

“Keeping Brothers: Communication and Control on the Internet”

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The internet has had a profound impact on the world in the last ten years as a tool to make our lives easier and give us access to more information. However, it is often described as a thing of myth or mystery, having a mind of its own, or, even worse, no mind at all, acting and lashing out at people irrationally. The following is by no means a solution, but instead is an approach, to better describe the mythical monster and to help outline a direction of thinking about what the internet is by thinking of it in terms of a series of models, and examining the effect the internet has had and why or how.

To begin, I would like to think of the internet in terms of a language system, a communication system, using terms borrowed from Michel Foucault.¹ On the base level it is composed of physical reality, code written on hard disks. The code is signified by a statement which is its signifier. An example of a statement could be a page on the world wide web which signifies code, and is also a signifier for a person’s idea. The statement as signifier is dependent upon other signifiers for its structure. These statements are grouped together to constitute a discourse or practice, something the pages express or perform. The discourse is exemplified by the web site, being composed of web pages, but may also describe a fileserver menu as accessed by a retrieval system such as Fetch or Gopher. This structure is immediately formed by a surface of emergence, the social and cultural area through which a discourse appears, consisting of the community of people or sites who share similar interests and establish discourses around a body of common subjects. These areas are subject to authorities of delimitation, institutes that govern, embodied by webservers, the members of the cultural area or web community, or

¹ Given the short length of this essay, I will not set up the original framework of these terms. Many are taken from Foucault’s proposed treatment of the human sciences as a “discourse-object” in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, which Foucault backed away from in his later career. Dreyfus, Hubert L. and

governmental agencies. These areas are connected by a network that allows them to relate to others in a greater system, the internet as a whole. It is important to realize that this system is at the same time physical in that this entire system is manifested in magnetic markings on a metallic hard drives. However, these hard drives project visuals and audio that is perceivable if not tangible, like the complements between the physical mind and mental thought. These two aspects together form an object. The question, if the internet is a language, is are we able to master the system of sites? The philosophical struggle is now to make new links between the language of the internet and being.

One identifies oneself with a site, one’s personal site. These can be sites one identifies with through visiting often, one’s personal account page, a web page created by a person, or a page that is a direct document of a person’s life, such as webcam pages like www.jennicam.com, a page that broadcasts video images of a person’s real life. All sites are made by someone (even if distanced by a composing application or several applications), however, others may also identify with a site, therefore claiming a kind of ownership. Multiple people can identify with a site and a person can identify with multiple sites. This identification is made easier by the internet being viewed behind the glass screen of a monitor, so the face of the viewer is reflected; one actually sees oneself in the site. This phenomenon has suggested to me another idea of a site, the site of the terminal, at which one is accepted into the network and the network is made readable to one. To the web browser, or other application used to access the internet, a site is identified with a person or a group of people, those who identify with its cultural area. So to the web browser, one becomes simply an idea projected by the site’s web server. This

Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, University of Chicago Press, 1983, xxiv.

represents a new form of manifesting humanity. In the last lines of Foucault’s *The Order of Things*, the author notes that the idea of human is a recent invention and that perhaps it is nearing its end.² I believe we have already begun the transition to a new human, being placed in a new reality composed of physical and non-physical parts to be perceived.

So the language is organized spatially in both a physical space (connected hard drives acting as servers) and a virtual space in a seemingly infinite universe, but actually limited by the collective hard drive capacity. This space is fundamental in any exercise of power, as Foucault discusses in his essay “On Other Spaces.”³ In many ways, it is depersonalized and formed by a complex series of relations and rules, discursive formations between sites. However, these sites are themselves personal and have changed “the temporal and spatial shape and meaning of our bodily and symbolic sense of ourselves.”⁴ They allow one to be disembodied, disseminated, and dissipated.

To study the system is difficult because studies are usually based on the examination of an object’s history, through books, accounts, and acts of an object’s attributes. But in the case of the internet, these attributes are to a large extent ephemeral, being deleted or updated like the mythical ship Argo. To examine a phrase in Latin is possible because it exists physically in books. Though the meaning or spelling may change with time, it is still recorded in physical form and can be placed in a context, given the date of the production of the physical form that contains it. A site’s physical form is never permanent, able to be rewritten and updated continually, leaving often little

² Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things: An Anthology of Human Sciences*, Vintage Books, 1970, 386.

³ Foucault, Michel, “On Other Spaces,” *The Visual Culture Reader*, edited by Nicholas Mirzoeff, Routledge, 1998, 237.

