

**Activism & New Media:
Communication and Organisation
Through the Internet**

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Abstract

This Research Project will explore the use of new media communication and organisation by activists through the internet. By highlighting the various forms of new media available to activists, this project will demonstrate the recent uptake by individuals of idealistic terms and how they might organise themselves in this new technological age.

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Figure 1. Visual diagram of *LambdaMOOs* virtual community network

Introduction

This Research Project will deal with the issues surrounding activism in new media and the internet. It will explore the use of new media by activists and how this could be used to bring about change in the future. I will outline the conditions that enable activists to use new media especially the publishing and information sharing ability of the internet to communicate messages of their protests to networks across both geographical and media boundaries. The first section will concentrate on activism and their uptake of new media while leading on from this, section two will discuss the various means of activism, the 'tools of the trade' in our new technological age. Section three gathers the previous sections and looks into the use of new media, the internet, and online communities, which concludes by considering activism and information also. The following will set out the framework for this project.

Activism

The use of direct, often confrontational action, such as a demonstration or strike, in opposition to or support of a cause.

Extremist

One who advocates or resorts to measures beyond the norm, especially in politics.

Terrorism

The unlawful use or threatened use of force or violence by a person or an organized group against people or property with the intention of intimidating or coercing societies or governments, often for ideological or political reasons.

(Lexico Publishing Group, 2006)

Taken from the online dictionary, *Dictionary.com*, I have arranged these terms in order of 'severity' to society. For the purpose of this essay, I believe it is important to define the term 'activism' and differentiate it from the other, more loaded, terms of terrorism and extremism. Note how activism is defined as merely confrontational with the use of more socially accepted 'demonstrations or strikes'. Extremism goes a step further by going 'beyond the norm' and groups are typically defined as extremist by opposing

governments – as they often employ political tactics. Terrorism, on the other hand, is a collection of both activism and extremism with the use of violence or terror to meet its needs. For this reason, this essay will concentrate on the internet and its use by activists, although as it will become clear later how all three intertwine and how it really depends on what the government and society/media of each country or state say particular parties activities are.

‘You take my life when you do take the means whereby I live’

(William Shakespeare, 1564–1616)
(Multitude, 2003)

Our means of life have changed considerably since the time William Shakespeare penned these lines. Our new media technologies, gadgets and the internet replace the simpler assets of life from the 17th century, or even 19th century for that matter. Is all our new technology our life, a life surrounded in our expanding new media and global communications?

The values of money, status and property remain in our present society, however, these traditional values may be destabilising, shifting in meaning with the advent of the internet and new media. The removal of our technology may suddenly leave the new age activist hindered or lost in their promotion of a cause, as the technology that surrounds them is their way of life. They have forgotten their past; society is now fully dependable on its life of technology:

Our contemporary social system has lost its capacity to know its own past, has begun to live in ‘a perpetual present’ without depth, definition, or secure identity

(Jameson, 1997, p44)

On the Internet, organisation and mass communications come together as a medium where we can bring the 'whole planet' into our homes and work. The birth of the internet has been well documented and I will not be going into the intricacies of its development, but will stay within the confines of its use by activists. Online activism can include positive actions that look to enhance participation or exist alongside today's political structures. Present forms of positive online activism include social support groups, watchdogs, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation that uses the internet as a platform to distribute its information and raise awareness on protecting your digital rights.

The internet has also been a factor in the birth and growth of oppositional protest groups that use the internet strategically (Flew, 2002). Many activist movements have acquired new media technologies available on the internet such as e-mail, bulletin board services (BBS), discussion forums, web logs (blogs) and encryption and anonymity software to organise meetings, protest marches and demonstrations. The internet in the form of communication is cost effective, as you only need a second hand computer and a modem plus a monthly subscription to an Internet Service Provider (ISP). It is also efficient and effective in reaching a vast audience in very little time with the use of anonymous free email and website hosting accounts with the likes of *Hotmail.com*, *Yahoo.com* and *Angelfire.com*. The feature of anonymity and being free from regulation or control on the internet has allowed the free exchange of information, largely unhindered by governmental moderation. While this has helped to promote freedom of thought and a greater access to information online, it has what most of society would call, negative impacts also. This includes activists like the online neo-Nazi groups, such as *combat18.org* (2005) or the *British National Front* (2005), which exploit the mostly unchecked and borderless nature of the internet to post online racist and hate material,

which would most likely be illegal to distribute in other medias in many societies. For this reason, it is often left to the governments of the world to create a harmony between the freedom of online information and opinion, and those who manipulate these ideals in ways that could hurt or threaten society.

Nevertheless, as Benjamin Franklin once said:

'Those who would sacrifice essential freedoms for temporary
safety deserve neither'

(Franklin, n.d)

1. Activism

Growing concern about the growth of activism and particularly terrorism in the recent news media has been equalled by development of new information and communication technologies (ICT's). It is worth noting though that forms of activism and terrorism have been around throughout history. Ideas pressured by activists have been in use for thousands of years before the birth of the internet and all our new medias, our lives. I can imagine the developed cave man of history organising groups to hinder another tribes hunting in their territory for example. Informal methods of communication, such as the talk in bars, schools and on the streets, have been our normal local news source for communicating information and opinion, and these informal channels also coexist with all our latest multimedia in our modern societies.

The Assassin sectarians of Shia Islam, especially The Nizari Ismailis, who according to Lewis (2003) attempted to terrorise the Muslim world in the 12th century by relying upon word of mouth past through the mosques and marketplaces to relay news and organisation of their attacks. The same may be said of the Russian and Balkan terrorists of the 19th century who used similar methods of communication (Reich, 1998). Lewis states that the Nizari Ismailis wanted to 'sow terror throughout Islam countries' although it is noted that 'the Ismailis were not a band of terrorists, but their fighting against their oppressors was a struggle for survival' and that Mediaeval Europeans 'had transmitted a number of tales, and produced a perverted image of the Ismailis' (*The Heritage Society*, 2005). The Ismailis where painted in a 'terrorist light' as most of their history was written by their enemies. This could be seen instead as evidence of real activism, many years before the word technology had even transpired.

It's a new medium, it's a universal medium and it's not itself a medium which inherently makes people do good things, or bad things. It allows people to do what they want to do more efficiently. It allows people to exist in an information space which doesn't know geographical boundaries. My hope is that it'll be very positive in bringing people together around the planet, because it'll make communication between different countries more possible.

(Lee, 2005)

The Internet provides activists with new and previously un-heard of benefits including the attraction to growing numbers of day-to-day media consumers who may encounter activist information on the internet itself and in the growing interfaces between the internet and the mass media. This audience-building form of the Internet seems to differ from earlier activist internal communication by 'pulling' audiences that often extend far beyond activist communities. Adding to this, E-mail, DVDs, CDs and the Internet have put new and sophisticated tools of idealism into the grasp of activist groups and these digital means have totally revolutionised the idea of activism. Whereas activism practised in the past was directed at a community or collective of people, these tools have made it possible to direct activist ideals to hand-picked citizens in targeted populations, who might be in the position to entice further followers.

Amnesty International, the Electronic Frontier Foundation and the Anti-Defamation League as well as many other NGOs are extensively using e-mail and the Internet. These groups are mainly perceived in society's eye as participating in positive activism. That is, its ideologies claim to be for the good of society or the planet. For example, the protection of basic human rights, working to protect your digital rights and to stop the defamation of Jewish people respectively (*Amnesty International et.al*, 2005).

An early example of the use of the internet to promote a cause was the rather personal orientated website initiated by the Attorney Brian K. Murphy for the petition to free Girvies L. Davis from execution. (*Late Show*, 1995). The simple website was one of the first of its kind to appeal to the online public. It included a count down in days to his execution, a picture of himself, a brief statement declaring his innocence and a 'vote' link for users to click and 'show their support' and belief for Mr Davis's life.

Looking over the proceedings of his trial and appeals, it seems likely that Mr Davis had a strong case in his defence to at least, appease the death sentence. However, he was executed by lethal ejection on May 17, 1995.

A more recent use by an activist group, *The Stop the War Coalition*, boldly invites all visitors to join in a protest march against the occupation of Iraq by the military. The coalition seems quite a force as they provide an expansive list of their main party members and titles (that includes British MP's), and include details of one-off events across the UK, even charging admission for some. On their homepage, in large text backed by red, the invitation reads:

Mobilise for international demonstrations on March 18-19 2006, the third anniversary of the war and invasion, calling for the immediate withdrawal of troops and an end to the occupation.
CENTRAL LONDON
SATURDAY 18 MARCH

(*Stopwar*, 2006)

Although classed as a terrorist action in the eyes of western government, a recent group based in Iraq has used the internet to promote its message in a different way. Where Mr Davis's case and the *Stopwar* site can be seen as a 'pull' mechanism, where online users had to stumble upon their sites to participate; this group employed a heavy 'push' tactic (Jordan, 1999. p123).

In August 2005, A supposed al-Qaeda linked-group issued their second statement to the press proclaiming their utilisation of new media to launch what it called a 'media jihad' to 'terrorise' United States and British forces in Iraq and their families with a barrage of e-mails and by posting 'horrific' photos online. Here follows a short excerpt from the statement in Habib Trabelsi's article who received the statement through the *AFP news24.com* network.

The group, calling itself the 'Brigade of Media Jihad', called on its militants to 'post terrifying pictures on the internet in order to terrorise the enemy...Our objective is to undermine the morale of our enemies, dash their hopes and dreams and reveal the truth of what is happening in Iraq. The media war is an integral part of the war on the ground...The group said it has launched its media offensive in 'several languages on hundreds of internet forums and through horrific e-mails sent to enemy soldiers and their families in order to terrorise them and break their morale. The statement accused 'Crusaders' of controlling the mainstream media 'and so we decided to use an important outlet, the Internet, that they cannot control'.

(Trabelsi, 2005)

It is worthy to note how the Brigade of Media Jihad described the internet as an important outlet for their information. They are utilising the internet to reach thousands of people to 'alter the thinking' of those in their Jihad path. Also worth noting here, though, is the use by anti-war peace activists of the same tactic for initially the same result, to end the war and pull out all forces from Iraq (*mediajihad.com & stopwar.org.uk*).

To use a well used phrase:

'One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'

2. Tools

Just before the time of fast, cheap internet broadband connectivity, the television played a large part in the activists' arsenal of tools. Through the struggles of some core journalists and peace activists across the globe, shocking images and footage of the Vietnam War were transmitted to the 'living rooms' of the world. As Marshal McLuhan points out:

Television brought the brutality of war into the comfort of the living room. Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America--not on the battlefields of Vietnam.

(McLuhan, 1975)

The military and the politicians learnt a valuable lesson after Vietnam. The press where given almost free exposure to the horror of the war, which led to the largely uncensored broadcasts McLuhan points out. At this time, these images where incredibly shocking and gave rise to heavy public damnation and protest of the war across the world. Politicians have now learnt to constrict and manipulate media to their advantage as seen in the recent Gulf wars where only long distance, low human connection, video, or imagery was shown. Western politicians are now acutely aware of the new media power, and how it can be used against them or to their advantage.

New socially interactive forms of internet media, such as web logs -blogs- and discussion boards have now become widely popular communication tools alongside email. Varying opinions seem to be arising within the new internet cultures that could be used for activism.

The young internet culture has mushroomed in its use of blogging and virtual communities where they have established themselves as multi-opinionated activists favouring not only democratic discussion and networking, but also global media critique and new media perceptive socio-political intervention.

An early and far simpler form of blogging as mentioned earlier, was known as bulletin board services or BBSs, which is the use of a public shared text file that users can add too. These, or versions of, have been in use since the early 1980' s and David Hughes was one of the first to use it for activism:

Hughes is a believer in teleports...where people can enjoy a small-town atmosphere and work from their homes by using computers and modems. When it looked as if the Colorado Springs city council was going to make a decision that would effectively prohibit telecommuting from his home in nearby Old Colorado City, Hughes went into action.

'The city planners of Colorado Springs decided to tighten the directive that regulates working out of the home,' Hughes recalls. 'I was the only person to stand up in front of the planning commission and testify against the ordinance; the planners tabled the matter for thirty days. I then brought the text of the ordinance home with me and put it on my BBS.'

(Rheingold, 2000. p256 and David Hughes, n.d)

Hughes sent out letters to his local newspapers that invited the public to dial into his BBS and look at the directive. Many of the readers worked in sizeable corporations and as email at this time was practically non-existent, the employees had downloaded, copied, printed, and circulated many copies of the directive throughout the city. A month later, at the next council meeting, almost 200 citizens turned up in protest and the motion was defeated. Hughes pointed out that 'ordinarily, the effort needed to get involved with local politics is enormous. But the economy of effort that computers provided made it possible for me to mobilise opinion' (Rheingold, 2000. pp256-257).

Following on from BBS, blogs have become in part successful because they are so easy to create and maintain, even for new internet users. Combining hypertext links, multi-user discussion boards, the mass syndication of XML and RSS, email and file upload abilities, blogs are becoming ever more popular (Faris, *shadows* and *Jupitermedia*, 2005). If the internet was all about forming global networks of connected, informative, entertaining websites; blogs make the idea of a dynamic network of ongoing discussion, communication and debate central to the new core use of the internet, especially since many blogs are now including discussion that has an increasingly political agenda across the blogosphere or 'blogging biosphere' (Hiler, 2002).

There is now a reciprocal relationship between bloggers and activists, especially as blogs have grown from marginal to mainstream in the past three years or so. To put this in real terms 'In 1999, there were some 50 bloggers on the web; in January there were about 5.4 million; today, according to the blog search engine *Technorati*, there are more than 23 million' states Ben Macintyre(2005) from *The Times Newspaper*. Looking on *Technorati* today (8th January 2006) there is now over 25 million (*Technorati*, 2005), over 2 million new blogs in 16 days, remarkable. Blogging gives people a way to, in effect, publish their own individual news, which is one of the main reasons blogging has become so very popular. Everyone has a story to tell and a cause to promote, they now have the easy means to do this and be heard.

Apparently, since the rise of the blogs, graffiti have almost entirely vanished from the walls of Tehran's public toilets.

With almost all Iran's reformist newspapers closed down and many editors imprisoned, blogs offer an opportunity for dissent, discussion and dissemination of ideas that is not available in any other forum. There is wistful yearning in many Iranian blogs, and a persistent vein of anger. "I keep a weblog so that I can breathe in this suffocating air," writes one blogger. "I write so as not be lost in despair."

(Macintyre, 2005)

Writes Ben Macintyre for *The Times newspaper*. He goes on to mention the hard-line the Iranian government takes on the perceived activist threats to its power:

The Iranian State has done its utmost to smother the nascent Iranian blogosphere. In 2003, the Government began to take direct action against bloggers — more than 20 have been arrested, on charges ranging from “morality violations” to insulting leaders of the Islamic Republic. One blogger was sentenced to 14 years in prison for “spying and aiding foreign counter-revolutionaries”; in October, Omid Sheikhan was sentenced to a year’s jail and 124 lashes for a weblog featuring satirical political cartoons.

(Macintyre, 2005)

The Iranian regime has also reportedly brought in advanced software tools to filter the internet and block access to provocative blogs. Nevertheless, the Government remains profoundly alarmed by a tool it cannot control. The bloggers have proved so hard to censor that the Government has even considered removing Iran from the internet entirely, by creating a national intranet that would seal off Iranians from the contaminating freedom of the World Wide Web (Macintyre, 2005).

Other activists and sympathisers developed a new tool in response to this, and similar cases like these, for the need for completely anonymous and untraceable blogging to protect online activists’ identities. Freely available open source software has been utilised by sites such as *Invisiblog* for ‘anonymous weblog publishing’ (*Invisiblog*, 2005), so suppressed activists can still have some word with out fear or reprimand. If the government does decide to close its global internet links, they will surely ban any kind of infringement that denounces their rule and so force any independent ISPs to restrict its content.

The government should tread carefully though, If the bloggers can not express themselves the way they are now used too, if they are not allowed to 'breathe in this suffocating air' and 'write so as not be lost in despair' they may find other ways to vent their stifled democracy. Will this lead to conflicts, revolution even? Will the USA and the United Nations Step in?

Another form of online defence by an individual from abuse or attack through activism would be to enroll others of like mind in your digital community to force out the perpetrator:

Organised groups of fascists may be operating in a virtual environment but they intend actual physical harm to other people. That's why there should be no place for these groups in Cyberspace.' She goes on to argue that users should use the freedom that is being defended to exercise some direct control. 'If there are Nazis in a conference you are enjoined to drive them out.'

(Basset, 1997, pp.223-224)

Caroline Basset suggests here that peaceful users of cyberspace should join forces against disliked activist material or hate mail and messages and should 'drive them out' by what is called 'flaming-out' online. 'Flaming' is to 'insult or criticize provokingly, as on a computer network' and to 'flame out' would be to bombard their machines with thousands of messages, irrelevant data, and multiple hits to their email or URL address (*Dictionary.com*). Thus choking their internet connection and eventually disabling their computers and internet servers. This would not be a long term solution, although in the short term, various online communities and bloggers used it in the past to expel or punish negative activists groups. Flaming-out has also been used for the opposite effect and Littman points out that the practice of 'flaming' is:

A dangerous invitation to digital vigilantism and promiscuous computer violence. It turns cyberspace into a rude, lawless, frontier town in which everyone carries a six-shooter and exacts his own revenge . . . There is no discourse when everyone is free to interrupt and no-one is appointed to keep order. No human activity can long remain unregulated . . . The internet, too, is a form of human behaviour. Computers and modems do not remove them from the human orbit.

