CONTRA-INTERNET

1. Killing the Internet

On January 28th, 2011, only a few days after protests had broken out in Egypt demanding the overthrow of then President Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian government terminated national access to the internet. This state-sponsored shutdown became known as flipping the internet's"kill switch." Intentions motivating the killing of the internet in Egypt were to block protestors from coordinating with one another and the dissemination of any media about the uprising, especially to those outside of the country. Peculiarly, it is a death that only lasted five days, as internet access was soon reinstated. More precisely, the internet kill switch unfolded as a series of political demands and technical operations. Egyptian Internet Service Providers, such as Telecom Egypt, Raya, and Link Egypt, were ordered to cancel their routing services, which had the effect of stymying internet connectivity through these major companies. Fiber-optic cables were another target, as the small number of fiber-optic lines that links Egypt to international internet traffic are owned by the Egyptian government. As a result, eighty-eight percent of internet connectivity in Egypt was suspended in a matter of hours. Notably, the only ISP that remained active during this period was the Noor Data Network, which is used by the Egyptian Stock Exchange.

[insert Egypt fiber optic map image]

What does it mean to kill the internet? If one were to attempt to physically locate where the internet was killed in Egypt, it could be the Telecom Egypt Building at 26 Ramses Street in Cairo, just 4 kilometers from Tahrir Square, which is the major fiber-optic connection point going into and out of Egypt. But can technical infrastructure be killed? Or, can technical infrastructure die a political death, like the more than 800 people killed during the uprising? If the internet did die, then it was also resurrected, while the protestors remain dead. Is the internet undead then, like a zombie? To understand withdrawing access to the internet as killing emphasizes a potentially grievable loss or a violation of international human rights laws, as the United Nations claims.[1] This is confusing, though. If the internet was killed by the Egyptian government, then it must be assumed that the internet is on the side of the revolutionaries; however, internet infrastructure is fully controlled by the state. If the internet was, in fact, killed in Egypt, then it was both a suicide and a murder. Simply, it was an act believed to curtail revolution, but there was a failure on behalf of the Egyptian government to see the potential for political struggle after the internet's death—as though the desire for political change can only persist within telecommunications itself.

The events in Egypt are not isolated. A whole minor history of the internet is waiting to be told, not based on its core contribution to the project of globalization but rather on political blockage and impasse, not of total flatness, global villages, and linkability but of sharp breaks, dead ends, and back doors: a history of when the internet ceases to exist. During the 2007 Saffron Revolution in Myanmar, internet access was blocked throughout the country. In 2014, in the aftermath of the Gezi protests in Istanbul, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğ an banned access to Twitter. Since 2014, Iraq frequently implements internet blackouts, and Nepal has seen similar action as early as 2005. In North Korea, citizens have little to no access to the internet and instead use a domestic only network called Kwangmyong. Site filtering and censorship regularly occurs in China, through what is nicknamed The Great Firewall of China, but also in many European countries, like the United Kingdom. In the United States, the internet might not be shut down but has instead become a refined crystallization and extension of an extremist surveillance state.

Recently in the US, political ideologues fight to align the internet with American imperial values. If, in 1994, former US vice president Al Gore prophesized that a coming Global Information Infrastructure would undoubtedly spread participatory democracy worldwide, then consider where we are now, when, in November 2015 at a campaign rally in South Carolina, US republican presidential candidate Donald Trump called for "closing that internet up" to prevent

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[1] See "Joint Declaration on Freedom of Expression and responses to conflict situations," http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15921&LangID=E (2015).

the internet from becoming a harbinger of terrorism by blocking ISIS training websites.[2] Trump's demand for an internet shutdown confirms that the killing of the internet is not only reserved for countries deemed totalitarian but also conducive with western democracy. In the United States, the death of the internet is the refashioning of network infrastructure as the smoothest site of capital accumulation and governmental control. Masses camp on city sidewalks—in front of Apple stores and Walmarts alike—in manic anticipation of the newest in networked commodities, whose shiny black surfaces belie algorithmic subterfuge by states. Online, Trump's dreaded freedom of speech is morally policed by a sprawling content management workforce, operating under non-disclosed guidelines, whose blocking of uploads remind that YouTube and Facebook were never agoras for freedom of expression to start. At the helm, as it were, is the internet user, a biopolitical subject, engineered by corporations and possessed of a dazed and addictive subjectivity that hungers for feeds that never stop, clickbait that always demands another click, and content generators that multiply browsing tabs until a computer crashes.

To ask the question, what is the internet's historical present demands an initial observation: unlike media theorist Marshall McLuhan's insistence on media as an extension of man, the Internet—as a paradigmatic example of such extensions—has become extensions of control.

2. Disappearing the Internet

In 2015 at the World Economic Forum, Google CEO Eric Schmidt promised that "the Internet will disappear" into our environments.[3] What is the difference between killing and disappearing the internet? Schmidt elaborates that "there will be so many IP addresses…so many devices, sensors, things that you are wearing, things that you are interacting with, that you won't even sense it. It will be part of your presence all the time."[4] Here, disappearance is the opposite of an internet shutdown. Rather, it is the elimination of the possibility of killing, a guarantee of total integration, seamlessness, and dispersion. To disappear the internet is to dissolve its infrastructures into the very materialities that compose contemporary life and the world. Internet = a new chemical element. An eye that is always GoogleGlass. A surface whose interactivity never falters. A transparent city where your personal data is your gateway to culture and entertainment. A cloud to aid a body that does not stop producing data, except perhaps in death. Rest assured, the disappearance of the internet is the internet of things to come, a technological promise to reengineer all objects and beings as ontologically networkable.

Of course, this is also the continued exacerbation of our neoliberal condition. Governance is now a rhizome gone bad, as networks that are assumed to be immortal unleash a torrent of rapid flows of protocological control and management, in which all life is networked, administrated, and programmable. Thus, the internet disappears into the corporate stranglehold of Silicon Valley, only to become the latest tool for incessant global surveillance, as evidenced with the NSA in the US and GCHQ in the UK. Or, just as the internet disappears into offshore data centers in California, it reappears as e-waste from the West, dumped in the Global South. Ultimately, Schmidt's prediction of the internet's disappearing act remains purely technical and misses the point that the internet is also disappearing into us, by becoming a mode of subjectivation, a set of feelings, a sense of longing, a human condition, a meta-narrative.

[insert internet definition image]

Out of this vortex of killings and disappearances, a definition of the internet emerges, far beyond its technical infrastructure, ascending as a seemingly totalized socio-cultural condition. Just as capitalism has been theorized, the internet has come to exist as a totality, as that which has no outside, no alternative, no ending. This begs a question

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[2] Sam Frizell, "Donald Trump Wants to Close Off Parts of the Internet," *Time*, http://time.com/4150891/republican-debate-donald-trump-internet/ (2015).

[3] Dave Smith, "GOOGLE CHAIRMAN: 'The Internet Will Disappear,'" http://uk.businessinsider.com/google-chief-eric-schmidt-the-internet-will-disappear-2015-1?r=US&IR=T (2015).

[4] Ibid.

that Julian Assange once asked: is the future of the internet also the future of the world? Once the internet disappears into the world—and the world becomes a global image of the internet—does this mean that to undo such a teleological trajectory thinking beyond the world is necessary? To start, if the Google CEO can think beyond the internet, then why can't we?

[insert internet world .gif triptych]

This is the task I present: to discursively and practically transform "the internet," in order to locate the potentialities of a militant alternative or outside to the totality the internet has become. I turn to my mentors in minoritarian politics, particularly queers and feminists, as their teachings in seeking alternatives to domination and control are of the utmost importance.

3. Postcapitalist Politics

In the 1996, the theorist/s J. K. Gibson-Graham penned the book *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)* and introduced a particularly feminist take on postcapitalist politics. Gibson-Graham, in part, aim their critique at Marxist philosophers—mostly men—who argue that capitalism has no outside, which has the curious effect of nullifying any anti-capitalist project, albeit a professed goal of many Marxists! Instead, Gibson-Graham expose thriving economic alternatives in existence, within the supposedly totalized frame of capitalism. For them, postcapitalist does not refer to a time after the totalization of capitalism but rather economic alternatives at play within capitalism itself. As such, Gibson-Graham instigate a much needed intervention into anti-capitalist politics, by shifting from thinking totality to thinking possibility. This is why they craft words like "capitalocentric," a term that critiques the left for not being able to think outside of or beyond capitalism.[5]

What might become thinkable if one were to engage the internet through postcapitalist politics? What becomes possible when Gibson-Graham's critique is aligned to target the internet as a totalized and hegemonic form of contemporary life? Certainly, a different definition of post-internet emerges, which can now be defined as today's network alternatives, like mesh networks and cryptographic practices, within the supposedly totalized frame of the internet. Resultantly, a new post-internet vocabulary follows, starting with the word "internetocentric," which can be defined as the inability to think beyond or outside of the internet. Tested in a sentence: "Zach struggles with being internetocentric, even though he longs for a political horizon beyond the internet."

4. Contrasexuality

In 2001, Paul Preciado put forth the queer concept contrasexuality in his *Manifesto Contrasexual.* Described as a refusal of sexual norms, contrasexuality prohibits any articulation of sexuality as naturalized. Indeed, speaking the word forces one to say "against sexuality," that is, against an understanding of sexuality as constituted by dominating and hegemonic powers. The body and sexuality are sites of struggle for power and politics. To enact contrasexuality, then, is to performatively and perversely produce contra-pleasures in the body, which also evokes a utopian horizon of political transformation. At once, contrasexuality is a refusal but also the constitution of an alternative. By confronting the internet with contrasexuality, a provisional definition of a burgeoning contra-internet politics manifests, as a militant practice that refuses internet totality and constructs network alternatives, while maintaining an alliance with feminist and queer politics. But still, how are contra-internet politics to be done?

[insert dildotectonics image]

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[5] J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 6.

Preciado explains that contrasexuality can be practiced through dildotectonics, what he calls the "experimental contra-science" of dildos.[6] The dildo is a chosen contrasexual form because it is both external to the body and undoes any assumptions that the body is a totalized heterosexual unit. In fact, Preciado claims that the body can be mapped out entirely as a dildo, which suggests that it can be transformed into pure contrasexuality. A body as dildo is sexually unnaturalized, reconfigured, made into transgressive prothesis. Significantly, the dildo does not reduce the body to a phallus, as it is not an emblem of patriarchy for Preciado. This is why a penis can be considered a meat dildo, but a dildo can never be a plastic penis. As evident in Preciado's drawings, the contrasexual dildo is a diagrammatic form that, when experimented with, reveals the potentialities of sexuality beyond the heteronormative and phallocentric. Preciado goes so far as to generously offer a set of "dildotopia" exercises, such as drawing a dildo onto one's arm and masturbating it like one is playing the violin.

These exercises provoke a question: what are the dildotectonics of the internet? Put differently: if the dildo is a form adequate to expose the norms and constructions of sexuality, then what is the form adequate to reveal the internet as totality? An initial yet insufficient way to respond is with the network, because the internet may be comprised of networks but a network is not necessarily the internet. Yet, in the end, the network links life to dominant form of governance and control today. Just as the dildo's form is external to the body, a contra-internet form must be external to the internet, so the answer summons that which is other than a network. What might be outside networks?

5. Paranodes

In "The Outside of Networks as a Method for Acting in the World," a chapter from 2013 book *Off the Network*, Ulises Ali Mejias introduces the "paranode," a term that conceptualizes that which is other to—or an alternative to—a network configuration. The paranode figures as an antidote to Mejias' critique of nodocentrism, which, he argues, is the dominant model for organizing and assembling the social. Derived from neuroscience, the paranode is imagined as the space that networks leave out, the negative space of networks, the noise between nodes and edges. It is the space that "lies beyond the topological and conceptual limits of the node."[7]

[insert network diagrams with paradnode image]

Consider this seminal network diagram by engineer Paul Baran. The diagram is of a distributed network, which is commonly used to explain the functionality of the internet, where any node can connect to any other node. The paranodal space is pointed out. Notice it is bound by nodes and edges but also understand that it is not constituted by that architecture. Within this seemingly empty white space, we must look much closer.
When we do, we see that the paranode positively demarcates the before, after, and beyond of networks. As its form is multitudinous, it might best be thought of as a collection of dildos for the internet, rather than a single one.

In a recent conversation with David M. Berry, Alexander R. Galloway combats the crushing totality of nodocentric thought that obscures the paranodal: "Today we are trapped in a sort of 'networked' or 'reticular' pessimism…*reticular pessimism* claims, in essence, that there is no escape from the fetters of the network. There is no way to think in, through, or beyond networks except in terms of networks themselves…we have a new meta-narrative to guide us…By offering no alternative to the network form, reticular pessimism is deeply cynical because it forecloses any kind of utopian thinking that might entail an alternative to our many pervasive and invasive networks."[8] Galloway's reticular pessimism destabilizes the nodes and edges of the network form. Cracks and

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[6] See Beatriz Preciado. *Manifesto contrasexual*. (Madrid: Anagrama, 2011).
[7] Ulises Ali Mejias, *Off the Network: Disrupting the Digital* World (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 153.
[8] David M. Berry and Alexander R. Galloway, "A Network is a Network is a Network: Reflections on the Computational and the Societies of Control," *Theory, Culture & Society* 0(0) 1-22, pp. 7.

fissures appear out of what were once straight lines and solid dots. The outside's force is felt and an opening to the paranode is provided. It is the moving toward such an opening that marks the beginning of all contra-internet politics.

6. AntiWeb

I would like to end with a different kind of example of the internet ceasing to exist. During the 2014 Hong Kong pro-democracy demonstrations, protestors sought an alternative networking platform due to concerns that the Chinese government might surveil or shut down the internet and other telecommunications networks. Consequently, those demonstrating utilized FireChat, a mesh-networking device for smartphones that enables autonomous networking without connecting to mobile phone or Wi-Fi networks. What is striking about this use of FireChat is that protestors digitally networked without connecting to the internet. Although FireChat does not break from the network form and enter the space of the paranodal, it does generate antiwebs, or networking alternatives to the undead world wide web. Reassuringly, such activity is not isolated: mesh networking has taken place in New York during Occupy as well as in Detroit, Taiwan, and Iraq. These events illustrate an emergent network militancy, by exposing the inadequacies of the internet as a political horizon and also offering a utopian glimmer of another kind of network. It could be said that these practices present to us, quite stunningly, the end of the internet (as we knew it).

But the internet's end is also the paranode's beginning. The paranode is the horizon, the site of futurity that contra-internet practices move toward. As contra-infrastructure and theoretical model, the paranode proposes two militancies: the practical search for antiwebs, which is not a killing or disappearing but a commons to come; and, second, the intellectual task to make thinkable that which is not only outside of the internet but also beyond the network form itself.

As the Zapatistas might say, let us approach the internet at the speed of dreams.

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