**Technologies of Liberation and Consumption: Shifting Discourses
Surrounding the Internet**

Submitted to the International Communication Association Conference,
Communication and Technology

Karen Gustafson
Ph.D. Program
University of Texas at Austin,
Department of Radio-Television-Film
Vertigo@mail.utexas.edu

Introduction

In the last two decades, the Internet has been framed in a wide variety of ways. It has been positioned as a link to global community, an information source, a symbol of modern scientific progress, a technology of democracy, and a site of commercial enterprise. The Internet is comprised of a relatively new group of communications technologies, and discourses surrounding the Internet are still in the process of formation. As demonstrated by Lynn Spigel in her study of the television as a domestic technology, and by Claude Fischer in his study of the social effects of the telephone, the use patterns of technology are never entirely predictable.[1] Rather, technologies are molded by a variety of forces including government regulation, the market, individual users, and on a mass level, discourse. Although originally created as defense technology, the Internet was later viewed as a tool of academic and scientific research. In 1991, the National Science Foundation relinquished control of the Internet, opening the door to commercialization. Since then, the Internet has been framed as a technology of education and political equality, and also increasingly as a technology of cultural and material consumption. While the 1996 Telecommunications Act mentioned the democratic necessity of universal service for online technologies and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration continues to report on the "digital divide," the Internet is also frequently positioned as a tool of free market commerce.

This paper will address these multiple and sometimes competing discourses of politics and democracy surrounding the Internet, drawing on material from mainstream

U.S. magazines including *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Time*. These periodicals were selected based upon their circulation and position as representations of dominant US discourse.[2] While this study examines articles mentioning the Internet going back to 1980, the focus of this discourse analysis will be from the early 1990s to March of 2000. In doing so, this paper seeks to establish and periodize certain dominant discourses surrounding the Internet. When and how did the Internet shift from being represented as an esoteric tool of specialists to being represented as a tool for democracy? How has the Internet been increasingly framed as platform for commercial pursuits and consumption? This paper will focus on the discursive development of the Internet as a political medium, examining initial utopian frames as well as later political discourses which re-locate the democratic potential of the Internet to outside the U.S.

The Utility of Discourse Analysis

Discourse refers to the way in which issues such as technology are discussed or framed in a society. While there is often no absolute articulation of norms concerning technology use, discourses can set boundaries for what is possible or acceptable. Mainstream media such as *Newsweek*, *US News and World Report*, and *Time* can be analyzed as representations of dominant discourse, propagating standards or norms. In this way, discourses are infused with power. In her explanation of discourse, Sara Mills draws on Michel Foucault and Michel Pecheux, arguing that "a discourse is not a disembodied collection of statements, but groupings of utterances or sentences,

---

[1] See L. Spigel, *Make Room for TV*, and C. Fischer, *A Social History of the Telephone*.
[2] *Newsweek* controlled circulation listed at 3,200,000; *US News and World Report* paid circulation listed at 2,224,003; *Time* paid circulation listed at 4,100,000. Source: *Publist*, [Online], http://www/publist.com, Accessed 5/15/00.

statements which are enacted within a social context, which are determined by that social context and which contribute to the way that social context continues its existence."[1997, p. 11] Discourse is more than just talk; it is talk embedded in power relations and social contexts. The fact that the Internet is framed in particular ways is not ideologically neutral; rather, it is indicative of certain agendas such as the support of the status quo or the spread of privatization. By examining the strands of discourse within these periodicals, one can articulate the changing roles of the Internet, and its shifting position in dominant discourse as a tool of democracy, education, better jobs, or more efficient consumption. Who should use this technology, and how should it be used?

While this analysis will not directly link the discourse in these publications to particular policy decisions, I argue that this press represents the changing attitudes of dominant opinion. Although it may be difficult to causally link mass discourse to policy-making, this discourse can represent the dominant spirit and attitudes of an era. These press representations can also flatten the more subtle aspects of a complex issue, such as the uses of the Internet, framing it in simplified terms: a current example of this would be the unquestioned urgency surrounding the profit potential of the Internet. Public discourse as represented in the mainstream press can serve to set particular agendas, filtering certain perspectives while highlighting others. Diane Macdonell alludes to this selective quality of discourse, suggesting that "any discourse concerns itself with certain objects and puts forward certain concepts at the expense of others."(1986. p. 3)

