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The Corporate Colonization of Online Attention and the Marginalization of Critical Communication?

This article provides a general exploration of the argument that the Internet’s potential for extending strong democratic culture through critical communication is being undermined by a corporate colonization of cyberspace. The article investigates which sites are attracting the attention of participants seeking public content and interaction. The investigation finds that large corporate portals and commercial media sites are dominating online attention for news, information, and interaction, privileging consumer content and practices while marginalizing many voices and critical forms of participation. This situation threatens to limit the Internet’s contribution to the expansion of democratic culture. More research is needed to identify exactly what is being represented on which sites and how different groups are participating. However, the general colonization trend seems clear, and this article concludes by considering public policy options and civil society initiatives that may increase the visibility of marginalized voices and critical communication online.

Keywords: corporate colonization; critical communication; democracy; Internet; online attention; portal

Corporate Colonization Thesis

Many democratic theorists today agree that at the heart of any strong democratic society must be a vibrant sphere of moral-practical discourse (critical communication) involving open and reflexive articulation and contestation of...
diverse positions on problems of living together with difference (see Bauman 2002; Benhabib, 1996; Boggs, 2000; Bohman, 1996; Dryzek, 2000; Habermas, 1996; Young, 2000). The safeguarding of this communication from state power is necessary for the free public interrogation of official decision-making processes and hence for political systems to be held accountable to the so-called democratic will. Needless to say, autonomy from state power has been far from realized in the mass-mediated spaces through which such communication predominantly takes place in today’s large-scale, dispersed societies. However, in these neoliberal times, it is private economic power that is largely dominating media systems, posing the most significant threat to democratic culture. Critical theorists and political economists have demonstrated soundly how privatized, commercialized media is instrumentalizing communication and thus undermining the public sphere (see Boggs, 2000; Curran, 2000; Gandy, 2002; Herman & McChesney, 1997; Kellner, 2004; McChesney, 1999; D. Schiller, 1999; H. I. Schiller, 1989). These critics have shown how the mass media, in particular, have been captured by powerful conservative interests, leading to the marginalization of critical and less powerful voices in the central discursive arenas of liberal-capitalist societies.

However, there has been much recent excitement among advocates of democratic communication about the possibility of the Internet’s radically enhancing the public sphere. The Internet is seen as subverting state and corporate power, offering a space to voice otherwise marginalized positions. Kellner (2004) put forward this vision eloquently:

The Internet, by contrast [to the corporate media], provides potential for a democratic revitalization of the public sphere. The Internet makes accessible more information available to a greater number of people, more easily, and from a wider array of sources than any instrument of information and communication in history. It is constantly astonishing to discover the extensive array of material available, articulating every conceivable point of view and providing news, opinion, and sources of a striking variety and diversity. Moreover, the Internet allows two-way communication and democratic participation in public dialogue, activity that is essential to producing a vital democracy . . . the Internet . . . contains the most varied and extensive sources of information and entertainment ever assembled in a single medium. The Internet can send disparate types and sources of information and images instantly throughout the world and is increasingly being used by a variety of oppositional groups. (p. 51)

The Internet, as presently stands, allows for public communication relatively free of state and corporate control. It is a global decentralized, two-way medium that is not currently owned by any one corporation or government. In fact, the fundamental software protocols that enable Internet communication are embedded within the public domain. This potential for critical communication can be seen unfolding in practice. Through e-mail, discussion spaces,
publishing sites (from Web logs to online media), and Web broadcasting (audio-video streaming), a vast network of actors engage in the articulation and contestation of positions on a myriad of issues of local, national, and international significance.

Research has demonstrated that various factors tend to limit the effectiveness of this online engagement, including poor-quality discourse, stratified participation, and state control of data flows through surveillance and regulation at the network’s ends (see Dahlberg, 2001; Davis, 1999; Fung & Kedl, 2000; Hill & Hughes, 1998; Wilhelm, 2000). Despite these problems, the Internet continues to facilitate the articulation and contestation of positions, which supports the expansion of strong democratic culture. However, a number of critical commentators argue that the limiting factors listed above do not include the most significant threat to the extension of the public sphere online. They believe the greatest threat to be the corporate colonization of cyberspace. The argument is that powerful corporations supported by neoliberal policies are re-creating and reinforcing through the Internet the dominant discourses and practices of consumer capitalism, marginalizing critical communication central to strong democratic culture (Barney, 2000, 2003; Fortier, 2001; McChesney, 1999; Napoli, 1998; D. Schiller, 1999).

In this article, I explore this colonization thesis. However, I approach the task in a somewhat different way from previous investigations. The limited amount of work undertaken so far in this area has concentrated on the possibilities of corporate control of online communication afforded by the increasing corporate ownership of Internet content, software, and bandwidth. I have elsewhere examined the threat to online democratic communication stemming from the increasing corporate ownership of these three layers (Dahlberg, 2004a). This is important work, as it highlights the need for urgent government action, including legislative measures, to ensure that space online is preserved for nondiscriminatory and noninstrumental communication. However, this work does not take into account the full extent of the corporate threat to the potential of Internet’s expanding the public sphere. It is not necessary to own and control all, or even an extensive amount, of Internet space—in terms of the data space constituted by bits—to have a major impact on online communication and use. This is because the route to the domination of online practice is the domination of online attention, achieved through control over key content, software, and bandwidth. Space may be preserved for critical communication free of corporate interests; yet such communication may be largely marginalized in the competition for user attention.

How successful then have corporations been at dominating online attention oriented to public discourse (news, information, discussion), and what is the impact of this on critical communication? This is a question yet to be extensively examined in communication research focused on enhancing democratic
culture. In this article, I undertake a critical and general examination of this question. The examination is critical in that it involves reasoned problematization and critique, consistent with how I use the term in the phrase “critical communication constituting the public sphere.” The approach here is focused on reasoned argumentation aimed at contributing to an ongoing discourse about the Internet and democracy, rather than applying a particular method to provide so-called objective findings. The examination is general in that the argument made is not focused on a particular context but makes broad-based (and preliminary) claims supported by reasoning based on currently available research, statistics, and my own observations. Although the examination does focus mostly on the case of the United States, it also draws examples from elsewhere to highlight global trends. This general exploration will complement research on the problems for online democracy of the increasing corporate ownership of the Internet and will lay the basis for more specific and in-depth research of the question of attention control and its impact on online critical communication.

The Corporate Domination of Online Attention

Attention is arguably the most valuable resource online (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Goldhaber, 1997; Hargittai, 2004). Although it is relatively straightforward (for those with the resources) to get views published on the Internet, having them noticed is another matter. With millions of Web pages, and millions more messages passing through e-mail and discussion groups, being noticed by any more than a handful of people is extremely difficult for most online participants. This is not the case for large media and communication corporations. They can gain significant audience attention given their established branding, strong customer loyalty, extensive product lines, large marketing budgets, and the capital to develop and buy up Internet service providers (ISPs), user applications, Web sites, and online content. Disney (with ABC), Microsoft, Time Warner (with AOL), Viacom (with CBS) and Yahoo!, among others, have successfully deployed these resources to capture audience attention for sales and advertising by developing megaportals that not only provide users with a starting point for all their online journeys but also promise to guide users through the maze of information and point them to relevant sites.

These corporations initially get people to their portals by operating ISPs, ensuring that users’ first point of entry each time they go online is the corporation’s default homepage. Internet research has consistently found that less than one half of those who sign up for an ISP change the default homepage (Hargittai, 2000, p. 130). Users are attracted to these portals in a number of other ways: through online and offline advertising, via recommender systems based on surveillance and profiling, and by extensive systems of links through-
out the Web. These megaportals attempt to keep users’ attention as long as possible by providing a one-stop shop, offering a wide array of enticing services including syndicated news, entertainment, shopping, chat channels, e-mail, discussion forums, information managers, packaged communities, search engines, and by attempting to create ongoing, so-called deep relationships with users. The idea is to structure a total online experience around the portal. Possibly the most extreme example of ISPs structuring user experience has been the practice of AOL, which has attempted to create a so-called walled garden to keep its subscribers within its sphere of influence, using strategies such as obscuring exits from its online properties and limiting the destinations available on its search engine (Patelis, 2000). Services such as directories and search engines do help users to move out into cyberspace at large; however, users repeatedly return to the major portals as the familiar starting points for new online experiences, particularly to undertake new searches. Search services assisting corporate portals monopolize attention in another way. By linking advertising banners to search results, portals are able to keep participants within a corporation’s online sphere of influence even when participants venture outside that particular corporation’s cyberproperties. Furthermore, the political economy and design of search engines means that searching tends to favor those who can afford to employ search engine optimization experts, can pay for priority indexing and/or sponsored links, can attract a large amount of inbound hyperlinks, and who own and control significant domain names and large amounts of interlinked online properties (Hargittai, 2004; Hindman, Tsioutsiouliklis, & Johnson, 2003; Introna & Nissenbaum, 2000; Lawrence & Giles, 1999; Walker, 2002).

