

the digital crowd: some questions on globalisation and agency

introduction

The Internet appears to offer renewed participation in the public sphere. Such positive claims for the Internet might derive from the conservative political context of the previous decade with its general disillusionment with the democratic processes available. This appears to have resulted in a search for a new sense of community and collectivism. As democracy is about exchange of information rather than information itself, the Internet and web appears to offer itself as a perfect model of inter-connectedness. But what are the conditions in which this information exchange takes place and what purpose does it serve? Surely access alone does not simply make 'good' participation.

This essay offers the metaphor of the crowd as one way of describing the agents (those that have the power to act for effect) in this Internet space, and to reveal some insights into the possibility of collective action. By the use of this collective noun, the 'crowd', I am not merely describing any type of collective (of a generic community, or the public, etc) but what historian George Rudé has called a 'direct-contact' or 'face-to-face' group.¹ Rudé's scope is the period immediately leading to the industrial revolution that he identifies as 1848. For the purposes of this argument I will concentrate firstly on the defining characteristics of the pre-industrial and industrial crowd, and then proceed to digitise them.

This essay seeks to make a comparison with the present condition of what might be called 'post-industrial' or information society that performs 'indirect contact' on a global scale. There are a surplus of fashionable terms here, not least that this crowd now operates under forces of 'globalisation'. According to Doreen Massey, one of the problems here is the way we talk about terms such as globalisation without adjectives.² Without further qualification, it appears as an inevitable force rather than a project with specific agencies and interest groups. The crowd also appears as a unifying force acting like a single body or machine and this also needs qualification. While crowds behave differently in different contexts, they have common elements such as those of direct action and a fundamental belief in their collective aims. So what happens when these social relations are indirect and stretched across global space?

¹ George Rudé, The Crowd in History: a study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848, Serif, 1995, p.3.

² See, Doreen Massey, "Problems with Globalisation", Soundings, issue 7, Autumn 1997.

It would be over-simplistic to regard people as the sole agents of revolution, or worse to see technological change as somehow a single determining factor. The Internet is not a fixed object and cannot be described simply as a technological medium or a constituency of users. Like a crowd, it is a set of interconnections, where exchange and collective actions are of an unpredictable nature. Thinking of the Internet as a crowd, in particular its dissident form and political interface, might help to define these collective actions. The central question here is whether this digitised and dispersed 'global' formation demobilises the crowd and serves to diminish its political agency.

the first photograph of a crowd



[image caption: 'The Great Chartist Meeting on Kennington Common, 10 April 1848', by William Kilburn - allegedly the first photograph of a crowd.]

The Royal Archives © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II ³

This photograph marks the transition from the pre-industrial to the new industrial system. Simultaneous with the second French revolution of 1848 and economic depression, Chartism marked a transition from older forms of popular movement (based not so much on socialist ideas but past radical parliamentary reformers, according to Rudé, in The Crowd in History.⁴ The photograph depicts a mass demonstration on Kennington Common in London to dispatch a petition of six million signatures claiming citizen's rights to the House of Commons. No doubt sparked by fears of revolution, a 170,000 force headed by the Duke of Wellington dispersed the crowd.

³ Despite being taken over 150 years ago (and therefore usually out of copyright), this photograph remains the copyright of Her Majesty the Queen. It is therefore 'not to be reproduced without permission'; which probably goes for the demonstration too.

⁴ Rudé, op. cit., p.179.

Although this particular demonstration marked the end of Chartism as a political movement, it left space for new forms of protest in the industrial period.

the crowd

On one level, it might be assumed that a crowd is simply the sum of its constituent parts. According to Rudé, there is a tendency to represent the crowd as an oversimplified disembodied mass, usually taken for a 'mob'; the word mob "... derived from the Latin 'mobile vulgus', and it is not surprising that the possessing classes, wherever they were unable to control its energies, should have looked on the crowd as a fickle monster, lacking in both rhyme and reason".⁵ Alternatively, the crowd can be broken down into particular behaviours and beliefs. On closer inspection, there are sub-crowds, there are relationships of the active few and the inactive mass, of the inside and outside, and so on. But typically, the crowd is represented as a mass that is inferior to its parts, acting in a 'hysterical' manner without reason.

Of course, the crowd has always acted precisely with reason, even if those in power don't agree with the reason. For the purposes of this argument, and following Rudé's 'crowd studies', I will be excluding certain crowds such as 'audience' crowds, 'ceremonial' crowds, or 'spectacle' crowds, in favour of crowds with political agency. However, it should be pointed out that crowds can be seen to transform themselves from one kind into another. People 'en masse' do very different things in different places at different times in different conditions. For instance, in the case of the recent crowds that assembled to mark the death of Lady Diana, a 'preferred reading' of their assembly might be taken to be a protest against the Royal family in the spirit of republicanism. Undoubtedly there were/are dominant and underlying motives for all disturbances; both economic and political. But it is worth emphasising that popular disturbances are generally well-defined by the participants (note the active noun), seeking change fuelled by real or imagined oppression towards material or ideological improvement. The marketing of Internet products reflects these crowd-like tendencies of desire for a better world, sadly unfulfilled after the purchase. Therefore to characterise the crowd as an abstract lumpen mass without definition, or without identity or consumer group, fails to spot the 'faces in the crowd' or to determine its actions - its leaders, victims, aims, motives, and ideas underlying the collective action. Rudé points out that historical data on this will be especially unreliable and most likely collated and ordered by the repressive powers themselves as part of their regulative function.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.252.

crowd control

It is this contradiction and tension between the whole and its constituent parts that makes the crowd so unpredictable. And it is this lack of predictability and resultant difficulty of control that makes it such a threat to the state and its mechanisms of crowd control. It is this tension and instability that is alarming. From the outside, a crowd is ugly, spontaneous, unstable (and hence destabilises meaning), and is militant (in an assault on meaning). Yet, within the crowd, meaning needs to be unified in order to achieve clear targets and objectives. Despite the fact that speeches were rare in the pre-industrial crowd, there is a consistent need to establish channels of communication, the transmission of ideas through the crowd. Pavel Büchler claims that communication takes place like a "ripple effect" through direct contact from person to person, spreading like a virus.⁶ Information travels through the crowd in all directions from no fixed point of origin in a web-like manner. This is what makes the crowd so unpredictable, uncontrollable and potentially disruptive. And this is also what necessitates the widescale introduction of surveillance technologies in public spaces in an effort to gain partial control over the crowd's scope of influence, to limit the spread of information and demobilise "the collective powers of the crowd".⁷ New technologies of control, according to Büchler, deny participation and resist transformation; although clearly this is not inherent in the technologies themselves.

the crowd with agency

But what characterised this kind of protest in 1848? The industrial revolution had precipitated widespread transformations which included shifts of populations, labour and transport, new social conditions and corresponding ideas of socialism and institutions of control. The 'industrial' indicates a new order of society based on organised mechanical production, commonly known by 1848 as the 'industrial revolution' referring in itself to the changed technical apparatus. The term 'industrial' here is a way of making distinctions between the period preceding this phase and after it (nevertheless, despite employing the term I am attempting to argue that the term 'post-industrial' is anachronistic). But there are broad differentiations to be made between the 'pre-industrial and 'industrial' crowd. Not least, the 'industrial' period is characterised by the creation of an industrial working class establishing an overt working class politics within collective struggles (bearing in mind that 1848 is also

⁶ See, Pavel Büchler, "A Shadow of a Crowd", Coil, issue 4, 1997.

⁷ ibid.

the year Marx and Engels published The Communist Manifesto). Many commentators including Mark Poster are keen to draw an “historical analogy” between the emergence of “technically-advanced societies” and an “urban, merchant culture in the midst of feudal society in the Middle Ages”.⁸ Despite the undeniable problems associated with such simple periodisations, there are perhaps broad similarities between these ‘pre-industrial’ and now ‘post-industrial’ periods. Such a model serves the purpose of this essay in emphasising the particular character of the industrial period as a euphemism for capitalism and in establishing channels of resistance. This is undoubtedly a very generalised argument; whether the so-called ‘post-industrial crowd’ or what I have called the ‘digital crowd’ is a return to the behavioural characteristics of the pre-industrial crowd is nevertheless an unsettling question. If so, this might indicate that both pre-industrial and post-industrial disturbances lack the specific ideological aims of the industrial crowd with its political agency diffused. The counter argument would simply be that the sphere of action has changed sufficiently to code opposition differently.

Without doubt, the historical and geographical coordinates of the crowd have shifted as a result of space and time compression, prompting a move toward discussion of its interconnections and actions. It is as if space/time compression needs decompressing to ground any new claims. Any crowd, and especially a digital one, needs to be seen as part of a long history of attempts to regulate the right to public assembly. In this way, the crowd can be seen as firmly located in the foundations of political discourse and the fear of the crowd can be taken as a fear of sociality and open democracy.⁹

the Internet and the public sphere

Any discussion of the democratic potential of the Internet would not be fully formed without fashionable reference to the historical emergence of the ‘Public Sphere’. In “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” written in 1962,¹⁰ Habermas argues that the

⁸ Mark Poster, The Second Media Age, Polity Press, 1995, p.24.

It is worth noting that utopian ideas of human collectivity tend to hark back to pre-industrial times. For instance, the Greek terms ‘polis’ (city-state) and the ‘agora’ (market-place) are trendy references for the Internet that usually avoid the detail of the Greek slave economy and that participation in public life correspondingly depended on private freedom from labour. Such omissions might easily be translated into more recent manifestations of the public sphere’s bourgeois forms (with class distinctions) and issues of access to the net.

⁹ See, Jeremy Gilbert, “Soundtrack to an Uncivil Society: Rave Culture, The Criminal Justice Act and the Politics of Modernity” in ‘Uncivil Societies’, New Formations, Number 31 Spring/Summer 1997, pp.5-22.

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, Polity Press, 1989.

development of early modern capitalism produced a new public engaged in political discussion through access to relevant information, publicity, publishing, café discussion, and so on. To summarise, Habermas traces the evolution of this space as one relatively unregulated by established authority and where society was held in check by debate, criticism and protest until the first half of the nineteenth century (we might call it 1848). After this, he argues the public sphere came to be dominated by state and corporate interests as result of capitalist development, with increased flows of commodities and information across distance (early postal routes, for instance); information that in turn came to be commodified. In this period, Habermas argues the media ceased to facilitate public debate and instead attempted to manipulate/coerce public opinion. Thus he accounts for present impoverished forms of public assembly and what some recognise as a cultural reluctance to gather.

The importance of this reference here (and for those that reference Habermas) is in stressing the potentially democratic role of the media technologies. In these terms, the Internet is often seen as a utopian zone “revitalising the public sphere”,¹¹ where meaning and community can be recovered and where lost social value can be restored. However, there are skeptics keen to point out the conservative and nostalgic tone to these matters. Such communities function according to their own parochial logic or rules, as closed systems where participants must demonstrate the required “Netiquette” to join in. It might be added that virtual communities have a shared collective culture, where the idea of culture is a set of collectively constructed meanings corresponding to meaningful action. Virtual communities are thus both open to political manipulation, and also capable of transforming into effective agencies of political resistance. Clearly some changes are due to definitions of the public sphere as a space of meaningful action.

the Internet and agency

The Internet is a decentralised communication system forming networks within networks. For Poster, this decentralisation is at the very core of the Internet and in the ways in which subjectivity, and meaning are being produced in what he calls ‘the mode of information’ (as opposed to the ‘mode of production’). He argues that our critical frameworks need to be changed to fully consider the political impact of Internet and dismisses the critical tools inherited from the industrial age, as it “presupposes the fixed, stable identities of its members, the exact assumption the Internet puts into question”.¹² In this schema, the rational, centred, individual

¹¹ For instance, Howard Rheingold, The Virtual Community, Secker & Warburg, 1994, p.12.

¹² Poster, op. cit., p.35.

subject of modernism has been superseded by multiple, decentred, unstable identities that sound uncannily similar to Rudé's description of the pre-industrial crowd. Poster suggests that we abandon Habermas' model as the Internet cannot reproduce embodied exchange (however sophisticated the 'avatar'). He rejects Marx too for concentrating on action and institutions and neglecting language. Poster claims emancipatory politics is based on the idea that autonomous agents can free themselves from externally imposed constraints, as if subjectivity itself was not the result of its own set of social and historical conditions. Rather Poster's politics of the Internet indicate that social relations and the social realm are fundamentally changed: "the issue now is that the machines enable new forms of decentralised dialogue and create new combinations of human-machine assemblages, new individual and collective 'voices', 'spectres', 'interactivities', which are the new building blocks of political formations and groupings"¹³; in other words, suggesting hypertextual (crowd-like) formations as 'decentred' as the people who use them.

What this line of argument fails to recognise is the collective and contingent nature of political agency. For example, 'affinity politics' acknowledges multiple subjectivity but chooses to focus it for strategic effect. It does seem possible that larger bodies of collective meaning might constitute a politics (before incorporation kicks-in) in shared 'virtual environments' such as 'socially-oriented' MUDs and MOOs.¹⁴ But any sense of collective political agency would certainly be dependent on access and ability to use the technologies available in a coordinated mass of shared targets and objectives. How might these new forms of indirect action be best understood? Or is it that, "the apparent blurring of the distinction between human and machine, and the ephemeral, mutable character of virtual communities, spell the end of meaningful action"?¹⁵ These relations are stratified and uneven, and not simply reducible to the equivalent of face-to-face encounter.

the Internet and globalisation

These responses indicate a need for solidarity and social action on a global scale. Regarding

¹³ Mark Poster, "Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere", David Porter, ed., Internet Culture, Routledge, 1997, p.210.

¹⁴ MUDs and MOOs are examples of networked multi-user environments: MUDs stands for 'Multi-User Domains' (formerly Dungeons) that are text-based environments in which users can communicate in shared virtual space simultaneously; MOOs are 'Object-Oriented Muds', so called because of programmed objects that can be made to interact.

¹⁵ David Lyon, "Cyberspace sociality", in, Brian D. Loader, ed., The Governance of Cyberspace: Politics, Technology and Global Restructuring, Routledge, 1997, p.34.

issues of globalisation and what is seen to be the expanding inter-connectedness and social relations across global space, there remains very little to choose between the utopian claims of corporate marketing and political rhetoric. Political parties of all persuasions, of the traditional left and right, appear to be united in policy. Amidst the politics of difference (or even indifference), alternatives are being sought to the present spatialisation of politics where divisions of left and right reveal themselves as adequate models according to certain sources (for instance, Tony Blair's vision of the "radical centre" and/or Jean Luc Nancy's The Inoperative Community).¹⁶ Capitalism has always sought to overcome space making faster, more efficient flows of goods and labour. Of course, travel and movement are not unprecedented; it is a question of frequency and speed (faster/slower) and there are many historical examples of the geographical extensiveness of networks, flows and interactions. A more complex mapping would reveal preferred measurements, spatialities and geographies. This is what Doreen Massey refers to as "two completely different geographical imaginations of the world",¹⁷ revealing blatant contradictions of capital's free movement: which proclaims 'goodness' on the one hand, whilst maintaining tightly-controlled immigration policies on the other. Even the automatic link between the free-market model and economic growth is dubious to say the least.¹⁸ The question is who has access to what forms of movement?

According to Massey, globalisation hides its political specificity as an undifferentiated mass regulated by external forces. Like the crowd, it is not a project but a process that hides the agencies that produce it. Echoing Rudé's wish to uncover the crowd as a faceless entity and an inevitable force, Massey sees the need to define this term in the context of particular power relations. It is as if governments have passed power from democratic political processes to the unaccountable free-market place (or made politics a part of it). The rhetoric of globalisation suggests we live in a unitary world in which space and time have collapsed and distance imploded. This is characterised as the unstoppable force of 'progress' that produces international markets, a unified Germany, the end of the Cold war, and so on. This present 'world order' is marked by tensions and contradictions at local-global levels. Furthermore, under globalisation, there is no evidence to suggest that class divisions are dissolving. Despite the fact that the potential for connectivity between different parts of the world is increasing, the terms of these interconnections need to be defined as different. Computer networks have their own specific geographies and information flows too.

¹⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, The Inoperative Community, University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

¹⁷ Massey, op. cit., p.10.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p.8.

In this model, power is not centralised but dispersed, like a web (or crowd) with no centre or edge. Power now presents itself in multiple flows rather than just in spaces like invisible information that passes along its channels of communication. It is as if the terms in which power is now described has multiplied into the interests of the Multi-media industry and Multi-national corporations. Moreover, it is as if computer networks “offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentered global network of the third stage of capital itself”.¹⁹ Rather than some kind of expanded public sphere, this global space is perhaps more a “‘new space of collective alienation’, one in which there is a ‘disconnection between people and spatial form’”.²⁰ Do computer-mediated communities merely emphasise remoteness of contact, indirect relations, distance and alienation? If this is likened to a crowd, one is left wondering why it has gathered in the first place; interaction has taken place but to no clear purpose.

the actual crowd

Perhaps it is this distinction between the real and the virtual crowd that needs further investigation. The virtual does not simply mean the crass opposition of the unreal. What is virtual might appear to be real and have real effects. If this is the case, might there be a potential threat in a crowd forming in virtual space, given the panic and restriction over gatherings in ‘real’ space? In the UK, The Criminal Justice Act (1994) was a set of regulations designed to restrict crowd’s gathering in public spaces. In fact, it was characterised by its hostile opposition and ‘direct-action politics’. It would appear there is no corresponding panic over crowds forming in the digital sphere. Kevin Robins argues there is something worryingly anti-political about most commentaries on the Internet that deny the real complexities of social and cultural relations, producing “In the end, not an alternative society, but an alternative to society”.²¹

The ways in which people talk about the virtual reveal something about the real world, and vice-versa. Sean Cubitt draws a parallel between the postal service of the early twentieth

¹⁹ Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Verso, 1991, p.37.

²⁰ David Morley & Kevin Robins quoting Manuel Castells, Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic landscapes and Cultural Boundaries, Routledge, 1995, p.31.

²¹ Kevin Robins, “Cyberspace and the world we live in”, Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision, Routledge, 1996, p.100. See also, Kevin Robins, “The New Communications Geography and the Politics of Optimism”, Soundings: Media Worlds, issue 5, Spring 1997.

century with present day E-mail services to reveal its underlying purpose. With Air mail, he sees the patterns of air flows as similar to information super highways and notes that: "the post was always perceived as the carrier of personal messages rather than as the commercial and governmental correspondence which formed its major business. Thus, again like the Internet, it maintained a beneficial public face by reserving a small though significant economic area for interpersonal communication, while the bulk of the work it undertook was in the domain of imperial trade and rule".²² Such comments question the realism of virtual exchange. In a similar manner (of critical realism), Allan Sekula argues that material flows of goods and hence labour are all but absent in narratives of globalisation. It is an anachronism to think that computer networks mark the end of traditional forms and routes of capital. Despite the fact that the majority of goods are still shifted by sea, movement is seen to be predominantly by air or by cable (in a sea of global flows). This is patently inaccurate according to Sekula, who argues for "the continued importance of maritime space to counter the exaggerated importance attached to that largely metaphysical construct, 'cyberspace', and the corollary myth of 'instantaneous' contact between distant spaces [...] the blinkered narcissism of the information specialist".²³

the digital crowd

Current research projects like MIT's "The Sociable Web" (as one example of many) necessarily privilege the web as "a social environment", developing interface designs to "visualise non-textual conversational components" and examine on-line communication "through an exchange of actions and reactions".²⁴ These interconnections might be managed and made visible in new ways but they tend to function in ways which mimic the real world within rational frameworks. What would constitute a public space, a space of sociality for an active crowd? In this changing sphere of action, "what can one say of a political discourse carried out between users?".²⁵ What is used-up in this transformation of human agency into usership? The question here is whether this user-'participation' might constitute not just sociality but social

²² Sean Cubitt, "The New International Postal Order: From Air mail to E-mail", Pavel Büchler & Nikos Papastergiadis, eds., Random Access 2: Ambient Fears, Rivers Oram Press, 1996, p.12.

²³ Allan Sekula, Fish Story, Richter Verlag, 1995, p.50.

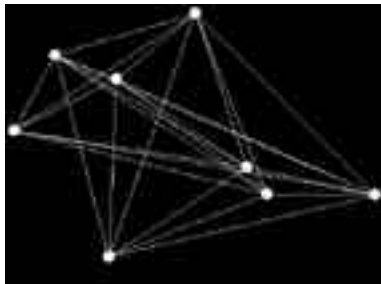
²⁴ Judith Donath & The Sociable Media Group, "The Sociable Web"

<http://judith.www.media.mit.edu/SocialWeb/SociableWeb.html>; See also, "Inhabiting the Virtual City: Contemporary On-line Social environments"

<http://judith.www.media.mit.edu/Thesis/Contemporary.frame.html>

²⁵ See, Dan Thu Nguyen and Jon Alexander, "The Coming of Cyberspacetime and the End of the Polity", Rob Shields, ed, Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies, Sage, 1996.

agency. It should be noted that the term 'agency' might suggest another application as artificial intelligence programs. These agents in interactive environments, called "bots", are usually 'employed' for information retrieval but can also simulate on-line discussion. "Avatars" are a cruder version of these, common in online environments such as MUDs and MOOs where, according to Victoria Vesna, utopian politics meets commercial enterprise.²⁶ This is the focus of Vesna's research in so far as "multi-user groups within a presumably democratic space, mimic a very structured corporate hierarchy". Clearly 'agents' need agency too! To date, chat-rooms, MOOs and MUDs represent space and the occupation of that space rather literally. Are there alternatives, other spatial arrangements that might facilitate crowd-like action (such as noise)? A certain lack of coherence, a clash of codes, irrational elements are all essential prerequisites for this crowd. It would seem that a crowd of active agents might function as the medium of communication itself, like an intelligent machine. The potential of new media to promulgate crowd-like action requires effort in "taking advantage of everything that the new technology offers but, at the same time, being aware that you can't rely on the technology to take you to a progressive result - that takes politics".²⁷ When thinking about the digital crowd, simply developing ever more sophisticated interfaces for pretend face-to-face conversation rather misses the point of what makes a crowd act collectively.



[image caption: 'Crowd Code', with Mark Winstanley - full shockwave version available at www.camerawork.net/crowd/code/]

²⁶ Victoria Vesna, "research notes", http://caiiamind.nsad.newport.ac.uk/4000_web/

²⁷ Susan Buck-Morss, "interview", <http://www.obsolete.com/artwork/SBM.html>, Camerawork/University of Plymouth, 1996.

postscript

As much as I might be criticised for using outmoded frameworks inherited from the industrial age, the point here is that the present is still locked into these frameworks.²⁸ So rather than the instantaneous delivery of information, it still might actually take eight days to cross the Atlantic by ship. However long it takes, the crucial factor is that capital regulates these flows.

In all this cross-talk of global flows and information exchange, there is a systematic forgetting of the crowd. Nevertheless, the crowd continues to refuse its dispersal.

[Geoff Cox 1998]

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 'Symposium Vision Plus 4: The Republic of Information', Carnegie Mellon University, March 1998.

²⁸ This point of emphasis is what Hal Foster calls The Return of the Real, MIT Press, 1996; where perhaps a concern to address the 'politics of the sign' must not supersede 'the sign of politics'.

In these very real spaces and flows exist workers that on occasion produce their own forms of opposition in strikes and protests, even utilising the Internet but in relation to events in the real world. For example, in 1997, activists involved in Korean Workers strikes and Merseyside dock strike in England (since 'resolved') used websites to gain international solidarity [see www.labournet.org.uk/docks2/other/dockhome.html]. Is this an instance of the digital crowd?