



Chapter 10

Citizens and Spokesmen: Politics and Personal Expression on the Web

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In a 1996 article in *The New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik (1996) recounted a story about how France got online. Gopnik argued that French interest in the Internet had hinged upon the migration of politics to web pages. In particular, the story revolved around a religious conflict between the Vatican and a French bishop who devoted much of his time advocating for the “excluded” (the homeless, who in France also are nationless), in part via frequent appeals to and appearances in the media. Not surprisingly, the Vatican did not appreciate the bishop’s unorthodox (and somewhat leftist) views. As punishment, the Vatican came up with the rather ingenious plan of reassigning the bishop to the diocese of Partenia, which, while vaguely locatable in Saharan North Africa, has not had any particular geographical location nor bounds since it was abandoned to the Saharan sand sometime around the 4th century. Without any solid geography, the bishop would be left with no subjects, no pulpit, and — conveniently — no more media spotlight.

However, the bishop reversed the logic of his “virtual” appointment, “relocating” his geographically indeterminate diocese to the abstract space of the Internet, creating a sort of trans-national diocese of heterodoxy. Of course, no one can go to confession or receive communion within the virtual diocese, but the domain of Partenia (www.partenia.fr) carved out a legitimate place within the Church for any left-of-the-Vatican Catholic with a computer. Much to the Vatican’s chagrin, Catholics looking for more inclusive (and

more socialist) gospels now had an official place of worship within the Church, and an ordained bishop to oversee that space, technically accessible around the globe.

According to the author, the media coverage of the dispute over Partenia was instrumental in bolstering the Internet into the French cultural spotlight. Gopnik went on to quote the bishop hailing the political promise of the Internet to create horizontal networks. To underscore the potential of such networks, the bishop compared them to the structure of early Christian church, which he noted had circumnavigated the highly vertical Roman Empire.

The story recounted in *The New Yorker* is exemplary of the political expectations and hopes many of us place upon the Internet. It is popularly represented as a tool by which the small (the lone activist... or the lone hacker) can defeat institutions, if not governments. We are told that horizontal networks similar to those of the bishop will revitalize political debate and democracy in America. Whether it is due to the horizontal aspect of computer networks or the interactivity of the Internet as a medium, a wide range of people are looking to the Internet for a way to improve democracy — or even for a road to increased personal freedom. Many of these hopes are focused upon the assumption that the Internet will increase direct personal interaction with and participation in the decision-making process, or that the greater availability of information from divergent sources will enable greater freedom in forming the opinions which motivate political action. These hopes of a citizenry moved to action have so far seen little fruition. The Internet has not drastically changed the way we interact with political institutions, nor has it changed voting habits, nor is there compelling evidence of major switches in patterns of information consumption among the mass voting populace. It should come as no surprise that the Internet alone is not changing the political behavior of the majority or bringing about a politicization of mass culture. By restricting the discussion to looking for participation in legislative politics on the part of an envisioned mass public, any action in the sphere of cultural politics is automatically beyond the scope of discussion.

In this chapter, I suggest that rather than focusing the discussion of the socio-political impact of new communications technologies solely within the realm of electoral politics, the scope of analysis should be broadened to take into consideration how individuals are using the Internet and how those practices relate to social and political life. I argue against the equation of technology with increases in individual political agency and suggest an approach that is based in Internet use patterns. Research that does focus on individual web use suggests patterns and strategies of use that do not fall

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