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Politically Wired

The Changing Places of Political Participation in the Age of the Internet

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Literacy, print, and journalism have during recent centuries become associated with an informed citizenry, political participation, and democratic forms of government. Freedom of the press—the First Amendment with its implied ability to question orthodoxy and entrenched interests, expose the deeds and misdeeds of the powerful and those entrusted with the powers of the state, and present alternative views of life and belief—has regularly been viewed as the cornerstone of U.S. democracy. To this we have added, over the past century and a half, a strong belief in public education to provide all citizens the means to participate in the free exchange of information as part of their political rights and responsibilities as citizens. Most recently, radio, television, and the Internet have extended the promise of public information, a more informed citizenry, and greater citizen participation in democratic processes.

Our public commitments to a free press, public education, universal literacy, and accessible communications media have combined in an ideology of rational public discourse that thrived in America long before Habermas reminded justifiably suspicious 20th-century intellectuals of the 18th-century formation of the public sphere. The realities, of course, have been more complicated than either our political ideologies or the Habermasian project have articulated, for both offer a broad sweep of hopes that obscure the particularities of actual historical formations. Only by continual struggle with the many forces that meet together in our communications forums do we manage to

produce a political discussion that both engages significant parts of the population and occasionally rises to the seriousness of issues before us. The Internet, while changing the dynamics and opportunities of communication, nonetheless continues a complex system of political communication forged in previous media and still contains means to degrade or elevate our politics. It remains up to us as citizens and political actors to struggle with the rhetorical opportunities and dynamics of this new medium and make choices about the type of politics in which we wish to engage.

Among the many complexities of power, economics, interests, personality, passions, social interaction, ideology, culture, and religion that keep politics both more and less than rational deliberation are those that arise from the dynamics of literate interchange, the historical formation of forums, and the generic shaping of utterances within those forums. Recent research on genre and discursive systems, along with situated cognition and action, suggests that the character of the local activity space is extremely important for what happens, what people think and learn, and what social consequences emerge (Bazerman 1988, 1994a, 1994b, 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Berkenkotter and Huckin 1995; Devitt 1991; Freedman and Medway 1994a, 1994b; Russell 1997a, 1997b). While the shape of politics to emerge in the cyberworld still is somewhat obscure, by considering the forums of political interchange that are emerging on the Internet, how they draw on previous forums and genres of political interchange, and the pressures that seem to be encouraging the heightening of certain elements within those genres, we may gain a first reading of some choices in front of us.

CONTEXT IN SPEECH, WRITING, AND CYBERSPACE

To consider the impact of electronic genres on our political life, I now make some gross distinctions between genres in the two major previous media of communication: speech and writing. The idealized distinctions I make are in full awareness of the many overlaps, fuzzy middles, and particular cases that complicate the picture; nonetheless, the ideal types will help us to identify the affordances of the media and potential tendencies in their use.

With face-to-face spoken genres, where major aspects of the interpersonal and material context may be immediately visible or directly sensible, everything from the physical gestures of participants to the chairs people sit on and the birds that fly overhead may become salient aspects of context (e.g., greeting genres focus one on interpersonal markers of particular interlocutors—smiles and waves and physical signs of well-being). In face-to-face encounters, distant events and situations also may be called on as relevant context

(e.g., the prior meeting last week in another city that perhaps was mentioned in discussion, the actions of legislators that frame every encounter of citizen and government official). However, these distant events generally are brought to bear on a situation in the here and now.

In more distantly mediated print genres (or even some phone conversations), however, the genre itself typically must announce and assemble the context. That is, when we receive a personal letter from the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), we all know that we are likely to be drawn up into its bureaucratic machinery, and the type of letter more specifically lets us know where—whether in the simple accounting of wrong addition or the inspec- table world of substantiating deductions. Moreover, although we might have to pass through a number of specifiable physical places with observable humans (e.g., an IRS office with an IRS examiner, a U.S. district court with lawyers and judges), the place we are caught up in is a place of symbolic interaction lodged deep within documents; it is not a physical space. So, whereas spoken face-to-face genres may change the footing (Goffman 1981) or perception of a situation, genres at a distance have to call forth a total recognition of the cultural symbolic space. We may think of this in terms of a stage, which in face-to-face interaction may undergo changes of lighting and perspective as genre, footing, or contextualization clues change the saliences of interaction. But genres of distant communication must call forth an imagined world of which they are part, a world not only of co-participants but also of all the objects and utterances that are indexically and intertextually linked to the utterance of the moment.

