Cyber Politics & Cyber Futures

Introduction & Definitions
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Definitions

6 ‘Cyber’
- Comes from ‘cybernetic’: “the science of communication and control theory that is concerned especially with the comparative study of automatic control systems (as the nervous system and brain and mechanical-electrical communication systems)” (“Cybernetic”)
- Note the correlation of brain and “mechanical-electrical communication systems”
- ‘Cyber’ basically means to do with computers and networks: but the significance of its use is the belief that organic and electronic systems are becoming intertwined – the ‘cyborg’
- Also note the original Greek source—“kybernan to steer, govern” (ibid.)
- The big debate is whether the electronic systems that humans depend upon more and more are going to ‘steer’ human society in particular ways
- Techno-determinism, the Frankenstein complex, neo-Luddism
6 ‘Cyberpolitics’ and ‘Cyberfuture’ implies politics and future being formed by computer technologies

Definitions

6 Politics: practices relating to social power
- Wide and narrow definitions: does political action have to be conscious?
- Feminism: the personal is political – historical deconstruction of patriarchal concepts that confined politics to the public sphere
- ‘Politics’ operates in all aspects of society, simultaneously and intrinsically
  - This lecture: interpersonal, economic, public
  ✴ NB: this is a very rough categorisation, and there
6 Look at
1. How cyber-technologies affect power on an interpersonal level – conscious and non-conscious
2. How cyber-technologies influence the relative power of economic institutions
3. How cyber-technologies affect the field of public politics: i.e. the public sphere where actors consciously and expressedly compete to achieve power over the society as a whole
Historical: household appliances ‘liberated’ women from lots of manual labour
- But they were still expected to stay in the home...

Cybertechnologies render physical strength irrelevant – so one excuse for excluding women is removed
- However, Wajcman details how technologies get re-interpreted to conform to patriarchal discourse
  e.g. Female artillery operators being classified as ‘non-combat’ (147)

Possibility of removal of face-to-face cues in interaction, which may make some difference

Cybertechnologies being used for pornography (the most profitable internet business, and drives development of new technologies)
- Why pornography so successful online? Product deliverable electronically (images), and disembodiment and anonymity create favourable environment
- Pornography is argued to be inherently oppressive to women

Ideals of beauty are communicated via media – computer imagery can create unrealistic standards
- Reshaping of female body (cf. Geoghegan),...
Women are often tied to the home – this can reduce their access to education, legal protection and employment
  - Cybertechnologies can mitigate this
  - However, with regards to ‘teleworking’, this means that women often get more work on top of what they do anyway (e.g. Ng)

In Bangladesh there is a well-known example of microcredit being used to provide women with loans, and they make a living by renting out mobile phones
  - However, this is apparently no longer profitable for small scale operations, and it is shop owners and the telecom companies that are reaping the advantage (Verclas)

Alternative media means marginalised groups such as women, homosexuals, etc. are able to create networks of support and empowerment

However, overall many other things need to change – not just the technology

Could affect other hierarchies
  - e.g. In household where the younger can use the technologies, and not the older, can lead to disempowering of elder people – especially relevant in e.g. Malaysia where seniority is important in terms of power
  - Use of tracking device in phone to track children...

Physically disabled people can communicate easier
  - SMS for deaf people; Stephen Hawking, etc.

Workplace
  - Telecommuting: those with better IT skills may gain advantages; those who are more able to work independently also
  - Reduction of face-to-face skills

The increased level of technologies seem to suggest that individuals can do more and more by themselves without needing social cooperation
  - However, this just means other social skills will come to dominate over current ones – society stills remains central to the meaning given to interpersonal relations
### Cyberpolitics

**Economic**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>6 Where to place market-related activities?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Consumer boycott and lobbying by companies ‡ conscious ‘public’ political action</td>
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<tr>
<th>6 The ‘free market’ is not apolitical</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Supports a system of power that is normalised – like patriarchy</td>
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<th>6 The hardware and software that enables the internet is mostly privately owned (e.g. Gutstein)</th>
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<th>6 Governments with less money and/or technological skills outsource internet management to companies</th>
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<td>• Filtering: proprietary technology, overreach and/or ineffective (Villeneuve)</td>
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<th>6 Cultural imperialism operates via the expansion of markets and the homogenisation of consumers (Klein)</th>
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### Cyberpolitics

