of bandwidth (especially fiber-optic networks) was built in the 1990s, those nets have largely remained dark because the handful of major media conglomerates that control them are unable or unwilling to generate revenue by allowing users to create and share content among themselves. Broadband services to the home (i.e., digital subscriber line [DSL] and cable modem services) were built asymmetrically, with much more downstream capacity (from the network to subscribers) than upstream capacity (from consumers to the network), reflecting a view of households as primarily consumers, rather than producers, of content. Indeed, the widely-heralded, late-90s goal of streaming video to the home via high-speed data networks has quietly been shelved. At present, the U.S. has one of the slowest "high-speed" consumer broadband networks in the world, and lags most of Europe, Korea, Japan, and other nations (Belson & Richtel, 2003).

The Internet and Media Ecology Today

In this contemporary "media ecology," then, what has happened to the early vision of small groups and individuals gaining greater political and economic voice and participation online? In fact a wide array of community groups, political and cultural activists, artists, and ordinary citizens have found innovative ways to use new media technologies and content to express their ideas and opinions online, despite the legal, economic and technological barriers that have been put in their way.

Collectively, these new forms might be called *oppositional new media*, echoing what Lovink and Richardson (2001) call "the media of opposition." They are oppositional in the sense that they constitute a response, reflection, critique, parody or rejoinder to situations and events created by or portrayed in mainstream media. *Oppositional new media* is an umbrella concept that encompasses a variety of forms and content. For example, Geert Lovink and his associates have coined the term *tactical media* and in different works describe its relationship to similar forms, such as alternative media. For the purposes of this paper, however, both tactical and alternative media are included as oppositional new media.

In terms of both content and technology oppositional new media evolve, bottom-up, in response and resistance to a media environment that some groups regard as being fully saturated with consumerism and political spin designed to impress rather than to inform or instigate. For these users, the Internet, mobile telephony and related infrastructures are tools for creating hospitable spaces to

develop and express unpopular or even 'fringe' ideas, and to resist the homogenization of mainstream computing, telecommunications, media and culture. The sites they design and build are necessarily low-budget, quick-response forms of communication that are specifically intended to "cut through the clutter" -- sometimes, by borrowing and subverting it. When they are well-designed and thoughtful, these sites can be memorable, effective, and can motivate impassioned response and participation. They advance the "alternative" philosophy of the early Internet proponents and visionaries, but they also depart from previous forms in important ways.

Groups like ®™ark and the Surveillance Camera Players may not have the cachet, pundits, or Microsoft bankroll of *Slate*, and blogs may never reach more than a few dozen loyal readers. Nonetheless, new genres of digital media have become a sort of laboratory for tinkering with political and cultural expression. In the rest of this paper several important genres of oppositional new media are described and illustrated with recent cases. The characteristics that make oppositional new media a distinctive form of communication, and its role in fostering community participation and involvement, are discussed.

Culture Jamming

The term *culture jamming* is often traced to an influential manifesto by media critic Mark Dery (1993), who himself credits the experimental band Negativland with coining the phrase. Dery defines culture jamming as "media hacking, information warfare, terror-art, and guerrilla semiotics, all in one." It is "directed against an ever more intrusive, instrumental technoculture whose operant mode is the manufacture of consent through the manipulation of symbols" (p. 5). Dery sets out an agenda for culture jamming, and describes a number of projects. Though his essay is now about ten years old, and reflects the media technologies of its time (for example, the reconfiguration of billboards by the Billboard Liberation Front [BLF], the overnight poster blitzes of artists like Robbie Conal, or media hoaxing), the principles and influences Dery cites are still at work today. For example, the BLF can be seen as a predecessor of contemporary website "spoofs" like gwobush.com and Dow-Chemical.com, supported by ®™ark (discussed below).

MIT Media Lab graduate student Jonah Peretti calls culture jamming "a strategy that turns corporate power against itself by co-opting, hacking, mocking and re-contextualizing meanings" (p. 1). In a project he called "My Nike Media Adventure" in an essay in *The Nation* (Peretti, 2001a), Peretti ordered a pair of running shoes from the firm. As a way to associate Nike with freedom and flexibility, the manufacturer offered a customization service which let consumers order shoes bearing their own choice of words or slogans. Peretti ordered a pair emblazoned with the word "sweatshop," a reference to Nike's overseas labor practices. They refused to fill the order, and their email response to Peretti was

the start of an email correspondence in which Nike never actually addressed the labor issue.