The Internet, and particularly the World Wide Web, provides another configuration as the virtual contexts take on more concrete immediacy in embedding utterances within networks of other utterances that occur in visible proximate virtual locales through links. We explore this later through our examples.

But locating the scene—the relevant contexts and indexical relations—is only part of the work of genre, the quieter part. Genre puts the scene into action and identifies activities expectably to be completed by the time the genre runs its course. In fact, we might say that the virtual scene is built for action, assembled specifically around the activity to be discursively carried forth. The IRS letter assembles a place and relevancies and intertextualities all brought to mind not for our idle amusement or terror but rather because the IRS wishes to conduct some particular business with us and we, in reading, begin to assemble where we stand and what actions are available to us.

In face-to-face encounters, we may at times be in repose, sitting on a lounge chair and staring idly at the clouds in the company of intimates, but the moment we make a comment, we start to give shape to the discursive moment. More forcefully, the moment we notice a more distant correspondence,

or the moment we look at print materials or answer the phone, we are drawn into different times and places with specific types of transactions afoot. It is the active purposiveness of the discursive locales that brings to mind and imagination all the contextual relevancies and socially localizing elements attached to the type of communication into which we enter.

As more and more of our interactions are mediated electronically, the activities may start by emulating and extending the interactions made possible in prior media, but the interactions and attendant relations and structures realized through the activities are likely to become transformed to take advantage of the new mediational opportunities, to move away from the practices that were conformable to prior media but awkward on the new medium, and to respond to the new communicative dynamics brought into being by the new medium. Those interactions that still seem important and still are best done in the prior media likely will remain in the prior media, but those activities that flourish in the new medium will create major new definitions of social activity, providing new means of carrying out our social needs and desires within new types of places.

RHETORIC, GENRE, AND THE HISTORY OF PRINT CULTURE

Political communication, in the European tradition, gave rise to the study of rhetoric as a way in which to increase the force and power of individuals' public participation in the agora of the Greek polis. Rhetoric's genres of forensic, deliberative, and epideictic discourses (i.e., roughly courtroom argument, parliamentary debate, and public oratory of praise and blame) were built around face-to-face forums that emerged and were regularized around the activities of those genres—courts, legislatures, and public speeches or sermons by leaders to mobilize communal values (often executive but sometimes legislative and sometimes spiritual, particularly after the introduction of Christianity). The continuity of these institutional forums, the intertextual or discursive contexts they provide for each new utterance, and the activities enacted through the associated discursive genres have in fact formed the basic structures of our core political institutions, particularly with the 18th-century revival of the republic as the preferred political form, although with radically different notions of individuality, citizen rights and equality, and social negotiation.

However, literacy and literate genres from the earliest historical periods began transforming and extending forms of political life (Goody 1986). Written codes of law added a solemnity and consequentiality to legislative considerations because they were not just arguing for a single war or instance

but rather were producing a consistent and enduring set of regulations for daily life. Written law and court records provided the means to increasingly turn judicial discourse into a matter of textual interpretation, comparison of current matters to prior texts, and the production of an inspectable court record to justify decisions, so that the law as a system rose above the direct sentiments of individual revenge and justice enacted on immediate participants.

The regularity of law meant that citizenship could be defined in terms of commitment to and obedience toward abstract rules—law abidingness, responsibilities, rights, and privileges—instead of personal commitment to individual, personally familiar leaders. Decision making and power were removed from public forums to clerics, bureaucrats, and scribes who controlled the written records of an increasingly organized, regularized, extended, and distant state that knew its citizens through the organized record keeping. The forums became associated with the records of their previous judgments, laws, and rulings, and these records provided specific intertextual context for each new instance of judgment and decision making.

However, printing provided public forums for attack and critique of the state and for the formulation of alternative programs. Polemics and manifestos could be distributed in various levels of secrecy or openness, especially as printing technology became less expensive and widely available (Eisenstein 1983). Governments concerned themselves with identifying subversive material and controlling its circulation, resulting in regulation of printing including copyright (Rose 1993).

Availability of alternative views and the organization of heterodox opinion through circulation of common texts found common cause with the new economic power of commercial classes aggregated outside the state but supported by accounting and literate practices. Print culture fed the associated desires for commercial and political information through pamphlets, journals, and newspapers concurrently with the times of political revolutions and reforms of the past four centuries.