These big corporate sites are becoming very effective at attracting online attention. In the case of the United States, Jupitermedia (2001) reported that between March 1999 and March 2001 the total number of companies controlling 50% of all U.S. online user minutes shrank from 11 to 4, and the number of companies controlling 60% of all U.S. minutes fell from 110 to 14, an 87% swing. The online properties of one company, AOL-Time Warner, accounted for almost one third (32%) of all time spent online by U.S. Internet users. According to Aram Sinnreich, former senior analyst for Jupitermedia, the “data show an irrefutable trend toward online media consolidation and indicate that the playing field is anything but even” (n.p.). He concluded that “a major share of the market is being absorbed by a handful of companies, with those same companies continuing to direct traffic across their own networks of sites” (Jupitermedia, 2001, n.p.). Since 2001, data from Jupitermedia, Nielsen/NetRatings, and International Data Corporation (IDC) consistently report the domination of attention by the big corporate portals (AOL, Microsoft, and Yahoo! being the big three). In China, which is second only to the United States in the number of citizens actively participating online, five corporate
portals have captured a large proportion of user attention (Liang, 2003). There is a similar pattern of domination taking shape globally. Nielson//NetRatings’s research shows that in most countries a handful of megaportals (including the above three) generally dominate the rankings of the most popular sites in many countries.\(^3\)

The Marginalization of Critical Communication

What is the impact of this domination in terms of the Internet’s extending critical communication and the public sphere? At first glance, these megaportals may seem to significantly facilitate the articulation and contestation of positions. They provide access to news and information from multiple sources, and they offer extensive discussion and publishing facilities. As such, they may be thought of as bringing together diverse positions for contestation in central public spaces, thus helping to overcome the fragmentation of the Internet into highly focused interest groups and the editorial bias of mass media sources. However, there are problems with this reasoning.

For a start, the multiplicity of media sources referred to does not result in a great deal of diversity. The news offerings, when not simply advertorials, are largely drawn from a few so-called authoritative sources (mainstream, commercial, and Western) that have been shown by media researchers to narrow diversity and limit criticism and that are often owned by or linked into strategic alliances with the corporate portals. Despite the Internet’s offering news editors the opportunity to represent diverse views on any story, corporate media tend to develop their online reports from the same pool of stories as their offline offerings and along the same editorial lines, even if providing a greater volume of material, and thus continue to represent most positively and most frequently conservative institutional voices (Boczkowski, 2002, p. 247; Zimmermann & Koopmans, 2003). By drawing attention to these conservative news and information offerings, the corporate portals narrow the diversity available to their users, driving content toward the homogeneity and compromised nature of the offline dominant news media.

Recently, news-aggregating systems have been developed by the likes of Google News and Microsoft Newsbot that move news portal sites away from the syndication model to a search model. As a result, Google and Microsoft claim to offer an unbiased selection of online news. Google News, part of Google’s set of online search and related services, claims to provide greater diversity by using an algorithm rather than human editors to search, choose, and rank (by relevancy) stories of a particular event from more than 4,500 Web-based news sources. This search service does indeed seem to offer a greater diversity than any single news media site. However, the selection and ranking of news stories for any particular event biases the big media. The 4,500
sources, though numerous, are dominated by the so-called authoritative Western, commercial media. Most independent online media channels and Web logs are not included. Furthermore, although the details of the algorithm are corporate secrets, a number of the main (relevancy) criteria for the selection and ranking of stories are well known. Three of the criteria are the credibility of the source, how recently stories are published on the Web, and how widely linked and reproduced stories are. These criteria again privilege the big, corporate media, which enjoy their codification as so-called quality and thus trusted news, have the resources to continually update their reports, and are extensively referred to online, given (and subsequently reinforcing) their trusted news status. So whereas a few non-Western media sources and a few noncommercial news sites are included, it is the dominant commercial media reports that are constantly ranked highest. Moreover, despite Google News’s providing multiple stories for each search, the stories tend to be highly cross-referenced and often derived from just a few corporate sources, further challenging the diversity claim. For example, Yahoo! stories are often highly ranked; however, Yahoo! simply acts as another news aggregator whose reports are again drawn from the authoritative media, which are themselves often simply versions of the corporate news wire services such as Associated Press and Reuters. Microsoft Network’s Newsbot (a recent addition to MSN’s extensive portal) similarly biases these media by using a computer algorithm that selects on the basis of “the number of sources covering the same story, when the story was published, and how many people have looked at a particular story” (Microsoft Network, 2004, n.p.). Google and MSN Newsbot draw further attention to big media sites by being forced by copyright law to link directly to the media site concerned, rather than host the content on an independent site.