Afterwards, Peretti forwarded the correspondence to a few friends via email. But he didn't anticipate that online, the message would spread exponentially among friends of friends, to school and activist groups, to blogs, and so on. Eventually Peretti's story was picked up by online news sites (e.g., Slashdot.com, Plastic.com), which are themselves monitored by the major print and broadcast news organizations. Soon Peretti's project crossed over into the mainstream media and he found he had become something of a short-lived celebrity. He traced the remarkable burst of Web traffic about the story and has posted data about his own email traffic at his website (Peretti, 2001b). Peretti argues that the case demonstrates the power of "micromedia" and "middle media" (online news sites) to influence mass media.

Another, more complex example of culture jamming is found in the nonprofit arts organization [®]™ark (pronounced Art-Mark), which channels philanthropic funding to artists and art projects that challenge corporate and government abuses of power and consumerism. [®]™ark-funded projects include the switching of voice chips in Barbie and GI Joe dolls, which were subsequently sold in a major toy retail outlet (the "Barbie Liberation Organization"); "Deconstructing Beck," a critique of the popular musician's image and music sources which [®]™ark distributes on CD; and GWBush.com, a spoof website for the George W. Bush 2000 Presidential campaign. [®]™ark also supported the art collective etoy.org against attempts in 1999 by the now-defunct retailer EToys.com to prevent the collective from using their own domain name.

[®]™ark figures prominently in another recent controversy, sparked by activist arts group and [®]™ark client The Yes Men (Carr, 2003; "Cyberspace artists," 2002; Delio, 2002; Web Host Industry Review, 2003). On December 3, 2002, the eighteenth anniversary of the toxic gas leak at Dow's Union Carbide plant which killed thousands of people in and around Bhopal, India, The Yes Men posted a parody web site for Dow Chemical which used Dow's graphics but which recounted the company's role in the Bhopal disaster, and linked it to the [®]™ark site. Both The Yes Men and [®]™ark -- as well as hundreds of other arts organizations in New York City, including the magazine *Artforum*, P.S. 1, and Mabou Mines -- were subscribers to an ISP, The Thing, which provided Web connections and design services to area artists and arts organizations. Citing the DMCA, Dow complained to The Thing's telecommunications provider, NTT/Verio.

In response, Verio shut down The Thing's whole network for 16 hours, including all of The Thing's other clients as well as [®]™ark, until the offending site was removed on December 4. Despite the fact that the site was taken down, however, Verio's attorney's soon informed The Thing that their service would be permanently terminated at the end of February 2003. Dow claimed copyright

infringement, violations of the DMCA, and defamation, but those claims were never legally tested; instead of addressing the offending parties directly, Dow "circumvented" the usual legal channels and simply pressured the upstream bandwidth provider, demonstrating that all that is needed to control speech online is to control the network. The Thing's business has been damaged, and according to the *Village Voice*, as of January 2003, the owner, Wolfgang Staehle, was considering moving to a European ISP, where the DMCA does not apply.

A wave of culture jamming projects has also emerged in response to the growing use of surveillance cameras on private property and in public spaces in the U.S. For example, artists have created websites with maps of all the surveillance cameras in certain New York City neighborhoods, and experimental dance projects have been performed for the cameras inside ATM lobbies (Markoff, 2002). New York artist Michael Naimark has created an ongoing project using inexpensive laser pointers to temporarily disable public surveillance cameras as he walks through public spaces. The technical details for the project are provided at his web site (Naimark, 2002). A drama troupe, the Surveillance Camera Players, stages performances of classical and contemporary drama for the benefit of surveillance cameras in public spaces (Rimensnyder, 2001; see also the Players' web site, <http://www.notbored.org/the-scp.html>).