Newspapers, written ballots, literate practices of expanding commerce, and calls for informed citizenry were associated with the expansion of schooling beyond the training of clerics, bureaucrats, and (to a lesser extent) the aristocracy who monitored, with some negligence, the work of clerics and bureaucrats. Newspapers were particularly associated with the expanding educated urban commercial classes in Britain and the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries along with the rise of political parties. Newspapers became forums for people to imagine themselves into wider political arenas and more distant events than they might have contact with daily, and they provided opportunities for people to identify themselves as partisans and members of communities (Habermas 1989). In the United States during the latter half of the 19th century, the formation of an independent press also became

associated with investigative journalism, public accountability, and the development of professional journalistic standards (Schudson 1995). That is, the press developed a somewhat independent perspective, to some extent outside government, party, or particular economic interest (although always within limits and viewed with some skepticism), from which to view government and political processes. By reading the newspapers (or multiple newspapers and journals of opinions), citizens could become observers and evaluators (actively or passively) of public officials and political actors, entering into a continuing, if vicarious, relationship with government and politics. News then supported a political culture of critique, celebrity, spectator rooting, and competition. Citizens also could enter into marginal amateur production of political opinion through letters to the editor, but the production of news, critique, and opinion became largely a professional matter. These professional productions, in turn, provided the information that supported local civic activity, activist group participation, and individual and group communication with legislators. Community and activist group newsletters and other communications came to rely on the news, as did citizen participation in campaigning and elections. Thus, newspapers became a major forum that mediated political participation of ordinary citizens, and the intertextual record of the news (both as remembered by individuals and as a research file for continually unfolding events to be placed in retrospective contexts) became the context for further news items.

The political culture informed by the news also got played out secondarily in personal social gatherings where people exchanged opinions as a type of identity play (Billig 1988) as well as exchange of thoughts. This political culture was given further, if somewhat restrictive and ritualizing, shape through surveys by which public opinion was expressed and aggregated, thereby becoming news and having a continuing influence on government as politicians kept closer and closer tabs on the moods of the voters as well as the news representation of the voters. Radio and television talk shows gave individuals an expanded opportunity to take this private exchange and turn it into public assertion and larger group affiliation processes, with consequences for public representations of public opinion as mediated through the print and electronic press.

In this evolving climate of public opinion, political parties developed their own internal cultures and media of communication and participation, in part enacted through traditional patronage and ward politics but also in part enacted through other forms of more conceptualized partisan commitment involving speeches, humor, demonizing characterizations of the opposition, newsletters, serious program papers, and forms of public hoopla and celebration. These activities, in turn, become re-presented in the general news media, over which partisan groups attempt to exert control through media

events, spin-doctoring, sound bites, and other means of shaping political messages for the news media.

The characterizations I have just provided are broad and sweeping, but beyond the particulars I point to, I want to suggest the range and complexity of political culture mediated through face-to-face, print media, and radio and television genres. This then provides a rich but finely shaped field of public participation that new forms of electronic communication may extend and transform at the same time as the existing modes of participation provide models of communication that may at first be fairly directly translated onto the Internet.

POLITICS ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

The Web became a clearly recognized presence as early as the 1994 election, with candidates already creating Web sites to set out their positions and elicit support (Fund 1994; Harmon 1994; Lewis 1994; Powers 1994; Seib 1995). In the 1996 election, parties and candidates had extensive and elaborate Web sites as well as many private, independent, commentary, journalistic, and humor sites, and the number of sites continues to grow with each public controversy and each political season (Allen 1996; Mossberg 1996; Seib 1997).¹

Quite visibly, the Web has provided fertile soil for many politically related sites that provide forums and contexts for specific forms of participation. Major news and political commentary organizations have established their own sites re-presenting material presented in other media—many newspapers (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Houston Chronicle*, *The Washington Post*), political magazines (e.g., *Congressional Quarterly*, *American Prospect*, *Washington Weekly*, *Tikkun*), public and private television and radio news shows (NPR's *All Things Considered*, PBS's *Evening Newshour*, MSNBC, CNN). Some are exclusively devoted to political news, such as CNN's *All-Politics*. Further new electronic journals have appeared (e.g., *Slate*, *Hot-Wired*).

Many of these sites are linked with each other and with other reputable sources of political and governmental information, giving some shape to a recognizable universe of legitimated professional public political information and commentary. This makes "What Washington is talking about" more public and accessible and virtually concrete, no longer requiring citizens to be at the right combination of cocktail parties, listen to many interview shows, and keep up subscriptions to a wide range of journals. By following links around the Web, one can have some access to the political buzz in a

fairly short time. However, although all of these sites provide news and commentary for various publics to contemplate, and although this news and commentary may provide the basis for later actions such as voting, community participation, and political involvement, immediately in themselves, these electronic journals afford no active form of participation except letter writing in response (typically, e-mail response is facilitated).

More technologically adept individuals can elevate themselves from consumers to producers of political chat by setting up amateur political home pages, and there are many such home pages pursuing political commentary and humor. Pages are built in fan support of political heroes and in attack of political enemies as well as in support and attack of parties and programs. Individuals assert their identities, share their visions, and aggregate resources for like-minded people. Humor usually is pointed, aimed at political enemies. The activities on such pages clearly are derivative of, on the one side, the public media culture of political celebrity and partisanship and, on the other, local community political argument; both extremes feed off of each other. It is not surprising that the talk show hosts, themselves mediating between national news and local discussion, become Web celebrities at the center of fascination and discussion—heroes of political talk on the Internet. On June 17, 1997, a search using the Excite search engine revealed 998,146 matches on the name Rush Limbaugh, 898,241 on the name Ollie North, 172,574 on the name Pat Buchanan, and 12,339 on the name Geraldine Ferraro. Whereas this clearly indicates the political direction of this phenomenon, it also suggests that even a Democrat new to the talk scene gets some attention. This amateur commentary is outspoken and aggressive, expressing both strongly positive and strongly negative comments, as symbolized by the Punch Rush Limbaugh home page (www.indirect.com/www/beetle87/rush/index.html).

Like the talk shows, the amateur Web political pages give non-politicians and non-journalists access to a media stage on which to perform political and journalistic activities, elevating their local talk into public performances and identities that extend out beyond their geographically immediate groups and allowing them to affiliate with geographically separated people of common interests. By participating in talk shows, and even more by creating Web sites, individuals can imagine themselves as politically engaged without too much monitoring of the concrete consequences, if any, of such participation. The locale of such talk clearly is outside more official political talk—outside the beltway, so to speak—but it also clearly is contextually and intertextually related to the public circulation of news and commentary.

One of the consequences of the multiplicity of amateur political sites, many of which are hotlinked to each other and to the more official sites (some amateur pages consist only of index pages of annotated links), is that produc-

ers and consumers can immerse themselves more fully and immediately in critical, independent, and partisan information and commentary. We might call this an intensification and a greater availability of the long-standing culture of political talk. The intensification, however, seems to bring about a qualitative change in that people can produce more extended turns for a more extended audience.

The amateur political talk sometimes aggregates within more organized sites of controversialism, often around minor political parties, cult followings, and activist groups—sometimes mediated through the identity of celebrity talk figures. For example, the Rush Limbaugh Featured Site (www2.southwind.net/vic/rush/rush.html) contains links to the Berkeley College Republicans, Newt Gingrich sites, the Republican National Convention site, the Massachusetts Republican Party, and other conservative groups.

Controversialism, always an aspect of advocacy journalism, has found new journalistic opportunities on the Internet as individuals set themselves up as public sources of news, rumors, or editorial opinions that immediately become widely accessible both to political activists and to more mainstream and professional journalists. The amateur production of “news” outside the standard practices, institutions, and self-regulation of print journalism (as loose as those procedures are), and outside the scope of libel laws written for a print age, has led to the elevation of unconfirmed reports and gossip into apparent journalistic credibility. For example, Matt Drudge, with his daily *Drudge Report*, has been a primary means of breaking unreliable reports, particularly aimed against President Clinton (Felsenthal 1998; Harmon 1998; Kaplan 1997; Kurtz 1997; Shaw 1998). The spread of less reliable unconfirmed stories into mainline Internet journalism sites is fostered by the immediacy of discussion, which makes traditional time pressures of “being scooped” more intense.

Organized political argument and activism also aggregates around a variety of movements, interests, and organizations, with more or less programmatic coherence such as libertarianism, objectivism, and many varieties and sites of environmentalism. The activities afforded by these sites are complex and multiple, and I do not begin to examine them here, but I should note that the sites often are affiliated with non-cyber-political organizations. The pages of political organizations, in turn, typically present information, platforms, candidate biographies and positions, speeches, news, resources, and links to candidate pages and affiliated organizations.

Furthermore, there are a variety of national, state, and local government sites, some of which are aimed at presenting the accomplishments of the agencies and the incumbent administrations along with agency-relevant information, query access, forms, and form-filing opportunities. Individual office holders have their pages affording a variety of activities and providing

a variety of governmental, political, and constituent service information. Legislative caucuses and other political groups of office holders also have their sites.

In addition, there are public service independent organizations that provide nonpartisan information on office holders, candidates, and elections such as the Vote Smart project.

Thus, the political landscape on the Web is becoming increasingly complex and, to some extent, is taking on its own novel character, building on prior forms of political activity but transforming them. Political culture is finding far more public forums and is being spread more easily. It is easier to immerse oneself into an array of opinions, surround oneself with networks of like-minded individuals, and assert a place in public political culture by establishing a Web page and links. A local person, even without affiliation with political groups or some institution that harbors political activity (e.g., a university campus), can form a public political presence and establish an identity within a political group, even a fringe group.

Although the increased opportunities for participation and affiliation seem to foster the ideals of democracy, there also are fewer filters on the partisanship, controversialism, and unreliability of reports that can become widely visible and seem to have some spillover effects on more traditional media. Individuals with Internet access are finding much larger soapboxes, megaphones, and opportunities for affiliations over much wider areas than in the past; at the same time, they are able to bypass traditional systems of responsibility, regulation, and accountability. The attempt by the courts to apply libel laws to the Internet in the *Drudge Report* case is only the beginning of a struggle to develop new systems of accountability for electronically mediated political speech. Similarly, there is no doubt that we will see a struggle to organize the fragmenting trends of Internet political controversy and to mobilize the aggregating possibilities of electronic linking and networking so as to influence issues played out on the mass scale of the nation.

THE DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE WEB SITE

The traditional means of fostering, aggregating, and developing some coherence to political participation has been the official party organizations. Of the two major parties in the United States, it has been the Democratic party to this point that has made the greatest effort to establish a strong Internet presence through its Web site, first established in June 1995.² The remainder of this chapter examines the Web site of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) to see the institutional party response to the dynamics of Internet political communication.³

The first impression that the DNC site (www.democrats.org) presents, as examined on various days in June 1997, is that it is embedded in the culture of news. The upper right of the home page has a publicity photo of President Clinton signing legislation and the left, just below a bold title "Democratic Party Online," has the day's date, suggesting the daily updating of news. Just below is a ticker-tape banner announcing the latest news bulletins. Below that, the hot button table of contents is headed by "DNC News." (The news ticker itself also is directly related to that news page, both in the content of the headlines and as a hotlink.) Over the next three years (last viewed in August 2000), the appearance of the front page changed to follow the evolving design used by major Internet news organizations, but the visual analogy to news remained constant.

Thus, the DNC site is immediately set within a context of breaking news, defining political participation as a form of involvement with unfolding news stories. The news, as might be expected, is partisan. "The Daily News" from the DNC on June 10, for example, includes the headlines "Unemployment Drops Again While Wages Continue to Rise," "Republicans Force President to Veto Disaster Relief—It's 1995-1996 All Over Again," "Barbour Sold Business Deals in China to Foreign Contributor," and "Gingrich Admits Fundraising Hearings Targeted at President, Vice-President; Wacko GOP Investigator Reportedly Stalks Witnesses."

Each of these headlines is followed by a few sentences of elaboration, emulating the lead paragraph of a news story, followed by a citation to a professional news organization (where it possibly is hotlinked to the full story at the news agency's home site) or by reference (and hotlink) to a DNC news release that elaborates the story and provides references to the independent press. There also is an archive of previous stories going back to the initiation of this news page feature on March 26, 1997.

The reference to the independent press (and, as often as possible, to right-leaning news sources) is important to maintain credibility for the reported news, even as it has a partisan edge and implications, because the larger part of the rhetorical impulse seems to be over trustworthiness and credibility—which party and which individuals can be relied on to deliver and who is misleading the American public. The approximately dozen stories on any day going back about a week divide up pretty evenly into tales of Clinton's and congressional Democrats' accomplishments and Republican leaders' embarrassments. In the middle usually is placed a quotation of the day, again highlighting a Democratic accomplishment or a Republican betrayal. The news, as reported here, is really a trafficking in celebrity, credit, and potential support.

This partisan retelling of the news, traced back to independent news sources, relies on news media already heavily engaged in reporting political

warfare, partisan events and leaks created for the media, and pre-spun news releases. That is, the news already is filled with stories of partisan import with consequences for evaluation of the opposing parties and consequent support. Part of the political struggle is for each party to gain an upper hand in this struggle over appearances of credibility. The DNC page presents itself as embedded within this partisan struggle for control of news impressions; thus, it places its readers in the role of consumers of political opinion or as purveyors of it insofar as they use the news reports as a resource for their own political discourse.

To draw the visitors more fully into a realm of partisan representation of the news, the page offers direct subscription to the news site through e-mail, and this service is offered through several postings on the main page, the news page, the Get Active page, and several other spots. The subscription page appeals to subscribers as party activists who will help to purvey the information to others:

Think about the potential. . . . For the first time in our Party's history, we have the ability to arm you with up-to-the minute news and information direct from Party Headquarters!

. . . When the DNC launched Democratic News, our goal was very simple—to help equip supporters with the information they need to deliver the Democratic Party's message. DEMOCRATIC NEWS enables the Party to get the same information to thousands of Democrats across the country instantaneously.

Whether these updates provide grist for dinner table talk, talk show reports, or editorial writing, they increase the circulation of partisan news, with a particular orientation to celebrity hero and villain politicians—most notably the president and vice president and the congressional leaders of both parties as well as whoever might be the target of the latest Republican embarrassment. (As of August 2000, this service still was active, periodically providing the same partisan news that appears on the Web site but with increasing activist information about meetings and volunteer and job opportunities. Hotlinks from the e-mail messages to related Web sites also were added, taking advantage of new technology.)

This sense of partisan celebrity is further enacted through the DNC's version of the Punch Rush Limbaugh page—an opportunity to vote on whether Gingrich should pay his fines from his own funds. Each 99-cent call to the 900 “Stop Newt Hotline” profits the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. This is accessed through the What's Hot page along with a more sedate survey (also prominently displayed on the main home page) that collects Internet use information rather than political opinions. This page also links to sites of three rather high-minded, nominally nonpolitical causes: the

Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial project, the Net Day initiative (aimed at gaining volunteers to wire up schools), and the Kids Campaign (an extensive set of resources on children's issues). So, “what's hot” apparently again consists of representations of high-road activities and accomplishments of the Democratic office holders, with which one can become affiliated, and low-road attacks on the deviousness of the opposition party, which one can enjoy and become incensed over.

Other opportunities for user participation are presented on the Get Active page. Here, one can join the DNC, volunteer to work for local candidates, find out about internship positions, get voter registration information and download a registration form, sign the guest book (also linked on the main home page), and subscribe to the DNC News (described earlier). Except for the latter, all of these are traditional and soberly respectable activities carried out by the political party. Interestingly, beyond the DNC membership fee (choices of \$20 up to \$100) and the Stop Newt Hotline, there is no fund-raising carried out on the site, presenting the Democratic party as a source of information and a site for identification and involvement without any pressure or cost. The suppression of the strong fund-raising motive that pervades much of modern political life suggests a conscious strategy of engagement by the designers of the page. The only thing visitors are pressured to give up is their names. The Guest Book, the volunteer registration, the subscription to the DNC News, and the User Survey all are means of gathering names. As anyone who has worked in politics knows, the only thing more valuable than money in politics is mailing lists of supporters; these provide access to both money and votes.

The DNC site also supports access to more in-depth information on policies, positions, and government actions as well as access to local Democratic parties and related information through two pages: the DNC FAQ (frequently asked questions) page (which embeds links in its prose responses to questions such as “How does the DNC work with local and state candidates?” and “Where can I find the Party's platform?”) and the Democratic Party Headquarters page (which is an extensive index of related links). These extensive links largely keep one within the orbit of Democratic party organizations and affiliates, but one page, Linking With America, leads the user outward to a wide array of amateur political sites, campaign professionals, local groups, activist abortion rights and environmental groups, and to the entire complex of left/liberal political culture.