Users seeking news and information can, of course, draw on general search engines to find a plethora of alternative sources to the dominant media. For instance, Google’s general search engine for the Web provides a much greater diversity of information sources and range of positions on any issue than is offered on the Google News site. Many news and information seekers do go online to find a greater range of views than can be found from offline sources. Pew research on U.S. Internet uses in relation to the Iraq War found two thirds of online news, information, and opinion seekers thought that it was very important (37%) or somewhat important (29%) that they could get news and information from a variety of sources (Rainie, Fox, & Fallows, 2003). In addition, 52% claimed that it is very important (22%) or somewhat important (30%) that they encounter points of view different from traditional news sources, and 52% replied that it is very important (24%) or somewhat important (28%) that they get different views from official government sources. However, only 17% of U.S. Internet users thought that the news and points of view that they found online in relation to the Iraq War was any different from
that found in newspapers and on television. This initially seems a surprising finding, given the diversity of views that is actually available online compared to the mass media. Yet it is not so surprising given that few of these news and information seekers actually visited sites other than the authoritative news sources. The research found that 32% of the users surveyed visited U.S. television network sites for news and 29% U.S. newspaper sites. In contrast, only 10% of the users surveyed visited foreign news organizations, 8% alternative media sites, and 4% Web logs (survey participants were allowed to select more than one option). According to measurements by Nielsen/NetRatings (cited in Greenspan, 2003), the 15 most popular news sites in the United States during the 1st week of the invasion of Iraq were CNN, MSNBC, Yahoo! News, NYTimes.com, AOL News, Washingtonpost.com, Fox News, ABC News, Internet Broadcasting Systems Inc., MSN Slate, Gannet Newspapers and Newspaper Division, USATODAY.com, Marketwatch.com, Hearst Newspapers Digital, and CBS News. Where does this leave the promise of the Internet operating as a significant alternative to the corporate media? Although Web logs surged in popularity during the war, by far the most popular Web log—the globally famous dear_raed.blogspot.com accounting for 86% of traffic to Blogspot.com—received less than 5% of the traffic that the top news sites attracted.

Other research of U.S. Internet news confirms that users favor corporate media sites (Kohut & Raine, 2003; Liang, 2003, p. 48; Pew Center, 2004). This is also true for many other countries, although there are variations in online media use, as can be expected given different political systems and cultures. In New Zealand and Australia, the most popular online news sites are owned by major telecommunications and media companies. The same is true for Japan (see Japanmediareview.com for details). In the United Kingdom, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is an exception in that it is a noncommercial public broadcaster that is by far and away the most popular online news destination for U.K. citizens. However, the BBC falls behind Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo! in terms of U.K. online population use and, in fact, is more like one of these megaportals than a news site given its extensive entertainment content, interactive services, and its Web search engine (BBC, 2003). After the BBC, all other popular online news sites are private and commercial. In Southern Africa, the corporate media Web news sites IOL, M-Web, and News24 dominate audiences. In China, the situation for alternative online media could be seen as even worse, with a matrix of state and corporate media dominating online attention for news (Liang, 2003).

Exceptions do exist. In the case of Russia and Ukraine, corporate and state media sites are a great deal less popular than independent, online-based media projects (Krasnoboka, 2002). In South Korea, which boasts a Net-savvy and politically active population, the pioneering citizen-based participatory news
site OhmyNews draws an estimated 2 million readers daily and 15 million hits (Gluck, 2003; Khaney, 2003). However, the general pattern, particularly in the case of liberal capitalist nations, is the domination of online news attention by major corporate (sometimes state-controlled) media interests via commercial media sites and the megaportals discussed earlier. Moreover, it is U.S. media corporations that dominate the global rankings of top online news sites in terms of user numbers and time spent online (see www.cyberjournalist.net/top_news_sites/ for monthly rankings of most popular news sites globally).

