BOOK REVIEW

Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture, by Geert Lovink. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002. ISBN 0-262-12249-9 cloth, 7 × 9, 394 pp., Electronic Culture Series.

The book is a collection of 25 essays by the author on various aspects of Internet culture, written between 1996 and 2001. The term *Dark Fiber* in the title of the book refers to unused fiber-optic cable laid in anticipation of future growth and commonly leased to individuals or companies who must provide their own systems to make use of it. How this relates to the content of the book is left up to the reader to interpret. The reviewer's interpretation is that culture, art, and political activism ride on the dark fiber of the Internet, whereas its backbone is dominated by mainstream media and the corporate agendas. Geert Lovink is a prominent figure in cyber culture and new media art, with the street wisdom of a former squatter, and a radical postmodern intellect, who has been active over a decade as founder of magazines, online community networks, temporary media labs and intellectual forums, organizer of conferences on media art, and book author.

The core theme of the book is the impact of the Internet on social and political activism, alternative media, and the interplay among the corporate, technical, and social agendas. For example, in "Travelogues," essays focus on media arts and culture in countries such as Albania (after the collapse of 1998), Taiwan (after the earthquake in 1999), and Delhi, India (at the opening of the New Media Center Sarai, 2001, on the advisory board of which the author serves). In "Towards a Political Economy," the focus is on interpretations of the dotcom hysteria of the late 1990s and its outcomes. In "Reality Check," the discussion is about media arts, and the dynamics of the associated social networks, both in cyberspace and in physical space.

Social and political activists have made use of the Internet as a means to disseminate news and ideologies associated with existing movements. This is the first level of "net activism." Campaigning and connecting people from different contexts is the second level. The third level involves purely virtual protests mounted over the Internet, causing virtual losses to corporations such as counterbranding. Lovink is, however, disappointed that the full potential of the new medium has not been realized, in part because the economic and legal boundaries of the net are determined by nation states and telecom giants.

It is interesting to note how during the Iraq war, as this review was being written, information about the war from multiple points of view, both in national media (such as the BBC) and in alternative sources (such as ZNet), was readily accessible over the Internet, dealing a decisive blow to the CNN monopoly on the news and the army's control of information flow via the new concept of embedded journalism. Why there was an abrupt halt to the English-language web site of Al-Jazeera during the war is anyone's guess. The book's essay on the war in Kosovo was indeed prophetic of what was to happen in the Iraq war.

Thanks to the Net, there is no limit to the availability of the counterinformation required for being informed in a well-rounded fashion. Such information is useful, however, only to those who have the time to look for and digest it. Tactical networks, the online networks for

social organization and mobilization, are forced to operate within the parameters of global capitalism.

To what extent can the new media facilitate new ways of political participation and thereby renew politics by offering efficient ways of political participation? The Net is indeed testing the will of political establishments to open up on the Net and to promote a participatory democracy at a much larger scale than ever previously known since the Athenian democracy. This is not only an opportunity, but also a threat, as information and propaganda on the Net are much harder to control, unlike that over traditional media. Will it ever come to the point that the new media actually replaces politics, by becoming the primary stage of political discourse?

According to the author, online communities and the communal Internet have spawned mailing list communities and Usenet newsgroups embody and reflect the aesthetics of text. The social networks created via e-mail have a lifecycle: They are exciting initially but then the limitation of online communication steps in and participants lose interest. E-mail is fast, but e-mail overload has made it difficult for us to keep up with the communication flow, to the extent that e-mail can often be slower than regular physical mail. Excess of e-mail does not speed up communication, it slows it down. Spam is making things even worse. Time is again the limiting resource in electronic communication.

In relation to electronic arts, the author discusses communities that are naturally tied to the Net. Impediments are that they are in need of space outside of institutional control (of the state or of the corporations). The need to meet in real space is present; actual production is best done face to face. Also the tensions that easily build up in virtual worlds must be resolved face to face. Virtual meetings, on the other hand, are good for discussing and preparing. Transition of social groups into cyberspace is poorly understood, and research into it is as important as research on the technology of the Net.

The author states that cultural content on the Net is dominated by corporations. The vast majority of Net users passively consume Internet information. Culture has been reduced to "innocent commodified technotainment," manifesting itself through ever more channels, but at the same time with ever less real content and impact. Synthetic and systematic analysis of the facts is shifted to the viewer. A prediction is made that the current state of affairs will result in a sudden realization that the viewer is being tricked, causing a "rage against the machine" and the implosion of media. Global media is now the battleground of infowars, which is where actual wars are fought as well. The Iraq war is an example. The alternative public sphere is shrinking, and the Internet has not been able to compensate. The official media have long pursued the Orwellian view of censorship in free societies: Unpopular ideas and inconvenient facts are kept in the dark because they are deemed not newsworthy, without any need for an official ban.

Accordingly, there is no new economy, only a process of transforming and adapting the old economy to information technology. The author concludes that the dotcom mania's rise was due to a myth that the number of users and their hunger for online services would continue to grow beyond bound. After the burst of the speculative bubble around dotcoms, the dotcom workforce became integrated into the existing corporate structures. The problem of who will pay for the information available on the Internet and how is still open. The hacker community that created the Internet promoted the ideology that information needs to be free. The dotcom mania evolved separately from the cultural arm of the Internet, including the media, the arts, and academia. It is still the case that money is made with technology, not content. There is no word of the neglect of social policies and public education or the decline of the public sphere. Open, decentralized citizen networks have no place in the Internet economy. The Free Software Movement assumes that its members have a regular income from

another source and they write free software in their free time. Dotcom startups either went bankrupt, or were bought out by corporate America. Internet stagnation is happening, as bandwidth is getting overpriced with respect to the (lack of) demand. True peer-to-peer networks will only take off when a critical mass of users has a permanent, open connection to the Internet. High-performance flat-rate Internet access is not generating enough cash to pay for equipment upgrades and generation of high-quality content. What is left? Advertising, the new revenue source for search engines! (Google Business Solutions, AdSense, 2003; Google Sponsored Links, 2003).

Overall, this book is a bricolage of ideas, as is common in cultural studies (Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992), a treasure chest of thought-provoking snippets that help us view the Internet and its relation to social movements and culture with a critical eye. As the recent Iraq war proved, the patterns of information dissemination and manipulation continue down the slope clearly evident from the essays in the book. The book has delivered on the promise made in its title, that of tracking critical Internet culture. The book is strongly recommended not only to social scientists who are interested in the emerging field of study of Internet culture but also to technologists like myself who want to know how the technical artifacts they design and implement influence social movement and culture.

On the downside, the book is too much of a bricolage, lacking in distinct methodology or analytical approach. The book has many typographical and grammatical errors, which are sometimes distracting to the reader. It makes abundant use of online references. Unfortunately, such references are also a convincing demonstration of the transitory nature of the web, with up to half of them being dead links in some essays.

The book would benefit from an index, which would make it easier to look up information. An index would also make it more useful as a reference book or textbook. In spite of these organizational and editorial shortcomings, the book raises many interesting issues about Internet culture, which will be coming to the foreground as Internet access is becoming more widespread and technology problems are resolved. Web logging, or blogging, or "push-button publishing for the people," is a new phenomenon that "offers you instant communication power by letting you post your thoughts to the web whenever the urge strikes" ("Blogger," 2003). We will be looking forward to Lovink's thoughts on it.

REFERENCES

Blogger, push-button publishing for the people. (2003). Retrieved July 24, 2003, from `http://www.blogger.com/`

Google Business Solutions, AdSense. (2003). Retrieved July 24, 2003, from `https://www.google.com/adsense/`

Google Sponsored Links. (2003). Retrieved July 24, 2003, from `http://www.google.ca/services/sponsored_links.html`

Grossberg, L., Nelson, C., & Treichler, P. (1992). *Cultural studies*. Boston: Routledge, Chapman and Hall.

Evangelos Milios
Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada