

THROUGH THE WEB BLOCKS

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"Through the Roadblocks" was conceived as a transdisciplinary project which examines ways with which information transverses geographical, political, social, economic, cultural and virtual borders is adopted through assimilation and transmutation, this short paper presents some existing roadblocks in our media landscape.

"We very soon got to six yards to the mile. Then we tried a hundred yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!" (L. Carol, 1889, Sylvie and Bruno Concluded: The Man in the Moon)

As the information highway is getting faster it is also getting bigger currently consisting of over 250,000,000 domains but, more is not always better. Surfing within these domains we find sites with thousands of pages and others with millions, some of which inform and others misinform. Similar to the propaganda rhetoric of the cold war era, we again, can not distinguish real from fake information. The web's exponential growth iterates Lewis Carol's map where too much information becomes incomprehensible. Are we experiencing a new information driven renaissance or are we falling into the digital dark ages?

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A HIGHWAY OR A ROADBLOCK?

On June 16, 2009, Reuters news agency reported that the US Government contacted Twitter to "urge it to delay a planned upgrade that would have cut daytime service to Iranians who are disputing their election." [1] *"The revolution may not be televised in Iran, but it may well be tweeted"* 'ragnarokker' wrote two days later. This year Facebook and Twitter continued their adopted role as unconventional platforms where revolutions are incited and reported. But was this a logical development from blogging to citizen journalism to social networking, climaxing into social upheaval? These cloud based tools according to Richard Stallman are contaminated as "The U.S. government is encouraging people to go on the cloud because it can seize that data without the need for a search warrant." [2] In web 3, the trend points towards social engineering geared towards macro political goals reinforcing Gómez-Pefia's comment that in discussions of electronic media "twenty years of post-colonial theory simply disappear." [3] Smart Mobs [4] might not be as smart after all and cyberspace as a "technologically mediated space of cognition, communication, and cooperation" [5] might be becoming a thing of the past as the activists become more technologically aware. For now Rheingold's 2005 statement "the designs that dominate early in the growth of a technology can have disproportionate power over the way the technology will affect power structures and social lives" [6] has become eerily prophetic.

A ROADBLOCK ON THE HIGHWAY

One of the popular definitions of web 3 is 'a fast broadband to the internet always and everywhere'. This definition assumes an international infrastructure and access to the latest hardware and software. The current model both enables and constrains this aspiration as it relies on the financial capabilities of individual countries whilst the access to the information depends on economic class but also, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, the cultural capital. The current volume of the net assumes that you read and write a European language (preferably English or Spanish) whereas if one wants to be involved in programming or scripting, English is the only available language which results in the exclusion of the non english speaking population or creating an unfair advantage at best. It might not just be the funding and infrastructure which makes the US a leader in software development but as software controls content, content can become prejudiced.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

According to Zuckerman, people are "interested in seeing cute cats being adorable online. When the government blocks DailyMotion, it impacts a much wider swath [...] than those who are politically active. Cute cats are collateral damage when governments block sites." [7] The dominant western view criticizes China's firewall which blocks part of the internet within its borders but this very same view blindly accepts the access limits and censorship on cloud computing based software. Google has in the past two years developed algorithms which block any YouTube videos which they recognise as bridging their content guidelines. Facebook goes one step further. During the Egyptian uprising earlier this year, online activists created facebook groups where plans of action were discussed. One such group was the 'April 6 Strike group' which eventually reached 76,000 members. [8] The group was administered by two users, Rashid and Maher who were moderating the messages. Maher started sending messages to the group which eventually resulted in getting him banned from Facebook as the software recognised them as spam not because of message content but because of message frequency. The absence of human judgment in the administration of large sites presents us with yet another restriction to our freedom reinforcing Zuckerman's argument "the tools that have become most useful to activists have characteristics that un-recommend them for activist uses." [9]

THE CONNECTION HAS BEEN RESET

Every site's server we visit records our IP address as well as other computer specific information. Our internet footsteps are recorded, existing as latent documentation with a potential to be analysed by webmasters or official and/or unofficial agencies. Collecting IP addresses has been recently made illegal in Germany and browser cookie serving will be made illegal in EU without the surfer's prior consent. The German law prohibits the collection and processing of IP addresses whilst the UK law seems to be clear regarding website owners who "must not store information or gain access to information stored in the computer (or other web-enabled device) of a user unless the user 'is provided with clear and comprehensive information about the purposes of the storage of, or access to, that information' and 'has given his or her consent'." [10] '*Wir speichern nicht*' has become a motto amongst the Apache server users in Germany but the rest of Europe is slow to follow whilst in many other countries, the discussion has not even begun.

Unlike online social networking software, where identities are exaggerated or faked, IPs and MAC addresses can be pinpointed to a particular computer in a particular street address. Rashid's Facebook protest resulted in her arrest by the Egyptian security forces. Our telepresence is currently traced and our online privacy is mostly non existent.

Cloud computing software might be appropriate for banal tasks like sharing pet photos or promoting a business but may be considered careless or naive for organising a protest against an oppressive regime. Nevertheless "There are times [...] when issues of autonomy, of voluntary cooperation, and the liberation of desire have greater practical currency." [11]

So, how does one transverse the roadblocks? In the physical world of geographical, political, economic, social and cultural borders, the model varies but its traces are evident. Fashion and cuisine are but two obvious disciplines whose inspiration crosses national boundaries. What interests me is the transitory stage which is temporary and possibly the most exciting. The stage when we are neither here nor there, when the fusion of ideas appears new and fresh and resistance in the form of revelations and actions from the unexpected, and in most cases, underestimated periphery dominate. In the virtual world of the internet where the body is absent, communication is mediated and the identities are constructed rather than experienced. The situation becomes more complex but models of activism, resistance and creative processes are present in both worlds.

... "Now let me ask you another question. What is the smallest world you would care to inhabit?" (L. Carol, 1889, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded: The Man in the Moon*)

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