Today, culture jamming is an increasingly familiar tactic in progressive-left politics and cultural circles. Nor is it limited to the Internet or information technology: the print magazines *The Baffler* and *Adbusters* (and their websites) carry ongoing critiques of consumerist ideology in American media culture. The editor of *Adbusters*, Kalle Lasn, has published a polemical call to activism, *Culture Jam: How to Reverse America's Suicidal Consumer Binge -- and Why We Must* (Lasn, 2000). Andrew Boyd, a New York City activist, has been called the "Tony Robbins" of the culture jamming movement (Caldwell, 2003), and offers "Culture Jamming 101" seminars on university campuses in which he encourages others to create their own projects.

Hacktivism

A second genre of oppositional new media is more likely to involve software engineers than artists or critics. Hacktivism employs the technical expertise of computer professionals who object to political or commercial restraints on access to information and information technology, or as Mark Dery puts it, "Outlaw computer hacking *with the intent of exposing institutional or corporate wrongdoing*" (1993, p. 5; italics in the original). Hacktivists' activities range from the creation and distribution of "open source" software, or freeware (such as that used to create blogs; see below), to the development and distribution of decryption programs, to deliberate sabotage such as denial of service (DOS) attacks.

In recent years the term "hacker" has been used by law-enforcement agencies, government and for-profit interests, and repeated in the popular media, as a synonym for criminal. However, the term originated within the computing and software community itself. As far back as the 1970s it was a term of admiration for someone especially adept at creating elegant solutions ("hacks") to difficult programming problems. Certainly, some early hacks involved programmers who figured out how to enter prohibited or restricted systems (e.g., telephone companies, the U.S. Department of Defense). However, these projects were typically intended to demonstrate the skill of the programmer, not to damage or disrupt the system. Indeed, among programmers a distinction is still drawn between skillful, "good-guy" hackers, who often deliberately demonstrate the vulnerabilities or bugs in systems and software programs, for example, and explicitly criminal "crackers."

One of the most prominent recent cases of hacktivism involved Eric Corley, the publisher of the online magazine *2600: The Hacker Quarterly*, and the related website (www.2600.com). In 2000, the magazine published code (DeCSS, or Decrypt Content Scrambling System) that would enable users to decrypt and view DVDs on computers running the Linux operating system, rather than exclusively on Microsoft OS-based systems. The code had been developed by a Scandinavian programmer, who shared it online without charge. The program is not illegal in Europe; nonetheless, Universal Studios sued Corley and *2600* on the grounds that the publication of DeCSS violated the Digital Millennium Copyright Act. Corley invoked his First Amendment speech and press rights as a defense. Nonetheless, the Federal circuit judge's ruling in 2001 not only prohibits Corley from publishing DeCSS; it also enjoins him from publishing links to any other site or source for the same code, even where it is legal.

Corley is appealing the ruling. (For a current list of the legal and media documentation of the case, see the *Hacker Quarterly* web site, <http://www.2600.com>.) But in the meantime, Corley's supporters in the programming community have launched a protest. On the principle that works of art are unambiguously covered by First Amendment speech protections, as online publishing apparently is not, they have set up an online art gallery at Carnegie-Mellon University of works which incorporate DeCSS code, including paintings, sculptures, apparel, and so on (<http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~dst/DeCSS/Gallery/>).

Affiliation Networks

A third category of oppositional new media takes advantage of the ability of digital media systems to connect like-minded but geographically dispersed people who may be otherwise unacquainted through conventional social channels, and diverse content (for example, through hyperlinking). These sites can be thought of as affiliation networks. For example, peer-to-peer (P2P) computing lies at the

heart of recent controversies about Napster and the sharing of music files online. P2P systems help people share files of information, effectively by making their hard drives available to other members of a group. There is no central repository or location for the information; rather, P2P systems allow group members to locate and retrieve each other's materials.

There is nothing inherently "oppositional" about P2P systems. However, one of the first, Napster, became a *cause célèbre* when major entertainment firms -- principally, record companies -- shut down the network. The firms claimed that the P2P architecture allowing users to share music files also made it possible to make illegal copies of copyrighted material, and thus violated the DMCA (and implying that users had no fair use rights to recordings they might already own).

As a result of its legal problems, Napster is gone; its software and patents have since been bought by the media giant BMG. But other P2P networks (e.g., Gnutella, Kazaa; see Woody, 2003) with different and much more distributed architectures are still operating despite industry efforts to stop them. Again, the DMCA is being invoked to prohibit a system architecture in the name of protecting intellectual property rights, at least until the music industry devises its own ways to use P2P. Both operators and users of the surviving P2P systems increasingly view their activities as a form of resistance to the market power of an oligopolistic industry.

However, it might be argued that peer-to-peer computing is not about copyright infringement per se; rather, it is a technological model based on interpersonal networks and people's shared interests. It is a fluid, social and cooperative environment by definition, and regulators prohibiting P2P may in effect be attempting to prohibit certain forms or aspects of social association.

Another cooperative form has become something of a craze in the last few years: blogs (short for "web logs"). Blogs are essentially running commentaries posted online by authors who invite readers to follow along, respond and interact. Authors create them using simple-to-use software that can be obtained for little or no charge online (see, for example, blogger.org and moveabletype.org). A fair proportion of blogs are devoted to political and cultural commentary, and many offer a point of view that is frequently marginalized or suppressed in the mainstream media.

Blogs differ from regular web sites in that they are not merely postings of static content, like an online newspaper; instead, readers can comment and respond to postings, engage with the author and with each other about the postings, link to related websites or "rings" of other like-minded blogs, and so on. Unlike listservs, they are ordinarily hosted and authored primarily by an individual or a small group.

The volume of blogging has increased so much that blog indexes and directories have been developed to help readers find sites they might like (e.g., portal.eatonweb.com). "Top blog" lists are found at directory sites, on individual

blog sites, and on other websites as well. News organizations regularly monitor popular or controversial blogs.

Peer-to-peer systems and blogs are not the only forms of oppositional new media that are based on affiliation and networking. For example, new "meetup" web sites help people with similar interests get together in person for meetings, such as political events; indeed, mainstream political campaigns have begun to take advantage of these informal meetings (NYT, March 13 2003). Text messaging via mobile phones has become another important form of sharing information and socializing. *Indymedia* sites provide local news reporting, commentary, and critique of mainstream news; its precedent is the 1960s alternative press (Deuze, 2003).

However, the key factor across this genre is the use of digital technologies to share information and interact with widely dispersed, like-minded others outside of traditional institutional or organizational structures. As such these affiliative forms may help foster new spaces for civil society or the encouragement of social capital in Putnam's sense (2000).

Features of Oppositional New Media

The preceding discussion is hardly a comprehensive inventory of the various established and emerging forms of online media that take a critical or oppositional stance to the political, cultural and economic status quo. But it gives a sense of the range of projects and activities involved, and suggests that these efforts share several key characteristics.

The first feature of the various genres of oppositional new media is their *small scale*; as Jonah Peretti says, they are "micromedia." In Garcia and Lovink's (1997) phrase, they are "what happens when the cheap 'do it yourself' media...are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture." They are run with a minimum investment -- for example, ®™ark solicits philanthropic donations amounting to no more than a few thousand dollars per project that it supports. As a result, the projects and their related web sites give visitors a sense of intimacy, of personal involvement, of advocating particular issues and interests, of "subcultural immediacy" in Kahn and Kellner's phrase (2003). The visitor to the ®™ark or DeCSS Gallery sites gets a sense of being an insider, an initiate. At the same time, however, because the sites are connected to the world-wide Internet infrastructure, they have the potential for global reach and impact; as Kahn and Kellner put it, they have the potential of contributing to "globalization from below."

The second important characteristic of oppositional new media is that they are *interventionist*. They "introduce noise into the signal" (Dery, 1993), they "jam dominant media transmissions" (Hebdige, 1979, quoted in Kahn & Kellner, 2003). They are intended to subvert taken-for-granted meanings in a way that is

obviously manipulated: "Culture jammers do not exist without corporate billboards" (Lovink & Richardson, 2001). In this sense, they are the legacy of earlier political parody and subversive art, like that of the World War II collage artist John Heartfield (Dery, 1993; Huhtamo, 2003).

The point of oppositional new media is that they either constitute intervention and action in and of themselves (e.g., performances for the benefit of surveillance cameras and whomever is watching at the other end; or the Carnegie-Mellon DeCSS Gallery), or they invite and motivate intervention by others (e.g., ®™ ark's "Mutual Funds," which solicit "investors" for prospective artworks, or Michael Naimark's instructions for disabling video surveillance cameras; see also Braman, 2002). As Mark Dery points out in his 1993 essay, those who engage in culture jamming, who are making counter-intuitive interpretations of the dominant culture, are practicing the "guerrilla semiotics" advocated by Umberto Eco in 1967:

"What must be occupied, in every part of the world, is the first chair in front of every TV set (and naturally, the chair of the group leader in front of every movie screen every transistor, every page of every newspaper)...The battle for the survival of man as a responsible being in the Communications Era is not to be won where the communication originates, but where it arrives" (Eco, 1986, p. 142).

The third key characteristic of oppositional new media is that they both demonstrate, and expect from their audiences, a relatively high level of *visual, cultural, or subcultural literacy*, as Kahn and Kellner put it (2003). They show a "hyper self-reflexivity about the nature of pop culture" (Collins, 1995, p. 2), an awareness and referentiality that can reinterpret the familiar because the sites' authors assume their audiences all know it, too. In this sense they are postmodern: issues, images, buzzwords, attitudes, are chosen, captured, subverted, coopted, fragmented, recombined and re-presented in unexpected (and hopefully felicitous) ways. Garcia and Lovink (1997) observe that they possess an "aesthetic of poaching, tricking, reading, speaking, strolling, shopping, desiring."

In this respect oppositional new media can trace their roots to the Situationist concept of *détournement*, the "strategy of diverting elements of affirmative bourgeois culture to revolutionary ends, of distorting received meanings" (McDonough, 2002: xiv). *Détournement* was exemplified by the uses of comics, pornography, and other images from popular culture in the posters, films, and manifestoes of the student uprising of May 1968 in France (Viénet, 1981 [1967]).

A fourth feature is that oppositional new media are *ironic*, playful, humorous, campy, or parodic (Braman, 2002). "[Culture jamming] is immature...[it] celebrates the possibility of ironic, humorous and contradictory political actions"

(Peretti, 2001). Oppositional new media "...do not take themselves that seriously...They know how to laugh" (Lovink & Richardson, 2001). The absurd is abundantly obvious to the designers and makers of oppositional media, and their aim is to inspire outrage by pointing out and mocking the absurdity. As intellectual property expert Jessica Litman has observed about the current copyright situation, "Members of the general public commonly find copyright rules implausible, and simply disbelieve them" (Litman, 2001, p. 29). Even situations that are not humorous or ironic on their face can quickly be turned to that purpose, as the CMU DeCSS Gallery does with the Eric Corley/*Hacker Quarterly* injunction.

The fifth characteristic of oppositional new media is that they are *liquid*, both in terms of their ephemerality in relation to the current cultural context, the meanings they draw upon and reinterpret, and the nature of electronic information and information technology generally. They are "...capable of taking risks, even if this means they might self-destruct in the process" (Lovink & Richardson, 2001). They are notable for their "*mobility*, [their] flexible response to events and changing contexts" (Meickle, 2000).

Jim Collins (1995) argues that new media destabilize the evaluative criteria of traditional culture and relegitimizes those criteria on new grounds: first, they create and enable new kinds of cultural collecting, archiving, and archivists; and second, they disperse cultural authority from a few institutional centers to multiple new sites (pp. 28-29). As social theorists like Manuel Castells would argue -- and the practical case of the P2P network Kazaa materially demonstrates (Woody, 2003) -- neither the networked form of the infrastructure nor the content of new media have a stable form or fixed structure; they organize, disorganize and reorganize recursively.

Conclusion

To conclude, then, the preceding cases and the characteristics proposed above suggest that oppositional new media are as varied, volatile and technologically sophisticated as the communities that create and share them. They embody the activist, culturally eclectic, local and playful values of the longstanding progressive strain in American culture and politics, and comprise a vital and innovative response to the dominant media and political/economic environment.

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