Illegal Knowledge: Strategies for New Media Activism
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Note: This colloquy is an edited version of an e-mail exchange between Chris Carter, Ricardo Dominguez, Geert Lovink, and Bruce Simon that took place during Winter 2000-Spring 2001.

Bruce Simon: When Geert Lovink originally proposed this project to Marc Bousquet, he conceived of it as "an exchange about strategies for media activism." Our charge from Marc was to "address some of the opportunities that new media present for an `informatics of resistance." I wonder if we might take as our model Stuart Hall's famous "New Ethnicities" essay from 1989, in which he sought to identify "moments" in Black British activist/representational strategies and what's at stake in them. That is to say, as we discuss where we see net.activism heading or where we'd like to see it go, we can also address where it's been and where it's at. So who wants to start us off?

Geert Lovink: There are lots of questions about how the Net could be used best for campaigning. Should activists focus on spreading counterinformation into the mainstream or rather on founding their own alternative networks? Should efforts be aimed at spreading content or rather be focused on confrontations at street level? Is the future in the Seattle model of Independent Media Centers (IMC), which is a wide collection of event-driven Websites dictated by the agenda of Meetings of the Powers That Be? Or should net.activism concentrate on developing software, hijack sites, to keep exploring the backway alleys of the Net? How much do we have to worry about consolidation of freezones in the eye of the corporatization of the net and the rise of state control over new media?

We are here to discuss strategies, a discussion which, in my view, requires direction and an ability to make common decisions - and act upon them. Activism is different from a general public debate. It asks itself the question What Is to Be Done? If the answer is "everything," not much will happen except for what is already happening. I think it's now time to speak about the dynamics of coalitions and alliances. The trick is to create "temporary unifying signifiers." The question we are discussing here, as far as I interpret it, is what role the Net is playing in this and which hybrid media forms work in a specific social and cultural formation, and which don't.

Bruce Simon: To Geert's first question, I'd respond that there are several good reasons for activists to prioritize founding and sustaining alternative Web-based networks over spreading counterinformation into the corporate media. First, it's a bad idea to conceive of the ends of our activism as getting our issues onto the agenda of major "decision-makers" and "decision-making" organizations (lobbyists, legislators, think tanks, government subcommittees, transnational institutions, NGOs, etc.); in this view, the Web simply becomes another medium for disseminating content, and use of it gets modeled after the mainstreamed uses of other media.
(print, radio, TV). We lose the opportunity to learn lessons from the strategies and defeats of those who, for instance, wanted radio and television to develop in radical democratic directions. Instead of thinking the Web as a new and improved PR tool, we need to think about how to take advantage of its interactive and multi-media capabilities to change who gets counted as a "decision-maker" and how decisions get made. We ought to focus our efforts on developing those aspects of the Web that allow for a different mode of campaigning than figuring out how to get something into the "spin cycle."

This leads to my second point: given that what happened to radio and television is happening with the Web right now, the creation of alternative networks is even more important, for if we don't create, sustain, and grow them, who will? Time-Warner? Disney? If we want it done right, we're going to have to do it ourselves. There's finally an efficiency argument for creating alternative networks for issue-or-event-oriented campaigning: corporate media won't simply ignore alternative networks; they will seek to incorporate and appropriate that which is created and/or distributed by them - whether that be an event or a position paper. Spreading counterinformation into corporate media will be a happy accident of the creation of alternative networks, in other words -it doesn't need to be a top or initial priority for net.activists.

This argument leads into my answer to Geert's last question about the effects of "corporatization of the net and the rise of state control over new media." Rather than worrying about these trends and forces, we need to figure out how to deal with the seemingly inevitable misrepresentations and imposition of standardized narratives that occur when any issue or event moves from alternative to corporate media. We can't allow the "worry" that this will happen to paralyze us; we have to learn from other activists who also deal with this problem. In The Working Class Majority, Michael Zweig critiques the mainstream media's tendency to report on strikes in ways that reinforce their readers' and viewers' identities as consumers rather than as workers; how different is this anti-union containment strategy from the representation of those protesting against corporatist globalization in Seattle or Washington as either loony idealists or dangerous disturbers of the peace? But consider the advantages of having alternative Web-based networks - the way they allow for almost-instantaneous critiques of systematic bias and the dissemination of progressive and radical viewpoints - to having to rely only on print, radio, or television networks.

Geert Lovink: In fact, many of the IMCs are developing into longer-term alternative media institutions. By contrast, the time frame of activism seems to be dictated by those we're all trying to counteract. Is the political agenda of the so-called anti-globalization movement constrained by "eventism," city-hopping from Washington to Prague, Melbourne and further? Is that a problem?

Ricardo Dominguez: - "Eventism" as a strategy for now is fine. These sorts of global focus points allow the many threads and issues that surround neo-liberalism to gather, share, and strengthen the networks. They allow these global networks to re-flesh themselves in direct action and show that activism will be as transnational as capital. That was the basic trajectory of the "Encuentros" (Encounters) the Zapatistas have called for since 1994. Also, a number of activists see a direct genealogy from the Seattle actions to the Zapatistas' call for an "International Network of Struggle and Resistance" at the start of 1996. The Zapatistas have used this method of "eventism" to strengthen the concerns of the local autonomous communities of Chiapas to
other global issues and they have done it in a very theatrical manner. At this very moment the Zapatistas are getting ready to march into Mexico City on March 11, 2001. It will be a two-week march that they are now calling the "ZapaTour." Very much part of their practice of "eventism."

Bruce Simon: I think there are many valid and effective ways to contribute to the "International Network of Struggle and Resistance" that the Zapatistas have called for; whether to focus more on content - or event-oriented on-line campaigning seems to me a matter of context and goals, and different groups with different priorities can combine their efforts. To take an example I know well, Marc Bousquet, Kent Puckett, Matt Gold, Christian Gregory, and I have worked to balance Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor ([www.workplace-gsc.com](http://www.workplace-gsc.com)) between supporting organizing efforts by graduate students and adjuncts in the U.S. and Canada and putting the North American academic labor movement in a broader analytical frame. Two examples of the latter goal: Anthony O'Brien's "Global Workplace: An Activist Forum" featured interviews with activists in Australia, South Africa, and the United States who compared their struggles against the neo-liberal transformation of the academy (issue 1.2, December 1998), while Christian Gregory's "The WTO and After" featured a variety of analyses of the anti-globalization movement (issue 3.1, May 2000). This is to say that the Web journal's function never has been only to spread "content" or "counterinformation"; from the start, Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor has been an organizing tool for graduate students, adjuncts, and tenure-track and tenured faculty already involved in or considering unionization, a site for debates over strategy and tactics within the academic labor movement and between it and other social movements, a lever for putting public pressure on professional associations and universities, and, since the May 2000 issue, a "portal" of sorts to other progressive and radical unionist Websites and e-journals.

Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor can take on these various roles only because of the existence and influence of a wave of organizing and activism by graduate students and faculty on individual colleges and universities, through municipal and regional organizing strategies, within academic unions like the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), within professional associations like the MLA or American Historical Association (AHA), and through organizations like the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the Canadian Association of University Professors (CAUP), the Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions (CGEU), and the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL). Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor, though, is one place where the analysis of the impact of casualization, managerialism, and corporatization on North American higher education systems can be linked to critiques of the impact of neo-liberalism on other institutions, communities, and peoples -including those done through events like the ZapaTour or the anti-globalization movement. This activity of theoretical or systemic "linking," I believe, is a necessary supplement to the kinds of activities that shouldn't be dismissed as mere "eventism."

Geert Lovink: I would like to make a distinction here between content-based campaigning, lobbying, and PR work and the more technical hacktivism. The positions concerning "hacktivism" were more or less consolidated back in '98. Back then, the model of the collective denial-of-service attacks (as promoted by the Electronic Disturbance Theatre) was fiercely
criticised, from both hackers and activist sides. Yet, the very effective strategy of [www.McSpotlight.org](http://www.McSpotlight.org), which is focused on research, outreach, and activist networking was never repeated on the same scale. Why not? Should we continue to make the distinction between good content and networking projects and "bad" criminal hackers? (No, but people still do.)

Ricardo Dominguez: Geert's breakdown of net.activism into a binary of good activism ([www.McSpotlight.org](http://www.McSpotlight.org)), or digitally correct activism, vs. the bad hacktivism of the Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT) strikes me as far too simple. EDT's work was and is tactical theater; [www.McSpotlight.org](http://www.McSpotlight.org) was a long-term strategic action. So to compare one with the other disregards the context within which the Zapatista FloodNet (a virtual sit-in tool created by EDT members Brett Stalbaum and Carmin Karasic) was used, disregards that the actions were done to bring global focus on the situation in Chiapas, Mexico after the massacre in Acteal, and disregards that the tool was one small element within the larger long-term activism of the digital Zapatistas movement in conjunction with the EZLN. The Zapatista movement as a whole has been one of the most important developments in international activism since they emerged out of the Lacandona in 1994. EDT's actions just added one more channel for information distribution, the core of net.activism, via these theatrical-strikes. In fact, many net.communities had not even heard or concerned themselves with the issues that the communities in Chiapas faced till we did these actions. The Zapatista FloodNet was a net.tactic tool that allowed a global network to bear witness to this atrocity and for them to become engaged via the net to something very real - these virtual actions structurally altered the electronic embodiment of the Mexican state and allowed networks to participate in the process. It also offered net.activists a new tactic for managing contemporary electronic nomadism without relinquishing the possibility of non-violent direct action on-line as a very real form of global political intervention. EDT's tools and actions were never meant to establish a long-term strategic design to counter the neo-liberal agenda. They are tools that can be used by any on-line or off-line community to disturb or slow down the high-speed virtualization so many face tactically, and not strategically.

Chris Carter: Sites like [www.McSpotlight.org](http://www.McSpotlight.org) generate a synergy between electronic activism and fully-embodied public confrontation. The interplay of multiple media makes palpable the conflicts on the streets and in the courthouses. McSpotlight's complex sensory experiences do not merely intensify readers' engagement with the Web, but potentially awaken those readers to the realities of labor exploitation, misleading advertising, and animal cruelty. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the audio-visual force of the site awakens readers to brave acts of resistance.

Like McSpotlight, the Florida Research Ensemble's "Imaging Florida" project and the California Part-time Faculty Association Website interweave varied media in virtual space in order to show that the work of resistance extends beyond the virtual. While "Imaging Florida" illustrates the field work of artists/theorists/activists attempting to counteract the commercialism of Florida tourism, [cpfa.org](http://cpfa.org) depicts the legislative struggles of contingent instructors attempting to expose and undermine the commercialism of higher education. In the case of CPFA, Web-mediated resistance seems particularly crucial in order to slow the proliferation of virtual
distance education. The bogus efficiency and cost-effectiveness of virtual education threatens to exacerbate the already excessive reliance of academic institutions on a contingent workforce. Instrumentalist technology threatens to relegate more and more teachers to part-time information deliverers and anonymous graders. While fighting for the reduced dependence of California Community Colleges on contingent workers, deploys Web technology against the forces of capital - even as that same technology facilitates capitalist exchange more effectively than any in history. CPFA members emphasize the public nature of their struggle by including audio-visual representations of their testimonies in state legislative hearings. The synergy of electronic activism and f2f confrontation energizes the organization, which has matured along with its Website. Will CPFA's ostensibly counterhegemonic practices within the capital-intensive network slow the virtualization and increased commodification of education? Might the alternative networks that Geert imagines help sustain CPFA's activist techniques? Or does the creation of alternative networks for resistance only further assure the increased commercialization and governmentality of the internet?

Ricardo Dominguez: The CPFA must look at the number of hybrid tactical and strategic net.activist and street.activist maps that have emerged and then deploy those that best fit the issues that they face. As in every activist case, the importance of the context and what information will reach and move the communities involved can only come from CPFA - who understand the issues intimately. In the best-case scenario, an element of invention will also emerge that can become the strange attractor for the issues, which will push the concerned community to another level of social response from those not directly involved - even though they should be. Does the "creation of alternative networks for resistance only further assure the increased commercialization and governmentality of the internet?" The forces of "commercialization and governmentality" will increase no matter what we do. No matter if we do everything possible to stop them or do nothing - they will continue the rapid "diversification of integration." The Zapatistas chose to do something, even if it meant that they would be surrounded by an endless cycle of low-intensity warfare. I don't think we have much choice either. Does this mean that we can't change the trajectory of neo-liberalism? I tend to fall on the side that believes that it maybe is possible - even if, as Geert said at the start, activists can't "do it all." However, we can take what tools we have at hand and what network situations we find ourselves in - and do what we can.

My question is: can we "discuss strategies, which, in my view, requires direction and an ability to make common decisions - and act upon them" without falling into constant negation and binaries about good vs. bad net.activism? Would it not be more active to find what was or is most useful in each endeavor of net.activism and share that? But, perhaps all we can share is our negation and nothing else.

Bruce Simon: I think we can offer something other than negation. For one thing, we can attempt to clarify what's at stake in various net.activist strategies and priorities - and perhaps model what that kind of collaborative yet contestatory process might look like (or at least provide an instructive example of how or how not to do it). At the very least, we can try to unsettle some pretty established binaries that seem to be already in place.
I'm wondering how our discussion thus far relates to what already seem like "classic" Web issues: access, identity, "virtual communities," the Web as instantiating a "public sphere" or "free market of ideas" (either the realization of the bourgeois public sphere or some sort of necessarily democratic space), intellectual property. Hasn't Napster created a virtual community/public sphere of sorts? is that Web activism?

Geert Lovink: We could say that activists are no different from other Web users. They all build sites, set up lists, have their own online events, just like the motorcycle gangs, video game fanatics, and those interested in exchanging Indian cooking recipes. That may be true. They all form virtual communities and create both group and individual identities. Still, I think it should be the task of activists to go beyond the user level and question the workings of net subjectivity. I would hope that activists are more aware of the underlying power structures of the information economy. Armored with this critical knowledge, net.activists can go beyond the status of merely using applications. By questioning the way existing network architectures work, new strategies come into existence, both on the aesthetic level of the user interface and software. That's why there is such a high awareness of the open source issue in activist circles. At least, that's the ideal case. Ideally there is an exchange, and sometimes even collaboration between net.activists, artists, and programmers. That's the difference in Napster. In the Napster model the users are just consumers (of a free service, in this case). The user is condemned to content. I think net.activism should not reduce itself to (good) arguments.

Chris Carter: Geert's move beyond argumentation into practical intervention leads "beyond the good" into Zizekian territory. In The Ticklish Subject, Slavoj Zizek sees "something 'terroristic' in every authentic act, in its gesture of thoroughly redefining the 'rules of the game,' inclusive of the very basic self-identity of the perpetrator." What new technologies might mobilize an ethically-charged terror? Ricardo spoke in an interview last year about the increasing use of countersurveillance devices such as Webcams to expose and challenge officially-sanctioned forms of technological observation. Such Webcams, in helping to obtain and disseminate dangerous information regarding corporate and governmental practices, seems to impose a greater terror than viruses or tools of information-destruction. Ricardo has already clarified the importance of using technologies that are appropriate to specific conflicts and particular locations. Effective activism (good terrorism?) depends on collective awareness of the range, stakes, and consequences of a locally-situated struggle. Might Webcams, however, allow for the disruption of authorized panoptic practices in a variety of contexts? If so, what risks must activists bear in returning the tyrant's gaze?

Ricardo Dominguez: The development of counter-surveillance (watching Big Brother watch us) devices as a net.activist.tactic, I think could be effective - it could be "good terrorism." The risks would be much the same as any direct action work that creates a disturbance. But, it would be our hope that it would also be a gesture that would create a traumatic situation for the Command and Control networks. Creating a social trauma in the power nexus is the point of "good terrorism" - in much the same manner that FloodNet created a traumatic event among the digitally correct communities, who had a visceral response to this type of simulated DDoS (Distributed Denial-of-Service). EDT's counter-surveillance project is entitled "Anchors for Witnessing: Post-media for Off-grid Communities." The specific purpose of these wireless
anchors will be to witness and send out real-time Netcast video of human rights abuses by paramilitary forces, the military, and other governmental forces that many remote communities, like Chiapas, Mexico, face on a daily basis. These wireless anchors would use the covert technology developed by corporate and military communities in the First World to centralize Command and Control of indigenous lands. The Electronic Disturbance Theater's aim is to use this covert technology and reverse the gaze of power towards its own structural disregard of human rights with the speed of autonomous wireless networks. Such anchors for witnessing would allow remote communities under daily low-intensity warfare the ability to witness, document, and disseminate to the networked world the abuses of power instantly - without having to have First World levels of highband interconnectivity.

Geert Lovink: Ricardo, you know very well that there is also another critique of denial of service attacks, coming from hackers and system administrators. They have been explaining over and over again how ineffective DDoS attacks are. In many cases attempts to bring down an enemy server get lost in the Net, somewhere, near your own ISP or further down the line. The Electronic Disturbance Theater has been criticized for its simulation of digital resistance. I agree with you that NGOs have been really scared by these new tactics. But let's not get distracted by their digital correctness. The question here should be not one of rhetoric or simulation but what models are effective in what situation, taking the specific local and cultural circumstances of the struggles and actions into account.

Ricardo Dominguez: I agree that we should not be distracted by the "question of technical effectiveness" or "digital correctness" in terms of what EDT has done. The Zapatista FloodNet was not attempting to be "technically effective"; effectiveness and efficiency, for EDT, are below the trajectory of symbolic efficacy. Our aim was not to "bring down the enemy;" our aim was to create a simulation of the "DDoS" event that would be "effective" in side-loading information beyond the local and offering a point of focus for the communities involved. It was an "event" that created a sense of the unbearable weight of beings in the middle of the super-highway for a limited time. It created a state of disturbance - not of destruction. But, as I stated earlier, the "context of an action" is of the highest importance. A net.tactic should always take into consideration the strategic value that it will be framed by and what the "event" of the action will bring into focus.

What I was trying to add to the development of this dialogue around the "Anchors for Witnessing" project is that it does not have to work to have an effect on the nature of the virtual panopticon. That is what the Zapatistas have taught us about InfoWar, or better, InfoPeace net.tactics: one can create a low-fi simulation that can have an 'effect' on the.mils and.govs. After EDT started speaking about the possibility of "Anchors" happening, perhaps already having happened, in mass media filters during 1999 (like Time magazine, InfoWar journals, and net.culture journals), EDT started to receive requests for more information about this project from Mexican newspapers. This added to the belief that the Zapatista Force Field now had a new layer of real-time networked counter-surveillance up and running. By the end of 2000, Zapatista communities began to overrun Mexican military bases and the military did not stop them or fire on them. One can only think that the fear that the "whole world is watching" was in the minds of Fox and the PAN in this instance and created a space that allowed this "event" to occur.
Still, one can re-direct the logic of the systems by tweaking the syntactical structure of code and reversing the logic of the system, in order to make it function in a manner it was never made to do. EDT's Zapatista FloodNet used the logic of the network to upload 404 files (or Files Not Found) in order to upload political questions into the Mexican government servers during our 1998 electronic actions. Questions, like, is "justice.html" found on this server? The Mexican government server would respond: "<justice> is not found on this server." Here the logic of the system was used to create a counter critique within the structure of the government's servers, which also pointed to the real political conditions of Chiapas, Mexico.

And last, but not least, is the semantic level of electronic resistance. It is at the semantic level that low-fi hacktivism has shown itself to be most useful. Semantic resistance (InfoWar) is what the Zapatistas have used since Jan 1, 1994. The Zapatistas' networks have displaced the structure of NAFTA trajectories and its neo-liberal agendas with poetic interventions, which hijack the logic of guerrilla war, and transgress the logic of InfoWar. Semantic, here, refers to using words as war to create a bottom-up social netwar on a global level, by using the simple tool of e-mail. E-mail should still be considered as the primary tool of hacktivism. For EDT the performance has been to slip between the syntactical and semantic trajectories, and to simulate the physical "event." Each one of these types of hacktivism can become a useful net.tactic. But no political organization should hang their hat on them to accomplish long-term strategic goals.

Bruce Simon: We don't need to go with this next question yet if people want to continue discussing the risks and rewards of counter-surveillance or other strategies that, as Geert put it earlier, "question the workings of net subjectivity" and "question the way existing network architectures work," but Ricardo's closing comment about different political organizations' long-term strategic goals made me wonder about a larger issue - the heavy influence of libertarianism and anarchism within net.activist circles. While radical strands of these political philosophies critique state power and the workings of multinational and transnational corporations, most of them haven't shown much interest in the history of colonialism and imperialism or much affinity with marxist or postcolonialist thinking. Is this a problem? To use literature as a shorthand, does it matter that Neal Stephenson's Snow Crash rather than Leslie Marmon Silko's Almanac of the Dead appears on most net.activists' reading lists for apocalyptic visions of possible capitalist futures and re-mappings of the neo-liberalizing present?

Geert Lovink: Libertarianism is philosophy at work. It is the dominating undercurrent at the dawn of the 21st century. I am always surprised to hear how mainstream thinkers are playing down its influence. Rather than writing the badly-needed Critique of Libertarian Reason, public intellectuals such as Zizek focus on dead horses such as Lenin, post-colonialism, cultural studies, and other "third way" sciences. And if they are really bored the professional thinkers will talk about the "chances and risks of globalization." Libertarianism in the Wired style has hardly been researched, which could be an indication that it is an unconscious consensus, not contested but rather denied. The book essay of Pauline Borsook, Cyberselfish, is a good attempt, even though it remains anecdotal, a bit light theory-wise, but it contains rich material which could be analyzed. So do the Stephenson novels, computer games, or more contemporary magazines such as Fast Company, Red Herring, and Business 2.0. Libertarianism connects the left and right wing of the net, the entrepreneurial forces and the net activists. Corporate elements and state officials
don't like it. Their common sense is Third Way with the aim to curb the new forms of freedom of speech and commercial opportunities.
social media can also be a key driver of new leads to your business. And as these prospects become customers, social media allows you to nurture those new relationships, leading to greater connection - and eventually conversions.  

10 Effective Strategies To Leverage Social Media For New Customers. John Rampton

Former Contributor. Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own. An interactive guide to using social media and other online platforms for activism. Mike Sliwinski, a writer for Law Street Media, introduces his readers to this evolution in The Evolution of Activism: From the Streets to Social Media: Beginning in the 20th century and taking focus during Martin Luther King’s Civil Rights movement, the notion of non-violent resistance came to the forefront. A discussion of net.activism, net.tactics, and strategy featuring Bruce Simon, Geert Lovink, Chris Carter, and Ricardo Dominguez. (Source: EBR). The permanent URL of this page: https://elmcip.net/node/12934. Record posted by: Filip Falk.