⁴ Sobchack, Vivian, “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Cinematic and Electronic Presence,” *Materialities of Consciousness*, edited by Hans Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, Stanford University Press, 1994, 83.

record of its etymology. To describe the contents of a site at one instance is to describe it at that instance only, for it may be changed, seemingly instantaneously, by a myriad of sources. To examine a net document as a statement should therefor begin with a history of the statement itself, noting changes in code in order to perceive what parts are permanent or have existing during a certain time span to effect others around it. What perhaps would be helpful would be a categorization of sites for historical purposes as permanent, changing, or temporary.

As mentioned earlier, these sites are personal to a varying degree. The statement or web site determines the position an individual occupies, inserted into a discursive formation, which is in some ways an ideological relation produced by the capitalist institution and government institution that funds the internet and allows it to float as an apparatus of the state (not just an apparatus, but consisting of and referring to all previous apparati) and as simultaneously a network of circulating forces.⁵ These institutions are, to use the term of Theodor Adorno, the “culture industry.”⁶ It is this entity that exercises power over the internet and the mind and body of those connected to it. This power places pressure on its attached, who resist the grip it has on them in constantly shifting power relationship with the internet not just the vehicle for power, but being the actual power, inhabiting all aspects of daily life with people serving as its vehicles, not just points of application.⁷

As Katherine Hayles puts it, “[w]e become the code we punch.”⁸ In that people are attached personally to statements of the language system and this system includes

⁵ Batchen, Geoffrey, *Burning With Desire*, The MIT Press, 1997, 188.

⁶ Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. By John Cumming, Continuum, 1997, 121.

⁷ Ibid.

power relationships, I would like to suggest a second model for understanding the internet, that of the “disciplined society.”⁹ Everyday behavior is under surveillance, with inappropriate activity resulting, for example, in one being flamed in a chat room. One is detained not just inside the disciplinary system, but in certain areas through phenomenon like narrow bandwidth hindering one’s travel speed to the next site, or proxy errors that prevent access to certain areas that are either full to capacity or simply off limits. With one being responsible for knowing information on the web, one is made to work, to view web sites, to be more social by creating sites or visiting the ideas of more people through their sites. The work of viewing produces capital for the culture industry that provides the internet, as a site becomes popular and companies wish to advertise on it. The body becomes docile (sitting before the screen), to be improved (by socializing) and useful (by producing capital). At the interface of the site, one becomes a part of the network, the sensory input and output, a nexus for reconfiguring information and redistributing it within the system. As McLuhan says in his *Understanding Media*, people become the sex organ of the machine world.¹⁰ They allow the system to reproduce, either through actual programming or through the act of viewing that raises the capital for the system and enables it to grow. This results in a larger system in which people are required to be more active and more social.

On the internet, discipline is enforced everywhere. The body becomes a mechanism of power, watching others (I become my brother’s keeper), forcing others to behave. It is not only insolence and laziness that is prohibited, but not having the proper

⁸ Hayles, N. Katherine, “Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers,” *October* 66, Fall 1993, 81.

⁹ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1979, 198.

communications skills, which can cause one’s email to be blocked. Unlike Bentham’s panopticon, there is no one singular tower that may or may not be supervising, but instead, one knows at all times that one’s activity could be monitored from any number of sources, such as one’s boss monitoring one’s keystrokes-per-minute through the company network to maintain high productivity. Another example: one sends out information that is insecure and is aware it can be watched, so one assumes responsibility for the constraints of power. Users must patrol themselves, of which one is constantly reminded by one’s reflection staring out from inside the computer screen.

So we have a language system, in which individuals, to a variety of degrees, become the signifieds. The signifiers are controlled by the servers, part of the culture industry, who hold the means of production and give the users what they require for a fee. To not buy into the system is tantamount to not having the means to communicate on the same level as the apparent majority, as one does not understand or have a translator for the language, and so one becomes an outsider, which is a mortal sin.¹¹ One is ostracized and alienated, unable to keep up with current events at the normal speed because of a lack of communication, and this has an effect of a prison, as one of a prisons most effective tools is its ability to cut a prisoner off from humanity with the knowledge that humanity is all around him/her. It should be noted that this is indeed the majority of the world’s population, who have not yet used a telephone, let alone personally encountered the internet. It should also be noted that one does not simple accept or reject the system, but there are many degrees of acceptance that can serve as steps in an initiation process.

¹⁰ McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964, 46.

¹¹ Horkheimer, 150.

However, to use the internet, the language system, is to become imprisoned as well. The culture industry claims to be based on the consumer or individual's needs to be accepted with little resistance.¹² It seems to submit to the vote of the people, whether through a vote by dollars in the purchasing of new software, or through a vote by hit count, the number of times an individual accesses a certain site. But the culture industry also instructs the people on how to vote, giving them information on “candidates” as well as supplying their taste for them through its pervasive influence.¹³ The result is a circle of manipulation and retroactive need in which the unity of the system grows, further alienating those outside the system and forcing them to capitulate.¹⁴ On a higher level, the culture industry is forced by a seemingly irrational power of the overriding social system of which the culture industry advertises it is in control. Seemingly irrational to the author because I have not been able to delude myself that I comprehend it.