These ascendant discourses create the parameters for likely everyday uses of the technology, setting boundaries around the possible implementations of the Internet. In this sense, I would compare these discursive formulations to Anthony Giddens' concepts

of structure and structuration. The "rules" for who uses the Internet and how it is to be used are not generally codified; rather, they are created discursively through multiple, dynamic interpretations. Giddens contrasts the power of these unspoken rules with codified, abstract law, stating, "I would propose, however, that many seemingly trivial procedures followed in daily life have a more profound influence upon the generality of social conduct."(1984, p. 22) Although there may be no law stating that the Internet is best used as a platform for commercial pursuits or cultural consumption, these have effectively become normal expectations. These expectations are discursively formed through channels including mass discourse such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News and World Report*, and form tacit rules for everyday conduct, such as Internet use. These tacit rules may also include what groups are positioned as likely Internet users—who is expected to use this technology, and how? In this way, these rules can also be considered resources, enabling certain actions while constraining others. These rules and resources form discursive structures, making certain groups more likely to have access to Internet technology, and also making certain uses more likely. Finally, these structures must be considered dynamic and recursive, neither codified nor imposed upon individuals from above. They provide what Giddens refers to as structuration, the "conditions governing the continuity or transmutation of structures, and therefore the reproduction of social systems."(1984, p. 25) The examples of dominant mass discourse discussed in this paper show the reproduction of particular social systems, and the evolution of tacit rules for behavior concerning the uses and users of the Internet.

Methods of Analysis

This study looks at three examples of mainstream US discourse over a period of several years. To initially find articles in *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *US News and World Report* that mention the Internet, I performed content searches with two databases, *Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe* and *Expanded Academic ASAP*. These search engines identified articles containing the word "Internet" in the headline, citation, or lead paragraph, between the dates of January 1, 1990 and May 1, 2000. This initial search revealed a considerable number of articles in each publication—1,059 in *Newsweek*, 640 *in US News and World Report*, and 370 articles in *Time*. Also, this number was skewed towards recent issues, so that although none of the magazines had articles focused on the Internet in 1990, all three had over 100 articles in 1999. To narrow this sample, I analyzed all of the articles before 1994 in each publication (a total of 10) and only articles within March or December issues thereafter. This abbreviated my sample to 313 articles, including 135 in *Newsweek*, 108 in *US News and World Report*, and 70 in *Time*. Articles from specialist subsidiary publications such as *Newsweek*'s *Washington Technology* or from advertising supplements were ignored in this analysis. March issues are chosen with the intention that they can provide a normal, non-holiday sample, and issues from December are examined because they are likely to provide revealing year-end reflections on the dynamic nature of society as well as predictions of future developments.

Theories of a Political Internet

Although the articles examined here represent a variety of inflections, this paper will focus on the shift of the Internet from a tool of participatory democracy to a tool of

consumption. Before exploring these representations in the sample, I will discuss them as they appear in more specialized accounts of Internet history.

Until the 1990s, the Internet was popularly viewed as a fairly esoteric tool of military personnel and academic researchers who constituted a knowledge elite. While financial institutions were among the first to utilize networked electronic communication, these were in the form of proprietary networks, not for public access. While bulletin board services, or BBSs, began to spread in the 1970s, they were largely the provinces of specialized communities, such as ham radio operators and electronics aficionados.(Stone 1995, p. 100) Allucquère Rosanne Stone suggests that these BBSs constituted an early form of virtual community, one of the popular early visions of networked computer-mediated communication. At the same time, she comments on the exclusivity of the computing community, which she describes as sometimes deliberately opaque in its languages and socially marginal.(1995, p. 104-5) Although enhanced community was one of the earliest dreams for the Internet, this vision was among a very limited, homogenous, and elite group.

While community-building has long been a popular Internet trope, the Internet has also been frequently framed as a political tool. Active community continues to be central for Howard Rheingold, who addresses the later forms of communication which sprung up on the Internet, such as the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link, or WELL. Rheingold also stresses engaged political participation, taking the vision of community one step further and suggesting that the Internet may lead to a revitalized public sphere, saving it from the grip of commodifed mass media. Proposing the creation of "alternative planetary information networks," Rheingold immediately identifies the political significance of

virtual interaction.(1993, p. 14) Although his examples of virtual politics are largely

extensions of explicitly political movements that exist outside of their online presence, he

defines the potential of virtual communication broadly--"access to alternate forms of

information and, most important, the power to reach others with your own alternatives to

the official view of events, are, by their nature, political phenomena."(1993, p. 268)

Despite this optimism, he acknowledges that online discourse may in fact be a substitute

for political participation. Rheingold especially sees threats in the corporations that

administer many Internet environments, cautioning against the commodification of the

public sphere as well as the potential for surveillance. As large companies establish

themselves as gateways to the virtual realm, he suggests that the mass media paradigm of

broadcast technologies will spread to the Internet, transforming it into a site of

entertainment and consumption.   Moreover, these corporations encroach on the privacy

of individuals, collecting information for marketing purposes--a tactic made easier by

online technologies. Drawing on Habermas's descriptions of the ideal speech space,

Rheingold represents both utopian and dystopian discourses surrounding online

interaction, calling for a politically-conscious virtual citizenry that will resist the

strategies of capitalist mass culture and authoritarian government. As models of mass

media are injected into new media, they may lose their potential as democratizing agents.

"The consumer society has become the accepted model both for individual behavior and

political decision making. Discourse degenerated into publicity, and publicity used the

increasing power of electronic media to alter perceptions and shape beliefs."(Rheingold

1993, p. 285) Rheingold sees corporate interests who depend on mass media models of

consumerism moving onto the Internet, threatening to absorb these democratic

technologies of new media. These co-opted communication technologies will serve the current hegemony of consumer capitalist democracy, based on a mass-mediated, simulated appearance of political participation. Rheingold acknowledges the dangers of corporate control and simulated democracy but remains hopeful, suggesting that the realization of an online public sphere of uninhibited and informed debate is possible but requires increased attention to individual rights such as privacy, as well as resistance to a commercially-produced simulacrum of community involvement.

While Rheingold and Stone address early visions of the Internet as a tool of community and democracy, Manuel Castells focuses on global information flows, and evolving industry structure. For Castells, the Internet is a tool of free market power and capital, leading to advantages for an information elite but at the risk of those who are still outside the information flows. Like Stone, Manuel Castells comments on the government and countercultural roots of the Internet, contrasting this with its increasingly commercial development. While the Internet infrastructure was originally constructed and administered by the federal government, Castells notes that the technology quickly diffused to less official groups, such as the early Usenet and BBS participants. He attributes this to both the horizontal architecture of the network and to economic forces:

> Ironically, this countercultural approach to technology had a similar effect to the military-inspired strategy of horizontal networking: it made available technological means to whoever had the technical knowledge and a computing tool, the PC, which soon would start a spectacular progression of increasing power and decreasing price at the same time.(1996, p. 354)

These early grassroots appropriations of the technology had lasting impact on the development of the Internet, and a variety of political groups have since taken advantage of the medium. Castells cites a variety of examples, such as the Zapatistas of Mexico and

American militia groups, as well as networks oriented towards local democratic participation, such as the Public Electronic Network in Santa Monica.(1996, p. 362)

He casts this trend against the growing commercialization of the networked technologies, in some ways echoing Rheingold. To make these new media profitable, companies have attempted to develop entertainment models to supplant the earlier uses of the medium for decentralized communication: Electronically-mediated grassroots activism is not as easily marketable as video on demand. Although these commercial forces will have " lasting consequences on the characteristics of the new electronic culture," Castells notes that this may not be the general will of the population.(1996, p. 366) Citing a study on multimedia demand by Charles Piller, Castells reports that interest in political uses of these communications media for voting or community discussion exceeds users' interest in entertainment content.(1996, p. 368) "[O]bservation tends to suggest that mass-produced, diversified entertainment on demand may not be the obvious choice for multimedia users, although it is clear that this is the strategic choice of business firms shaping the field."(1996, p. 369) So although users may prefer more civic-oriented uses of the emerging technology, he suggests that commercial development may override these desires.

Finally, Castells acknowledges that differences in access to these technologies will have political consequences. The network society will not erase historical social and economic inequalities, and it may even reinforce current social patterns.(1996 p. 363) "Because access to CMC is culturally, educationally, and economically restrictive, and will be so for a long time, the most important cultural impact of CMC could be potentially the reinforcement of the culturally dominant social networks, as well as the

increase of their cosmopolitanism and globalization."(1996, p. 363) This could result in increasing social stratification, into groups Castells refers to as "the interacting," and the "interacted." While the culturally and educationally advantaged will be more likely to use the networks for their own needs, the vast lower tier is resigned to becoming a segmented market audience. Castells predicts this trend "leading to the coexistence of a customized mass media culture and an interactive electronic communication network of self-selected communes."(1996, p. 371) This creates a paradox—he theorizes a societal division between a passive mass-mediated group, disenfranchised in the face of commercial forces, versus an upper tier who may be able to take advantage of the democratic potentials of the technology to create their own groups around their own interests.

