Steeped in Rhetoric: Digital Populism and the Tea Party Movement

By

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Abstract

Though politically disparate and hard to quantify, one of the binding elements of the Tea Party Movement is Internet Communication Technology, or new media. Social media, online discussion boards, blogs, and other forms of new media constitute a veritable component of the discourse among its members. From the whispering confederation of conservative bloggers in its beginning stages, to the relatively quick transition into a social media powerhouse, the Tea Party fits into the category of dissident social movements in a new way than movements past, in that web-based communication is a staple of the movement. Also, the Tea Party's "Web 2.0" identity intersects with a tradition of populism, combining new media communication with rhetoric depicting the Tea Party as "common" people pitted against "elitist" enemies of the country. The populist sentiments within the Tea Party reflect a wider understanding about the role of technology in fostering democracy, and "restoring" the republic back to its "core values." Tea Partiers, then, could be described as "Digital Populists," historically situated among the histories of other American populist moments, but understanding new media technology as a new way to shape political discourse. Throughout this project, then, my aim is to link populist rhetoric with technological determinism, using the Tea Party's new media ecology as a case study. The first chapter provides historical examples of populist rhetorical frameworks informing the relationship between technology and society; Chapter 2 is a case study of three Tea Party websites; and Chapter 3 is a theoretical reflection on the data that analyzes how the Tea Party's engagement with new media fits into broader conversations about technology and democracy. At the core of this project is an inquiry into how technology works in our everyday lives. My analysis questions the presumption that new media communication technology fosters a more democratic society. Specifically, I argue that, while steeped in rhetoric of technological liberation, revolution, and democracy, the Tea Party's approach to new media contributes less to a vibrant culture of democratic engagement, and more to a peculiar and unstable technological mythology in American culture.

Acknowledgements

Any sort of large-scale writing project indeed is a labor of love, the completion of which by no means is the work of the author alone. I am indebted to many people for their consistent support and consideration as I undertook the task of completing this project in just under two years. It wasn't easy. And to say it was the product of my work-ethic alone would be foolish. Special thanks are needed especially to my advisor, Dr. Randal Jelks, who at times functioned both as academic and spiritual counsel as I traversed through the writing process and life in general. Also, Dr. Ruben Flores planted in my head the initial seed of this thesis, helping me organize some of the earliest drafts of the project. Throughout the process, Dr. Ray Pence was a great boss, friend, and confidant. Dr. Ben Chappell was always willing to chat after class, for no other reason than because he cares so deeply about the work of his colleagues, graduate students, and knowledge in general. Also, my friends and AMS colleagues were integral to keeping my mind and heart healthy. Their kind words, healthy criticism, and flattering encouragement kept me on pace and energetic, especially during the last several weeks of writing. I am also grateful for my parents, who instilled in me a strong work ethic and passion for success. Their emotional support, unconditional love, and unwavering belief in me keep me strong, but also grounded and humble. And finally, special thanks to Jamie for reading drafts and listening to incessant ramblings about the project over the phone, often late at night when I had ideas and she undoubtedly wanted to sleep. Most of all, though, Jamie inspired me to work harder, spend more time in the library, and ultimately gave me a reason to push myself harder than I ever had; because one day closer to a defense was another day closer to finally being next to her again.

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Introduction: Issues of Technology and the Tea Party Movement

The Tea Party Movement embodies a notable, yet puzzling force in American politics. For one, the political positions within the party vary widely among the spectrum of political ideologies, making it hard to categorize by anyone attempting to understand it. The rhetoric out of the party can be calculated and focused at times, and provocative, controversial, and contradictory at others. The Tea Party is difficult to pin down and hard to understand, but yet it nevertheless exhibits a tremendous influence on American politics, the news cycle, and society in general. Ultimately, the Tea Party can be characterized as shared outrage at the Obama administration's financial policies as well as the healthcare reform acts of 2010. But the Tea Party represents much more than that. The strains of thought often compete with one another, and different factions align themselves with different goals, some using the Tea Party as a vehicle to elect certain officials, while others maintaining the movement is strictly ideological. Detractors call its members racist, nativist, conspiratorial, and even those who agree with their fiscal policies often don't know what to do with them.

One of the binding elements of the Tea Party movement, though, is Internet Communication Technology, or new media. Social media like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, or online discussion boards, blogs, and other forms of new media constitute a veritable component of the discourse among Tea Partiers. From the whispering confederation of conservative bloggers in its beginning stages, to the relatively quick transition into a social media powerhouse, the Tea Party fits into the category of dissident social movements in a new way than movements past, in that web-based communication is a staple of the movement.

Also, the Tea Party's "Web 2.0" identity intersects with a tradition of populism, combining new media communication with rhetoric depicting the Tea Party as "common" people pitted against "elitist" enemies of the country. The populist sentiments within the Tea Party reflect a wider understanding about the role of technology in fostering democracy, and "restoring" the republic back to its "core values." Tea Partiers, then, could also be described as what I call "Digital Populists," historically situated among the histories of other American populist movements, but understanding new media technology as a new way to shape political discourse. For instance, Ben McGrath of *The New Yorker* captures a telling portrait of how populist rhetoric intersects with a "Web 2.0" identity. Reporting from a Kentucky-based Tea Party rally in February of 2010, McGrath noted a man parading the event impersonating George Washington. "I'm back for the Second American Revolution," he said. Only, "my weapons this time will be the Constitution, the Internet, and my talk-radio ads."[1] The Tea Party's populist tendencies enable its members to understand technology both as a foundational organizational tool as well as a liberating weapon of democracy.

Therefore I frame my questions around the intersections of populism, technology, and democracy: How does the Tea Party take up, use, and talk about technology and how do their media engagement/narratives fit into a broader conversation about technology and democracy? Throughout this project, then, I propose that the Tea Party taps into a populist rhetorical framework to describe and make use of new media, which exposes the weakness of a "deterministic" understanding of technology while simultaneously revealing a deeper American myth that technology enhances a stronger, more "effective" democracy.

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[1] McGrath, Ben. "The Movement: The Rise of Tea Party Activism" The New Yorker, February 1, 2010

The United States has a peculiar history with regard to technological rhetoric, framing technology in terms of liberation, democracy, freedom, and revolution. One does not need to travel far to see these connections. Think about Apple commercials, the railroads, or the 2009 Iranian election protests, which American journalists at one point dubbed "The Twitter Revolution." However, this project takes as its starting point philosophies of technology that reject these "deterministic" narratives of how technology interacts with society, and instead puts forward a critique of internet-based communication technology and its relationship to democracy through an analysis of the Tea Party movement. The temptation when writing about new media technology is to fall into the trap of writing about how technology *affects* a certain group, or how technology *impacts* the way we communicate. This is what I mean by deterministic. As Langdon Winner writes, technologies do not inherently have political properties: "What matters is not technology itself, but the social or economic system in which it is embedded."[2] Deterministic narratives of how technology functions in society fail to address the fact that social and political processes create technology. Rather than an autonomous agent that acts *upon* political groups, technology is a tool that groups themselves use in culturally and historically specific ways, which reflects less about how technology *affects* groups and more about how technology reflects political, social, and cultural demographics. Lelia Green writes that technology is never neutral: "When technology is implicated in social processes," she writes, "there is nothing neutral about *society*" either.[3] Pierre Levy echoes this notion by highlighting that technology is not inherently good or bad, or even neutral. Rather technology "conditions or constrains, exposes or closes off, a range of possibilities."[4] Technology is thus one component— a context—tangled among a web of politics, culture, and government policy. Therefore, we

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[2] Langdon Winner, "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus*, 109 (1980): 121-136.
[3] Lelia Green, *Technoculture: From Alphabet to Cybersex* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2002), 1–20.
[4] Pierre Levy, *Cyberculture.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 8

cannot understand how technology functions within society without understanding first who is using it, what institutions and backdrops they are products of, and how this manifests itself in their contemporary use of and attitudes toward technology. Thus the Tea Party is a valuable movement to study in terms of these questions. A unique and divisive social movement, the Tea Party uses new media technology in politically specific ways for culturally specific reasons.

Also, by "new media," I employ Mizuko Ito's notion of media "ecologies." Ito uses "new media" to describe "a media ecology where more traditional media such as books, television, and radio are intersecting with digital media, specifically interactive media and media for social communication." Ito notes the difficulty in describing the media we are scrutinizing when we say "new" because the media that are "new" in our historical moment are continually shifting. "Interactive, digital, virtual, online, social, networked, convergent, etc." are categories that define new only at this contemporary moment. In time these too will be subsumed by "newer" new media. For now, though, I am examining what Ito calls a "constellation of media changes, in a move toward more digital, networked, and interactive forms, which together define the horizon of the "new.""[5] Ito describes "ecologies" as a metaphor that emphasizes "the characteristics of an overall technical, social, cultural, and place-based system, in which the components are not decomposable or separable."[6] It is not just one platform over another that is valuable to study, but the overall engagement with new media embedded in social and historical contexts. Ito's study applies "media ecologies" to youth and teen culture, but the Tea Party's new media ecology suggests that teens are not the only ones using new media. My analysis, like Ito's, focuses on "group social interaction and engagement with shared cultural forms," but with regard

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[5] Mizuko Ito et al. *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out: Kids Living and Learning with New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 10
[6] Ito, *Hanging Out*, 31

to political movements. "Engagement with the media (itself a form of mediated sociability)," Ito writes, "Is a constitutive part of how we learn to participate as culturally competent, social, and knowledgeable beings." Therefore, the ways in which the Tea Party Movement takes up and engage with new media in the context of its social and historical perspective are important in extending Ito's analysis beyond the realm of youth participation in media ecologies to the media ecologies of other political and social movements.[7]

Using the context of new media and media ecologies then, we see how the Tea Party's media ecology, which recognizes the cultural and historical contexts of engagement with technology, reveals three overlapping and intersecting currents of the Tea Party: populism, technology, and democracy. The three chapters that follow are an attempt to unpack these concepts, as this social movement is deeply embedded in a history of populism, technology, and democracy. Furthermore, through the brief case study of several Tea Party Websites in chapter 2, I want to propose new avenues of research on the relationship between technology and democracy. I consider this project a qualitative rhetorical analysis relying heavily on theory and close textual readings of cultural productions. Therefore this project uses historical, rhetorical and media analyses to gauge the relationship between technology, democracy, and social movements in our web 2.0 historical/cultural moment.

Chapter 1 addresses the Tea Party's rhetorical relationship with American populist movements and technology. The mostly conservative, white demographic of populist movements throughout history shows a pattern of a relationship with technology characterized as oppositional, alternative, or serving a common "people" to whom traditional forms of communication are now unreliable. The Tea Party of the 21st century similarly understands the

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[7] Ito, *Hanging Out,* 19

Internet, utilizing "Web 2.0" communication as a way to counteract the "lame-stream media" and to disseminate its own information, championing an increased democratic exchange in which "freedom" and "liberty" can now be reclaimed from an unscrupulous class of elites. But understanding technology through this type of populist rhetorical frame is an *unstable* relationship at best. The history of populism reveals more generally that who was included among the common "people" was usually more exclusive than inclusive. The Tea Party's relationship with new media communication technology is complex in that, much like populist movements of the past, the Tea Party's use of technology promotes "democracy," "freedom," and "liberty," while simultaneously fostering a radicalized social environment that defines itself more in terms of who is excluded rather than who is included; The "we" in "we the people" often tends to be smaller and more insulated than the Tea Party rhetoric would lead on, and this is reflected in the Tea Party's use of online communication technology.

The Tea Party's use of online communication technology exposes its populist roots in the way it promotes democracy, freedom, and liberty while simultaneously restricting debate and closing off access to outsiders. The Tea Party is connected to this rhetorical history of populist movements, and rhetoric of fighting for the rights of "the common man" in opposition to "elitists" reveals itself markedly in the way the Tea Party uses and talks about new media. While the Tea Party's digital genesis marks a new way of looking at political communication, the movement nevertheless functions within a larger historical context of other dissonant groups using technology to communicate. The goal of this chapter is to argue for a rhetorical definition of populism, while simultaneously situating the Tea Party Movement more broadly in a historical context of reactionary ideology. I argue that rhetoric of "taking the country back," and a rejection of popular modes of communication technology in favor of a more "democratic,"

alternative form of communication is a pattern in populist uprisings throughout American history. I do this in part to note the ways in which the Tea Party fit into larger historical patterns, but also to show where the Tea Party forges new ways of understanding technology and citizenship. Michael Kazin is a helpful guide in this respect. Kazin's definition of populism is defined as a rhetorical mode rather than a prescriptive ideology, communicated through various types of technological platforms. To Kazin, "populism" is not an ideology but an "impulse," a "flexible mode of persuasion":

> Whether orated, written, drawn, broadcast, or televised, this language is used by those who claim to speak for the vast majority of Americans who work hard and love their country. That is the most basic and telling definition of populism: a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter .[8]

The rhetoric of reclamation, common now among Tea Party websites, blogs, and general proponents, is comparable to many populist moments in American history, both liberal and conservative. In particular, though, I focus on the influence of conservative, reactionary populist movements and the unique attributes of their relationship with technology that correlate with the Tea Party Movement of today.

Chapter 2 is a brief history of the Tea Party, focusing primarily on three important Tea Party websites, *Tea Party Patriots*, *Tea Party Express*, and *Freedomworks*. This analysis looks at the histories, mission statements, videos, training sessions, blog posts, and other forms of digital political rhetoric to explore the populist rhetorical patterns from Chapter 1. By utilizing a close reading of these websites, I hope to capture the online element of how Tea Partiers see new media as an opportunity to express an anti-elitist desire to "reclaim" America and "return" to

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[8] Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1998), 1.

core values of "democracy" and "freedom." Thinking about this methodologically, Kazin also is helpful. In *Populist Persuasion*, his methodology straddles two notions: the power of rhetoric in constructing the public sphere and the materiality of that social world. In other words, "the social world of language users and the types of expression they employed." Kazin writes, "Political discourse does not speak itself; it is the creation of people engaged in institutions with varied resources and agendas**."** Combining these two methodological principles, Kazin writes what he calls "linguistically informed history," including the contributions a variety of people and institutions as sources: "parties, unions, voluntary associations, universities, the state, media institutions—from the Jacksonian penny press to cable television."[9]

In this way I extend Kazin's claim that people with varied institutional backgrounds and agendas use technological platforms to create political discourse. Therefore, understanding who is using technology, what institutions they are products of, and how they came to appropriate technology to spread their populist messages are important components to unpacking the relationship among populism, technology and democracy. The group in-fighting and major disagreements within the Tea Party groups, the influence of the media, populist rhetorical narratives in Tea Party online content, all indicate that the comparison with progress and new technology is a fleeting and unstable relationship. I argue that through a "linguistically informed history" of these three Tea Party websites, we see more clearly the American myth that technology is a freedom-granting, liberating weapon of democracy, when actually new media technology can open *and close* doors, depending on resources, capital, agendas, and politics.

Chapter 3 is a theoretical reflection on the data that analyzes how the Tea Party's engagement with new media fits into broader conversations about technology and democracy.

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[9] Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, 292.

Moreover, this relationship suggests a need for further research into the relationship between the *Internet* and democracy. For instance, many previous studies focus on *progressive* social movements and their use of new media technology to fight corporate power, democratize information, or to critique hegemonic society. But the Tea Party, a conservative, some might call radical political movement, offers a different perspective on traditional understandings about the relationship between technology and democracy. Born out of what some may call a "digital genesis," the Tea Party relies on new media to communicate, recruit and train potential activists, disseminate information, and organize one another. But they also use technology to stifle debate, promote exclusive, often nativist philosophies of hyper individualism and political propaganda, which seemingly contradicts notions that new media aids democratic exchange, combats tyranny, and facilitates civic engagement.

Indeed, much of the scholarship on technology and democracy involves notions of the "public sphere," which is a metaphor for the space within which debate and public opinion are formed, where ideas flow freely, access is open, and civic engagement occurs. In this chapter I cover the unstable relationship between online communication and what can be referred to as "the public sphere," and how the Tea Party's fundamental use of new media complicates traditional technological narratives about the Internet and democracy. The Tea Party's use of technology, I argue, exposes how communication technologies are both a potential tool for fostering a democratic civil society, as others have aptly brought up, *and* as a potential for extremist camps on any side of the political fence to gain unprecedented access and influence in the public sphere. This in turn exposes the unstable and contested legitimacy of new media with regard to the public sphere entirely. I argue that the online presence of a right-wing populist political and social movement like the Tea Party complicates scholarship on the Internet and

democracy in that a crucial element of a successful democracy, a public sphere based on critical

rational debate, is compromised by a stifling and exclusive radical presence, despite its

widespread publicity. Moreover, group use of technology to place ideas into a larger discursive

space can sometimes create "digital islands" of communication, which may suppress counter-

narratives of those without digital access, resulting in the stifling of democracy.

Part of this analysis draws from definitions of "public culture," which help show that the

Tea Party's engagement with new media is linked to its participation in the public sphere.

Appadurai and Breckenridge describe "public culture" as "a set of arenas that have emerged in a

variety of historical conditions and that articulate the space between domestic life and the

projects of the nation state—where different social groups (classes, ethnic groups, genders)

constitute their identities by their experience of mass mediated forms in relation to the practices

of everyday life."[10] In other words, public culture, as it is experienced by the Tea Party, is

situated between "commercial media environments" and the nation state.[11] This unique

relationship between mass media and online communication is what Henry Jenkins calls

"Convergence," and reveals new ways of conceptualizing technology and democracy. While

there are many "techno-utopians" who theorize that new media and convergence culture are the

signal of a re-flourishing of a viable democracy, I argue that in the Tea Party's case, this is not

necessarily true. As Henry Jenkins notes, "Too often, there is a tendency to read all grassroots

media as somehow "resistant" to dominant institutions rather than acknowledging that citizens

sometimes deploy bottom-up means to keep others down." The Tea Party, a self-purported

grassroots movement utilizing a presupposed democratic technology of the Internet, defines itself

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[10] Arjon Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, "Public Modernity in India," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World,* ed. C. A. Breckenridge. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 4-5.
[11] Ito et al., *Hanging Out*, 19

in these terms and as a minority of "true" participants in the public sphere. But as we will see, demographically, politically, and rhetorically, the Tea Party's relationship with the "marketplace of ideas" is fleeting and unstable at best. Again, Jenkins warns, "Too often, we have sought to deflect criticism of grassroots culture rather than trying to identify and resolve conflicts and contradictions which might prevent it from achieving its full potentials." [12]

Obviously, however, the model of the public sphere is limiting, and for good reason. As Zizi Paparachissi writes on her analysis of the public sphere, "the public sphere is not proposed as the ideal model for understanding the political significance of the Internet. Since the beginning of democracy, individuals have strived to convene politically within the locus of a public sphere with more or less success. Thus, this is used as a model that allows us to organize, characterize, and evaluate the merit of civic uses of the Internet." In other words, Habermas's public sphere is not an *essentialized* reality into which the Tea Party fits nicely. Rather, as Papacharissi writes, the public sphere is "a theoretical model that allows us to discuss the civic gravitas of the Internet, contextualize it within the contemporary socio-economic setting, and compare it to that of other media."[13] Through an analysis of the public sphere, as it was first introduced by Jurgen Habermas, and through the series of critiques that followed, including notions of counter-publics, alternative publics, and public culture, I place the Tea Party's media engagement among these conversations to heed Jenkins warning and show a possibility for further research into the relationship between social movements, convergence culture, and democracy.

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[12]Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 294.
[13] Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 113.

At the core of this project, then, is an inquiry into how technology works in our everyday lives. My analysis questions the presumption that new media technology does indeed foster a more democratic society. Specifically, I look at the new media practices of the Tea Party movement to gauge how its use of and rhetoric about technology fit into a specific rhetorical legacy as well as broader conversations about the relationship between technology and democracy. Understanding this relationship is important. Andrew Feenberg notes that the tangled relationship between democracy and the Internet is related to the meaning of modernity itself,[14] and Pierre Levy similarly notes the importance in distinguishing technology's place in society: "It is a question not of evaluating its "impact" but of identifying those points of irreversibility where technology forces us to commit ourselves and provides us with opportunities, of formulating the projects that will exploit the virtualities it bears within it and deciding what we will make of them." Like Levy, I hope to draw attention to the potentials of cyberculture as both a prospective poison *and* a remedy; the onus is on society to make valuable use of it. [15] The Tea Party is a suitable lens through which to view these questions because of its distinct narrative about the democratic and liberating uses of technology. In addition, the Tea Party's populist lineage provides a rhetorical framework that enables its supporters to view technology in this way. Through the study of the Tea Party and its various uses of new media, we see an *unstable relationship* with populism, technology and democracy.

The implications of the instability of technology and democracy are not just academic— but speak to a core believe in America that there is something *inherently* democratic about technology, and moreover that a populist rhetorical frame pervades national conversations about

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[14] Andrew Feenberg, *Transforming Technology: A Critical Theory Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 9.
[15] Levy, *Cyberpolitics,* 8.

technology and innovation in general. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent speech on

"internet freedom" echoes this sentiment. Drawing from populist narratives about the

relationship between innovation, knowledge and democracy, Clinton stated that the United States

stands for a "single internet where all of humanity has equal access to knowledge and ideas."

Interestingly enough, this statement comes at a time when "Wikileaks," an organization

notorious for releasing classified American intelligence, had its account (and ability to raise

money) frozen by the American companies PayPal and MasterCard. This begs the question,

what kind of equal access to knowledge do we mean? What kind of democracy are we trying to

promote? In this case study, I look at the new media practices of the Tea Party movement to

gauge how its use of and rhetoric about technology fit into this conversation. This brief study

into the Tea Party's new media practices offers a new perspective that will expand understanding

of how social groups use and talk about technology in contributing to a democratic society.

To be sure, though, new media and internet communication technology say yes to many

things. The way political groups challenge power by organizing and connecting to one another

through new media is important to study. But technology can also say no. Governments can use

new media to increase surveillance, produce propaganda, or subdue populations.[16] While the Tea

Party is no authoritarian regime, my project shows the limits of new media with regard to

democracy, and that just because new media makes organization more effective does not

necessarily foster a livelier public sphere and more robust democratic engagement. By

approaching the Tea Party in terms of the aforementioned overlapping relationships with

populism, technology, and democracy, I use a methodological pretext that Michael Kazin has

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[16] Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (New York: Public Affairs), 2011.
Morozov goes into much greater detail about the implications of how we talk about technology with regard to
foreign policy. I use Morozov as a lens to understand how we might analyze technological rhetoric in the United
States as well.

called "linguistically informed history," to show how the Tea Party, while steeped in rhetoric of technological liberation, revolution, and democracy, contributes less to a more vibrant democracy, and more to a peculiar and unstable technological mythology in American history and politics.

Chapter 1: Populist Rhetorical Frames and Technological Dispositions

When famous depression-era radio priest Father Coughlin broadcast his sermons on the radio, defending the aspirations of the "common people" and chastising the pervasive influence of communism, in addition to advocating a particular ideology, he was also taking advantage of a political style of communication, a linguistic mode of persuasion. When the People's Party circulated alternative newspapers, when Ross Perot took advantage of cable news to advertise his campaign for presidency, or when Sara Palin chastises the "lamestream media" in praise of the Tea Party Movement—these politicians were using the rhetoric of populism to advocate not only their political platform, but also for a particular relationship with communication technology. While it is not my position that populism functions as a coherent ideology throughout each of these diverse political moments, I do argue that populism is a sustained rhetorical pattern that shows up in each of these movements, particularly in the way they regard technology, but also in the way they pit themselves and their constituents as virtuous "people" against their detractors, who function as villainous "enemies" who are out to subvert and maliciously destroy a virtuous way of life. Moreover, I argue that these populist rhetorical frameworks also inform the relationship between social groups and technology—depicting technology as a way to oust elite "eggheads" or circumvent unreliable "mainstream" media in favor of more democratic means of communication.

The first part of this chapter discusses the multiple, competing, and often overlapping definitions of "populism." Then, through a discussion of the various approaches to populism scholarship, couched in various examples, including the People's Party, Father Coughlin, Ross Perot, and the Tea Party Movement, I argue that there is a distinct relationship between populism

and technology that indicates sustained patterns as much as it does dynamic and complex differences.

The Tea Partiers represent strains of what the scholars, the media, and critics often refer to as "populist" in that the group maintains that their cause and their motives benefit "the people" over elites. Ron Formissano, in an effort to define populism in manageable terms, first noted this difficulty in studying populism "because populist movements usually tend to be amalgams of contradictory tendencies."[1] Indeed, populist rhetoric has been a staple of American politics since the founding of the United States, from Thomas Paine's influential pamphlet "Common Sense" to Rousseau's advocacy of direct democracy. Michael P. Federici called people like Pain and Rousseau "plebiscitary democrats" in their impulse toward the popular will, which "should be uninhibited by institutional or cultural checks."[2] But the meaning of populism has taken many different forms throughout American history, for Paine's use of populism (the term wasn't even used in his lifetime) differs very differently from Thomas Jefferson's. Nevertheless the impulse toward populism came to bear through the Jeffersonians and the Jacksonians, and again in the Populist Party (capital P) in the late 19th century. At those points, more or less, populism was a political style used by *progressive* reformers and their movements for social justice. The rise of *conservative* populism can be contributed to the rise of the Conservative party in the United States, which takes a distinct turn in the period following WWII. It was not until World War II that more conservative politicians began to appropriate populist rhetoric in a form of "right-wing populism."[3] As Peter Schweizer and Wynton C. Hall note, their study begins in the post-war period because it is only after 1945 that conservatism began to represent for once a "unifying

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[1] Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 1.

[2] Michael P. Federici, *The Challenge of Populism: The Rise of Right-Wing Democratism in Postwar America,* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 13.

[3] Formisano, *For the* People, 2.

current." Quoting George Nash, Schweizer and Hall note that before 1945 there was no strong

conservative voice in the country. But "gradually during the first postwar decade these voices

multiplied, acquired an audience, and began to generate an intellectual movement."[4]

Michael Kazin, however, defines populism as form of rhetoric, a "flexible mode of

persuasion" communicated through various technological modes: "Whether orated, written,

drawn, broadcast, or televised," Kazin writes, populism functions as a "language" that is "used

by those who claim to speak for the vast majority of Americans who work hard and love their

country." Moreover, Kazin writes, "That is the most basic and telling definition of populism: a

language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded

narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self serving and undemocratic, and seek to

mobilize the former against the latter."[5] Populism, Kazin notes, is a type of utopic "rhetorical

optimism" that questions class inequalities without calling the entire system into question, avoids

racial imagery, even though populism is usually shaped in the image of white working class men,

and appeals to a broad consortium of "Americans" and "simple people" whose values are being

challenged and undermined by the powers that be. In this sense, Kazin describes populism as a

force that "binds even as it divides."[6] Taken as a rhetorical mode rather than an ideology, Kazin

understands populism as "an impulse" bound by particular rhetorical patterns, flexible, elastic,

malleable, a product of historical forces that shape its meaning and importance: populism

functions thus "as a persistent yet mutable style of political rhetoric."[7]

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[4] Peter Schweizer and Wynton C. Hall, Landmark Speeches of the American Conservative Movement (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2007), 1-2.
[5] Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, 1.
[6] Kazin, *Populist Persuasion,* 2.
[7] Kazin, *Populist Persuasion,* 5.

Contrary to Michael Kazin's interpretation of populism, as a language and an impulse toward persuasion, Formissano instead seeks to understand populism as social movements, since, as he writes, including "pretenders and free riders" in your definition of populism is difficult and counterproductive. Therefore, Formissano suggests mapping out the attributes of various populist social movements in the United Sates within a spectrum of what he calls progressive movements and reactionary movements. Progressive populists, Formissano contends, are grassroots movements distrustful of "conventional politics," capitalizing on a base of "ordinary people," but "not necessarily anti-institutional" in belief; rather progressive populists are reacting against what they consider unfair and imbalanced political institutions. Progressive populists seek to regain control of their lives, which they see as lost or fleeting. For example, Formissano highlights the People's Party, which "wanted to restore the traditional independence of farmers through the novel means of the sub-treasury plan."[8]

Reactionary populist movements, on the other hand, project a more "masculine," or "macho appeal," resulting in a disproportionate number of male support than female. Despite how reactionary populist movements at times place women into the public sphere of their discourse, it is nevertheless "under cover of traditional gender ideology and accompanied by antifeminist protestations." For example, Formissano highlights "nativist women of the 1850s who supported the anti-Catholic Know-Nothing movement or the women auxiliaries of the second Klan." Moreover, reactionary populism usually expresses cultural intolerance, hostility toward "others," the scapegoating of vulnerable groups and racial intolerance, as well as

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[8] Formisano, *For the People,* 3.

controversial communication methods, like "denying opponents the ability to assemble or speak or by engaging in harsher persecutions or silencing through violence.[9]

Formissano's contextualization of populism as a spectrum of ideologies competes with Kazin's notion of populism as a *rhetorical mode*. But the two definitions also complement each other in some respects, as populism as a rhetorical device can be understood better if taken as a spectrum of ideological dispositions—in other words, a social movement dynamic comprised of competing rhetorics. Also, it seems that despite the difference in opinion, Kazin and Formissano agree on some level that populism represents *some* kind of blueprint for political engagement and rhetorical structure, though who is included in the blueprint may differ.

Michael J. Lee attempts to bridge this gap, writing that populism is indeed a dynamic and complex rhetorical system, often competing with other populist rhetorics, changing in its focus and content like a chameleon, but nevertheless containing a cohesive "argumentative frame" that "positions a virtuous "people" against a powerful enemy and expresses disdain toward traditional forms of democratic deliberation and republican representation"[10] Lee writes that Kazin's characterization of populism as a language that pits the common man versus the elite is incomplete in "addressing the complex interactions between the "people" and their enemy in the construction of populist identity."[11] Lee therefore highlights four interrelated rhetorical forms: "Populism," he writes, "begins with 1) the constitution of a virtuous "people," then 2) envisions

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[9] Formisano, *For the People,* 13.
[10] Michael J. Lee, "The Populist Chameleon: The People's Party, Huey Long, George Wallace, and the Populist Argumentative Frame," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 4 (2006), 356.
[11] Lee,"The Populist Chameleon," 357.

a robust "enemy," 3) decries the current "system," and finally 4) finds the promise of reform in "apocalyptic confrontation""[12]

First, populists and rhetoricians define the "people" or the "common man" in terms of a "collective force which transcends both individuality and reason."[13] Second, crucial in defining the people is the concept of the enemy against which the people position themselves. For instance, Lee notes Stuart Hall, who wrote how identity is structured in direct relation to an enemy: "[Identity] has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself."[14] Boyte explains populism in terms of the negative as well: "The conviction that an elite has dishonored a historically, culturally, or geographically constituted people, its memories, origins, common territory, ways of life."[15] The "people" are pitted against an enemy committed to "hoarding power" and destroying "traditional values,"—values like "simple," "honest" or "ordinary" provide an "interior referent" to constitute their identity, but the constitution of an enemy is a "stabilizing exterior referent."[16] Third, the traditional values subverted by the enemy represent a fear of the corruption of the "system." The sites along which power is distributed are in danger of being unseated, and a system that at one point represented justice, freedom, and liberty, is in danger of being dishonored, and worse, toppled entirely. And finally the fourth

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[12] Lee, "The Populist Chameleon," 358.

[13] Michael McGee, "In Search of "The People": A Rhetorical Alternative," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (1975): 238

[14] Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," in *Culture, Globalization, and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity,* ed. A. King (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 210, in Lee, "Populist Chameleon."

[15] Harry Boyte, "The Making of a Democratic Populist: A Profile," in *The New Populism: The Politics of Empowerment*, ed. H. Boyte and F. Riessman (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 8, in Lee, "Populist Chameleon, 359.

[16] Lee, "Populist Chameleon," 360.

frame, as Lee describes, is thus an "apocalyptic confrontation as the vehicle to revolutionary change."[17]

For example, the 1892 People's Party Convention featured the keynote speaker, Ignatius Donnelly, an important political figure whom both Kazin and Lee mention, who gave a lengthy indictment of the present system in favor of a more celebrated democratic past which celebrated the Founders, guising the current agenda in the "glorious" vision of the constitution. "Corruption dominates the ballot box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the ermine of the bench," he writes. "The people are demoralized…the newspapers are subsidized or muzzled, public opinion silenced, business prostrated." Donnelly distinguishes between the elites and the common man, linking "governmental injustice" to "the two great classes—paupers and millionaires." Moreover, these inequalities are the product of "a vast conspiracy against mankind" that "has been organized on two continents and is rapidly taking possession of the world. If not met and overthrown at once it forbodes terrible social convulsions, the destruction of civilization or the establishment of an absolute despotism."[18] This speech to the People's Party convention in Omaha in 1892 utilizes the construction of a people, defining an enemy, suspicion of a corrupt system, and finally, and most markedly, is the warning of an apocalyptic showdown if the traditional values are not restored. Lee calls this rhetorical frame "restorationism":

> Put clearly, "restorationism" is the rhetorical production of historical simplicity. The revolutionary era in this regard is not a series of contingent choices, vigorous debate, and consequential errors; rather, the populist argumentative frame harkens back to a simpler period when the political stars had aligned to reveal unmistakably just principles. Hence,

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[17] Lee, "Populist Chameleon," 360.

[18] Thomas E. Watson, *The People's Party Campaign Book, 1892,* American Farmers and the Rise of Agribusiness (New York: Arno Press, 1975), 123-124.

populists become systemic revolutionaries battling present perversions on behalf of past principles.[19]

Through the case studies of the People's Party, Huey Long, and George Wallace, Lee concludes that through its four rhetorical tropes, "populism, as a chameleonic political discourse, is a pattern of argument reverberating through U.S. history" and that "populists of all political stripes have used this language to disparage the shielding of concentrated power in the space between citizens and their government," which "explains why radical political reformers of both the left and the right have found it a congenial language with which to challenge the status quo." This all demonstrates the "shared political skepticism and uncompromising style of otherwise dissimilar rhetorics."[20]

By considering the various and competing definitions of populism, Kazin and Lee are helpful in their conceptualization of populism as a rhetorical form. And while Formissano disagrees with Kazin in what he considers a rather large rhetorical leap, Formissano nevertheless presents a valuable framework for categorizing various types of populist rhetoric in terms of progressive and conservative, which does not necessarily deviate from the rhetorical definition. While the messages and methods may differ, a similar rhetorical framework to which Kazin and Lee allude, is at work in populist moments, constructing a common people against an elite other, where the entire balance of freedom and liberty is in the fray. Moreover, part of my argument here is also technological. I would like to add to the scholarly conversation to argue that in addition to the populist rhetorical frameworks, various populist movements and groups also favored particular means of communication over others because of the perceived more

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[19] Lee, "Populist Chameleon," 362.
[20] Lee, "Populist Chameleon," 372.

"common" forms. For instance, in the aforementioned speech by Donnelly, notice the importance he put on the role of communication technology, the newspapers in his speech, describing the voice of the people being "muzzled" by corporate elitists, arguing for public ownership of the newspaper as part of their political ideology. Understanding technology as a tool for democracy, either for conquering a primitive frontier, reaching out more easily to the "common man," or owning the very means to the way the "simple folk" can communicate—are patterns in populist groups particularly, and in America in general.

However, when analyzing political rhetoric, it is important to understand it not in terms of equating one historical moment to another, or to say "their moment *is* this moment," a view Jill Lapore describes as "antihistory."[21] Rather, I intend on noting patterns and investigating these relationships to understand how a sustained narrative about technology is informed by populist rhetoric. In retreating from antihistory, though, there is danger in succumbing to an ideology that discredits your objects of inquiry politically—unfairly pathologizing something you disagree with. For instance, in his famous 1964 essay, Richard Hofstadter coined the term "Paranoid Style" to describe "the feeling of persecution" and "grandiose theories of conspiracy" characteristic of right wing political thought. Distinguishing between the clinical and political use of the term, Hofstadter noted that the clinically paranoid perceive conspiracies directed toward the individual, while "the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others." Moreover, the paranoid style practitioner views his passions with a heightened sense of patriotism, righteousness, and "moral indignation."[22] Hofstadter implied that certain types of

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[21] Jill Lapore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History,* The Public Square Book Series (Princeton, J.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), 8.
[22] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics, and Other Essays* ((New York: Knopf, 1965), 4.

political rhetoric align with mental pathology—as evidenced by historical theories of conspiracy dating back to late 19th century Populist Party sentiments and the anti-Catholic and Masonic movements of the 1820s and 1830s.

In current right-wing thought ("current" meaning the political climate of the 1960s, the time period in which Hofstadter was writing), Hofstadter noted the effects of mass media which renders "the villains of the modern right…much more vivid than those of their paranoid predecessors." Referencing the John Birch Society and McCarthyism, Hofstadter suggested that contemporary right-wing paranoid politics, then, exhibits a sense of America as being "dispossessed" and "eaten away" by "cosmopolitans and intellectuals."[23] Perceiving our current political environment as a fundamental battle between good and evil, Hofstadter concludes, the paranoid suffers doubly from history since he is "afflicted not only by the real world, with the rest of us, but by his fantasies as well."[24]

It is easy to make connections between Hofstadter's paranoid style and the rhetoric of the Tea Party Movement, which perceives, in some form or another, a hostile takeover of American culture and way of life. Indeed, many journalists invoke Hofstadter in the critique of people like Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck, and other Tea Party sympathizers. One journalist proclaims,

> Conspiracy-mindedness isn't just for fringe political groups anymore; it makes for
> riveting entertainment. And it is all around us today, a disorder with an entire industry to
> act as its enabler. The source for much of the current epidemic of paranoia is no doubt

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[23] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style,* 22
[24] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style*, 40.

the "Glenn Beck Show" on Fox News, which follows the Hofstadter script with

remarkable faithfulness.[25]

Hofstadter did mention the exacerbating effects of mass media on the projected demons of the

right, and the comparison is not necessarily inappropriate. Another journalist, for instance,

evokes Hofstadter again with regard to current conspiracy theories about President Barack

Obama and ardent gun-control activists: The Paranoid Style is "alive and frothing," *The

Economist* writes. And "Not much has changed since Richard Hofstadter described [The

Paranoid Style]; Gun-lovers still argue that the slightest curb on their right to bear arms will

make America vulnerable to tyranny."[26] However, perhaps it is important to broaden the scope of

the Tea Party, further back than Hofstadter's famous essay, in order to obtain a more nuanced

understanding of politics, culture, and American right-wing reactionary populism.

For instance, Gordon Wood, noting Hofstadter's influence on American psychohistory,

details how the paranoid style came to vastly influence more psychological interpretations of the

American Revolution. After Hofstadter's famous essay, Wood writes, "[The word] "Paranoia"

soon proliferated in historical writings on the Revolution." Psychology was thus given a

heightened significance and presumed "a close connection between paranoid thinking and

particular psychic sensibilities" of early American revolutionary thought.[27] However, Wood

urges historians to take a deep a breath. "How much further can we go?" he asks. "Maybe it is

time to pause in our psychological explorations, step back, and get a quite different, wider

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[25] Thomas Frank, "From John Birchers to Birthers," *Wall Street Journal- Eastern Edition* 254, no 95 (2009).
[26] Adrian Wolldridge, "Still Crazy after All These Years," *Economist* 392, no 8645 (2009).

[27] Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 39, no 3 (1982), 405.

perspective on this mode of thinking."[28] Wood urges that in order to understand how "reasonable" people came to believe in vast, dubious conspiracies, it is important to "suspend our modern understanding about how events ought to be explained and open ourselves to that different world." Wood traces how plots and conspiracies shifted in meaning from antiquity to the Enlightenment era, as the conceptions and worldviews of individuals began to transform and broaden. As the political world became more complex, Wood writes,

> Conspiratorial interpretations—attributing events to the concerted designs of willful individuals—became a major means by which educated men in the early modern period ordered and gave meaning to their political world. Far from being symptomatic of irrationality, this conspiratorial mode of explanation represented an enlightened stage in Western man's long struggle to comprehend his social reality. It flowed from the scientific promise of the enlightenment and represented an effort, perhaps in retrospect a last desperate effort, to hold men personally and morally responsible for their actions.

Wood attributes the Scientific Revolution for taking some of the mystery out of the world, issuing a "mechanistic cause and effect in which what happens does so only because something else happened before." Therefore, "what was fundamental is that American secular thought—in fact, all enlightened thought of the 18th century—was structured in such a way that conspiratorial explanations of complex events became normal, necessary, and rational."[29] In conclusion, Wood argues that descriptions of people and movements as "paranoid" and "irrational" unfairly pathologizes political characteristics: "Living in this complicated modern world, where the very

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[28] Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style," 406.
[29] Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style," 409-421.

notion of causality is in doubt, should not prevent us from seeing that at another time and in another culture most enlightened people accounted for events in just this particular way."[30]

Wood deviates from Hofstadter in considering conspiratorial belief some kind of mental aberration in American politics. Indeed, Hofstadter was correct to highlight patterns in contemporary right-wing conspiratorial thinking, from the "sustained conspiracy" of FDR's New Deal to the proliferation of socialism and communism.[31] However, Wood is careful to attribute historical specificity to the American Revolutionaries in particular to highlight how in a general sense, the paranoid style was a rational and logical behavior of *enlightened* people. That is not to say that Wood may not have taken issue with McCarthyism and the Bircher Society. However, Wood is deliberate in his analysis to take the Revolutionaries seriously, on their own terms, viewing their actions not as mental *defects*, as far as modern post-industrial behaviorism is concerned, but as a mode of thought characteristic of a particular cultural moment.

Thinking back to the commitment to retreating from Lapore's notion of "antihistory," it is worth noting Lapore's criticism of the "presentism" of the Tea Party movement, and her invocation and admiration of Hofstadter as the one of the most fervent, if not "bleakest," of historians challenging right-wing political narratives of history. Gordon Wood, interestingly enough, has criticized Lapore's take on the Tea Party for much of the same reasons he criticized Hofstadter's position on right-wing politics in the 1960s. "Sometimes her zeal to criticize the "*anti*history" of the Tea Partiers carries her a bit too far," Wood writes about Lapore. Wood

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[30] Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style,"441.
[31] Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style,* 25

criticizes Lapore for not taking the Tea Partiers seriously, on their own terms, and for criticizing the Tea Party for being silly, uneducated, and fundamentalists--and nothing more.[32]

When considering the Tea Party's ideological perspective, it is important, then, to understand both Lapore's warning of the dangers of "presentism" and "antihistory," and Hofstadter's analysis of a particular "paranoid style," all the while tempered by Wood's analysis of the Revolution. Dismissing the Tea Party as "paranoid" in a pejorative sense may in fact rob the Tea Party of historical particularity as well as how they are in some ways connected to a strain of political thought that historically made sense of the world around them in terms familiar to them. For instance, in his analysis of the presidential campaigns of Jessie Jackson and Pat Robertson, Allen Hertzke rejects the pejorative interpretation of the Populist tradition that portrays their depictions as nativist demagogues a la Hofstadter. "The populists of the late nineteenth century," he writes, "now seem prescient in their appreciation of the economic consequences of the emerging industrial order…even if populist uprisings cannot "govern," they may be viewed as a *societal gauge*, registering pressures that build up whenever the commonwealth fails to negotiate the challenges of the times. One does not have to agree with populist prescriptions, or approve of their attacks on elites, to sympathize with their disquiet."[33] Hertzke's investigation of populism as a "societal gauge" is notable in its methodological goal to take populism seriously, while not aligning politically to their causes nor dismissing their interpretation of events as uneducated or without merit.

Alfred Kazin also writes in *On Native Grounds* of taking Populist sentiment seriously, arguing that in fact Populist attitudes contain rich cultural and historical significance. "In some

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[32] Gordon S. Wood, "No Thanks for the Memories," *New York Review of Books* 58, no. 1 (2011).
[33] Allen D. Hertzke, *Echoes of Discontent: Jesse Jackson, Pat Robertson, and the Resurgence of Populism* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 1993), xiii.

respects the seeming demagoguery of Populism anticipated the Know-Nothing nativist Fascists

of our own time," Kazin writes:

> For Populism was essentially a groundswell of protest, an amorphous rebellion that
>
> caught all the confusions and hatreds of the time. Yet despite its gawkiness and the
>
> mounted banks who often seemed to lead it, Populism represented the first great
>
> challenge to the modern era. Out of the suffering of the farmers who saw themselves
>
> cheated on every hand with the rise of monopoly capitalism streamed a new and
>
> aggressive political consciousness in America without which the liberalism of the future
>
> would have foundered, and upon which its aggressive drive toward economic democracy
>
> had an incalculable influence.[34]

This is not to say that certain value judgments cannot be made with regard to populism both as a

rhetorical strategy and an ideology. Sean Wilentz writes in *The Age of Reagan* of his intention to

"analyze present-day events historically," in light of the pitfalls of "presntism" and partisanship.

Objectivity is necessary, he writes, in order to produce a work "more than propaganda, more than

a reaffirmation of one's own prejudices." However, he writes, objectivity does not mean

"reporting all views or interpretations as equally valid. Objectivity instead involves judging

validity for oneself, fairly, and then inviting others to consider and argue over the evidence,

logic, and fairness on which that judgment is based."[35] Therefore keeping in mind the need to

present a topic of inquiry not in terms of partisan propaganda, while at the same time noting the

need to judge objectively the facts as presented on their own terms, a study on the rhetoric of Tea

Party Movement can be made that fairly and accurately presents their presence in American

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[34] Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature,* (Garden City, N.Y.,: Doubleday, 1956)*,* 30.
[35] Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008.* (New York: Harper, 2008), 10-11

culture without retreating into stereotypes or false diagnoses nor without critiquing their influence in an engaging and meaningful way.

Writing on the American Progressive Era in the early 20th century, Henry May commented that to many of even the earliest reformers, there was a marked need for restoration, though the structures of truth and goodness in America remained intact. They advocated instead for a "return to the past" and to "get rid of the recent despoilers" in favor of the "ideals of the founders." Indeed, to "drive the money-changers out of the temple" because "the temple itself is perfectly sound."[36] The Tea Party falls somewhere within this strain of thought, employing similar populist rhetoric of restoration and redemption, expressing a heightened need to reclaim the nation from corrupt, liberal over-spenders, who are recklessly and maliciously driving the country into ruin. They also champion more "populist" technological modes of communication, whether through radio, pamphleting, or the internet—anything that allows the "common man" to experience the message of reclamation and anti-elitism over the unscrupulous and greedy elites.

Charles Postel writes that the Populist Party of the 1890s (Populism with a capital "P") reveals a collection of people revolting not *against* innovation and technological change, as some scholars have argued, but rather a dynamic and modern social movement pushing for "alternative models of capitalism" and a technological and communicative restructuring of "commercial and state institutions." The Populist Party, Postel writes, was a modern political and economic reform movement that believed firmly in progress and the "transforming power of science and technology," attacking what it regarded as corrupt financial, railroad, and labor systems. "Populism," Postel writes, "was an expression of protest against impoverishment and against the

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[36] Henry F. May, *The End of American Innocence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959) 22

power of the corporate elite."[37]   In rejecting the traditional interpretation of the Populist Party as "primitive" and restorationist as Frederick Jackson Turner suggested in one of his famous essays, Postel writes that the Populists indeed equated democracy with notions of *progress*, highlighting many of their more modern sensibilities:

> Modernity entailed technologically sophisticated communication and mass media. The telegraph, railroad, and steamship linked farm settlements with Chicago, New Orleans, Dallas, San Francisco, Cincinnati, New York, Liverpool, and London…Second-class postage brought millions of pounds of inexpensive newspapers and pamphlets into the rural heartland and brought millions of men and women into the national discussion of progress and reform.[38]

Postel highlights the early Farmer's Alliance Movement that recognized the democratizing power of the press and the vital need to reclaim the newspapers from their "corporate stranglehold" that one lecturer said was responsible for the "greed, tyranny, and flunkeyism" prevailing in America. Another Farmer's Alliance lecturer suggested that the "power of the press" is a struggle between elites and progress: "Shall we control it, or will we leave this, the greatest of all weapons, in the hands of others?"[39] Furthermore, the Farmer's Alliance created vast networks of rural newspapers to replace the unreliable "corporate" newspapers. For instance, reform newspapers like *Southern Mercury, Progressive Farmer, Kansas Famer* and others reveal a reliance on "reprinting from one another, creating a network of shared information" that attempted to circumvent the mainstream press.[40]

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[37] Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.
[38] Postel, *The Populist Vision,* 9.
[39] *National Economist,* March 30, 1889 in Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 63.
[40] Postel, *Populist Vision*, 64.

While much of the focus of this chapter stems from definitions of populism with a lowercase "P," taking a rhetorical approach offered by Kazin and others that defines populism as a "mode of persuasion" or a style as opposed to an ideology, Postel's detailed analysis of the People's Party and the Farmer's Alliance of the 1880s and 1890s shows how the legacy of Populism as an ideology continues to reverberate through society. Populism, Postel writes, "was a particular constellation of ideas, circulating within a specific coalition of reform, and set in motion within a distinct historical context." However, to say that Populism was unsuccessful as a reform movement fails to recognize "the impact [Populism] had on American life, and especially by the impetus that it provided for a wave of reform that carried into the new century."[41] The rhetoric of populism shifts and conforms to various types of political communication, evidenced throughout much of the twentieth and twenty-first century, which is why populism, and its rhetorical stance on technology, progress, and democracy is employed by both the right and the left, from Huey Long to Father Coughlin to Ross Perot to the Tea Party Movement. But the Populist Party of the late 19th century claims a part of this rhetorical lineage, especially in its concise attitudes toward progress, the press, and communication technologies like the telegraph and telephone.

Capturing the legacy of the earlier Populists that opposed the inequalities of industrialization and the mass centralization of government, Father Charles Coughlin was notable for his famous radio sermons during the 1920s and 1930s during the Great Depression that evoked a similar rhetorical tradition of decrying private elites. In the wake of the Great Depression, Christian, and increasingly Catholic, populists rose in prominence, championing the rights of the working man, denouncing unchecked wealth, and warning against the evils of a

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[41] Postel, *Populist Vision,* 22.

centralized state. "Like the Populists in the 1890s," Kazin writes, "activists wanted both to pull

down the rich and to raise the spiritual state of the nation."[42] Coughlin, the son of Irish

immigrants, established a church in the small industrial town of Royal Oak, Michigan called

"Little Flower of Jesus," and first began broadcasting his sermons on the air in 1926 after the

local KKK planted a flaming cross in the church lawn. Coughlin approached a manager of a

local radio station to propose weekly radio sermons, remarking "that he wanted to do something

to fight bigotry and build up his church." By 1930 he was broadcasting nationally to upwards of

40 million listeners.[43]

Coughlin espoused that the radio in particular was a medium of the "public," a means of

communication broadcast in the language "of the people:" "I write the discourse," Coughlin

once told the *New York Times,*

> First in my own language, the language of a cleric. Then I rewrite it, using metaphors the
>
> public can grasp, toning the phrases down to the language of the man-in-the street.
>
> Sometimes I coin a word to crystallize attention. Radio broadcasting, I have found, must not
>
> be high hat. It must be human, intensely human. It must be simple, but it must be done up in
>
> metaphors. It must deal with something vital to the life of the people, and it must be
>
> positive.[44]

Above, we see Coughlin touting the radio as a communication technology of the people,

chastising the elite in favor of simple, positive messages to affect the greatest possible political

result. A relatively new means of communication, the radio as a broadcast medium was quickly

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[42] Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion,* 111.
[43] Postel, *Populist Vision*, 91.
[44] John M. Carlisle, "Priest of a Parish of the Air Waves: Father Coughlin's Radio Sermons Bring Him a Flood of Letters Telling What People Are Thinking About," *The New York Times,* Oct. 29, 1933

growing to be the main source of news and entertainment of the American working class. Coughlin's presence on the radio was undoubtedly controversial, but to those who rarely read newspapers, which often tended to treat controversial figures like Coughlin with hostility, the radio was from the horse's mouth, and appealed to "critics of concentrated wealth" who "routinely depicted the urban press as an oligopolistic barrier to social change and a censor of anti-corporate views."[45] Coughlin was known for his unique blend of fiery evangelism, speaking to his listeners' sense of loss in the wake of the Depression, offering a message of hope and democracy in a "soothing" language, evoking Christian populism and the "rage of the common man." He was noted for injecting colloquialisms like "hot," "swell," "lousy," and "damn," and he "enthusiastically translated papal encyclicals about labor and poverty into the American vernacular." Kazin writes, "He unraveled the complexities of banking transactions and legislation concerning the economy. He ridiculed pompous men of wealth like J.P. Morgan and allegedly myopic government officials."[46]

To be clear, the populist rhetoric of Father Coughlin vaguely resembles the rhetoric of the Populist Party of the late 19th century. The Populists in their time assailed capitalism and the centralized power of elites, and more importantly offered an alternative vision of a decentralized economy. Coughlin, on the other hand, seldom suggested that the answer to hegemonic power rested in individual, local reforms. Rather, Coughlin generally argued in favor of positions that decried the "menacing power of the great private banks." In other words, "the only remaining antidote to centralized power was the greatest of all institutions of centralized power."[47] Nevertheless, Coughlin utilized a populist rhetoric, communicating within the parameters set up

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[45] Kazin, *Populist Persuasion, 115.*
[46] Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, 114.
[47] Postel, *Populist Vision*, 166.

in the beginning of the chapter—setting up a "people" through the needle of the "enemy," decrying the "system," and foreshadowing an apocalyptic final mêlée. For example, in this 1937 speech entitled "Somebody Must be Blamed," Coughlin, rejecting FDR's policies (a man he once openly supported), instead bemoans the failure of the new administration to effect change, lamenting the fall of capitalism at the hands of the "international bankers" and those in power maliciously leading the country away from democracy toward communism and rancor: "Somebody must be blamed," he said.

> Perhaps, perhaps another ambassador from another foreign capital shall come upon the scene. Perhaps, despite the advice of Washington of no foreign entanglements, despite the passage of the Jansen Act, which forbids us to lend money to those who already have borrowed it and who have not returned their loans, perhaps despite those things, some way, some miraculous way shall be found to project America into the next maelstrom. And democracy once more, thinking that it has power within its soul, shall rise up to clap and applaud, because the youth of the land is going abroad to make the world safe for what? Safe for dictatorship? Safe against communism abroad when we have communism at home? Safe from socialism in France when we have socialism in America? Or safe, safe for the international bankers?[48]

Coughlin understands "the people" and "America" in danger of being subverted by malicious and deliberate detractors, but not from communists abroad, but from "international bankers" at home, all the while American soldiers bravely fight for the principles of democracy in vain. Here we have populist rhetorical mode that Kazin and Lee define: a rhetorical system with complex roots that have linkages both historically and rhetorically with its Populist Party ancestors, despite their ideological differences. These populist tropes yield particular attitudes

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[48] Charles Coughlin, "Somebody Must be Blamed: Father Coughlin Speaks to the Nation." (1937).

toward communication technology as well, as indicated by Coughlin's explicit stance on the radio mentioned above.