(Littman, 1995)

Littman's analysis was recently highlighted in an article from *CiDX.org*, a NGO with the aim of improving 'the ease, speed and cost of securely conducting business' (CiDX, 2005a)

...in 2001, a court reported a teenager allegedly hacked into the computer server at the Port of Houston in Texas on September 20, 2001, in order to target a female chat room user following an argument...the teenager intended to take the woman's computer offline by bombarding it with a huge amount of useless data, and he needed to use a number of other servers to be able to do so. The attack bombarded scheduling computer systems at the world's eighth largest port with thousands of electronic messages. The port's Web service, which contained crucial data for shipping pilots, mooring companies and support firms responsible for helping ships navigate in and out of the harbour, was left inaccessible.

(CiDX, 2005b)

One tool that is being extensively used by both Governmental authorities and activists is the use of cryptography. By encrypting your activities, including email, webpage's and data transmissions, you can evade the unwanted prying eyes of your private information. This raises certain questions to its use, like, should everyone be allowed to complete privacy? Should governments be allowed access to all private public information, similar to telephone taps and the opening of letters at customs control? What are the individual's rights to privacy and democracy? A Research Project in itself could be written in this area it is so extensive; however, I will concentrate on the basics of cryptography as a tool in activism and try to answer some of the questions raised.

One of the earliest known uses of cryptography was found in the hieroglyphs carved on ancient Egyptian structures. Later, Hebrew scholars made use of simple 'Substitution ciphers' that were used around 500 to 600 BCE. One example of such a substitution cipher was the 'Atbash cipher', which was formed by substituting the first letter for the last, the second for the second to last and so on until the word was rearranged and coded. Encryption played a key role throughout religious history to disguise important doctrines from the more powerful alternative religions of the time (Wikipedia, 2005a).

World War 2 brought encryption technology into the spotlight for the military with the use of the enigma machine and codebooks, the 'key' to unlock the encrypted data. This proved to be risky as the key could easily fall into the enemy's hands and all your encryption could be broken. This paved the way for a form of encryption that when combined with our new age of digitalism, gave way to a stronger system, PGP (pretty Good Privacy) was born in the early 1990's that utilised only one key pair per recipient, no matter the number of senders. PGP resulted in being 'impossible' to break without the senders key, which including the property of this algorithm, made it possible, and practical, for widespread filtration over the internet of an extremely efficient encryption tool which anyone could use. This in turn gave government intelligence services worldwide a severe problem. For the first time ever, those outside governmental intelligence had access to encryption software that was not easily decoded by government agencies. This led to vast controversy and concern that enabled enthusiastic global libertarian activists' reason to protest at various new laws to appease the problem. In the US, for example, exporting strong (over 56bit) cryptography remains illegal and encryption methods and techniques are classified as munitions. (Denning, 1996 Hopkins, 1996 and Willan, 2003)

Phil Zimmermann, PGP's creator, remains convinced of the advantages of strong encryption for all, which was originally developed as a human rights project to protect individuals against oppressive governments, outweigh the disadvantages (Willian, 2003):

I'm sorry that cryptology is such a problematic technology, but there is nothing we can do that will give this technology to everyone without also giving it to the criminals...PGP is used by every human rights organization in the world. It's something that's used for good. It saves lives.

(Willian, 2003)

Governments believe that strong cryptography could lead to anarchy and a path to social disorder. They are frightened by the prospect of not knowing what its citizens are up to, not being able to take a 'sneaky peek' at anyone's email or data transfers. One alternative initiated by the American government is key escrow encryption. In April 1993, US Government agencies developed an escrowed encryption chip called the Clipper Chip. The chip was built into computer cards and equipment and used strong (often 80-120bit) encryption with a backdoor decryption capability. This was made possible by linking encrypted data to a data recovery key which aides decryption. The data recovery key is then held by a trusted third party, which would most likely be a governmental agency, court, or trusted private corporation or split amongst several of these groups. Another side to the emergency decryption possibilities in the case of kidnappings, terror activities etc, is that companies registered with an escrow provider can re-acquire their own keys for decryption, say, if their original key was corrupt or lost. A lawful inquiry or intelligence investigation could apply for the appropriate warrants to seek access to the key, upon compliance, to decrypt sensitive communications or stored files. Legitimate privacy and democratic interests could be protected through access procedures, independent watchdogs, and other safeguards like time limits to the duration the decryption key can be held. (Branstad and Denning, 1996).

I am sure the Iranian government would be interested in this technology to access its citizen's communications. The potential for this 'recovery key' to fall into the 'wrong' hands is immense, what is to stop the FBI or MI5 from duplicating the key and keeping it hidden from society's knowledge. Western society is too wary of its governments these days to lay that much trust in their hands. Should the government potentially have access to businesses confidential information? If terrorists got hold of this second key, all this protected information would suddenly be available to them. The risk is just far too great, not to mention the infringement on our hard fought for democracy. Here, I believe, Benjamin Franklin was correct again.

Until a time when we all use strong PGP encryption impervious to privacy attack from agencies or individuals, the western governments have found other ways that could (or have) impede(d) our liberties under the guise of 'the war against terrorism' . Terrorist and activist groups, as discussed earlier, are using the internet increasingly to promote their causes. This has led to the execution of powerful governmental surveillance systems such as *Echelon* and *Carnivore*, which monitor all forms of electronic information for keywords and behaviour patterns that are deemed potentially threatening. Designed by the National Security Agency of America, the *Echelon* system is used to intercept ordinary e-mail, telephone and all electronic communications carried over the world's telecommunications networks. The network was designed specifically for non-military targets, so it potentially affects every person communicating between, and within, countries anywhere in the world. The system works by 'catching' all information in its net that contains certain keywords by sifting through monumental quantities of communication in 'real-time' (Hager, n.d).

Is this why politicians are so frightened? If everyone starts using strong encryption, starts blogging and starts forming online groups of power, then these filtration systems will be unable to function. The governments will lose their power.

Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather.

(Barlow, 1996)

3. Online communities

We have entered the age of information technology and information idealism, it may now be time to re-examine and revise our thoughts on activists. As information becomes ever more significant to everyone, the moulding of this information and the careful manipulation of emerging media become essential to achieving idealistic goals. Some would argue that all the internet is, is just another communication device, a device that has distinctive design and capability aspects, but nonetheless, a device that does not 'inherently or necessarily change who we are or what we do together' (Bennett, 2003).

I disagree with this statement for a number of reasons. The internet is a fast evolving entity in its own right, with users and activist alike taking tentative steps into its future possibilities that are yet to be explored. I have shown a small example of its use by activists and governments to date, and probed the phenomenon of the 'blogosphere', which has mostly been individuals publishing their opinions, groups of individuals entering the same discussion thread and groups of like minded individuals signing up to a cause or website that shares (or 'pushes') their ideals. People are being changed by this networking internet, Iranian bloggers are becoming empowered with democratic

thought, and others are gaining knowledge and ideas through this vast instantaneous information tool that could define their path in life. Now, protest can be arranged the instant a cause comes to light, business and individuals have become far more cautious, I believe, in their activities while being under the all seeing eye of the potential internet activist and the all too willing mass media journalist hungry for his next scope. Has society entered the next plane of social interactive existence with the use of networked game play, emails, blogging, networks and virtual communities? I believe not, we are beginning to socially de-evolve with the ever-increasing information loads and the use of greater technological networking ability, network-de-evolving as it were.

An example of what I mean here, is an early insight in the form of Mr_Bungle's Cyber-rape on the virtual community *LambdaMOO* in summery form from Julian Dibbells (Dibbell, 2005) and Pavel Curtis's (Curtis, 2002) articles on the issue.

MUD = Multi-User Dungeon (An interactive text based, or 3D vector graphic virtual world)
MOO = MUD, Object Oriented. (The same, but with an ability to "program", or create interactive objects)

(Wikipedia, 2005b and Wikipedia, 2005c)

This MUD has been one of the keystones of cyberspace where many forms of online life have been first sighted or, at least, first written about (*LambdaMOO*, 2005 and Curtis, 2002). There was a night in March back in 1993, when many online characters (avatars) were gathered in the MUD's living room, a living room made out of text and individuals who brought their avatars together in virtual space. The living room in *LambdaMOO* is the place where people come simply to be with other people, the main starting area of the *LambdaMOO* 'house' network (*Figure 1.*). Several avatars were present, meeting,

greeting and catching up. One such avatar was called Mr_Bungle and his presentation to the virtual world was this:

...a fat, oleaginous, Bisquick-faced clown dresses in cum and girdled with a mistletoe and hemlock belt, whose buckle bore inscription 'KISS ME UNDER THIS BITCH!

(Dibbell, 1999)

'He began ... to force one of the room's occupants to sexually service him in a variety of more or less conventional ways' (Dibbell, 1999). The occupant was Exu, she was a well-liked avatar, and having sex in the living room among friends was extraordinary to many there. Even stranger was the fact Exu began hurling insults at Mr_Bungle, even as more extreme descriptions of sex scrolled down the screen. It became clear to other avatars that Exu was being assaulted; Mr_Bungle had created a voodoo doll that allowed him to take possession of Exu's avatar. This meant that while Exu could talk, Mr_Bungle could also emote for Exu, against her will. Following more seedy acts from Mr_Bungle, 'he was soon ejected from the room'. Mr_Bungle then committed many more distasteful acts on various avatars from his private chambers until finally, someone called for 'Iggy', 'a wise and trusted old-timer 'with superior programming powers'. Iggy managed to 'cage' Mr_Bungle's avatar up with bars impermeable to voodoo dolls and attack, his rain was silenced, for the short term. It was not until the evening on the second day after the incident that Exu finally gave her opinion:

I am requesting that Mr. Bungle be toaded for raping Starsinger and I. I have never done this before, and have thought about it for days. He hurt us both.

(Dibbell, 1999)

Therefore, the MOO community debated and discussed the fate of Mr_Bungle late into the evening. Before Exu's comments, the community where more interested in the reasons why Mr_Bungle had did what he did, and after, the community felt sympathy and rage.

Quietly, another 'wise and trusted old timer', erased Mr_Bungle from the system. (Dibbell, 1999)

In the wake of this 'death and rape', Pavel Curtis the creator of *LambdaMOO*, sat down and created a system of ballots that allowed direct democracy to control the virtual community. There are now a number of rules that have been agreed (*LambdaMOO*, 2005).

The online community at *LambdaMOO* were in an environment without law or government; all the creators did was to give more power to the community to sort out this very real world problem. A rape in reality will often mean the apprehension of the culprit by a designated force, where their taken to court and their guilt is decided to a predefined set of laws that government impose. This may seem to contradict my argument earlier of a technological society de-evolving, as this real world criterion seems to match the case of the *LambdaMOO* cyber-rape. However, our real world laws have been defined throughout history, one being piled onto the statue books after another, governments imposing their own at times at odds with societies mind set. The courtroom of today requires only a few significant people to pass judgement and punishment; the 'courtroom' of *LambdaMOO* involved the whole of its virtual world in discussion about what to do with Mr_Bungle.

As this virtual world is completely closed off to those who do not download the software, it has created its own boundary, much like remote villages hundreds of years ago, villages where revenge and justice was provided by anyone, a self-policing network, a network-de-evolving.