Castells calls for people to adapt to the emerging network technology in order to have their interests considered but the success of this seems unlikely, given his description of the powerful commercial forces colonizing the Internet. Although there is a countercultural history to Castells' informational society, and the technical infrastructure itself is engineered against centralized deployments of power, he finds that commercial forces and existing social and economic patterns will override these influences. Castells acknowledges that there is a democratic potential in the technology, but shies away from technological determinism, attributing more influence to commercial and historical social forces.

Stone and Rheingold discuss some of the more utopian discourses that have historically surrounding the Internet. While Castells sees an emerging informational society, he also finds continued gaps in opportunity between rich and poor, and even suggests that the networked economy will lead to greater gaps. The theories discussed

above come from academic sources, representing some of the discourses that have historically surrounded Internet use. The Internet has been alternately positioned as a technology of rarified research cultures, and as a tool of democracy, community, consumption, and information. While none of the mass media discourses of the Internet examined here necessarily contain the nuances of theory, many of them echo the frames discussed above. Moreover, the historical study of these mass media representations reveals trends and shifts in these multiple discourses, as some recede while others come to the fore.

Internet Discourses, 1994-2000

Mentions of the Internet increase considerably in 1994, and certain discourses of business success and entertainment emerge and overtake earlier themes of crime and technological wonder. While periodizing these mass media representations gives a sense of their development, it is also important to recognize that many of the discourses traced here do not have a clear beginning and end. Rather, these primary discourses are almost constantly present but alter in tone or focus. For instance, although early discussions of the Internet's impact on politics focus on libertarianism and grassroots power within the U.S., later political discourses stress the democratizing impact of the Internet on non-U.S. political structures, such as in the People's Republic of China. This development seems to assume the Internet is primarily a market force within the late 1990s U.S., but is still a potential tool of political change in other countries. Thus, while it is important to note the waxing or waning of particular discourses surrounding the Internet, this analysis will also focus on the changing quality of the discourses.

While many of these discourses seem predictable and perhaps obvious in 1990s mass media, their dominance occurs at a cost to other, discarded discourses. Although the overwhelming presence of business success stories and discussions of the Internet as a market tool became naturalized during the 1990s era of deregulation and economic boom, these discourses of the Internet as a technology of commercial consumption displace earlier discourses which marvel at the Internet's political or democratizing potential. Significantly, there are also fewer explicit allusions to the Internet as a necessary tool for public discourse or information-gathering, shifting the digital divide to an issue of access to technologies of consumption, rather than access to technologies of information and education. Now, perhaps, the Internet's democratic virtues are conflated with the democracy attributed to free market values, so that everyone is invited to participate through activities of consumption rather than political organization.

The Internet as Political Communication

This section focuses on articles that address issues of power inequity, political organization, and explicit political resistance, and especially those that imply the Internet user's position as an agent of power, knowledge, and strategic organization. Whereas earlier coverage of the Internet's political potentials focus on issues of access and the creation of new political formations within the U.S., later articles discuss the potential of the Internet as a democratizing force *outside* of the U.S. Also, although several articles are concerned with the amount of power the government may exercise over free speech or individual privacy, concerns later shift towards corporations, which eclipse the

government as a threat to personal privacy. The following analysis will examine these issues: How is access addressed over time? How is the Internet framed over time as a vehicle of political communication?

Fomenting Cyberrevolution

The Internet is consistently framed as a tool for the masses to access elite forms of knowledge, and to interact more directly with their government, whether through accessing consumer advocacy information or through electronic tax filing. In 1995, however, conflict over regulation and commercialization on the Internet appear to provoke more explicit forms of political discourse, as the Internet is framed as a descendant of 1960s counterculture.

A short blurb in *Newsweek* mentions the tension surrounding commodification of Internet services and content, describing the "uproar" over a commercialized chess server. *Newsweek* states, "One user called the move "the rape of the Internet by business," despite the promise of added frills like a snappier graphical interface."(1995) While this illustrates the disillusionment of long-time Internet users in a newly commercialized environment, the piece's title, "Searching for Bobby Freebie," naturalizes the Internet as a commercial site, where "freebies" are unusual. At the same time, this coverage also presents the Internet as a fringe medium, the domain of computer science professors and chess enthusiasts.