**Economic**

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<tr>
<th>6 Colonisation of the internet and ‘Net neutrality’ [YouTube video]</th>
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<th>6 ‘Net neutrality’: some proposals in America for providers to be able to charge for preferential treatment</th>
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<td>• Like a highway with different lanes for people who pay higher tolls</td>
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<th>6 In 2007 opponents to net neutrality said:</th>
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<td>• “The Internet has done just fine without the help of regulators and politicians... The Internet is the modern frontier of innovation and economic development, and should remain free from regulation.” (“Critics Say If Net Ain’t Broke, Don’t Fix It.”)</td>
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<th>6 Supporters argue that for the internet to benefit everyone, needs to be a ‘level playing field’</th>
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<td>‡ Use of similar discourse by the different groups: ‘open frontier’, ‘free’, ...</td>
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Cyberpolitics
Economic

6 Some examples already
- Canada, 1995: ISP block access to website of trade union it was in dispute with (Geist)
- USA, 2006: AOL claims “technical glitch” resulted in the blocking of emails campaigning against AOL policies (Johnson)
Cyberpolitics
Economic

1. Intellectual property and the market
   - Napster – closed down 2001; Bittorrent, etc.
   - Music industry pursuing file-sharing – e.g. US$222,000 fine for sharing 24 songs via Kazaa (“Jury Penalises Music File-Sharer.”)

2. Microsoft as monopoly
   - Netscape and bundling

3. As the importance of the internet as a social media grows, those in control of that media will also gain more power

Digital Divide

1. Reality check: most people in the world do not have access to the internet, know how to use a computer, or have a mobile phone
   - But people can still be affected even if they don’t: e.g. blogs in Malaysia reported in the mainstream media (MSM); YouTube and Namewee; ...
How may new media be affecting this situation?
"In Nigeria, Africa’s most populated country... mobile telephony has helped to increase total telephone penetration from 0.5 to 8 percent between 1999 and 2004" (Gray)

**Figure 3.1: Mobile in Africa**
Mobile and fixed telephone subscribers per 100 inhabitants in Africa, 1995-2004 (left) and annual average percentage growth in mobile network subscribers, 1999-2004, world regions (right)

Source: ITU World Telecommunication Indicators Database

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**Digital Divide**

6 But people can still be affected even if they don’t have the internet
   - Blogs in Malaysia reported in the mainstream media (MSM); YouTube and Namewee; ...

6 Eventually, most people will have some access
   - But there will probably always be a divide between the have and have-nots

6 Open Source is important for increasing access to software

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Can see a lot more use and effect of cybertechnologies in the public political arena

- Used to support as well as to oppose existing power structures
  - American Democratic Presidential candidates debated on YouTube, and are seeking to make their presence felt online in various ways

Second Life

- “IBM owns about 50 virtual facilities in Second Life which it uses for research, induction of new employees, and meetings. About 5000 of its employees work or operate in a number of virtual worlds including Second Life... the protesters’ intention [is] to stage peaceful demonstrations at each of the IBM facilities in Second Life, they would also be appearing in other public areas of the virtual world - just in case IBM effected a virtual lock out.” (Hutcheon)
China

6 ISPs need to keep on users for 60 days and responsible to ensure no illegal material is hosted (Open Net Initiative 3)
6 Cybercafes need to note users’ identity, and keep records for 60 days (ibid. 3)
6 Proposal to require that all users of blogs to record their identity
6 Constant online presence of ‘Internet police’ Jingjing and Chacha
   * Many laws used: subversion, etc.
6 Two ‘backbone’ operators are the gateway to outside China (ibid. 5)

“Even if the psiphon website is blocked it does not affect psiphon’s distribution model. psiphon is completely decentralized; each psiphonode is independent of all others. The distribution of access to personal psiphon servers is based on social networks. Each psiphonode administrator grows his/her private network based on social relations of trust.” (psiphon)
Cyberpolitics
Public

Singapore
George – “smart authoritarian regime” in Singapore
- Allows more freedom online than offline; no political site blocked from 1996-1997
- Recent elections: political parties not allowed to use online petitions, or audio/video features
- Although internet-specific legislation exists, other used – defamation, sedition, etc. (record: http://calibratedcoercion.wordpress.com/)

Shariff: online forum/website in provides a contesting voice for the Malay minority in Singapore
- Website had to register as political, declare members; alternative websites promoted by authorities
- State intimidation and surveillance of those who ran the website

Singapore blocks 100 “symbolic” sites (George): they have the technology to block any site

Malaysia
Malaysiakini, alternative online news provider, came out of the 1997-8 socio-economic crisis
- Moved to subscriber model when advertisers withdrew due to political concerns (Tong)
- Dr. Mahathir, previous critic, also used it to bypass state control of MSM

Postill, documents the use of internet and mobile telephony in local disputes in Subang Jaya
Blogs: leading blogger Jeff Ooi been around since 2003 (www.screenshots.com)
- Malaysia Today, hosted by Raja Petra Kamaruddin, archives since 2004 (http://malaysia-today.net/)
Malaysia

1. In 2007 blogs became the centre of a number of well-publicised government criticisms
   - Have proved to be a significant alternative media source
   - ‘Watchdog’ of MSM – the SoPo blogging format is frequently one of comments on news items

2. Nat Tan incident: blogger arrested, a vigil organised via blogs and handphone
   - Sister posted information in real time with a phone; films posted online

Burma

1. Bloggers use software and websites to evade government control (Holmes)
2. Computers with internet connection need to be registered
3. Recent demonstrations
   - Mobile phone coverage blacked out in some areas
   - People with mobile phones and/or cameras targeted
   - Also used those pictures to trace demonstrators etc.
4. Portable media devices helps to publicise events – but more is needed to take power from the regime
Most/all countries have controls over online activities
- Religious, political, commercial and moral reasons
- Some may have laws specific to the internet, others use pre-existing laws
- The image of the internet as an uncontrolled arena is not accurate
  - Depends on relative technical skills of actors involved
Cyberpolitics

- Cybertechnologies will affect the ways in which power is contested
  - But how it can be used depends on many factors
  - How it affects the relative balance of power is important
- Potential for decentralising
- Importance of commercial interests controlling cybertechnologies

Cyberfutures

- Then
- Now
- Future
Politics is about the present – the politician seeks to shape the future by manipulating the present

- Ultimately, politicians rarely have as much control over the future as they (and we) would like to think

To have an idea of the future we can look at historical models and present trends

- Ultimately, however, it is all speculation

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“This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.”
— Western Union internal memo, 1876.

Technology gets better

“Aeroplanes are interesting toys but of no military value.”
— Marshal Ferdinand Foch, Professor of Strategy, Ecole Superieure de Guerre. [c. 1914]

Military drives technology

“The wireless music box has no imaginable commercial value. Who would pay for a message sent to nobody in particular?”
— David Sarnoff’s associates in response to his urgings for investment in the radio in the 1920’s.

Importance of commercial considerations

“Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?”

Paradigms

“So we went to Atari and said, 'Hey, we've got this amazing thing, even built with some of your parts, and what do you think about funding us? Or we'll give it to you. We just want to do it. Pay our salary, we'll come work for you.' And they said, 'No.' So, then we went to Hewlett-Packard, and they said 'Hey, we don't need you. You haven't got through college yet,'”
— Apple Computer Inc. founder Steve Jobs on attempts to get Atari and H-P interested in his and Steve Wozniak’s personal computer.

Established hierarchies can impede change

(all quotes: Sprex)
“Rearview mirrorism” (McLuhan): people see the future and the present through the lens of the past – inevitable

Teleology (telos = ‘goal’)
- Looking back, it seems obvious that everything was leading to this point – but this does not mean that there is an equally definite point in the future that will be arrived at

However, having an awareness of change may influence change
- In a social environment where ‘the future’ is embraced as a positive value, symbolic capital can be accumulated by associations with ‘the future’

Historical parallel: futurism of the early 20th century
- Artistic movement: “Being a Futurist meant pursuing the perpetual regeneration of all things... seeking the utmost integration of human life with the logic of becoming.” (Lista 10)
- “We declare that the splendour of the world has enriched itself with a new beauty: the beauty of speed.” (Marinetti, “The Manifesto of Futurism” qtd. in Lista 30; trans. by Hopkins)
- “conquer the seemingly unconquerable hostility that separates out human flesh from the metal of motors” (Marinetti qtd. in Humphreys 39-40)
The ‘Space Race’ of the 60’s also saw an aesthetic and discursive embracing of the ‘modern’

- McLuhan: “We’re the first culture in the history of the world that ever regarded innovation as a friendly act.” ([1971] qtd. in Benedetti & DeHart 1993)
  - May not be accurate in terms of uniqueness, but reflects the value placed on all things new at the time

An embracing of the ‘future’ as symbolic capital can perhaps accelerate change

- e.g. End 20th century, ‘dot.com’ bubble; resulted in over capacity of fibre optic cables, but this enabled faster development of worldwide networks etc. (e.g. “The End of the Fibre Optic Cable Boom...”)

Nowadays obtaining the latest software upgrade or handphone model is often seen as an end in itself; built-in obsolescence

- Do I really need Office 2007?
We cannot predict the future (duh) but we live in an age where technological change is valued for political, social and economic purposes.

Rheingold described the internet as an ‘open frontier’
- “Networks ... use many possible paths to distribute information from any link to any other, and are self-regulated through flat governance hierarchies and distributed power... [possibly] the newest major social organizational form, after tribes, hierarchies, and markets.” (Rheingold 163)
- “Putting cameras and high-speed Net connections into telephones... moves blogging to the streets. By the time this book is published [2002], I’m confident that street bloggers will have constructed a world-wide culture.” (Rheingold 169)

Katz:
- Predicts the rise of the “netizen”, and “postpolitics and the birth of the Digital Nation”.
- “The world's information is being liberated, and so, as a consequence, are we.”
Prevalence of databases in western society “...has a discursive effect...[that with other cultural technologies is] slowly erecting the basis of a culture that is decidedly different from the modern.” (Poster 90-1)

Manovich (45-8) speaks of “cultural transcoding”: the underlying “computer layer” of computers, having its own inherent driving logic, interacts with the “cultural layer”

- “the result of this composite is a new computer culture – a blend of human and computer meanings, of traditional ways in which human culture modelled the world and the computer’s own means of representing it.” (46)

- debateable here: why is the ‘new’ culture a ‘computer’ culture?

Gutstein: “e-con” – the internet is increasing surveillance possibilities and extending the reach of corporations

- Canadian government (in 1999) is “commercialising public information resources” (Gutstein 5) – e.g. libraries, government databases; danger of undermining democracy

- “The reality is that we are still in the same corporate-dominated society, only this time the domination is greater because of the surveillance capabilities of the computer networks.” (Gutstein 283).

Sardar: “We are thus set to move from the physical colonisation of the Other to virtual colonisation of everything by virtual capitalism... Virtual colonisation is the new dimension of European colonialism” (Sardar 33)
“new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example: and that, to a degree equally without example” (Bentham 31)

- The prisoner never knows when s/he is under observation, therefore acts as if s/he always is self-discipline
Knowing that our emails, our blogs, may be retrieved may affect our communicative practices

Public spaces under surveillance; CCTV
- Google World Street View – the technology exists
- Face recognition software – the crowd cannot hide you
- Satellite imaging – you cannot run away

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Surveillance and Panopticon

What are the possible future trends that respond to this?

Two extremes: individual isolation or complete collectivism

New interpretations of public and private
Wellman *et al.* discuss the potential for “networked individualism”
- “changing towards networked societies where boundaries are more
  permeable, interactions are with diverse others, linkages switch
  between multiple networks, and hierarchies are flatter and more
  recursive... the Internet and other new communication technology
  are helping each individual to personalize his or her own
  community... a complex, fundamental transformation in the nature
  of community.” (*ibid.*)

However, they also note the significance of offline cultural differences
- “Personal encounters are the predominant mode of communication
  among Catalans [in Spain]... Telephoning is of secondary
  importance. The Internet is hardly ever used except to communicate
  with those few friends who live in other countries...” (*ibid.*)

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The technological basis of the internet is decentralisation
- Mesh: means being able to connect via different nodes
- Terranet – mobile phones using each other as nodes in a mesh network (“Mobile System Promises Free Calls.”)
  - Free calls, no centralised control possible (apart from airborne jamming or something)
- Fon – by allowing a small amount of your fixed-line broadband connection to be accessed wirelessly by other subscribers, accessibility is expanded (“Wi-fi sharing plan launched in UK”)
  - Ultimately centralised to some extent

One Laptop per Child
- Initiative to bring IT technologies to developing countries
- Uses wireless mesh to connect laptops
Depending on available technology and cultural patterns, communication exchange can avoid hierarchies of control that centralise it.
## Cyberfutures
### Networks: Multiple

1. Not necessary to have one ‘internet’
2. Possible creation of national networks, with only privileged people having direct access internationally
   - Response to ‘cyberterrorism’ or economic competition
3. Probable continued predominance of commercial control of the internet, etc.
4. Creation of privileged access SNS: e.g. a ‘Facebook’ only for people of particular groups – e.g. Hollywood actors, millionaires
   - ‘By invitation only’: like exclusive social clubs, golf clubs

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## Cyberfutures
### Virtual reality: cyborg life in ‘The Matrix’?

1. It is possible that brains could all be wired into one big network, and bodies become mostly irrelevant – will it happen?
   - Biological needs: food and reproduction
   - Ecology and environment: the current socio-economic system is not sustainable for the whole world

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Cyberfutures
Virtual reality: cyborg life in ‘The Matrix’?

6 Can all social needs be met via electronic means? Maybe, social systems are very flexible
   • Our sense of identity may change as we integrate the potentials of media-as-extension into our understanding of the world
   • How we relate to each other affects how we construct our sense of identity

6 Digital cyborgs: our social identity becoming mediated via digital extensions
   • e.g. Facebook profile
   • But flesh and blood is assumed to be behind it
The Marketplace

Make real money in a virtual world. That's right, real money.
Here's how it works:

- Second Life has a fully integrated economy, unlimited to reward risk, creativity, and craftsmanship.
- Residents can create their own virtual goods and services, because residents rule the IP rights of their creations. They are able to sell them at prices they set themselves.
- Businesses, driven by the ingenuity, artistry, ability, entrepreneurial spirit, and good reputation of their owners.
- Residents who have achieved lots of Linden dollars are matched with residents who want to buy Linden dollars at L$50, our official Linden Dollar exchange, or at other unofficial third party exchanges.
- Second Life's real estate market provides opportunities for residents to install their own communications and business locations. See http://www.secondlife.com for details.
Social interaction via cybertechnologies will increase
- Even within the house – e.g. IM

If these cybertechnologies are commercialised – how does this affect identity construction?

Our means of relating to others, and constructing ourselves – our performances – will be mediated through a commercialised discourse
- ‘I am what I consume’
- Celebrities, blogs, reality shows: the ‘commoditisation of the self’

‘Viral marketing’: leveraging the automation of interpersonal ties to promote products
- People interact via commercial messages; commercial entities take on mediating role
  - e.g. Proton video

Use of ‘biochips’
- Medical records, ‘IC card’, criminal record, etc.

Wearable computers
- Thought-activated technology, nano-technology, etc.
Conclusions

- Central question: is ‘the media the message’?
  - Does a particular media change human society by virtue of some intrinsic properties?
  - I think: potential is there, but many other factors matter too

- There is a greater scope for individual isolation, and more formal interaction (shopping, bureaucratic processes) will be done via automated processes
  - Reduction of the importance of face-to-face interaction, and/or it becomes something intimate

- More personalised social networks

- Changing conceptions of public vs. private

- As the governments catch up with the technical aspects of the internet, they will be able to control it more and more

- Commercialisation likely to extend into more fields of social interaction

- Change tends to be slower than people think
  - Unlike that power differences disappear – the more powerful will always be the first to benefit from advantages, and changes will tend to benefit them

Works Cited

Works Cited

Recommended Reading


6 Watch PBS documentary on Net Neutrality
   • http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6689euTvCkE
   • http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQOHQaKMIHNR