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**CYBERCULTURAL POLITICS. POLITICAL
ACTIVISM AT DISTANCE IN A
TRANSNATIONAL WORLD.**

Gustavo Lins Ribeiro

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**CYBERCULTURAL POLITICS.
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Gustavo Lins Ribeiro
Dept. of Anthropology/ U of Brasilia

INTRODUCTION

Globalization, the information era and non-governmental organizations are highly-complex, much debated topics that may be considered as causes and results of many changes in political, social, cultural and economic contemporary life. I want to explore the entwinement of these issues to shed light on the emergence of another dimension of political and cultural life, the emergence of the virtual-imagined transnational community that can be better understood through an analysis of cybercultural politics. My aim is to advance the existence of two powerful political dimensions: witnessing at distance and activism at distance. I locate my own discussion within a growing literature on global citizenship and planetary civil society; and on the impact of new technologies of communications on the formation of new subjectivities, collectivities, social, economic and institutional needs, ideologies, utopias and dystopias, flows of people, goods and information². Though this approach cannot be circumscribed to a given region of the world, most of my examples are marked by a Latin American perspective.

Since my interest is to examine how cyberspace alters the cultural politics of collective and individual political actors in a shrinking world, I will limit myself to presenting a few arguments on globalization and transnationalism that are central to the unfolding of my reasoning. I will then briefly describe two computer networks that, amongst many, are important loci of political information and action for NGOs. My choice is based upon the fact that these networks are not only intimately and functionally related but are also highly influential within the environment in which they operate. The Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is designed to be of global scope and is a set of 18 nationally based networks. Alternex, a member of APC, is also of international reach (given the interconnections currently available for networks within the Internet) but it is mainly designed to serve Brazilian NGOs. Before concluding, I will

1. Reginaldo Ramos de Lima and Gabriel O. Alvarez assisted me gathering data on the Internet and discussing this work on different occasions.

2. See the works of Alvarez (1995), Appadurai (1990, 1991), Aranha (1996), Canclini (1995), Carey & Quirk (1996), Cocco (1996), Edwards (1994), Ellias (1994), Escobar (1994), Feenberg (1990), Fernandez (1995), Hakken (1993), Hannerz (1992), Inoue (1995), Leis (1995), Lévy (1993), Rheingold (1993), Ribeiro (1994, 1996), Rosenau (1992), Roszak (1994), Schiller (1996), Stallabass (1995), Stone (1992, 1994, 1995), The Commission on Global Governance (1995), Wapner (1995). For a related set of works see footnote number 3.

consider these issues in view of the experiences of activists of one of Brazil's most well-known NGOs, the Brasilia-based INESC.

GLOBALIZATION AND TRANSNATIONALISM

The world system is witnessing a deepening of some of its strongest tendencies, something well captured by the metaphor of the "shrinking of the world" (Harvey 1989). The development of the transportation, communication and information industries, the planetarization of financial markets, and the diffusion of segments of productive processes through different areas of the world have meant an increase of circulation of capital, information and people never experienced before. At the same time that the control of scientific and technological development intensifies unequal competition between economic actors, there is a noticeable growth of the importance of services in the economy. This is an era of flexible accumulation, of post-fordist capitalism (Harvey 1989), that corresponds to different economic and political actors with new ideologies and goals.

A significant number of social scientists, economists and geographers are explicitly working with transnationalism or with globalization, its close relative³. For the purposes of making an analytical distinction, I consider globalization mostly as a historical economic process directly related to the expansion of capitalism, to the "shrinking of the world". In this connection, the process of globalization creates the economic and technological basis that makes possible the existence of transnationalism. Although it obviously has cultural and political implications, globalization differs from transnationalism in the sense that politics and ideology are the privileged realms of the latter. The organization of people within imagined communities, their relationships to power institutions, the reformulation of identities and subjectivities as well as of the relationships between the private and public spheres are the main thrust of the discussion on transnationalism. Citizenship, for instance, is an issue more pertinent to transnationalism than to globalization.

Institutions and political subjects geared to the logics of fordist capitalism are undergoing profound transformations with diverse impacts on their power of agency. An often mentioned illustration refers to the relative weakening of the nation-state vis-à-vis the unleashing of transnational forces and actors. The emergence of global fragmented space generates new relationships between different localities, in spite of the mediation of the nation-states where they are situated, and between these localities and the world system. New communication media, especially the Internet, create, under the aegis of computer-and-electronic capitalism, the possibility for the existence of a virtual-imagined

3. A brief list would include, amongst others, Barnet (1994), Breton (1994), Featherstone (1990), Giddens (1990), Harvey (1989), Ianni (1995), Mattelart (1994), Monetta (1994), Ortiz (1994), Santos et al (1994), Sassen (1991), Sklair (1991). Works such as those of Wolf (1982) and Nash (1981, 1983) may be considered as part of an anthropology of the world system. More recently, in anthropology, there are the works of Alvarez (1995), Appadurai (1990, 1991), Basch et al (1994), Canclini (1994, 1995), Edwards (1994), Foster (1991), Gupta (1992), Rothstein and Blim (1992), Rouse (1995) and Ruben (1995). For a review essay on anthropology, globalization and transnationalism see Kearney (1995). For related references see footnote number 2.

transnational community (Ribeiro 1996).

Levels of Integration, Transnationalism and Imagined Communities.

The social representation of membership to a level of integration is often expressed in terms of an inclusive logic that may be analytically simplified as the relationships between local, regional, national and international levels of integration⁴. The appearance of novel forms of relating space to politics (the nation-state for instance) generally puts into jeopardy the modes of representing membership to socio-cultural and political-economic units. In his analysis of the changing relationships between processes of individual and collective formation prompted by contemporary global integrative forces, Norbert Ellias (1994: 148) considers that the transition to a new level of total integration of humankind, with a more complex and wider type of human organization, generates, like in other similar situations, "conflicts of loyalty and consciousness" given, among other things, the resulting representational and institutional instability as well as the concomitant presence of disintegrating processes and transference of power from one level to another.

The transnational level of integration does not obey to the same classificatory logic of inclusivity as the other levels do. It crosscuts, as a transversal axis, the different levels of integration in such a manner that it is highly difficult to positively relate transnationalism to a circumscribed territory. Its space can only be conceived as diffused, disseminated in a web or a network. I can, thus, say that a transnational level of integration does not correspond to spatial realities as the other levels do. In fact, transnationalism typically manifests itself through a different articulation of real space and through the creation of a new domain of political contestation and cultural ambience that are not equivalent to the space we normally experience: the so-called cyberspace and cyberculture. This is why the techno-symbolic basis for the emergence of what I call the virtual imagined transnational community is the global computer network, the Internet.

Many factors concur in the creation of the transnational condition. In a previous article, I considered the existence of six clusters of conditions that create the constraints through which transnationality may exist: historical, economic, technological, ideological-symbolical, social and ritual (Ribeiro 1994a). In Appadurai's (1990) vision the "global cultural economy" develops from the disjunctive interplay of different "scapes": ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, finanscapas, and ideascapes. Sklair (1991: 6), in order to avoid state-centrism, bases her analysis on three different "levels" of transnational practices: "the transnational corporation (TNC) is the major locus of **transnational economic practices**; ... the transnational capitalist class is the major locus of **transnational political practices**; and the major locus of **transnational cultural-ideological practices** is to be found in the culture-ideology of consumerism" (my emphasis). Other considerations

4. A diagram of these levels of integration (that in reality are always condensed) would have the shape of concentric circles. If I were supposing a unilineal and evolutive relationship between the levels of integration, I would remain within the framework of cultural diffusionism. The power of structuration of the different levels of integration operates in a multilinear and heteroclite manner, unequally distributing itself in geographical and social terms.

are equally important, for instance: processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, inter and transnational migratory flows, identity fragmentation, new political and social actors, the advent of new individual skills as well as of an international pop culture geared to the mass media and entertainment industry (Basch et al 1994, Gupta 1992, Ortiz 1994, Rosenau 1992).

But, at this point, I am interested in highlighting what I deem to be the emergence of a new **imagined** community. For that reason, the focus needs to be placed upon communications technologies - that are also technologies of community creation (Stone 1992) - especially upon the newest and most powerful technology of interactive communication operating at a global scale, the global computer network. Only thus, we will be able to understand how cybercultural politics enhances the interplay between political actors anchored in different levels of integration, transnational flows of political information and articulation, as well as "witnessing and political activism at distance". Benedict Anderson (1991) showed, in retrospect, how important print-capitalism was to the creation of an imagined community that would develop into a nation. I suggest that electronic and computer capitalism is the necessary environment for the development of a transnation.

Anderson emphasized the central role that visual representations, print-languages, the spread of publishing houses, the mass production of books and newspapers ("print-as-commodity"; "the vernacular print-market"), and the coalition between Protestantism and print-capitalism played in the erosion of previously existing "sacred imagined communities" and in the making of national imagined communities. These forces displaced Latin (the elite language) as the only written language, thereby greatly enlarging the numbers of readers, and engendered new administrative vernaculars closer to common speech. They also generated communion and imagined linkages by fixing an "assemblage" of related vernaculars or certain dialects, creating a sense of simultaneity, of "unified fields of exchange and communications" (47), between fellow-readers who "gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that **only those** ... so belonged. These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally-imagined community" (idem). For me, cyber-fellows are the embryo of the transnationally-imagined community.

INTERNET AND THE VIRTUAL-IMAGINED TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITY

First developed as part of an American defense project, the Internet, the network of the networks, is presently interconnecting millions of people all over the globe and has become the most powerful symbolic transnational means of interactive communication. In practice, the Internet's global distribution is skewed, especially considering regions of the world such as the Middle East, Latin America and Africa. In the U.S., where more than 50% of the Net's computers reside (the rest is dispersed throughout more than 100 other countries), white middle-class males predominate, and users are seen as a market of

affluent, educated consumers (Bournellis 1995)⁵. For a world elite, virtual reality now exists in a "on-line", "parallel" world, a sort of hyper-post-modern universe, where time, space and geography are non-existent or non-important (Escobar 1994, Laquey & Ryer 1994).

Computer networks generate their own culture and space, that are frequently, but not exclusively, designated as cyberculture and cyberspace. For Arturo Escobar (1994: 214) **cyberculture** "refers specifically to new technologies in two areas: artificial intelligence [particularly computer and information technologies] and biotechnology". The diffusion of new technologies brings into light two regimes of sociality, technosociality and biosociality, that "embody the realization that we increasingly live and make ourselves in technobiocultural environments structured by novel forms of science and technology" (idem). **Cyberspace** "refers to the growing networks and systems of computer-mediated environments. As a spatialized, computer-mediated network of interactions, cyberspace is seen as 'enabling full copresence and interaction of multiple users, allowing input and output from and to the full human sensorium, permitting situations of real and virtual realities, remote data collection and control through telepresence, of intelligent products and environments in real space' "([Novak 1991: 225] Escobar 1994: 216)⁶.

Cyberspace is thus the universe a **user** enters when s/he plugs into a network. There s/he will not only feel that s/he is within a high-tech virtual world but will also meet other **users**, norms, worldviews, procedures and discourses that comprise a cyberculture subdivided into many different subcultures. The Internet is a global virtual archipelago within an electronic ocean that calls for navigators who embody and are fascinated by its virtues. It exposes the "Internaut" to the dazzling works of speed, simultaneity and virtuality, to the immediate, conscious experiencing of the shrinking of the world, to the mesmerizing sensation of access to infinite availability of information and interlocution (with the opposite feeling of information overload, its frustrating counterpart). Cyberculture takes to paroxysm some of the most powerful promises of modernity, including the assumption of one global diversified community, existing on real-time, there in a parallel dimension, with its many fragments, unified only through abstractions, imploding over actors' heads haunted by former pretensions to resolved and organic identities. The reconfiguration of bodies and identities, made possible by the virtual global crowd and virtual, global, decentered, fragmented space, potentializes the anonymous cosmopolitan experience within the planetary virtual web. Manipulation of identity is now as easy as to play with video-games, something that partially accounts for the expressive numbers of teenagers within the Net. Identity manipulation and the fascination with an infinite availability of information and interlocution (without the exposure to the dangers that may

5. Surveys on the characteristics of virtualshoppers found different but high average incomes: between U.S.\$ 50,000 and 60,000; between U.S.\$ 60,000 and 75,000; or a median yearly income of U.S.\$ 40,000 (Bournellis 1995).

6. Stone (1992: 609) defines cyberspace as "a physically inhabitable, electronically generated alternate reality, entered by means of direct links to the brain - that is, it is inhabited by refigured human 'persons' separated from their physical bodies, which are parked in 'normal' space. (...) The 'original' body is the authenticating source for the refigured person in cyberspace: no 'persons' exist whose presence is not warranted by a physical body back in 'normal' space".

accompany facing difference in the real world) together with the feeling that you are here and in many other places at the same time, plus that you can choose to create universes of your own, provide for a feeling of enlargement of the self that is even more understandable when crossed with the characteristics of the (re)production of loneliness in mass societies. The enlarged self is now ready to colonize the real world from the virtual one.

Virtuality is a key concept to understand the type of culture of the transnational community⁷. Sensitivity to virtuality seems to be a general characteristic of human beings, since we are capable of being symbolically transported to other places, imagining what is not here and, more, to create realities from structures that are pure abstractions before they become empirical facts. Virtual communities and apparatuses have existed prior to computer networks. Movie spectators, radio listeners, TV watchers, and radio-amateurs can be listed amongst those. One result of the development of technology is a quantitative and qualitative enhancement of the virtual universe.

But, what is the difference between an imagined community and a virtual one? The difference lies in the fact that an imagined community is an abstraction symbolically and politically constructed, while the virtual community, besides being that, is a reality of a different kind, a sort of intermediate, parallel state between reality and abstraction where simulation and simulacra have lives of their own⁸. The virtual reality is "there" it can be experienced, manipulated and lived as if it were real. Once finished your presence in the virtual universe, you can reenter the real hard world. There is a "hybridization" between the "real and the virtual, between the synthetic and the natural" (Quéau 1993: 96).

The culture of the network, with its codes, protocols and emerging writing styles, also presupposes the existence of a linguistic competence, something that, as Bourdieu noted (1983: 161 and following) cannot be separated from power analysis. Who speaks, to whom, through what media and in what constructed circumstances are vital elements of any communication process. Some studies (Weber 1994, Edwards 1994 and Stone 1992, for instance) indicate that people have to be "socialized" into newsgroups, or conference groups. "Lurkers", i.e., people that observe newsgroups without interacting, "first write in an apologetic and respectful fashion. Their writers may ask for welcome or claim membership. They explicitly acknowledge the rules and conventions ...[of the newsgroup], and the need for 'safety' on the group" (Weber 1994: 2). Like in other situations, "the creation of criteria of inclusion and exclusion to control and delimit the group" (Williams 1989: 407) is also at stake in the structuring of virtual communities.

7. The imagined and virtual transnational community can only be understood if we consider the difficult question of virtuality, a rather complex state that intervenes in different ways in social and psychological life. From a symbolical perspective, the dynamics of virtuality are the hard core of the transnational community (Ribeiro 1996).

8. The imagined community cannot be reduced to the virtual one since once a person exits cyberspace s/he can still imagine that the virtual community is "there" and is ready to be (re)entered. Furthermore, virtuality is to some extent more "real" than imagination. See my discussion on the subtle relationships between reality, virtuality and imagination (Ribeiro 1996). According to Howard Rheingold (1994: 5) "**virtual communities** are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace".

As a means of transnational communication, the Internet raises the interesting question of the emergence of an "international auxiliary language", to phrase it like Edward Sapir did in 1931 (Sapir 1956). The existence of computer-English, a transnational creole that will not destroy the many other national languages, points to a process of debabelization that is occurring within the virtual imagined transnational community. In such a context, though, we may imagine three likely scenarios. One where English gains autonomy as the Internet language, backed up by the consolidation of its commercial, military, scientific and diplomatic functions, and other phenomena of globalization such as the expansion of cable TV and of mass pop culture hegemonized by the American production. A second scenario would be that where "computerise" gains autonomy, under the impulse of user-friendly softwares, mainly based upon the utilization of icons. Finally, a third possibility would be the existence of a "Tower of Babel" software capable of translating all languages within the Net.

The sociolinguistic issue is rapidly becoming a cultural and political one. In Latin America, for instance, there are groups, such as the Hispanored, dedicated to promoting the **hispanización** of the Internet and to discuss "the future of our culture in the information age". There are initiatives that go along similar lines in different countries (Argentina, Cuba, Peru, Mexico) and amongst the Latino community in the U.S. (the Midwest Consortium for Latino Research, p. ex.)⁹. Still, hybrid situations are often created where a sort of bilingual interaction develops: one reads a message in Spanish and answers in English (or vice-versa). In Hispanored there occurred the case of a Brazilian who, after apologizing for his poor Spanish, used an automatic translation software to translate his message originally written in Portuguese.

As many members of other political imagined communities, the members of the transnational one, especially its ideologues, tend to have hyperbolic opinions about their role in the real world (see, for instance, Laquey & Ryer 1994). They often think of themselves as capable of freely manipulating the system, once they are entitled as "users" of this new order, just like, I can imagine, people felt in the pre-history of bourgeois democracy, nation-states and the free market. Children both of globalism and the computer age see themselves as creating a new world, a situation, mediated by hi-tech, where access to the network is at the same time a sort of post-modern liberation and the experiencing of a new democratic means that empower people to flood the world system with information thereby checking the abuses of the powerful. Non-governmental organizations everywhere praise this potential of liberation.

But, every technological innovation is ambiguous, containing in itself both the potential for utopia and dystopia (Feenberg 1990). The Internet does not fit the image of a liberal free market, uncontrolled, or responsive only to individual manipulation. Although we should explore the idea of a decentralized control, it may be argued that the network is controlled by a "hierarchy of connections" whose highest points are located within the

9. The Cuban National Library of Science and Technology together with the Autonomous National University of Mexico produced a Directory of Networks and Information Systems and Communication on Latin America and the Caribbean, with information on eighty networks and systems of information of the region. See also the E-Mail Directory of Labor Organizations in Latin America and the Caribbean produced by the **Instituto Laboral de Educación Sindical of Puerto Rico** <RazaNet@S.F.State>.

American state, in security agencies, and in private corporations that in case of necessity may always exercise their electronic power. Cocco (1996: 23), in an article on the relationships between information, communication and new forms of capitalist accumulation, states that the Information Superhighway "may be interpreted as an attempt to transform the partial advantage accumulated by the U.S. in the first phase of the emergence of the information economy, into a new hegemonic project at the industrial, political and cultural levels". Herbert Schiller (1996: 92-93), working along similar lines, notes the longstanding recognition by U.S. leadership of the "centrality of information control for gaining world advantage" and that "the free flow of information, in its implementation, has meant the ascendance of U.S. cultural products worldwide". American dominance in the satellite and electronic information industry has its roots in pragmatic imperial geopolitics: "control of information instrumentation, invariably, goes hand in hand with control of the message flow, its content, surveillance capability, and all forms of information capability" (93). Schiller (1996: 103) concludes that "the strength, flexibility, and range of global business, already remarkable, will become more so. The capability of the state, including the still very powerful United States, to enforce its will on the economy, domestic or international, will be further diminished. This may be partly obscured for a time because the National Security State will have at its disposal an enhanced military and intelligence capability, derived from the new information technologies. For this reason, the American state will be the least vulnerable, **for a time**, to the forces undermining states everywhere". More prosaic factors limit the implementation of virtual democracy: the costs of computers, related equipment and services; access and knowledge to the codes of the network; education; knowledge of the English language; the control of the functioning of the system by many different computer centers¹⁰.

Perhaps it is a common characteristic of all imagined communities to give the impression that everyone is equal once qualified with the necessary competence. However, the virtual imagined transnational community, shares, so far, much more of "primordial sentiments" - ties characteristics of emerging new states (Geertz 1963) - than civil ones. This is why it is more interesting to investigate its cultural politics than its political culture.

10. For yet another critical position see Stallabrass (1995). For him "cyberspace is also likely to be, in flagrant contradiction to its postmodern apologists, the embodiment of the totalizing system of Capital" (29). And more, cyberspace "is merely a literal expression of the situation of the individual in contemporary society, and more specifically of business people and their camp followers (engineers and intellectuals) spinning universalizing fantasies out of their desire to ride the next commercial wave. This wondrous but specious technology threatens to act as another curtain between those who consume it and the condition of the world: as the poor are excluded from cyberspace, and will appear on it only as objects, never as subjects with their own voices, there is a danger that they recede even further from the consciousness of the comfortable. As the real world is left to decline, the air once again becomes full of phantoms, this time digital, promising at the last moment to pluck utopia from apocalypse" (30). The interplay between visions of utopia and dystopia on the Internet will last and deepen in a way analogous to what happened with other discussions on new technologies of communication (Carey & Quirk 1996). Electronic computer networks, since their very beginning, have been doomed with conflicts that stemmed from its corporate conception, use and control, and those of individuals and groups adapting the technology to their own interests (Feenberg 1990).

CYBERCULTURAL POLITICS

Cybercultural politics can be divided into two different, but interrelated, realms. One is defined by the political activity within the Internet itself; the other by the relationship between computer networks and political activism in the real world. These realms will increasingly become more imbricated given the new configuration of interdependency of electronic and magnetic means where economy, information and politics circulate in a fashion that is vulnerable to the anarchical or organized manipulation of individuals and groups (Schwartz 1995).

The Net: cyberpolitics and cyberactivism

Internet's pre-history is composed of four different myths of origin. Besides its **military** origin, it is often associated with the community of computer and electronics **engineers** and with the **scientific and academic community**, with their need for information exchange. Finally, there are the heirs of the **Californian counter-culture** with their dreams of an alternative media that would empower a highly democratic and secondarily anarchical community. These myths of origin still inform the Net's cultural politics along with different discourses of the groups struggling to impose a hegemonic interpretation over its purposes and destiny. Issues such as freedom of speech versus censorship, public space versus private space, large corporations and capitalist interests versus community needs, privacy, etc., are some of the most hotly debated topics around which many cyberactivists organize. At the same time, the rapid commercialization of cyberspace is increasingly transforming it into a virtual shopping-mall, with **emoney** buying everything, from pornography to information on stock markets¹¹. Since my main goal in this article is to deal with the relationship between NGOs and electronic networks, i.e. with the second realm of cybercultural politics above mentioned, in this section I will explore a few of the different ways the Internet is opening a new field of political conflicts and contestation.

Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein (1994) are two of the most provocative analysts of the power struggles within the Net. They point to the advent of new fetishes and power systems, of the "wired body", of what they call the "virtual class". Notwithstanding their quasi-deliriant rhetoric and hyper-criticism that sometimes reify technopower, Kroker and Weinstein are acid demolishers of cyber-authoritarianism and of the hysteria created by technotopia in favor of the controllers of the Internet, the privileged space for the exercise of power by the virtual class, the version of the dominant class in the electronic and computer era. Mainly composed of "pure capitalists" and "visionary capitalists specialized in computers", this class is grounded in the communication industry. Once the force of the movement of the electronic frontier in expansion is installed, the virtual class seeks to subdivide cyberspace for the purposes of capitalist accumulation and political control.

11. Internet's commercial domain (.com) has been the fastest growing segment since 1994 and is now the largest domain, education being the second largest one (Bournellis 1995). Total sales between September 1994 and August 1995 were estimated at U.S.\$ 118 million.

What is at stake is a competition for rights to intellectual property. The democratic possibilities of the Internet comprise the initial seduction for the construction of the digital superhighway (the "privileged monopoly of global data communication") and for the subordination of the network to the "predatory commercial interests" of the virtual class.

A fierce struggle is going on within the Internet between the virtual class and its opponents. For Kroker and Weinstein, the "wireless body" or the "hyper-texted body" is the locus of "the major political and ethical conflict of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century experience" (idem : 17). A sort of humanist residue within the universe of cybernetic fetish, the "wireless body" is "a moving field of aesthetic contestation for remapping the galactic empire of technotopia" (ibidem)¹².

Based upon the disseminated, fluid and fragmented characteristics of the Net, a group of cyberactivists, the Critical Art Ensemble, proposes a new interpretation of the dynamics of power in the present and a mode of counterbalancing it: the electronic disturbance. For them, power does not consolidate any longer in bunkers that can be taken over. Sedentary structures, typical of former modes of exercising and circulating power, are at service of a "nomadic power" exercised by a nomadic elite that "moves from centralized urban areas to decentralized and deterritorialized cyberspace" transforming itself into a "transcendent entity that can only be imagined" (Critical Art Ensemble 1994: 17). Therefore, "nomadic power must be resisted in cyberspace rather than in physical space (...) a small but coordinated group of hackers could introduce electronic viruses, worms and bombs into data banks, programs and networks of authority, possibly bringing the destructive force of inertia into the nomadic realm. Prolonged inertia equals the collapse of nomadic authority on a global level. Such strategy does not require a unified class action, nor does it require simultaneous action in numerous geographic areas. The less nihilistic could resurrect the strategy of occupation by holding data as hostage, instead of property. By whatever means the electronic authority is disturbed, the key is to totally disrupt command and control. Under such conditions, all dead capital in the military/corporate entwinement becomes an economic drain - material, equipment and labor power, all would be left without a means of deployment. Late capital would collapse under its own excessive weight" (op. cit. 25).

Another point that is necessary to consider is the fascination with information availability within the network. For the Critical Art Ensemble (1994: 132), while the

12. John Perry Barlow, a "Cognitive-Dissident and Co-Founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation", wrote a manifesto against the commercialization of cyberspace which circulated within the Net. Here some passages: "Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us lone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather. We have no elected government, nor are we likely to have one, so I address you with no greater authority than that with which liberty itself always speaks. (...) We are forming our own Social Contract. This governance will arise according to the conditions of our world, not yours. (...) Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live. (...) Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement and context do not apply to us. They are based on matter. There is no matter here. Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge".

current situation is partly defined by information overload, it is also defined by insufficient access to information, conforming "a peculiar case of censorship. Rather than stopping the flow of information, far more is generated than can be digested. The strategy is to classify or privatize all information that could be used by the individual for self empowerment, and to bury the useful information under the reams of useless junk data offered to the public. Instead of the traditional information blackout, we face an information blizzard - a white-out. This forces the individual to depend on an authority to help prioritize the information to be selected. This is the foundation for the information catastrophe, an endless recycling of sovereignty back to the state under the pretense of informational freedom". To avoid white-out activists need to have a clear agenda and definition of their interests in order to locate relevant information within the opaque, overwhelming mazes of the Net¹³.

Most activists in "physical space" are unaware of the political discussions and struggles that are occurring within cyberspace. Many different actors - government agencies, political parties, unions, NGOs, etc. - with different ideologies - progressive, conservative and repressive ones - make use of computer networks. Workers, for instance, may find in the Net a perfect ambience to resurrect their presence in a globalized and transnational economy, in a manner relatively free of corporate and national constraints as demonstrated by an online newspaper produced by San Francisco strikers in 1994, The San Francisco Free Press (http://www.cnet.com/SF_Free_Press/welcome.html), read by unionists in different countries (Lee 1995: 64). Many trade unions, federations and confederations have their own networks in countries such as Australia, Brazil, Canada, Great Britain, Israel, South Africa, U.S.A. and others. Eric Lee (1995: 67) ends his article on the forging of worldwide solidarity in an optimistic vein: "Thanks to the Internet, a century-long decline in internationalism has already been reversed, and for thousands of trade unionists who log-in every day, internationalism already has been reborn".

But I will focus on the use that NGO activists, especially environmentalists, make of electronic networks because these actors are highly sensitive to new ways of enhancing political action and to ideologies that boost transnationalism.

The Net and NGO Political Activism

The realization that ecological frontiers do not coincide with political ones, together with the identification of many supra-national and global environmental problems (acid rain, nuclear disasters, the depletion of the ozone layer, global warming, for instance) have provided environmentalism with a clear transnational discourse. One planet, one globe; think globally, act locally; are banners that epitomize this propensity and the need to articulate on a global level.

Environmentalist NGOs often act like brokers between different actors involved in the developmentalist drama. Local populations, social movements, government agencies, political parties, unions and multilateral agencies conform the political field where NGOs intervene. Reliable and up-to-date information, obtained in the transit between these actors,

13. It is important to note that overload of information has existed at least since the first libraries were built.

are one of the most valuable assets that characterize the speed with which NGOs carry their political action. In this connection, they are highly dependent on communications to operate properly. NGOs are also known for their capacity of establishing different, often adhoc coalitions between various actors of the political field where they intervene in achievement of specific goals. To the extent that this flexibility permits pragmatic and heterodox alliances that can prove to be effective in many circumstances, it is also responsible for a certain ideological and political fuzziness that may get translated in endless debates about tactics, strategic initiatives and appropriate discourse.

Networking pragmatism, thus, is an effective instrument, reflected in NGOs' strong ability of moving from local to national, international and transnational scenarios, but also engenders a relative loss of homogeneity of the resulting political subjects who often exist as target-oriented coalitions that are dismantled once the task is accomplished. This is why NGOs and their networks may be characterized as pragmatic, fragmented, disseminated, circumstantial and even volatile political actors. Their strength comes from these characteristics that enable them to match the fluidity of a changing political field with more effectiveness than traditional political actors often bound by the need of internal ideological, organizational and political coherence and cohesiveness (with its consequent weight and institutional investment of energy) which serves as an external identity that qualifies them as representative of a segment, a corporation or of precisely delimited interests. But NGOs weakness also comes from these characteristics since networking pragmatism dissolves them as political actors who could have a larger presence if they were consolidated into a more homogeneous and coherent subject with a shared programmatic objective. Thus NGOs and their networks are certainly a new political subject creating new forms of action and impasses to older mechanisms of political representation and action. Since they are not invested with the claims of universal or corporate representation typical of the Enlightenment's meta-narrative responsible for the institutional and ideological profiles of most of the "traditional" political actors and apparatuses, NGOs can indeed be an effective fragmented, decentered, political subject, in a post-modern world, but the cost of flexibility, pragmatism and fragmentation may well be reformism, i.e. a weak capability of promoting radical change.

The pragmatism inherent to the interconnection of different nodal points of agency within a temporary, circumscribed field is also one of the pivotal forces of the structuring of electronic networks. Thus, used to networking in "physical space", and hungry for effective means of communication and for information, NGOs rapidly found electronic networks as another useful and powerful milieu for their organizational and political needs. Networking in real politics seems to find an ideal mirror in the many possibilities of networking in cyberspace. Coalitions may be formed with various actors operating in different levels of agency, transnational communications and alliances become effective without or with little control of nation-states.

Conscious of the potential of this new means of communication and integration, NGOs started to promote and praise its use. Articles published in **Le Monde Diplomatique** by leaders of "Third World NGOs" highlight electronic networks' potential for worldwide empowerment and democratisation of information. The news of the assassination of the Brazilian environmental leader, Chico Mendes, in 1988; the denouncement of brutalities against arrested Russian unionists, in 1993; and the worldwide mobilization against the particular interpretation made by the Clinton administration of the

Rio-92 Convention on Biodiversity (also in 1993), are amongst the examples Carlos Alberto Afonso (1994) and Roberto Bissio (1994) give on the effective use of the net¹⁴. Both authors value the emergence of virtual communities, and the speed, simultaneity, low operational costs and the capability of retrieving texts from different addresses as powerful weapons available to world civil society. For Bissio "the participation in an electronic debate has a clear democratic characteristic. The point of view of a large 'world' institution has exactly the same weight, considering its visual presentation, as that of a popular group working at the village level. Without the attraction exerted by fancy paper and editing, readers are sensitive only to arguments. Documents from both sides are simultaneously transmitted to the whole world, and receivers can immediately react with their own commentaries". Bissio is also aware that the need to diffuse access to this new technology has to be accompanied by the diffusion of new equipment, hardware and telecommunication infrastructure if we are not to witness the replication and enlargement of the gap between North and South.

Until now, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio in 1992, has been the largest stage for the demonstration of the significance NGOs and electronic networks have in contemporary cultural politics¹⁵. The U.N. granted unprecedented visible participation for NGOs in the official conference and installed a computer network that kept the transnational virtual community informed of the events and decisions in Rio. Environmentalist activists that could not attend the Global Forum, the assembly of transnational citizens parallel to the Earth Summit, could participate in this mega global ritual of the transnational community (Ribeiro 1994a) via cyberspace. The UNCED also revealed an important actor, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), a network that from Rio-92 through Beijing-95 has been responsible for the linking of U.N. conferences with the virtual imagined transnational community.

14. Other examples often quoted to illustrate how, in crisis situations, the Net evades official censorship and provides independent information are: the Tiananmen Square incident in China, the coup attempt in Moscow 1991 and the Gulf War.

15. "In the preparation of UNCED, during and after it, electronic networks contributed to NGO's networking. NGOs had access to and exchanged information and documents, discussed positions, articulated actions within and through networks during the entire Rio-92 process" (Ioune 1995: 93). This author quotes Shelley Preston's (1994) opinion, according to which through electronic networks "citizens from around the world were able to access and share information related to the planning and substance of UNCED".

Electronic Networks for NGOs

Cyberactivists count on different organizations to promote and defend their interests such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Internet Communications Affairs Association, the Internet Society, Association of Online Professionals (in the U.S.), Association for Community Telematics (Australia), the Digital Citizens' Movement of the Netherlands, Network Society of New Zealand, CommUnity (U.K.), and many others¹⁶. These institutions are often more oriented towards what I previously defined as the political activity within the Net (cyberpolitics and cyberactivism). But, as we know, cybercultural politics is also composed of actors who struggle to enhance the political efficacy of computer networks for civil society in "physical space". Here the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) is certainly prominent, not only because it gathers an impressive number of members and affiliates but also because of the power it has been capable of garnering (based on its political and technical know-how) in the process of becoming an institution representative of NGO opinions on these subjects and a broker between powerful governmental organizations and supranational agencies of global governance such as the United Nations¹⁷.

In the 1980's several non-profit computer networks were created in different countries. Many environmental NGOs took the leadership in establishing networks to serve their information and communication needs. From 1987 to 1990, the following networks emerged: IGC (Institute for Global Communications, U.S.A.¹⁸); Greenet (Great Britain); Pegasus (Australia); Web (Canada); Nicarao (Nicaragua); Nordnet (Sweden) and Alternex (Brazil). According to Afonso (1994) they were led by NGOs that collaborated to establish international email services in order to exchange information on the environment. In May 1990 APC was founded to coordinate the operation and development of these seven independent networks and to stimulate the creation of others. In August 1995 the APC, a non-profit organization, was a consortium of 18 international member networks serving approximately 30,000 community activists, scientists, natural resource-managers, educators, policymakers and non-profit and non-governmental organizations in over 133

16. The Online Activism Organizations List kept by ACTION (ACTivism ONline, ACTION@EFF.ORG) enumerated, in November 1995, a total of 97 "international, national, regional and local groups supporting the online community". The great majority was based in the U.S., but they are also operated from Australia, Austria, Canada, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, Spain, and Great Britain. Some of their most representative goals include: to enhance computer use and literacy as well as the Net extension and applications; to develop low cost-access to computer networking; to give independence to Internet affairs and bring the entire Internet community together as a whole; to enhance democracy on-line and off-line; to develop community-based computer networks; to defend freedom of expression and oppose governmental censorship and regulation of online media; to affirm and protect constitutional rights for "electronic citizens"; the protection of privacy and data security.

17. The following is mostly based upon the study of Susanne Sallin (1994) on the Association for Progressive Communications.

18. In 1995, five networks comprised IGC: PeaceNet, EcoNet, ConflictNet, LaborNet and WomensNet.

countries. It is the largest global computer networking system dedicated to social and environmental issues and to enhancing NGOs effectiveness, organizational ability and capacity¹⁹.

The IGC and APC are divisions of the Tides Foundation, an American, non-profit, charitable institution. APC's organizational structure comprises a North American Regional Office in the U.S., the International Secretariat based in Brazil, and the APC Council (i.e. its Board of Directors). It is flexible and inclusive of members needs that operate in autonomous fashion. It fosters ideological pluralism and the development of new international networks²⁰. The APC Coordinating Council experiments with its own medium: it formulates policy primarily on-line, keeps quarterly "meetings" and also votes on-line. There is only one face-to-face annual meeting. The APC is a multinational political structure promoting transnational forms of political integration within cyberspace.

APC leadership and members have connections with different segments and initiatives of electronic capitalism. Members of IGC worked with Hewlett-Packard, and received funding and computers from the Apple Corporation. IGC technicians, assisted by technical staff from other APC networks, have developed an "APC Unix-based Software" that is provided free or at low cost to APC members. In 1994, the IGC advisory board was searching for "one member with significant business expertise, who is also well connected to the computer industry" (Sallin 1994). GreenNet, the British network, ran commercial networks for Apple UK in the past. In addition, Sun Microsystems has donated equipment to some networks.

Compared to the millions of users of systems such as Compuserve and America-on-line, APC appears to be a small undertaking. But it would be tedious to mention all the users and services within the Association. I will mention but a few. They include a variety of environmental interest groups, industries, commercial groups, government offices on the state and federal levels, universities, scientific and research groups, etc. ECONET users, for instance, include: Environmental Defense Fund, Earth First!, Rainforest Action Network, Greenpeace, Amnesty International, Oxfam, The Third World Network, World Resources Institute, World Wildlife Fund, Centre for our Common Future, the National Audobon Society, the Army Corps of Engineers, Dow Chemical, The Cable News Network-Network Earth (CNN), Atlantic Richfield Company, and the U.S. Department of Energy²¹.

19. Besides the above mentioned founding networks the following are other APC members: Comlink (Germany), Glasnet (Russia), Equanex (Ecuador), Chasque (Uruguay), SangoNet (South Africa), Wamani (Argentina), GLUK (Ukraine), Histria (Slovenija), LaNeta (Mexico), Colnodo (Colombia); PlaNet (New Zealand).

20. "The networks profess to exist for educational purposes, and cannot be used to directly influence the outcome of legislation or election, but this is a fine line that staff at IGC admit is difficult to define at times" (Sallin 1994).

21. Amongst the many services that may be found in APC networks there are the Pacific News Service, Peacenet World News Service, Greenpeace News, The Environmental News Service, InterPress Service (IPS, the largest news agency of the "Third World"), conferences of the International Institute for Sustainable Development, and information related to United Nations conferences. ECONET'S electronic conferences and databases include: energy policy, global warming, rainforest preservation, water quality, toxics and environmental education.

The diversity of users of the networks facilitates not only a rich exchange of information but also the establishment of several partnerships between different actors. Web, a Canadian network that encompasses hundreds of environmental organizations, all levels of government and many businesses, is involved with many projects of the federal government and the government of Ontario. The latter created a fund of \$100 million to develop networks and networking infrastructure.

The profile of APC users is a portrait of the environmental political field and of the logic of networking with a great variety of governmental and non-governmental organizations, scientists, private corporations, and concerned individuals. APC shows that this kind of computer network is a diversified, fragmented, albeit unified subject, hegemonized politically and administratively by NGOs. This structure is replicated in less inclusive scenarios such as the Alternex, the Brazilian network of NGOs and an APC founder and node.

Alternex was created in 1989, in Rio de Janeiro, by one of the most prominent Brazilian NGOs, IBASE (Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis), in partnership with the Institute for Global Communications (IGC), and the support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Brazilian Agency of Cooperation (of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the Italian agency of cooperation Cesvi (**Cooperazione e Sviluppo**), amongst other international organizations²². In November 1990, together with the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, IBASE participated in a project to install and operate a node of the Internet in Rio, becoming "the first computer network service operated by a NGO in Latin America to have a permanent connection with the Internet, a privilege for the Brazilian civil society" (Carlos Alberto Afonso, quoted in Aguiar 1995). Although in 1994, 80% of Alternex users were based in Brazil, it had accounts over 35 countries, mostly in Latin America where its staff helped to create other networks (Sallin 1994). Today Alternex is a server that allows access to the APC networks, the Internet and the Brazilian national computer networks (RNP), exclusively run, until recently, by a federal agency, the Brazilian Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

Within Alternex, individual users predominate in relationship to institutional ones. Amongst the latter more than 70% are non-profit organizations and a few governmental ones, plus corporations and businesses mostly related to the computer industry and services. Users are mainly professionals, university professors and scientists, and political activists. Alternex regional distribution replicates Brazil's uneven development, the largest number of users concentrated in the rich Southeastern region (1,778 as of April, 1995) and the smallest figure (54) being found in the Amazon (see Aguiar 1995).

Alternex's 22 public conferences in Portuguese and Spanish represent only 30% of all the public conferences within the Network, but since they were initiated they have been fed by more than 120 institutions, of which the great majority are NGOs. Predominant amongst these is a group of 44 acting in "the areas of transference of information/knowledge/technologies", followed by 40 environmental or ecological

22. IBASE is one of Brazil's largest and most influential NGOs, working in different political and social issues, such as the campaign against hunger, human rights, popular movements, environmental problems, etc. The following information on Alternex is mostly based upon Aguiar (1995).

organizations (Aguiar 1995). The largest and most influential Brazilian NGOs use Alternex as a medium of communication. Amongst these I chose INESC, a Brasilia- based NGO, to examine how electronic networks are actually used by political activists.

Activism and Electronic Networks

INESC (Institute of Socio-Economic Studies) is a NGO basically dedicated to monitoring the activities of Brazil's National Congress on issues involving human rights, the environment, Indian rights, popular movements, agrarian reform, and the advancement of democracy. Its office in Brasilia is completely computerized and has a manager for the operation of its computer system. It has a highly experienced staff composed of anthropologists, sociologists, journalists, economists, lawyers and other professionals. In the late eighties, INESC participated in the first discussions about the need to socialize and democratize advanced systems of communication for Brazilian NGOs. It has long been a member of Alternex²³.

INESC activists define themselves basically as an information and communication NGO that makes available to social movements, political parties, other NGOs, intellectuals and concerned citizens critical information on the day-to-day of Brazil's National Congress. Their need for information and communication, thus, is high. All activists recognize the great importance of computer networks for their present activities. Emailing is used in-office, saving paperwork and time that was previously spent in meetings and socializing crucial information amongst all members of the organization. It is also highly useful for coordinators to control the internal flux of information, as well as to make sure that each staff person receives messages and will act accordingly.

Alternex is used for email, to participate in virtual conferences, and to send and receive documents. Together with letters, bulletins, newspapers and other printed matter, regular and cellular phones, and the fax machine, the network is considered as one of the various communication media necessary for their political and administrative work. In this sense, it did not substitute other media but represented a welcome addition since it opened up new and different possibilities.

First, it is viewed as a very inexpensive medium. Although it is recognized that the installation of computer equipment and networks in general reproduces the existing stratification within the NGO community in Brazil, the largest ones having joined electronic networks long ago and owning more and better equipment and software, it is also considered that Alternex empowers smaller NGOs since they may keep regional, national and international communication with very low relative costs. Second, the dissemination and capilarity of the global electronic networks together with their speed and simultaneity are characteristics cherished by a community highly dependent on information, contacts and exchanges with qualified sources. Furthermore, the Net allows for the storage and organization of information. Other possibilities not explicitly mentioned by INESC activists but found by Inoue (1995: 116) in her research on NGOs and electronic networks,

23. . The following is based upon interviews I carried in INESC with its manager of computer systems and with its environmental and Indian rights staff.

include: "finding information otherwise unavailable" and "global access to information on local facts, and local access to global issues" especially to U.N. and World Bank related activities.

For INESC activists the Net is most valuable for contacts at the national and international levels. At the local level, in spite of the fact that it is also used, telephone and personal interactions are still more valued since they cannot be replaced by "colder" forms of communication. Trust, friendship, reputation, predictability, hierarchical position within a social network, and even charisma are certainly elements of the political activity that cannot be reduced to technologies of communication²⁴. There are features of co-presence (gestures, tone, pitch, indexicality) and even of telephone communication that are highly informative and that are concealed in cyberinteractions. In some crisis situations, the intensity of communication is highly amplified when activists recur to all means available: letters, faxes, telephone calls, emails and personal visits.

Since computer networks are part of the apparatuses of time-space compression it is not surprising that annihilation of distance, speed and simultaneity play a central role in users' evaluations. One environmentalist said that hours before a preparatory meeting of the UNCED in New York, he could retrieve vital last-minute official U.N. information that gave him political leverage, vis-à-vis other negotiators, such as officials of Brazil's Foreign Ministry. The use of the electronic network, thus, allowed him to influence the results of that important meeting²⁵.

In this connection, it would be expected that in faraway places Alternex becomes a more decisive factor. However, one activist who worked with another NGO for almost two years in the Amazon region, reported that although the local office where she was placed had computers connected to Alternex, the staff did not know how to use it. Furthermore, the local telecommunication infrastructure was inappropriate to such a degree that even fax transmissions were frequently interrupted. These are not uncommon drawbacks. On the contrary, perhaps the two strongest obstacles for the diffusion of computer technologies and networks are users' ignorance and old telephone systems. The dissemination of up-to-date hi-tech telecommunication infrastructure is clearly a matter of macro development policies and replicates the unequal distribution of wealth within and across nations. The diffusion of computer literacy, though also related to wider determinations such as standards of living and education, is a phenomenon that also takes place via informal mechanisms of socialization encountering different structures of personality.

Inoue (1995: 113) considers that the present is an "adaptation" period where there is a "mismatch between the [Net's] potential and what is effectively used". Indeed, a greater degree of computer literacy is, today, a valuable asset for NGO activists with different impacts on hierarchical structures. It is becoming a condition for self-achievement. Another

24. A Dutch activist told Inoue (1995: 112), that "you wouldn't dream of planning a strategy campaign if the others involved are not known to you".

25. Given the plural composition of networks and the interconnections available within the Internet, the opposite situation may also happen. An activist justified to Inoue (1995: 112) his opinion on the importance of face-to-face relations by mentioning "the case of people from the World Bank that secretly get to know the contents of electronic conferences in order to anticipate NGOs reactions to Bank's projects".

differentiating factor is proficiency in English. Given the transnational and international fields where most NGOs operate and the crucial weight of foreign funds and partnerships, this is hardly surprising. Within electronic networks, such as Alternex and other APC networks, as well as the Internet, the overwhelming predominance of English is recognized as a limitation. Aguiar (1995), for instance, states that the problem with this large offer of information:

"is that the greatest amount of the 'hundreds of conferences existing within the system'... is capable of being accessed only by a selected number of persons that dominate the English language, since only 30% of the conferences are in Portuguese. This is radically against the primordial objective of democratization of information to civil society ... since it excludes, for instance, thousands of union and community leaders, high-school teachers, municipal administration employees, amongst many other 'multiplying agents' that should be stimulated to use the Net. The scarcity of material in Portuguese is also related to the treatment of subjects of interest to the Brazilian user, to the need of critical analysis of the national reality and even of a Brazilian perspective on world issues. In the present ... what is being primordially disseminated is the worldview of certain foreign NGOs and social movements (above all from the U.S.) and the thoughts of the United Nations on international relations and on important structural issues of poor countries".

One INESC activist said that computer literacy and English proficiency are decisive since they enable individuals to have access to more information, in a milieu where information and power are components of the same equation. These linguistic and techno-symbolical objective factors, rooted in globalization and transnationalization processes, may have, thus, unforeseen impacts on organizations' cultural politics, hierarchical structures, needs and demands. They also provide another indication that the virtual transnational imagined community is a world elite even when we consider its most progressive members and institutions. But, we must recall that global political articulations, notably those promoted by the environmental movement, be they virtual or real, also empower local actors, often giving them a national and global visibility/capability they would hardly otherwise achieve (Wapner 1995, Albert 1995).

Linguistic and cultural issues will remain as a major political battlefield within cyberspace and some activists are aware of this. Demands for translation of major documents affecting a nation or nation(s) political-economy, what an INESC activist called the "democratization of language", are already part of the negotiations with large multilateral agencies such as the World Bank. We are again facing the dual, paradoxical movement of globalization: the simultaneous fostering of integration and fragmentation (Rosenau 1992).

CONCLUSIONS

Computer networks undoubtedly enhance the capability of political activists. It allows virtual coalitions, a swifter and inexpensive means of communication with global

capilarity and data availability that multiply the denouncing, articulating and campaigning capacities of individuals and groups. The virtual communities it creates are powerful weapons to generate transnational solidarity regarding many pressing issues. The Internet, thus, is an important tool to empower individuals and groups by linking them "into distant developments", making them "more aware of how micro actions might aggregate to collective outcomes" and affording them a "multitude of access to the course of events" (Rosenau 1992: 285-286).

Besides the fact that the Internet is based upon a very special, "intelligent" and interactive machine, the possibility of manipulating the networks is also a result of the history of the diffusion of computers which, in turn, generated the context for the discussion on "electronic democracy" and the empowerment of "digital citizens". Only after computers were already relatively common domestic appliances, did they start to be used in networks as communication media. This made possible, as Rheingold (1994) maintains, the establishment of a medium of communication "of many to many" where a centralization by powerful political and economic agencies has not occurred, or perhaps, in view of the growing commercialization and censorship within the Net, I should say, has not occurred yet.

Indeed, given the intelligent characteristics of the electronic networks and of some of the segments of its virtual community, the vulnerability of economic, political and military information is such that it engenders various problems of security, with the consequent appeals to cryptography and restriction of freedom of speech and circulation within cyberspace. In this connection, "war of information" scenarios (Schwartau 1995) are created, where keepers of the establishment may confront hackers, this sort of cyber-Robin Hoods, outlaws for some, heroes for others. The interest American security forces have on the Internet is already a well-known fact. David Corn (1996) comments on a paper written by an official of the Department of Defense calling the attention to "cyber-smart lefties" and to the potential use of the Internet for counterintelligence and disinformation purposes. IGC (Institute for Global Communications, the American network from which the Association for Progressive Communications initiative took-off) is particularly pinpointed due to its characteristics of an "alternative news source" and its worldwide connections. According to Corn, the paper "refers to IGC conferences that might be considered noteworthy by the Pentagon, including ones on anti-nuclear arms campaigns, the extreme right, social change, and 'multicultural, multi-racial news'". At the same time, there are recurrent news items on the Net indicating the control and censorship the Chinese government exerts over computer networks. According to an e-source, such control includes the registration of the Internet users at their local police station. In Latin America, Guatemala is mentioned as a government that has policies against the widespread dissemination of the Net.

Inoue (1995: 79) quotes a passage by Tehranian (1990: xiv, xv) that summarizes the dual and paradoxical role information technologies play, since they "can extend and augment our powers - for good and evil, for better or worse, for democracy or tyranny. (...) On one hand, they have provided the indispensable tools and channels for the centralization of authority, control, and communication typical of modern industrial state. But on the other hand, they have also supplied the alternative channels of cultural resistance and ideological mobilization for the oppositionist forces".

The discussion on the role of the new technologies of communication and

information is bound to last and provoke many exchanges between "apocalypticists" and "integrationists" (Eco 1976). But I agree with Lévy (1995), on his book on the "technologies of intelligence", when he states that "unfortunately, the image of technique as an evil potency, isolated and against which it is impossible to struggle, reveals itself to be not only false but catastrophic, it disarms the citizen in front of the new prince who knows very well that the redistributions of power are negotiated and disputed in **all** terrains and that nothing is definitive" (Lévy 1995: 12). This is why I offer the notions of witnessing and political activism at distance. A Latin American example will provide a necessary innuendo.

The use that the **Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional** (Chiapas, Mexico) made of the Internet in several occasions, is a powerful illustration of how cyberpolitics can intervene in real politics²⁶. They were able, for instance, to halt a likely attack of the Mexican army, by alerting the transnational virtual community that responded flooding the Mexican government's email address with protests. Mexico's Secretary of Foreign Affairs, recognizing the effectiveness of this initiative, stated that "the war in Chiapas was an Internet war" (Proceso 991, October 30, 1995: 48). Such an outcome can only happen because of the existence of what I call witnessing at distance, i.e. the virtual power of the world public opinion, of the transnational community.

Communication technologies (texts, paintings, photos, records), given their capacity of deferring and enlarging the subject (Lévy 1995, Stone 1995), have allowed for the transmission of audiovisual information that was not directly witnessed by the subject. In a sense, thus, witnessing at distance is nothing new. However, under the empire of the mass media, in the age of information and electronic reproduction dominated by the immediacy of image and circulation of simulacra, witnessing at distance operates to a much larger degree than ever before. It became a powerful political weapon of mass societies enhanced by the development of the means of communication²⁷. The latecomer is the global computer network that, in addition to exchanges of written, visual and audio information, stimulates the creation of the transnational virtual community.

Witnessing, besides being an existential and empirical force, activates different forms of commitment embedded in moral and sometimes religious values. Wapner (1995: 321) while commenting upon the use that "transnational environmental activist groups", especially Greenpeace, make of mass media to bring "hidden spots of the globe into people's everyday lives", asserts that this enables "people to 'bear witness' to environmental

26. The FZLN can be understood as a globalized local movement that was able to become a localized global movement due to its ability to use mass media and especially the Internet to deterritorialize its claims, disseminating them to a much wider audience. In this vein, it is interesting to see the rhetorical strategies of a summons diffused, since May 1996, within the Net for an Intercontinental Encounter for Humankind and Against Neoliberalism (to be held from July 27-August 3, 1996) a humorous document written in five different versions to match the characteristics of what the FZLN deemed to be a diversified universe of sympathizers. For a work on the Zapatista movement see Barabas (1996).

27. It is useful to recall the role images played in mobilizing American and international opinion against the Vietnam war. This is also a reason why the media coverage on the Gulf War was so intensively controlled.

abuse". Furthermore, Wapner (idem) shows that "bearing witness is a type of political action that originated with the Quakers. It requires that one who has observed a morally objectionable act (in this case an ecologically destructive one) must either take action to prevent further injustice or stand by and attest to its occurrence; one may not turn away in ignorance" (the moral importance of "bearing witness" is certainly not exclusive to Quakers). But witnessing at distance cannot only be conceived of as a floating entity, a segment of a moral economy, that appeals to enlightened individual's indignity. It needs to transform its moral outrage into changes in the real world, into action. And this is what the Internet allows: the existence of "activism at distance" with a strong capability of intervening in the course of real events. Only the Internet allows for instantaneous, collective, decentered "activism at distance". In another paradoxical operation of cyberspace it enlarges public sphere and political action through the virtual world and reduces them in the real one.

The sight of violence perpetrated by political or institutional agents and the possibility of widely reproducing and distributing related information represent effective means of controlling abuses of the powerful. But neither witnessing nor activism at distance are totally efficient weapons at the disposal of political activists. This recognition poses the difficult topic of the relationship between power and information. First, the fact that a ruler disposes of a large quantity of information indicating positions against his or her own real or presumed actions, does not mean that s/he will take them into consideration. Second, pressure through activism at distance capable of resulting in institutional or individual political costs to power holders is part of the horizons of decision-makers but, I can reasonably assume, decisions are mostly measured against pragmatic power alliances and calculations that exist in the real world. Finally, all political subjects struggle for political visibility in mass societies' battlefields, and resort to different media to achieve their goals. What defines whether an issue or claim hits the center stage is a complex amalgamation of social energies deriving from many different contexts on which even fortuitous happenings may play a role.

It is true that the diffusion of information is positively correlated to the democratization of access to power. However, if we take into consideration that books, public education and the emergence of the mass media did not destroy neither the profound existing social inequalities nor power abuses, we may suppose that computer networks will not represent a libertarian panacea. In spite of virtual reality's growing importance in the contemporary world, power is, in the last instance, defined by social, economic and political relationships that are enacted in the real world.

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