Other articles during this period, however, frame the Internet as an explicitly politicized medium, one that will quickly become widespread. *Time*'s special spring 1995 issue, "Welcome to Cyberspace," features an article by Stewart Brand of MIT in which

Brand stresses the visionary, independent nature of cyberspace. He traces the Internet to

"hippie communalism and libertarian politics" which "formed the roots of the

cyberrevolution," and suggests that the liberatory, self-reliant nature of the Internet

continues to spread.(Brand 1995) Brand frames the development of the Internet in terms

of revolutionary waves, suggesting that early hackers were the first to transform

computers into "tools of liberation."(Brand 1995) He finds that "with the same ethic that

has guided previous generations, today's users are leading the way with tools created

initially as "freeware" or "shareware," available to anyone at all who wants them."(Brand

1995) This rhetoric is both utopian and non-commercial, implying that Internet

technology is inextricably interwoven with themes of decentralized power and free flows

of information. This "revolution" is framed as an ongoing, spreading force that will

transform political and economic structures, carrying the influence of 1960s

libertarianism into later decades. Internet coverage by *U.S. News and World Report* takes

a similar tone, noting John Perry Barlow's call to "declare cyberspace sovereign."(Leo

1995) Although the tone of the article remains humorously skeptical, it implies that this

secessionist, libertarian outlook is popular among avid Internet users. "This 'nothing will

ever be the same' theme has a triumphal, libertarian edge…John Perry Barlow thinks

computer use is creating more political libertarians each day, and there seems to be

something to his theory."(Leo 1995) While this utopian framing of the Internet echoes the

observations made years earlier by Howard Rheingold, this resistant discourse might also

be constructed as a response to the mounting calls for content regulation as well as to the

growing waves of commercialism. This period of Spring 1995 seems to be the last clear

calls for Internet-based political mobilization in these mainstream media samples; after

this, media interest turns to individual rights of privacy and free expression, perhaps triggered by the 1996 Telecommunications Act. After this point there is less reported concern for broad-based political organization, and users are framed as political individuals who are imbued with certain rights, but who are not necessarily organizing agents of group action.

The Internet and Civil Liberties for Individuals

Much of the coverage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 focuses on the component of the Communications Decency Act or CDA, which sought to define and prohibit indecent Internet expression. Debate over the CDA revolved around the rights of individual Americans to free speech and countering this First Amendment right, the potential danger of minors' exposure to indecent Internet material. Coverage of the CDA also notes the difficulty of establishing a model of Internet regulation, hazarding between approaching the Internet as a broadcast medium or a press medium, with correspondingly less or more restriction on each model. Articles on the political aspects of the CDA focus on the issues of free speech and pornography. Although this recognizes the political nature of Internet expression, the CDA coverage frames the Internet as a site of troublesome pornography and potential threats to free speech, but not as a medium of political organization or expression. The discourse surrounding the Internet shifts from early hopes of a new, possibly utopian cyber-society to worries of the Internet as a potential public nuisance, endangering children with indecent material. In December 1995, *Time* comments on the debate surrounding the development of what would become the CDA, both noting the spread of Internet pornography and the constitutional issues of

16

limiting indecent material—"free speech, even indecent speech, is guaranteed by the First

Amendment." (Dibbell 1995) Later coverage continues this focus on free speech while

continuing to situate the Internet as a potentially hazardous medium of free expression,

stressing the need to protect minor users from pornography.

The civil rights of Internet users is also the focus of coverage on privacy,

which discusses the efforts of the US government to retain encryption keys for encoded

Internet communications. Interestingly, however, this government involvement is

presented in one article as potentially "thwarting the growth of America's software

industry."(Thomas 1998) Here the Internet is framed as a medium of commercial

enterprise rather than as a mode of political or public expression. Threats to regulate the

Internet shift from violations of constitutional rights to threats to commercial growth. A

year after this encryption coverage, however, another article recognizes the threat posed

by commercial databases to individual privacy. Stating that "the Web has evolved into a

marketplace, and in the process transformed privacy from a right to a commodity," this

Newsweek piece suggests that individual users at least demand a price for surrendered

personal information.(McGrath 1999) The commercialization of the Internet is framed as

an inevitable evolutionary step, and although the coverage suggests that that technologies

such as collaborative filtering may be abused by marketers, it puts the onus for privacy

protection on the individual user, who must decide for him or herself how much

information to offer. Again, constitutional rights are transformed into commercial issues,

as "marketing imperatives place even greater strains on privacy."(McGrath 1999)

Finally, coverage in the late 1990s invokes the politicized user as taxpayer

and consumer of tax services. March articles in 1999 and 2000 discuss the ease of

electronic tax filing, and recommend commercial web sites and software that offer tax advice and calculation. Although this can be seen as an example of online political behavior, the articles frame online tax filing as an issue of consumerism, focusing on the evaluation of sites' customer service.

A Political Technology in China

While US Internet use is discussed increasingly in terms of consumption and the evolution to a market model, the Internet continues to be framed as a politicized medium in China. This coverage positions the Internet as a tool of democratic revolution, stressing its potentials for political communication. One feature finds that "political change is occurring around the margins," as Chinese political dissidents organize via new technologies, such as email.(Liu 1998) While these articles focus on the arrests of political activists who engage in electronic communication, they also imply a degree of technological determinism, suggesting that Internet technologies lend themselves naturally to democratic political organization. While authoritarian government surveillance may still imperil Internet activists, the new media allow for speedy global communication with diaspora communities, and a greater awareness of oppressive government action. One article, however, frames the Internet as a potential tool of "red hackers," describing the threat the PRC's hackers pose to Taiwanese government computers during the 2000 elections. Still, even this coverage imbues the Internet with political qualities, an element that seems to be lacking in coverage of Internet use in the US. While the Internet's treatment as a lightly-regulated commercial medium in the US obviously contrasts with the PRC's more restrictive content regulation, this should not

naturally eliminate the potential of the Internet as a political medium within the US as well. This would imply that the Internet's democratic potentials only apply to overtly authoritarian (and moreover, non-capitalist) regimes. Is there no place for politicized Internet communication within the commercially-based US system? The mainstream media discourses examined here appear to forget these potentials after the early coverage of electronic libertarianism. Rather than framing the Internet as a tool for new political formations in the US, these discourses describe Internet technologies as supporting traditional, established political roles, such as taxpayer, fund donor, or voter.

The Internet and Elections

Finally, the Internet has been described as a tool of political candidates. Although this coverage frames the Internet as a medium for overthrowing the traditional order, this revolutionary discourse is apparently limited to mainstream candidates. While reports allude to "hundreds of political web sites," examples are limited to dominant political affiliations.(Glasser 2000) One site organizer, Phil Noble, is quoted in an article as saying "the Internet is a great place for insurgents," alluding to the Internet strategies of the John McCain campaign.(Glasser 2000) The Internet is celebrated as new means for spreading campaign information and fundraising, but this coverage is restricted to the activities of mainstream political party candidates, not suggesting the possibility of new grassroots organizations originally discussed by visionaries such as Rheingold. Even in the political context, the Internet is framed as a means of moneymaking rather than as any sort of new public sphere. Contributions and fundraising schemes are emphasized in this discourse,

as another article mentions the Internet savvy of a Republican candidate in Illinois, who is raising campaign funds by raffling guns online.(Cole 2000)

While the size of this discourse sample is necessarily limited, it reflects the changing articulations of the Internet as a tool of political communication. Whereas early mentions of the Internet allude to the need for equal access and recognize the potentials for new grassroots-oriented political formations in the US, later democratic discourse shifts its focus to outside the US, in the PRC and Taiwan. Although even recent coverage continues to discuss the Internet's political uses with revolutionary rhetoric of insurgency, this discourse sticks to examples of traditional political parties and the Internet, suggesting that the Internet will prove a boon to established political organizations rather than aid in the formation of new ones. While this analysis is perhaps predictable, it is important to remember the potential costs of these narrowing discourses. In 1994 and 1995, coverage focuses on the necessity of establishing greater access to the Internet, and on the countercultural roots of this communications technology. This peaks in 1995, with the libertarian calls of John Perry Barlow and with the optimistic futurism of Stewart Brand. After 1995, the public discourse shifts towards individual concerns about privacy and freedom of expression, and the Internet ceases to be framed as an organizing tool, at least in the US. However, the Internet continues in the late 1990s to be viewed as a political tool in non-democratic contexts such as in the PRC—the explicitly democratic values initially ascribed to the Internet seem no longer important in the US, where the Internet has increasingly become naturalized as a tool of commerce. Whereas the Internet is discursively constructed in 1995 as an open field of both individual

expression and group organization in the US, later articulations focus on more traditional user roles of mainstream voter, taxpayer, and consumer.

The Shift to Discourses of Consumption

Although the Internet continues to be promoted as an information technology, I argue that mass discourse increasingly situates the Internet as a tool of material and cultural consumption. Internet users are correspondingly framed as a market, or perhaps more accurately, multiple segmented markets. This rhetoric of privatization conflates public interest and individual empowerment with consumer agency, so that the Internet is hailed as a new form of customized, convenient media service offering more choice and flexibility to the consumer/user. In this way, the political rhetoric of power and liberation remain, but now refer to the freedom offered by greater consumer choice and commercial competition. This discourse is significant in that it creates assumptions about whom and what the Internet is for; whereas the business discourse explored below represents the Internet as a gold mine for business elite, the consumer discourse examined here portrays the Internet user as the consumer of products. In this way, stratification develops between those who are represented as using the Internet for profit and power and those who are expected to access the Internet as an audience or customer. In addressing issues of access and knowledge gaps, it is important to examine how potential Internet users are cast in particular roles by mass media discourse such as the articles examined here.

Between March 1994 and March 1997, very few articles cast the Internet as a tool of commerce, although several appear during this period referring to the Internet as a medium of entertainment. In December of 1997, there is a sudden proliferation of articles

on both the entertainment and commercial potentials of the Internet, and this trend

continues to rise until March of 2000, the last period sampled.   During this early

period, the Internet began to be portrayed as the ultimate niche-marketing tool. A

Newsweek article from March 1994 refers critically to the "shovelware" of massified sites

such as AOL and suggests that "critics say most cyberfare lacks depth and

interest."(Meyer 1994) In response to this, the article hails Microsoft's new Complete

Baseball, an "interactive multimedia extravaganza," as the cutting edge of specialized

Internet content. Niche marketing is celebrated as the new trend of the increasingly

competitive online market, with "one clear winner: the consumer."(Meyer 1994)

        In December of 1997, perhaps corresponding with winter holidays, coverage of

electronic commerce takes off. Whereas previous coverage framed online entertainment

and commercial enterprises as fledging or experimental, the discourse of late 1997 and

1998 is confident; the novelty of electronic shopping begins to wear off as it becomes

increasingly mainstream. The Internet is hailed as a profitable commercial medium, and

predictions of future e-commerce are optimistic. *Time* reports that commerce has

triumphed over content, and that the surge in online commercial activity has led to

massive successes in the information industry. "[E]verywhere you hear the same story:

thanks to E-commerce—selling goods and services on the Web—their business is

exceeding the rosiest expectations."(Quittner 1997) At the same time, this article notes

that this reverses earlier expectations that the World Wide Web might lead to "a

renaissance for writers and artists and even journalists." Instead of serving as a source of

community, information-gathering, or creative expression, the Internet is declared "a mall

without a parking lot."(Quittner 1997) Within this discourse, technological advances are

framed as valuable in terms of their usefulness to commerce such as real-time interactive

video that will allow consumers to interact with live salespeople. Coverage of an

encryption technology trade show notes "what a difference secure transactions make,"

predicting global e-commerce to "mushroom to a stunning $223 billion annually in the

next three years."(Goldfarb 1998) The acceptance of Internet shopping is the focus of

these articles, although the Internet continues to also be invoked as an entertainment

medium as well in coverage of online content including porn, games, and sports sites.

In December 1998, coverage of the Diamond Rio Player continues to bolster the

entertainment discourse, while AOL's purchase of Netscape is framed as a masterstroke

of e-commerce genius, a business deal that will allow AOL to "build the largest shopping

mall on Earth." The development of the Internet is reflected upon here:

> The World Wide Web started out as a place to find information. But forget
> information. The Web is becoming a mass medium, not just a haunt for nerds.
> And there is little the masses enjoy more than finding, acquiring, and consuming
> things. In other words, shopping.(Mitchell 1998)

No longer the fringe environment of technophiles, the Web is heralded as a mass

medium, democratized in its devotion to consumption. And while no one may really

forget the Web as an informational technology, this is clearly no longer its primary

designated function. *Time* declares 1999 to be the "year of e-tailing," and reports on the

efforts of massive brick-and-mortar concern Wal-Mart to improve their site, as well as on

the attempts of emerging e-commerce start-ups to launch themselves into the 1999

holiday season. E-commerce is framed in terms of consumer choice, individual

empowerment, and hands-off regulation. One *Newsweek* article reports on the fight to

resist taxation of e-commerce, profiling one opponent who suggests a permanent ban on

taxation would be "a triumph for freedom in the new millennium."(Fineman 1999) *Time*
predicts that inflated retail goods prices in Europe will fall, partially due to the Internet.
"[G]reater ease of travel, along with the borderless, democratic Internet, already gives
shoppers the ultimate weapon—knowledge—and the ultimate power to vote with their
wallets."(1999) It is important to note that the consumerist appeal of e-commerce is
described in political terms—the Internet lacks national boundary and is an information
channel, democratically empowering the savvy shopper to fight for low prices, voting
through consumer choice.

Finally, the March 2000 sample reveals firmly entrenched discourses of
consumption, both promoting entertainment and e-commerce. While coverage continues
to showcase new products offered through commercial web sites, there is also a
discursive turn signaling the establishment of the Internet as a medium of consumption.
Rather than simply commenting on the number of businesses and consumers flocking to
the Internet, articles focus on issues that have arisen from the diffusion of e-commerce.
These include the necessity of alternative forms of payment for Internet users—such as
the burgeoning teenage market--who lack credit cards.(2000) Meanwhile, certain states
are considering implementation of tax holidays, to entice consumers away from tax-free
e-commerce.(2000) Internet service providers compete for customers, offering free
access in exchange for personal information and constant advertising, and electronic porn
sites begin to go public on Wall Street, signaling possible cultural acceptance of
cyberporn as a legitimate commodity. The torrent of coverage from March 2000
demonstrates an increasingly nuanced framing of the Internet as a technology of
consumption. Furthermore, Internet users are portrayed as benefiting from this shift. The

libertarian discourses of the mid-1990s had lamented the shift towards

commercialization, as chess players registered their displeasure with gaming fees. Later,

the Internet becomes naturalized as a commercial medium, and this turn towards

massification is shown as democratic—everyone has the chance to be equal in the pursuit

of low prices, and the public can only benefit from unregulated competition.

Conclusions

    While the Internet is portrayed as both a battlefield and a gold rush for businesses,

this discourse sets an agenda of commercialization while excluding players who do not fit

into the emerging digital economy. The unquestioned goal of the Internet is to reap

profits, rather than to organize, educate, gather information, or personally communicate.

Although there are much smaller discourses that include these alternative uses, the

Internet is strongly framed as a technology for communication between businesses,

buyers and sellers. While those already among the technological elite may benefit

financially from this new economy, there is little apparent possibility of benefits trickling

down to those outside of the digital sphere. In this way, the Internet is simultaneously

presented as both a revolution in money and information and also as fairly irrelevant to

those not already in on the digital game. While the discourse surrounding the political

potential of the Internet peaked in 1995, discourses of consumption easily overtake these

libertarian musings so that by winter of 1997, the Internet is positioned as a massified

tool for shopping and the consumption of culture. As a political instrument in the late

1990s, the Internet becomes another medium for established candidates and parties,

receding from its earlier framing as a cradle for new political formations. For those

excluded from these realms of digital wonder, the Internet is positioned as a desirable

tool for entertainment and material consumption, but not necessarily political or

economic empowerment.

Bibliography

(1995). Searching for Bobby Freebie. *Newsweek*.

(1999). Buyer beware. *Time International*. **154**.

(2000). Don't have plastic? Grab some Mon-e. *Newsweek.*

(2000). Taxes take a holiday. *Newsweek.*

Brand, S. (1995). We owe it all to the hippies: forget antiwar protests, even long hair. The real legacy of the sixties generation is the computer revolution. *Time*. **145:** 3.

Castells, M. (1996). *The Rise of the Information Society*. Cambridge, Blackwell Publishers.

Cole, W. (2000). Campaigns: want to get elected? Try selling guns online. *Time*. **155:** 1.

Dibbell, J. (1995). Muzzling the Internet: can this Congress find a way to preserve civil liberties while curbing cyberporn? So far, no. *Time*. **146:** 1.

Fineman, H. (1999). The tax war goes online. *Newsweek.*

Giddens, A. (1984). *The constitution of society : outline of the theory of structuration*. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press.

Glasser, B. S. a. J. (2000). Virtual campaign takes off. *US news and world report*. **128**.

Goldfarb, M. (1998). E-commerce. *Time International*. **150:** 1.

Leo, J. (1995). Life among the cyberfolk. *US news and world report*.

Liu, L. M. a. M. (1998). A taste of the good life. *Newsweek*.

MacDonell, D. (1986). *Theories of Discourse: An Introduction*. New York, Blackwell.

McGrath, P. (1999). Knowing you all too well. *Newsweek.*

Meyer, M. (1994). The 'on-line' war heats up. *Newsweek*.

Mitchell, R. (1998). Why AOL really clicks. *US news and world report*.

Quittner, J. (1997). The once and future king. *Time*. **150:** 1.

Rheingold, H. (1993). *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading, MA, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Stone, R. A. (1995). *The War of Desire and Technology at the End of the Mechanical Age*. Cambridge, MIT Press.

Thomas, S. G. (1998). Fighting for computer privacy. *US news and world report*.