This is further exemplified by my own guest experience on the LambdaMOO virtual community where I was assigned the designation 'Ebony_Guest':

```
The Living Room...aldon, Tobin (out on his feet), Link,
Jed (out on his feet), bonn,
and Nerdboi are here.
```

```
Cockatoo squawks, "hello!"
Link shakes your hand and greets you warmly.
```

```
You say, "hello"
You say, "v new to all this, reminds me of spectrum
games[D[D[D[D[D[D[D[D[D[D[D
  [D[D[D[D[D[D[D[D[Dthe old spectrum RPG games!"
```

```
bonn says, "Men stop spamming"
bonn picks you up and tosses you into its mouth!
Ebony_Guest falls in with a wet smack, apparently having
just been eaten.
bonn belches after eating you
```

```
The Linen Closet
The linen closet is a dark, snug space, with barely
enough room for one person
  in it. You notice what feel like towels, blankets,
sheets, and spare pillows. One useful thing you've
discovered is a metal doorknob set at waist level into
what might be a door. Next to it is a spring lever
labeled 'NOISY!'. There is also a small button set
into the wall.
```

```
You have been ejected. Bye.
```

(Appendix 2)

I Found out there was a rule in LambdaMOO's agreement policy for filling up the screen with text, which could be seen as abuse:

The MOO is a fun place to socialize, program, and play as long as people are polite to each other. Rudeness and harassment make LambdaMOO less pleasant for everyone. Do not harass or abuse other players, using any tactic including:

- Spamming (filling their screen with unwanted text)

(Appendix 2)

However, I had been 'eaten' by 'bonn' and ejected for simply trying to delete and rephrase my sentence. This resulted in an unexpected small line of '[D's in my statement of being 'v new to all this'. I had thought I was being friendly; I had managed a 'hello' earlier, and then brought up what everyone should love, the good old spectrum and its similar gaming style. This was not enough to justify my apparent abuse though, without any form of defence, I was ejected without a word from anyone.

If this is what online communities are forming, I think I would rather keep to the traditional false politeness, social graces and complex interactions of our real reality.

On the other hand, maybe I should have just read the 'social conduct' rulebook more thoroughly.

The individual demand for greater mastery of cyberspace leads to the demand for new tools. Once developed, these new tools immediately sink into the fabric of cyberspace, becoming things enabling individuals and their powers, but in doing so they create a more complex cyberspace that needs greater expertise to manipulate.

(Jordon, 1999, p211)

Conclusions

The main feature of these online communities and most online communication is the anonymity that comes with it, especially with the specialist masking software used by activists under suppressing regimes. This puts everyone online, at first, on the same democratic level. Only your thoughts and ideals are required, there is no account for gender, race or wealth. A completely new language of social clues must be learnt for optimal communication with this emerging virtual planet. Internet communities do not have to be superficial though, with anonymity comes freedom of speech, in this overly governed world; the internet provides an escape from the governments heavy doctrines. Increasing fears of terrorism, I believe, have made people wary to say anything in public about the government. With internet communities, it is very simple to set up an msn group or message board to discuss wayward political ideas. These do not have to be sinister in nature; all political parties now have a website where the uninformed can read up on their policies and make a decision as to their stance.

Presently, millions of people across the world's societies have little or no contact with the media. In many parts of Africa for example, television, radio and newspapers are hard to come by and even though some countries are fortunate enough to pick up TV transmissions, there are many individuals who cannot afford TV sets (*Cut2TheChase*, 2001). Investment initiated by western society to set up technologies and communications in these countries could lead to yet more people taking up causes against the very society that gave them the technology to do so. By settling the poor/rich divide, may create less terrorism but greater activism as they feel more empowered to express their opinions by the increased information and awareness of new media.

The internet communities may become too hard for these new users with ideals to break into as more technological tools and pages of irrelevant information become sown into the World Wide Web each day.

This may lead to, as David Shenk puts it, an 'information overload' (Shenk, 1998). He believes that the Internet could lead to a flooding of information and misinformation that will become impossible to sift through.

...the glut of information no longer adds to our quality of life, but instead begins to cultivate stress, confusion, and even ignorance. Information overload threatens our ability to educate ourselves, and leaves us more vulnerable as consumers and less cohesive as a society. For most of us, it actually diminishes our control over our own lives, while those already in power find their positions considerably strengthened.

(Shenk, 1998)

This can also directly relate to the increasing amount of causes and those who promote them on the internet. As the internet expands its web over the rest of the world and society, will this new increase in information lead us to an 'information overload'? Who will sympathise with all the uprising activist communication that will flood individuals with overwhelming information in the future? If everyone has a cause, which one do you back? The premise that with 'larger numbers comes greater power' may become null and void as activists splinter into a greater number of causes. This could lead to never-ending discussions and self-policing that will cause little to be achieved or unaccomplished, a 'de-evolved' but technologically advanced society.

For these reasons, to answer an earlier question, I believe the internet to be far more than just a communication tool. It changes people by empowering them with information and ideals that may facilitate their freedom. In the near future though, this same aspect may splinter society with half in the real and the other in the virtual.

The future of the internet is completely unknown though, so to conclude this project I leave you with Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the creator of the first website who has a more optimistic view:

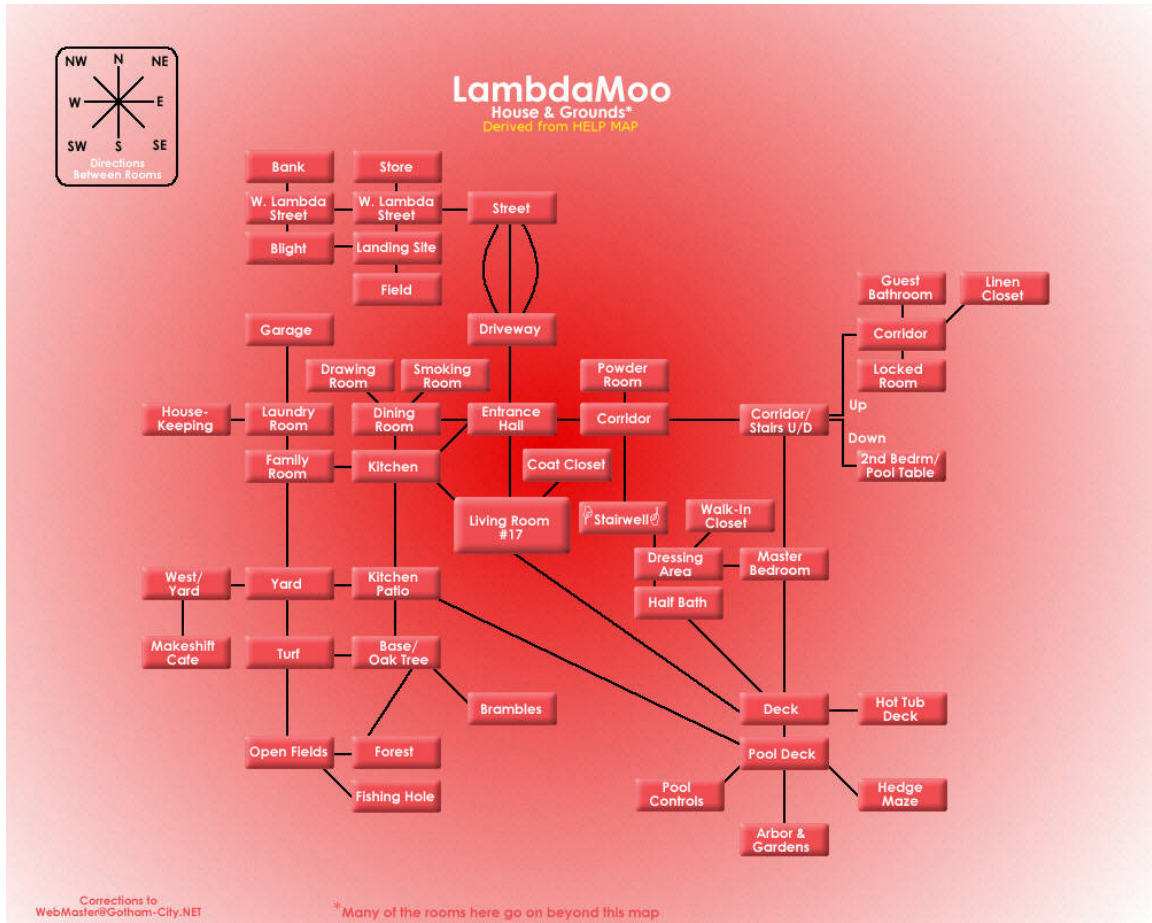
...the web will be, hopefully, will be something which is sunk into the background as an assumption. Now, if as technologists develop, we've done our job well, the web will be this universal medium, which will be very, very flexible. It won't, itself, have any preconceived notions about what's built on top.

One of the reasons that I want to keep it open like that, is partly because I want humanity to have it as a clean slate. My goal for the web in 30 years is to be the platform which has led to the building of something very new and special, which we can't imagine now.

(Lee, 2005)

Illustrations

Figure 1



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<http://www.stopwar.org.uk/>

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<http://www.web-andflow.com/members/tmarch/freedom2/webquest.htm>

Safer Internet Action Plan
<http://europa.eu.int/ISPO/iap/>

Email and Host Providers
www.hotmail.com,
www.yahoo.com,
www.angelfire.com

Appendix

Appendix 1.

Creating an account to access newsgroups and discussion threads on a white supremacist site. Shows the secrecy surrounding combat18, part of the Blood & Honour network where they first show a statement making the site administrators not liable for most of its contents(i) and in (ii) where it states that activation of my account will be authorised by the Combat18 administrator.

bloodandhonour.com - Registration Agreement Terms

While the administrators and moderators of this forum will attempt to remove or edit any generally objectionable material as quickly as possible, it is impossible to review every message. Therefore you acknowledge that all posts made to these forums express the views and opinions of the author and not the administrators, moderators or webmaster (except for posts by these people) and hence will not be held liable.

You agree not to post any abusive, obscene, vulgar, slanderous, hateful, threatening, sexually-oriented or any other material that may violate any applicable laws. Doing so may lead to you being immediately and permanently banned (and your service provider being informed). The IP address of all posts is recorded to aid in enforcing these conditions. You agree that the webmaster, administrator and moderators of this forum have the right to remove, edit, move or close any topic at any time should they see fit. As a user you agree to any information you have entered above being stored in a database. While this information will not be disclosed to any third party without your consent the webmaster, administrator and moderators cannot be held responsible for any hacking attempt that may lead to the data being compromised.

This forum system uses cookies to store information on your local computer. These cookies do not contain any of the information you have entered above; they serve only to improve your viewing pleasure. The e-mail address is used only for confirming your registration details and password (and for sending new passwords should you forget your current one).

By clicking Register below you agree to be bound by these conditions.

You MUST have a valid and working email address or your account will be deleted

Information

Your account has been created. However, this forum requires account activation by the administrator. An e-mail has been sent to the combat18.org Admin and you will be informed when your account has been activated. **PLEASE WAIT FOR YOUR CONFIRMATION** email and do not register another name.

You Must have a Valid and working email address or your account will be deleted.

Click [Here](#) to return to the Index

Appendix 2.

The full text dialogue of my own LambdaMOO virtual community experience. The software for which to connect can be found on <http://LambdaMOO.info>

Guests at LambdaMOO are warned that they are accountable for their actions here. In particular, Guests are warned that any mail or other form of communication sent to individual characters here, may be traced back to the site from which you are logged in; this information may be used in the event of a complaint against you and may be made available to someone acting in an official capacity. Logging into LambdaMOO as a Guest implies that you have read and understood this warning and that you accept these facts - and that in the event of any need to use your site information in the aforementioned manner, you agree to its use.

Having read the above text, do you wish to connect? [YES/NO]

yes

Okay,...Guest is in use. Logging you in as `Ebony_Guest'

*** Connected ***

The Coat Closet

The closet is a dark, cramped space. It appears to be very crowded in here; you keep bumping into what feels like coats, boots, and other people (apparently sleeping). One useful thing that you've discovered in your bumbling about is a metal doorknob set at waist level into what might be a door. Next to it is a spring lever labeled 'QUIET!'. There is new news. Type `news' to read all news or `news new' to read just new news.