Given the diversity of reports and information available online, why do so many users simply go to mainstream commercial sources? An obvious answer would be that these news media are familiar and trusted and that they reinforce this trust by designing their sites to signify authority, professionalism, objectivity, up-to-date-ness, and so on. In the United States, market research confirms strong brand loyalty by Internet users to major mass media sites (Elkin, 2003). The variations in online media use noted above also fit this trust thesis. Korea’s OhmyNews prospers from its technological and political climate, whereas the BBC prospers from large state funding and its reputation for high-quality professional journalism. China’s most popular online news sites are provided by state-controlled mass media, which are also the most trusted news source in the country (Liang, 2003). The case of Russia and Ukraine shows that users seek out alternative online news sources more in situations where trust in the mass media has been undermined. Another significant reason why mass media Web sites attract so many users is that these sites tend to be the most visible online. This visibility is because they are systematically favored by search engine results (in the ways indicated earlier for the megaportals) and also by hyperlink patterns—governments, civic organizations, and individuals (on average) link their Web pages to mass media sites more than any other information source (Hargittai, 2004; Zimmermann & Koopman, 2003). In addition, the corporate news media parallel the megaportals in being able to deploy their extensive content and other resources (advertising budgets, cross-promotional strategies, strategic alliances) to not only attract attention but to keep it. Riley, Keough, and Christiansen (1998) provided an interesting case study of a mainstream newspaper, showing that central to the newspaper’s online strategy is the building of an online colony to keep people in its sphere of influence as long as possible. Through acquisitions and strategic alliances, the newspaper has been able to build its virtual colony, offering the user a vast amount of content and providing extensive links to other sites that it controls. So even if a user believes that he or she is leaving the newspaper’s site through one of the links provided, he or she simply gets to another site controlled by the newspaper. Noncommercial media and nongovernmental organization (NGO) sites that provide more diverse views to those offered by the corporate media do not generally have the same level of resources to attract extensive participa-
tion (Hargittai, 2004). It is ironic to note, if such spaces do achieve large participation levels, they can be the victim of their own success given that bandwidth costs—especially with increasing pressure to provide audio-visual content—can cripple a low-budget Web site (Simpson, 2003).

There are other possibilities for the voicing of difference and contestation of meanings offered by corporate portals and professional media sites. In particular, we can think of online discussion spaces. Certainly there seems to be much diversity and contestation of opinion within such spaces. This is less so in the case of the major portals than in the case of those commercial media sites offering discussion forums. Although megaportals, including the big three (AOL, MSN, Yahoo!), often provide space for a large number of user-run discussion forums, critical dialogue tends to be buried among a myriad of specialized interest groups, spaces of mutual support, and private transaction. In contrast to the megaportals, many commercial news media do not offer discussion spaces; however, those that do often provide spaces that support vibrant and critical engagement on so-called serious issues (Boczkowski, 2002, 2004; Light & Rogers, 1999; Tanner, 2001). This provision of citizen discussion encourages visions of the Internet expanding democratic culture. However, those participating in these discussions tend to be those persons already politically engaged offline (Dahlberg, 2001; Schultz, 2000). In addition, various factors in the structuring of these discussion spaces presently limit them from developing the full potential of the Internet for extending critical communication: Agendas tend to be structured by the media organization, discussions are largely separated from foregrounded news reports, and there is a lack of facilities for opinions to feed back into news stories. Thus, the articulation and contestation of positions that does take place in discussion forums remains largely hidden from the larger news readership.7

In contrast, there are a large number of independent and citizen-contributing publishers—critical discussion spaces, bloggers, independent-media sites, media-watch sites—that are watching and contesting the corporate news reportage, as well as making space for alternative stories. The opinions and critiques expressed on these sites can ultimately feed into and alter corporate news online and offline. In this way, the media is opened to more diverse claims and critiques, although it is often the more sensational stories and views that are picked up by the mass media. For instance, the mass media in the United States have, on a number of occasions, picked up and run with scandalous stories from the sensationalist Drudge Report, including the Monica Lewinsky story and, more recently, the false rumor of an affair between a graduate student and Sen. John Kerry (Karr, 2004). The mass media have not been so fast to carry stories from independent online media and media-watch sites. Yet the Internet does provide opportunities for this to happen. Moreover, in contexts where the mass media is not highly trusted, as seen earlier in the case
of Russia and Ukraine, users who can get online access often seek critical information and discussion. Colonization is thus only partial, and control of attention and meaning is highly contested. Overall, however, the general exploration undertaken here indicates that a domination of online attention by corporate hubs and media sites is taking place, leading to a marginalization of online critical communication. Critique of dominant views and articulation of alternative positions online is largely confined to the sidelined discussion spaces of corporate portals and commercial news media sites, and to the marginalized cyberspaces of alternative media and civic society. How does this affect the constitution of democratic citizens? I now investigate this question.