The question becomes why, what is the purpose for all this control. One apparent step in one explanation is “money.” The culture industry controls the network which supplies a market by telling people what they need to consume and by selling not only information, but also the tools by which the message of what should be consumed is transmitted. McLuhan summarizes this point concisely:

Archimedes once said, “Give me a place to stand and I will move the world.” Today he would have pointed to our electronic media and said, “I will stand on your eyes, your ears, your nerves, and your brain, and the world will move in any tempo or pattern I choose.” We have leased these “places to stand” to private corporations.¹⁵

¹² Ibid., 121

¹³ Ibid., 134.

¹⁴ Ibid., 121.

¹⁵ McLuhan, 68.

The next step in this explanation is that money is power. Power is what the culture industry wants, as it is told by the irrational overriding social system that it needs power and that this power enables one to be a dominator and not the dominated. It says that the dominator is in a better position, but is simultaneously dominating the culture industry by dictating its desires. Again, this description is dependent on the mythical and unintelligible overriding social system whose principles have been established by history.

At the same time, there seems to be operating another answer to the question why, and that is “to better man.” A system of communication is built to bring people together. There is control within the system as those who operate it act as parents to those who utilize it, also guarding them from delinquent elements that those in control, perhaps out of ignorance, produce (by disciplining an individual, such as a warning in a chatroom, which may result in a reaction to authority through a more aggressively rebellious act). By connecting ourselves to the network through our personal web sites or our personal terminal at our respective institution (university, business, home), our knowledge is dispersed through the network for others to receive, the entire business becoming learning and knowing.¹⁶ The translation of our individual lives into information through the network process leads to the network, spanning the globe, to become one singular, greater consciousness.¹⁷ There is a loss of individuality in this idea as the self is expanded over the internet, dispersed and transmitted across its social space, but also a harmonizing unity.

One might respond that those who are helping do so because they enjoy a place of authority, of domination, as helper and not in need of help. They have been, or are at

¹⁶ Ibid., 58.

¹⁷ Ibid., 61.

times, in a position of helplessness, dislike the feeling, and prefer a position of power. Another response is that the capitulation of one to technology seems like enslavement to the outsider.¹⁸ Extreme examples of this can be found on webcam sites such as www.jennicam.com where Jenni places her entire life on the web for all to see. She is releasing her privacy for attention. As a .com, one might offer the suggestion that she has done this for profit; the site contains advertisements and boasts that it is viewed by one thousand viewers at any given time. Yet she has claimed from the beginning to be making “minimal profit” and more recently, as do most webcam sites, to be losing money due to monthly server costs.¹⁹ She puts herself under the gaze of her ever-present camera, always aware that some unknown viewer is watching, and does so voluntarily, even with the consequence of various losses. Why? To “extend the body in space and time”?²⁰ For attention and the increase of self communicated to a large audience? This would seem to boil down to a conflict between the individual and the community, a dialectical relationship between wanting power and submitting to the power of the collective consciousness. Is Jenni’s exposure a result of a voluntary desire for fame or people to be educated about her, or are these desires implanted in her by the culture industry which gains from her popularity an increase in viewing, an increase of participation, and, therefore, an increase in capital, power, and control? As a constant performer, she controls her audience and is controlled by it. Yet, while there is this domination conflict, it in itself is an example of communication in which two parties are brought together in a way impossible in the past.

¹⁸ Ibid., 69.

¹⁹ Allen, Jamie. “Ed’ of the Internet: JenniCAM going strong after three years,” CNN Online, March 26, 1999, <<http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/Movies/9903/26/jennicam/>>.

²⁰ Jones, Amelia, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 205.

The thought I would like to end on is that humanity is always progressing and changing, whether due to competition for survival or to altruistic intentions of bettering society's situation. In accordance with the ideas of the nineteenth century anarchist Peter Kropotkin, we evolve through a combination of both survival of the fittest and mutual aid strategies. With radical change, such as the internet has caused in our society, there is initially anxiety which produces a desire for militarism and hierarchy, as those who do not know what to do wish to be given instruction by those who have a handle on the situation.²¹ This fear and desire for security produce an empire, which brings expansion, more progress, and more change. The competition for power in society produces a need for mutual aid, which in turn produces expansion, resulting in more competition with neighbors. Innovations, such as the internet, bring to the fore a system of shifting social relations and serves as an index of cultural interaction. The internet is itself a model for understanding the community interactions and communication dynamics and so a study of the internet is actually a study of something much larger: it is a study of society.

²¹ McLuhan, 71.