Type `@tutorial' for an introduction to basic MOOing. If you have not already done so, please type `help manners' and read the text carefully. It outlines the community standard of conduct, which each player is expected to follow while in LambdaMOO.

help manners
LambdaMOO, like other MUDs, is a social community; it is populated by real people interacting through the computer network. Like members of other communities, the inhabitants of LambdaMOO have certain expectations about the behavior of members and visitors. This article lays out a system of rules of courteous behavior, or "manners", which has been agreed upon by popular vote.

First of all, any action that threatens the functional integrity of the MOO, or might cause legal trouble for the MOO's supporters, will get the player responsible thrown off by the wizards. If you find a loophole or bug in the core, report it to a wizard without attempting to take advantage of it. Cracking falls outside the realm of manners. Read `help cracking' for more information.

Additionally, other loopholes should also not be exploited. This rule was established by *B:Patch-Arbitration-Loopholes (#4223):

If you find a loophole in the social system, make a petition to fix it. If you find a place where the documentation does not match the standing law on the subject, report it to a wizard without attempting to take advantage of it.

Taking personal advantage of loopholes and bugs to personal ends will be regarded as an antisocial act. The purpose of the social system here is to allow us to work together, not to allow us opportunities to revel in how we can beat the system.

Beyond that, there are two basic principles of friendly MOOing: let the MOO function and don't abuse other players.

==== LET THE MOO FUNCTION =====

Besides not trying to hack or break things, this means not hogging resources by taking up more memory or processing time than necessary.

To help keep database bloat down, please @create thoughtfully, @recycle unused objects, @rmmail when done with it, use feature objects instead of copying lots of verbs, and don't recycle and recreate objects seeking "interesting" numbers (this inflates all the object #'s, which are long enough already).

The MOO server is carefully shared among all the connected players so that everyone gets a chance to execute their commands. The more demanding players' commands are, the more of a load there is on the server, and thus the more lag there is.

If you are writing a program that will run for a long time, please make it wait at least five seconds between iterations (use `fork (n)' or `suspend(n)' where `n' is at least 5). This will give others a chance to get their commands in between yours.

==== DON'T ABUSE OTHER PLAYERS =====

The MOO is a fun place to socialize, program, and play as long as people are polite to each other. Rudeness and harassment make LambdaMOO less pleasant for everyone. Do not harass or abuse other players, using any tactic including:

- * Spamming (filling their screen with unwanted text)
- * Teleporting them or their objects without consent
- * Emoted violence or obscenities
- * Shouting (sending a message to all connected players)
Don't shout unless you have something everyone needs to hear. This basically means emergency system messages from wizards.
- * Spoofing (causing messages to appear that are not attributed to your character)
Spoofs can be funny and expressive when used with forethought. If you spoof, use a polite version than announces itself as a spoof promptly, and use it sparingly. See `help spoofing' for more information.
- * Spying
Don't create or use spying devices. If you reset your teleport message, make sure it is set to something, so that you don't teleport silently. Besides having a disorienting effect on people, silent teleportation is a form of spying.
- * Sexual harassment (particularly involving unsolicited acts which simulate rape against unwilling participants)
Such behavior is not tolerated by the LambdaMOO community. A single incidence of such an act may, as a consequence of due process, result in permanent expulsion from LambdaMOO.
- * Hate speech in the public areas.
This is generally frowned upon though not forbidden (see the paragraph headed "General"). LambdaMOOers are generally very tolerant of all races, religions, sexual orientations, and just about whatever else you can think of. They do not tend to tolerate hatred based on such distinctions.
- * Try to respect other players' privacy and their right to control their own

objects, including the right to decide who may enter or remain in their rooms.

* Respect other players' sensibilities. MOO inhabitants and visitors come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds both in the U.S. and abroad, and have varying ideas of what constitutes offensive speech or descriptions. Please keep text that other players can casually run across as free of potentially-offensive material as you can. If you want to build objects or areas that are likely to offend some segment of the community, please give sufficient warning to casual explorers so that they can choose to avoid those objects or areas.

* Outing (publicizing information about a player's offline identity without the player's consent)

Players value the ability to remain anonymous. The breach of a player's anonymity without the player's consent can have serious offline consequences, some of which could potentially endanger the player and/or the functioning of the moo. Therefore, any grave incident of outing may be considered the worst form of unmannerly behavior and may result in swift, permanent expulsion from LambdaMOO. (For more information about expulsion (toading) and toadable offenses, see 'help toading'.)

Per *B:Intolerance, LambdaMOO citizens will not tolerate the use of LambdaMOO to enable, encourage or cause Real Life harassment or harm of other human beings.

* General:

Although it is not technically against MOO law to harass people, it is suggested that you do not. The advice here is intended to make the MOO a better place for everyone, not to limit freedom of expression. However, the legal system on the MOO is evolving at this time, and it is not well understood just how some laws from the real world might apply. If you commit an act that could be considered a transgression against these manners it is possible you will be punished by anything up to and including permanent banishment from LambdaMOO. There is some disagreement in the LambdaMOO community about how much protection for free speech rights should be provided. This document, while not favoring censorship, encourages you to think about what you say and do.

===== SELF-DEFENSE =====

Avoid revenge!

If someone is bothering you, you have several options. The appropriate first step is usually to ask them to stop.

If this fails, and avoiding the person is insufficient, useful verbs include @gag, @refuse, and @eject. Help is available on all of these.

Note these following rules established by the passage of *B:Patch-Arbitration-L oopholes (#4223):

* All characters are bound by some system of justice which has been voted by the people.

Characters are free to suggest that this is not so, but such suggestions will be regarded as "mere speech" and will carry no force of law. [...] Characters who wish not to be subject to the lawfully created rules of this MOO are, like anyone else, free to request that their accounts be turned off.

* No character may in any way exploit the use of multiple characters to beat the system.