The Constitution of Cyberparticipants as Consumers

The corporate domination of attention not only marginalizes many voices but also promotes the constitution of participants as individualized-instrumental consumers rather than as critical-reflexive citizens. This constitution takes place in many ways, and to various extents, depending on the sites concerned. On corporate portals such as AOL, MSN and Yahoo!, public communication is often buried within a myriad of consumer services, marketing, and privatized practices, encouraging participants to perform as private, strategic actors (Koerner, 2001; Patelis, 2000). News items provided are often kept brief for easy consumption and tend to promote consumer identities. News can even be found written as consumer advice, stories sponsored by businesses that offer solutions to problems outlined in the stories—links at the end of stories directing readers to sponsors’ Web sites. For instance, on New Zealand’s dominant portal—Xtra.co.nz in alliance with MSN—there was a story in early 2003 discussing “how will an Iraq war affect your investments,” with a link to where to go for advice—to the investment company sponsoring the story. Moreover, marketing does not simply confront the user as banner and pop-up advertisements distinct from news but can be found written as stories and placed within lists of story hyperlinks. In response to protest, Google News has removed press releases from its lists of so-called most relevant news but does still consider them acceptable content for its search results (McCullagh, 2003). Whereas Google tags these stories press releases, some corporate portals such as Xtra do not distinguish advertorials from news: The reader is simply deemed a consumer to be targeted. Furthermore, there is an individualization of news and interaction on these spaces that fragments the audience into isolated consumers. As well as news written as individual consumer advice, this individualization includes hyperlinks directing participants to personal consumer interests, news customization feeding “daily me” news and information (e.g., My Yahoo!, My MSN), and so-called interactive instruments such as
pools and petitions for voicing private views. These services tend to be focused on national identity, with portals and information sites customizing their operations to look similar to national communication services (e.g., Google.co.nz). However, commercial ventures are increasingly taking over information and interaction sites of civic groups focused around other identities, notably those of race and sexuality. The aim is to build commercial portals that capture the attention of large user communities. As a result, participants are fed a diet of marketing and consumer-focused, politically conservative news (Gamson, 2003; McLaine, 2003). The only reprieve from this barrage of consumer-oriented content seems to be the discussion spaces offered. However, as noted above, when discussion groups on corporate megaportals do not simply offer another means for material transactions, they often involve the reinforcement of private interests.

The major commercial news media sites, in contrast to the more general corporate Internet portals, present themselves as maintaining some traditional news standards. They do not simply declare themselves quality press but signify this by using the style of news reporting that has come to be coded as objective and systematic. Moreover, as discussed above, some of these sites provide spaces for public discussion, which encourages communicative action oriented to citizenship. However, to conform to models of quality journalism, these media sideline public (citizen-constituting) participation in the writing of news and the development of associated Web sites, participation that is so nicely enabled by the Internet as demonstrated by the Independent Media Centers (indymedia.org). Many news media sites continue to provide some citizen-oriented interactive services, such as e-mail feedback forms and public discussion groups. However, most corporate online news sites only pay lip service to citizen participation. In fact, many newspapers are now simply providing online digital replicas of their newsprint editions, abandoning all interactive features (Lasica, 2003).

Furthermore, there is a noticeable encroachment of advertising into editorial content on many professional media sites (Boczkowski, 2002, p. 275). Not only is advertising taking up significant space above and alongside news clips but, on many news sites, marketing links are mixed in with news links, advertisements are placed within editorial columns, and pop-up advertisements distract the reader and obscure the news story until removed. Moreover, marketing and advertising personnel are having an increasing influence on what gets covered, via topic selection and budget allocation (Boczkowski, 2004). Despite all this, online advertising revenues are failing to produce profits for news media Web ventures. This failure is leading many media operations to charge for all or part of their content and services (hAnluain, 2004; Lasica, 2003). It is hard to tell at this early stage whether this move to charge for content will lead to more open and less consumer-oriented news or will simply drive the online
world further toward a consumer model, where journalists are compelled to produce material that will attract a paying audience.

The merging of advertising and editorial material is most apparent on dedicated corporate news Web-casting sites such as WNBC’s Feedroom.com. Here, a limited range of conservative, entertainment-oriented news clips and slick advertising are served up together in the same format. This Web casting is attempting to combine the interactivity of the Internet with the audience-pulling power of television, to attract large audiences and serve them with interactive marketing. As the Feedroom enthusiastically claims on its Web site, “The Feedroom is where Television and the Internet converge,” it is “just like TV, only better.” The very name Feedroom evokes ideas of a passive audience, interactivity being reduced to choosing channels and products. Of course, Web casting can be developed and deployed as a democratic and critical communication tool for bringing sidelined issues and concerns to a wider public. The human rights media project Witness.org gives local activists around the world video cameras and field training and then Web casts the resulting stories. This allows previously unheard voices to be broadcast globally. Similarly, the international human rights and sustainable development news network OneWorld.net supports limited Web casting through its online radio and television, and the U.S. alternative media organization Democracy Now provides audio and video streaming of its reports and interviews. Yet these democratic initiatives have limited resources and will continue to struggle to attract a large online audience given the increasing monopolization of attention by the content-rich and distribution-controlling corporate portals and commercial media sites.

Extending Critical Communication Through the Internet

In this article, I undertook a preliminary exploration of the corporate domination of Internet attention and the impact of this on critical communication. This provides the basis for further research to identify more fully how various voices are being represented on particular online portals and media sites and how exactly users are participating. However, a general trend is already clear: Although the Internet provides for the articulation and contestation of diverse views in multiple spaces, corporate portals and media sites are directing much online attention toward conservative news and consumer practices. This situation goes against the vision of the Internet operating as an alternative medium to the mass media, as a space where positions and critique excluded offline are foregrounded.

Despite this domination of attention, extensive critical communication continues to take place through the Internet on an impressive scale. As well as a
certain amount of critical interaction taking place within corporate sites, thousands of online civil society and independent media spaces are facilitating diasporic, alternative, and counterpublics that provide safe places for the articulation, contestation, and development of identities and positions and for the organization of online and offline actions to publicize voices excluded from dominant discourses (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Franklin, 2001; Lekhi, 2000; Mills, 2002; Salazar, 2003). Moreover, there are a number of initiatives working to support the development and publicity of marginal voices online, initiatives such as the Association for Progressive Communications (APC; www.apc.org). The APC is a global network of civil society organizations dedicated to supporting progressive groups through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), by providing Internet access, information (on ICT policy, technologies, rights, etc), and applications (Web-publishing software). As well as assisting technically, the APC links up NGO sites. Other democratic initiatives have developed not-for-profit online portals and search tools specifically for making visible the diverse voices and critical practices that can be found online. For instance, DemocracyGroups.org offers an online directory of 550 plus U.S.-based electronic mail discussions and e-mail newsletters related to social change and democratic participation to enhance grassroots organizations. Many portals of cultural groups who are socially marginalized also exist, such as Te Karere Ipurangi (Maori News Online) that lists online Maori information and interaction sites (see http://maorinews.com/karere/). Another exciting initiative is Clift’s Open Groups (opengroups.org), which aims to build a directory system to provide greater access to online public discussion forums by developing a set of open standards, through which online interactive hosts can describe their forums to help people search, locate, evaluate, and join ongoing interactive public groups across the Internet.

In spite of such initiatives, the dominant voices online continue to be those that are dominant offline. What further can be done to give marginal voices and critical practices more prominence online and thus help overcome the bias toward certain views and forms of participation in political arenas at large? The implementation of public-service-type criteria on major portals and media sites would help; however, it is highly unlikely that arguments for such criteria would be successful, given the current dominance of neoliberal discourse and the diversity of material actually available (somewhere) online. Similar to print media, the problem of vast attention inequalities between publications is masked by abundance; and this abundance, combined with the simplistic notion that people freely choose what they consume, convinces policy makers of the inherent democracy of the medium. We must look to other strategies for bringing to the fore in cyberspace those viewpoints and critical forms of practice silenced or marginalized in offline media.
One strategy for resourcing, linking, and making visible progressive groups is to build major public media sites. The BBC has attempted such a site for U.K. citizens. The BBC successfully competes for online attention with corporate megaportals and media sites by drawing on its global reputation for news and information and by providing a Web site with extensive content and services (see BBC, 2003). The BBC’s site draws together in one space investigative news and hundreds of public discussion groups covering diverse issues. Some groups have been set aside specifically for public debate on the BBC’s own programming and interactive services. These latter discussions are responded to (at times) by BBC staff members and provide an additional feedback system to formally organized consultation sessions and the standard e-mail form provided for direct communication with the BBC. Furthermore, its new iCan service allows groups to develop and publicize citizen projects.

However, the BBC’s site is developing on the back of an established and well-funded public service institution, capitalizing on its offline reputation and resources, and doing so in the context of a third-way politics pushing online democracy as a solution to social problems (see BBC, 2003). It is improbable that many other governments could, or would, foot the bill to support such a major operation, and the BBC’s public service status and funding is itself increasingly being questioned in the United Kingdom. Moreover, despite the BBC’s so-called independence, its site remains embedded within dominant ideologies that define news discourse conservatively and marginalize radical positions, if less so than in the case of the U.S. corporate media. The BBC site also continues to rely on mainstream, professional journalist codes and so aims to signify itself as a quality news service, which has steered its online offerings away from experimentation with citizen participation in news production and also from the provision of direct links to alternative or radical media organizations.

It is unlikely, within liberal capitalist nations, that state-driven initiatives will improve on the less-than-ideal BBC effort at providing public space online for critical communication. In any case, it seems sensible to find ways to support the independent directory and search system initiatives mentioned above that are attempting to point people to spaces of critical communication online. The major limitation facing these initiatives is that they must themselves be made visible before they can be effective. One simple but possibly very helpful solution would be to have all ISP home pages, Internet megaportals, mass media sites, and government home pages prominently display a link to a progressive metaportal carrying major civic directories and search tools. It would be preferable to have such a metaportal as the first Web page users encounter when logging on to the Internet, enforcing an initial separation between carrier and content. However, this is unrealistic to expect given the current neoliberal policy climate and the powerful resistance likely from cor-
porate media to any such requirement. Hence, the more limited proposal that major portals simply display a link to a civic metaportal. Voluntary compliance in this matter is not unheard of. For instance, OneWorld.net achieved a news syndication agreement with Yahoo! News in 2001 to provide some of the news for Yahoo!’s World Section. However, further research is needed to determine the extent that this syndication might simply result in cooptation. In any case, compliance to public service norms will remain exceptional in a commercially dominated environment. Regulation would thus be necessary. Moreover, public funding would be needed to develop and promote the civic portal. Such regulation and funding should be seen as central to a democratic government’s role in protecting and advancing a strong public sphere and should be incorporated into e-democracy programs. However, government must not be involved in the operation of such critical communication initiatives. The actual design, development, governance, and day-to-day running of any civic metaportal need to be undertaken by those civil society groups already active and successful in fostering initiatives extending online public participation.

Even this limited proposal may be unrealistic, given the present alliance between neoliberal government and powerful corporations, and given the general ideological climate celebrating consumer sovereignty, free markets, technological solutions, and the inherent democratic character of the Internet. In this environment, putting forward regulatory-based solutions does indeed invite hostility. For significant advancement of any such proposal, a stronger understanding and commitment to democratic communication is needed among policy makers and the general public. To bring this about, progressive civic organizations challenging consumer models of politics and articulating democratic ideals for communication media are required. A number of such organizations do presently exist, including academic centers, such as the Yale Information Society with its Democracy in Cyberspace initiative; professional organizations, such as the Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility with its Public Sphere Project; independent public-media advocacy groups, such as the Center for Digital Democracy with its digital media policy activism; and civic networks, such as the APC with its ICT policy advocacy and Internet rights lobbying. 8 Although not (yet) particularly influential at policy level, these groups are working hard to broaden public understanding and debate about the need to develop ways to limit the corporate colonization of the Internet. As such, these groups provide the basis for mobilizing support for policies and initiatives that would demarginalize critical communication online and enable the Internet to more fully fulfill its potential to enhance the public sphere, a mobilization that for success needs the support of critical intellectuals and democratically oriented civic groups.
Notes

1. Following Habermas (2001), quality discourse in the public sphere is open, reciprocal, reasoned, reflexive, sincere, inclusive, and noncoercive. For an outline of these criteria, see Dahlberg (2004b).

2. Control of the entry point into cyberspace is also possible through computer operating systems and applications software. I discuss this possibility with reference to the case of Microsoft in Dahlberg (2004a).


4. The only exception here is that in New Zealand the State Broadcaster’s (TVNZ) Web site Nzoom.com ranks in the top four New Zealand media sites for popularity. However, TVNZ is a commercial and conservatively focused media organization with only limited public service obligations. See Redsherif.com for ongoing Internet-market research for New Zealand and Australia.

5. The Guardian report of MediaMetrix research can be found at http://media.guardian.co.uk/newmedia/tables/0%2C7681%2C638820%2C00.html (retrieved February 19, 2004).


7. There are very few exceptions in terms of the lack of reader-responsive online news. Boczkowski’s (2004) study of three cutting-edge online news sites led him to argue that online news is developing in response to readers. However, at present, most online news sites are not developing in this way. In fact, two of the three specialized cases Boczkowski studied have subsequently closed down—HoustonChronicle.com’s Virtual Voyager and the nonprofit sites in New Jersey Online’s Community Connection. The third case, The New York Times’ Technology Section may be more user oriented than the majority of corporate media sites but is hardly radical in its approach to journalism. It largely contains reader views within discussion forums and does not encourage citizen participation in the writing of news stories as in alternative media sites.


References


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