The structuring of the site to keep the user in the orbit of the DNC pages and affiliated organizations is one of the major changes that had occurred in the site since the 1996 election—when the site was more irreverent, playful, and cyber-culture oriented—and also quickly led the user outside the narrow world of Democratic party representations of the world, Democratic party activities, and Democratic party sentiments into a general, young, ironic, and

multivalent left political culture. Now, the DNC pages try to keep the users engaged for a longer period in a more official, controlled, organized, and institutional world of political practice and with a more coherent viewpoint whereby the world is divided between workers for good and abusers of the public trust.

By June 1998, the site had moved further toward institutional sobriety and providing more extensive access to policy statements and concrete policy accomplishments. Although the basic format of the site remained the same, a new set of pages, accessed through a new entry-page title, "Where We Stand," gives extensive details of "Economic Progress Under President Clinton," "Democratic Platform," "Democratic Position Papers," "Democratic Accomplishments Overview," and "State by State Presidential Accomplishments" (actually kept at the whitehouse.gov Web address). The information presented here is concrete and extensive. There are, for example, more than 40 detailed position papers available on topics such as "Clean Air," "Permanent Replacements for Lawful Economic Strikers," "Violence Against Women," and "National Endowment for the Arts." Although some of this information was accessible in earlier versions of the site, gathering these pieces of information together here and supplementing them foregrounds the party as an instrument of policy rather than a vehicle of partisan interests. The site also distanced itself from raucous partisanship by dropping the outdated Stop Newt Hotline and not replacing it with any similar amusement. Nonetheless, the partisan "Democratic News" remains. By August 2000, in anticipation of the presidential campaign, the Democratic site had incorporated further new technology such as multimedia links and live video from the party convention. The attack pages on opponents were moved to separate Web addresses but remained hotlinked to the main party front page. A moderated bulletin board posting statements on "Why I am a Democrat" was added.

The changes that have occurred on the DNC site, as a professional strategy of party presentation and supporter enlistment that seems to have taken over from a type of exuberant overflow of the youthful political culture of cyber-savvy 20-something staffers, suggest not only that a great deal of thought and energy is going into the creation of institutionally significant Web sites but also that some thought and energy is going into thinking about what types of engagement and participation are being offered to the nonprofessional participant in political culture. No doubt, the Web and participant design are in dialectic with the responses and opinions of users (it would be interesting to note how that information is gathered and used), probably in a way that parallels any marketing, entertainment, or political venture.

At the moment, the result appears to be a backing away from the type of partisan brawling that seems to pervade amateur politics on the Web and a movement toward providing more solid and extensive information and policy

thought (although, of course, still partisan). If such a trend continues and is matched by similar developments on the Web sites of other political institutions such as advocacy groups, citizen information organizations, and political parties and campaigns, then some of the hopes for access to increased political information may be realized.

It might be that on more serious policy issues, beyond the visceral controversial issues that are manipulated in marketing strategies for parties and candidates and that evoke the type of controversialist amateur participation that seems so pervasive on the Web, the discussion is so professionalized and dependent on substantial informational and intellectual resources that citizen participation already requires a large investment in becoming informed and much work in finding a place in the conversation. Yet, on particular issues such as the environment and health care, large numbers of citizens have shown the commitment both to understand the issues and to assert their presence in the policy discussions. It is perhaps around special issues that depth of information and discussion might develop most forcefully on the Internet.

POLITICS AND SOCIALITY IN THE CYBER-AGE

The example of the DNC site, for the moment, still seems to draw on our culture of news, now spun and pre-spun into a partisan frame, heavily weighted with emotions of benefaction and trust set against suspicion and repulsion and then projected onto celebrity heroic and villain figures. These emotions of political culture are being muted from their most virulent forms of political entertainment and are given the somberness of institutional authority, yet they pervade the selection and organization of the information. Nonetheless, this morality drama is providing entryways into increasingly more substantive information and deliberation.

There is no reason to think that the current DNC site will stabilize as the form by which major party participation will be enacted in the cyber-age. Perhaps the major parties will find other strategies for enlisting partisans and support. Perhaps the opportunities of cyberspace will support other political organizations or forms of action. But what does seem clear already is that long-standing issues of political and journalistic responsibility are only written fresh and more compellingly on the Web. On the Web, the time immediacy, wide geographic spread, democratic access, and ability to make large amounts of information available do not in themselves protect us from the narrowest forms of partisanship, rumor, scurrilous attacks, and crude appeals; indeed, the Web has shown itself to be an inviting place for the baser forms of politics. The Web can serve equally as an instrument of

further centralization, advancing the causes of the most legitimated institutions, as quality information with institutional approval may become a distinctive and valued commodity against an unregulated open market of unreliable information and as institutional voices delegitimize the voices of amateur citizens. Even if we find the right mix of legitimated information from multiple sources and perspectives with opportunities for citizens to develop and express their positions and form political identities, we still need to establish vehicles for political opinion to aggregate in ways that become effective within mass society.

The ancient issue of democratic politics—how democracy becomes more than rabble-rousing—is being posed fresh in the cyber-age under new conditions and dynamics of communication. The solutions that we will develop in the long run are as yet unsettled, but the future of our political culture depends on them.

NOTES

1. An early study of the Internet on politics, using a general communication flow model, predicts that the two-way communication afforded by the Internet "should have a positive influence on political participation" (Bonchek 1996). But the optimistic predictions, in treating information as an abstracted commodity conveyed in any communication, take no account of the particular forums, contexts, and activities within which the information is deployed, nor does it examine the types of participation and roles enacted by individuals in the communicating of the information. Another set of studies in progress (Bimber 1998) is tracking the demographics of political use of the Internet. The preliminary data released from this project are starting to identify who uses the Internet for what political purposes, but they do not examine the specific content or communicative form of the interactions. Until we have a more finely grained examination of exactly what occurs within the communications, in what types of forums and contexts, within what genres they are organized and deployed, and what forms of social activity occur within these genres, any predictions that we might make about increasing democracy would have to be tempered by awareness of our own ignorance. To use a not inappropriate analogy, just because more people might gather in more venues to watch sports on more channels and media; trade opinions about sports in person and electronically; gather and communicate sports information in magazines, trading cards, and Web sites; and deal in memorabilia does not necessarily make a nation more athletic, fit, skilled in team interactions, or communally bonded in sportsmanship. It is the nature of the participation carried out through structured, socially organized activities in recognizable forums and contexts that shapes the social results.

2. This followed the Clinton administration setting up public bulletin boards and e-mail access as soon as the administration arrived in office (Mossberg 1993).

3. By the middle of 1997, the Republican National Committee (RNC) had set up a similar site (www.rnc.org). As of June 1998, it had many features similar to those of the DNC site including news and a news subscription service, party information and platform, announcement of party training and events, and membership sign-up. In addition, it has a gift shop, an RNC Weekly Trivia Contest, and a chat room. Even more than the DNC site, the RNC site seems to be pervaded by accounts of the misdeeds of the leaders of the opposition party, not only on the news

page but also on an "Interactive Clinton Calendar" that puts scandals on a time line, a set of links devoted to "The Selling of America's House," and a "Clinton/Gore/DNC Chinagate Chart." The links page, besides linking party and government sites (as does the DNC site), also links to conservative organizations, such as the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation, and to "Fun and Games," which includes an electronic futures market and two parody sites: the moderately right Capital Steps and the more extreme right Paul Silhan's PARO-DISE (Silhan is a regular on Rush Limbaugh's radio program).

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6

Information Technology in a Culture of Complaint

Derogation, Deprecation, and the
Appropriation of Organizational Transformation

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Why do people complain about information technology (IT)? This might sound like a pedestrian question, one whose answer could be expected to hold about as much interest as a scholarly treatment of why the chicken crossed the road. It seems obvious that people complain about a technology because they want it to be improved or removed. But the old joke about the jaywalking chicken may be instructive in shaking our certainty about this. The joke is funny (albeit only once) because the answer, "to get to the other side," is self-evidently correct and yet unexpected. We do not expect it because we take it for granted; we skip past it in our search for explanations based on deeper poultry urges. A first introduction to tautology for most children, the joke points to the fact that we cannot answer its question in a more satisfying way without more information about the chicken and its situation. Returning to my original question, the analogous answer is that people complain about a piece of IT to voice dissatisfaction with it. This is by definition¹ and, I claim, is the only thing we can say in general. All more satisfying answers will be context specific.

This chapter draws from the specific context of an ethnographic study of an ongoing organizational transformation in a large British retail bank to argue that complaint about IT does not always express a desire for change or a return to the status quo ante. Sometimes it performs these expressive functions, but complaint is best understood, to use Goffman's (1971, p. 63) termi-