Cyberpeace: The Struggle of Civil Society for Radical Democracy and Hegemony in Cyberspace

Ronald H. Tuschl

European University Center for Peace Studies, Rochusplatz 1, A-7461 Stadtschlaining, Austria
E-Mails: tuschl@epu.ac.at; ronaldtuschl@yahoo.de

Introduction: Electronic agora, escape velocity or agony of the real? – The intellectual controversy about the impacts of cyberspace

"The new source of power is not money in the hands of a few, but information in the hands of many."

John Naisbitt [1]

After the collapse of the Cold War system and the establishment of the new global information society through the Internet, a controversial debate occurred among social scientists and philosophers about the impacts of the new and forthcoming digital world. The main focus of this debate was the question whether the new digital society would change or preserve the current socio-political situation of the current world society. The 'mainstream' of the Silicon Valley computer technology industries, who endorsed the so-called 'dotcom neo-liberalism' with its new characteristics of individualism, libertarianism combined with neo-liberal economy and techno-utopianism, were heavily criticised as the so-called 'Californian Ideology' by Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron [2]. Both authors characterised this new post-technological ideology as a strange mixture of 'Hippie'-beliefs of the 1960ies (personal freedom) and the 'Yuppie'-beliefs of the 1980ies (individual success). The core idea of the Californian Ideology is that the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) could establish a new kind of 'Electronic Agora', where its members would be able to promote and share their opinions without any fear, suppression or censorship. These new achievements would be able to undermine the current power structures and guarantee individual freedom for the people. Barbrook and Cameron were criticising that the current high-tech-elites were unable to articulate a clear socio-political position and that their promoted 'Electronic Agora' would also be insufficient to solve the problems of modern societies [3]. In fact, the 'Electronic Agora' would rather be replaced by an "electronic marketplace" of the new "virtual class" influenced by neo-liberal techno-determinism [4].

Barbrook's and Cameron's critique on the 'Californian Ideology' was not the only one. Mark Dery, a US-American author and cultural critic, and French post-structuralists like Paul Virilio or Jean Baudrillard have been criticising the new neo-liberal techno-determinism as well. Mark Dery was emphasising that the new cyberspace ideology that is existing since the beginning of the 1990s might be described as an "escape velocity", which means a transcendental escape from terrestrial matter by high speed resulting in the wish for overcoming natural limits and death [5].

The French philosopher Paul Virilio referred to Albert Einstein, who was convinced in the early 1950s that the post-industrial society is threatened by three bombs: The first one is the atomic bomb, which has already been exploded; the second one is the information bomb and the third one is the world population bomb that will explode in the 21st century. Therefore, the information bomb is currently exploding. According to Einstein's hypothesis, Paul Virilio comes to the conclusion that the explosion of the information bomb will result in the so-called "zero time", which means that the time difference in between all events in cyberspace is becoming shorter and shorter caused by the high speed of information transmission. In other words, all events in cyberspace are happening at the same time and result in a paradoxical phenomenon, which Virilio has called "racing standstill" [6].

The French philosopher and post-structuralist Jean Baudrillard criticises that within cyberspace the "real" would be increasingly replaced by "simulation", which means that within virtual worlds, any reference to reality would get lost. Furthermore, the simulation is tending to become a perfect copy of reality and a construction of illusion. He calls this phenomenon the "agony of the real" [7-8]. Achim Bühl has stressed another critique on the currently used cyber-terminology like "data highway", "cyberspace", "virtual community", "global village", "virtual marketplace" or "city of bits". In his analysis he comes to the conclusion that the "virtual society" is characterised by the partial substitution of real production, distribution and communication of reality, but in the end the real world cannot be completely replaced by virtualisation. The result of this transformation process would therefore be a virtual "parallel society" coexisting with reality [9].

Another interesting approach that accompanied the digital transformation process of the world society as well as the academic discussion since the beginning of the 90s was neo-Gramscianism that referred to Gramsci's concept of "hegemony". According to Gramsci's classic approach, the dominant classes of a society would constitute "historical blocks", which are able to convince the dominated class to share the cultural values and to universalise the common standards. Neo-Gramscianism tries to shift this concept of hegemony on a global scale and argues that currently the neo-liberal dominance tries to reach a global "cultural hegemony" according to Gramsci. The Neo-Gramscianists Robert W. Cox und Stephen Gill argue that currently the "transnational capitalist class" or the "transnational managerial class" represent the new "historical block". Furthermore, the current cultural hegemony of neo-liberalism has failed and is based on enforcement since it has not reached a social consensus on its own values among civil society so far [10-11]. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have refined this neo-Gramscian concept of "cultural hegemony" towards a conception of "radical democracy" (a democracy based on the difference of entities and pluralism) that would be required to challenge the current dominance of neo-liberalism [12].

In this point of view, the digital information society can also be interpreted as challenging the dominance of the neo-liberal discourse of the 'Californian Ideology' and as a struggle for hegemony in cyberspace. In this sense, the civil society has become a battleground of the struggle for hegemony against the dominant political sphere of the world information society.

Struggling for hegemony and the future of the information society

After the establishment of the WWW and its enormous expansion during the 1990s, it was unclear for the Generation X whether the participation in the global information society by the new social movements was useful or harmful. Adherers of the 'Californian Ideology' and techno-eschatologists reinterpreted the well-known post-Maoist parole "long march through the institutions" by the APO ('Außerparlamentarische Opposition', German for extra-parliamentary opposition), spokesman Rudi Dutschke as a "long march through the cyberspace". On the other hand, the techno-cultural pessimism of the French post-structuralists also influenced the sceptics among the new social movements. Apart from this controversial debate, many peace movements, NGOs and grassroots of the 1970s and 1980s have been attracted by the potentials that the WWW had to offer: It is basically flexible, open to many people and cheap as well to promote the intentions of small organisations, movements and grassroots, whose ideas and work have been commonly unknown to the public. In this respect, especially peace-related movements and institutions, most of them from the mid-1990s, tried to expose themselves through the Internet.

Most of the peace movements in the US and other countries have unionised in the Usenet (e.g. 'alt.peace' or 'alt.peace-corps'), which was a parent communication platform of the so-called 'Social Networks'. One of the first peace education related networks was 'Communication for a Sustainable Future' (CSF) at the University of Colorado. This network published a catalogue of all peace study programs worldwide. In Europe, 'Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research' (TFF) became one of the most important and independent information providers during the wars in former Yugoslavia or in the Caucasus. One of the first peace research institutions in Germany that joined the WWW was the 'PRIF' ('Peace Research Institute Frankfurt'), which did not only promote its aims and perspectives, but also offered several publications to download ("PRIF report", "Friedensgutachten"). In the UK it was the Department of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford which allowed the first Telnet access to their library catalogue. In 1996 the 'Austrian Study Center for Peace and Conflict Resolution' (ASPR) launched its first website, offering news and articles, research and conference reports, training course programmes and publication archives for the public. Its partner institution European Peace University, formerly called 'European University Center for Peace Studies' (EPU) was the first organisation in continental Europe, which presented an MA Programme in Peace and Conflict Studies to students from around the world. Later, in 2010, the EPU re-launched its website after becoming a private university and introduced a 'Virtual Campus' covering an online catalogue of the peace library, an intranet for the students and a huge publication archive of the UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) Chair on Peace, Human Rights & Democracy. After the emergence of the so-called 'Web 2.0', most of the institutions mentioned above also joined the new Social Networks like Facebook or Twitter to connect with international peace movements.

Since the early beginning and establishment of the Internet, not only the global society has been in transition but also the Internet itself. The first version of the WWW was mainly a passive information medium, whose primary purpose was to inform the 'information rich' and an elite of technocrats. Although the digital divide still exists, the expansion of the net has meanwhile spread all around the world and the number of participants has been dramatically increasing. Furthermore, the 'Web 2.0' has also changed the quality of the net. By the establishment of the 'Social Networks' like Facebook, Twitter, Xing or Google+ that cover nearly one billion of participants, the Internet is no longer a passive information medium but it has become more flexible and mobile in terms of interactive communication and sharing of interests. The third stage of the net is the 'Web 3.0' that is also known as the so-called 'Semantic Web'. This means that not only passive information or interactive communication and sharing will be provided in the future. 'Semantic' means furthermore that the 'Web 3.0' will be able to identify correlations and relationships of data, which have not been transparent before. This implies that passive databases will serve as multiple information clusters in the future. This circumstance has an enormous potential for civil society, especially for future peace and conflict studies. The 'Semantic Web' could be useful for conflict transformation, early warning systems, crisis prevention and new interdisciplinary peace and conflict research.

Conclusion

It is hard to predict how the information society will develop in the future. The web might be increasingly used for common goods of the world population like democratic participation, human rights, crisis management or political change. However, it might also be misused for monopolistic opinion leadership, information warfare, violating privacy, as well as for suppression, exclusion or censorship of the freedom of speech.

However, one thing is certain: the digital divide and the power monopoly of the US government, which both still exist, are symptomatic of the circumstance that the struggle for neo-Gramscian 'Hegemony' and the quest for 'Radical Democracy' within the information society are still going on and the net community with its 'Netizens' will remain the battleground of this struggle to overcome the current state of democracy in crisis.

References and Notes

1. Naisbitt, John. *Megatrends. Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives*. Warner Books: New York, 1982, 16.
2. Barbrook, Richard/Cameron, Andy. The Californian Ideology. *Science as Culture*. 6.1, 1995, 44-72.
3. Barbrook, Richard. Cyber-Communism. How The Americans Are Superseding Capitalism In Cyberspace. *Science as Culture*. 2000, 9, 5-40.
4. *Die kalifornische Ideologie*. February 5th 1997. http://www.heise.de/tp/artikel/1/1007/1.html
5. Dery, Mark. *Escape Velocity. Cyberculture at the End of the Century.* Grove Press: New York, 1996.
6. Virilio, Paul. *La Bombe Informatique*, Galilée: Paris, 1998.
7. Baudrillard, Jean. *Die Agonie des Realen*. Merve-Verlag: Berlin, 1978.

8. Rötzer, Florian. *Illusion, Verführung und Simulation. Florian Rötzer im Gespräch mit Jean Baudrillard*. http://on1.zkm.de/zkm/discuss/msgReader$1072?mode=day

9. Bühl, Achim. *Die virtuelle Gesellschaft. Ökonomie, Politik und Kultur im Zeichen des Cyberspace.* In *Soziologie des Internet. Handeln im elektronischen Web-Werk*, Lorenz Gräf, Markus Krajewski; Eds.; Campus: Frankfurt/New York, 1997; pp. 39-59.

10. Cox, Robert W. *Power, Production, and World Order.* Columbia University Press: New York, 1987.

11. Gill, Stephen. *American hegemony and the Trilateral Commission.* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1990.

12. Laclau, Ernesto/Mouffe, Chantal. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Verso: London, 1985.