Another example of populist rhetoric with particular emphases on technology is Ross Perot, a man Kazin called "a secular Father Coughlin, armed with four-color charts and graphs."[49] Kazin writes that amid the 1980s and 90s political rhetoric that, in a sense commodified populism as a sort of "fashion statement" or a "deliberate rhetorical project" covered in appeals to the "working class," there arose Ross Perot, the billionaire businessman from Texas who proposed massive budget cuts and spoke in a unique colloquial manner, a "Texas-accented ridicule of overdressed lobbyists and the "country clubbers and "preppies" in George Bush's White house."[50] One of the most significant aspects of Perot's presidential campaign, which garnered some of the highest votes for an Independent presidential candidate in almost 70 years, was utilization of technology. Jonathan Laurence notes that Perot announcing his campaign for presidency on a cable talk show, *Larry King Live*, was a precedent in modern political communication. By eschewing the traditional campaign strategies of the time, Perot "invigorated the talk-show circuit as a locus of campaign communication" which then spurred an unprecedented television advertising campaign.[51]

Perot's use of "new media" (in this sense cable talk show news as opposed to more "traditional" media like national news programs and seasoned newspapers like the *New York Times* and others), is notable in that the content of his campaign became "more permeable" and his "shrewd use of nontraditional media" garnered mass attention that "spilled over into

[49] Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, 273.
[50] Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, 272-273
[51] Jonathan Laurence, "Ross Perot's Outsider Challenge: New and Old Media in American Presidential Campaigns, in Gianpietro Mazzoleni, Julanne Stewart, and Bruce Horsfield, *The Media and Neo-Populism: A Contemporary Comparative Analysis,* Praeger Series in Political Communication, (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2003), 176.

traditional news-media domains."[52] Perot's use of "electronic town halls," spots on popular talk

shows and call-in radio shows, in addition to "toll-free telephone numbers to disseminate

campaign information" ushered a rise of a "new, interactive communication genre, which

circumvented the filter of traditional new media."[53] Perot reasoned that "If you talk to a thousand

people a night seven nights a week, it takes you about three years to talk to a million." And

moreover, "On shows where you get 20 and 30 million people…you realize the multiplier effect

you can create with just one short comment—a nationwide reaction."[54] Perot's presidential

announcement on Larry King was a "big bang" in political communication, which set the stage

for Republicans like Bob Dole, who announced his candidacy for president in 1995 on *Late

Night with David Letterman*. Ultimately, more popular communication platforms, in this case

talk shows and talk radio leads to more political inclusion, more room for nontraditional

politicians/celebrities like Ross Perot (or more recently, businessman and television celebrity

Donald Trump), to gain political access. These electronic platforms give untraditional politicians

more impact, and moreover, more room for populist-style candidacies to flourish in the

mainstream.[55]

Laurence cautions, however, that "all outsiders must eventually face the press, even if

institutional reforms and new forms of direct communication have reduced the barriers to entry

into the political arena." Laurence's comment underscores the fact that while populist platforms,

modes of communication, and otherwise "untraditional" ways of addressing the people are

powerful, the rhetoric nevertheless eventually must face the music and enter dominant discourse

to have any sort of success. Judging by the failure of the Populist Party, Coughlin's eventual

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[52] Laurence, Ross Perot's Outsider Challenge," 176-177.
[53] Laurence, Ross Perot's Outsider Challenge," 180.
[54] Larry King and Mark Stencel, *On the Line: The New Road to the White House* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993) in Laurence, "Ross Perot's Outsider Challenge," 181.
[55] Laurence, "Ross Perot's Outsider Challenge," 190.

demise, and Ross Perot's succumbing to the criticism of his conspiratorial tendencies and failure to address any substantive issues in his campaigns, Laurence's theory on the success (or lack of success) of populism is a poignant analysis. Ross Perot's insistence on a more "public" form of communication that can reach more people and his populist rhetorical frame that took potshots at elites who have unfairly taken control of the country, reveals a theme with regard to political communication and technology. Coughlin's notion that the radio was a way to ensure democracy by reaching the "public" or the "common man," the Populist Party's grip on newspapers, pamphlets, and other forms of communication to circumvent unreliable media that does not, in their view, serve the interest of the people—all indicate a trend in populist movements and views toward technology.

For example, former governor of Alaska and Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin, speaking at the Tea Party National Convention in 2009, reiterated one of her often harped upon themes: that the mainstream media is unreliable. Palin, notable for her use of social media like Twitter and Facebook, often eschews mainstream media, which she dubbed "lamestream media" as a misrepresentation of conservative causes. For instance, in a question and answer session after her initial address at the Tea Party Convention, Palin called the mainstream media "irrelevant" and moreover an institution attempting to undermine more "traditional" values like patriotism and faith:

> Really, at the end of the day, who cares what an irrelevant, mainstream media is going to say about you? Who cares? The political hot shots that they want to take at you for standing up and saying what you believe in and proclaiming the patriotic love that you have for country and a lot of those in the mainstream media, they don't want to hear that. At the end of the day, it really doesn't matter what they have to say about you.

This view toward communication technology intersects with a populist rhetorical framework that depicts (consistent with Lee's 4 tropes of populism) a "common people" against an ominous and elitist enemy: "I really believe that there are more of us than they want us to believe," she said. "That should empower us. That should strengthen us and plow right on through it." Moreover, at the beginning of her address, Palin asserted: "I look forward to attending more Tea Party events in the near future. It is so inspiring to see *real people*, not politicos" (emphasis added). In describing the Tea Party, Palin proclaimed: "This is about the people. And it's bigger than any king or queen of a tea party. And it's a lot bigger than any charismatic guy with a teleprompter." The core of the Tea Party, Palin contends, is "the people," whom she defines as:

> Everyday Americans, who grow our food and run our small businesses, who teach our kids and fight our wars. They're folks in small towns and cities across this great nation who saw what was happening and they saw and were concerned and they got involved. Like you, they go to town hall meetings and they write op-eds. They run for local office. You all have the courage to stand up and speak out. You have a vision for the future, one that values conservative principles and commonsense solutions. And if that sounds like you, then you probably, too, are feeling a bit discouraged by what you see in Washington, D.C.[56]

Clearly evident in Palin's speech is the conceptualization of a common "people," the formation of an "elite" that threatens those values, a condemnation of our current system, and a sense of an impending confrontation in which those traditional values will be restored to a time

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[56]Sarah Palin, "Tea Party Convention Keynote Address," Speech, Tea Party National Convention, Nashville, Feb. 6, 2010.

when people were "not being afraid to kind of go back to some of our roots as a God-fearing nation."[57]

Palin also assails the mainstream media in favor of alternative modes of communication. For example, after an unflattering portrayal of Palin's disabled son on the television show *Family Guy,* Palin took to Facebook to chastise the writers for their insensitivity which felt, she writes, like "a kick in the gut."[58] Using social media technology like Facebook to respond to public events is a move, one journalist suggests, to "Get her message out there more without having to use the media she claims produced personal and salacious reports about her and her family during the campaign.[59] Populist rhetoric informs Palin's approach to technology, which an aversion to conceptions of the "mainstream" in favor of alternative, untraditional modes that rhetorically appeal to a more "common," "everyday" people.

By highlighting various patterns of populist rhetoric in the People's Party, Father Coughlin, Ross Perot, and Sarah Palin, I point out sustained rhetorical patterns and a distinct association with communication technology. Moreover, in addition to Lee's four rhetorical tropes of populism and Kazin's broad description of populism as a linguistic mode of persuasion, I argue that there is a distinct attitude toward technology, specifically communication technology, enabled by populist rhetoric. Viewing some means of communication with disdain, and others with reverence for its ability to reach "the people" more easily, underscores a recurrent trend in populist movements in particular and pervasive in American culture in general, to be explored with regard to the Tea Party in the next chapter, and explored more deeply in the

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[57] Palin, "Tea Party Convention."
[58] Sarah Palin, "Fox Hollywood—What a Disappointment," (February 15th, 2010)
https://www.facebook.com/notes/sarah-palin/fox-hollywood-what-a-disappointment/305122263434
[59] Katharine Zaleski, "Sarah Palin Twitter Account: Governor Starts her Own Feed," *Huffington Post*, May 2, 2009,
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/02/sarah-palin-twitter-accou_n_195118.html

last chapter in terms of the implications toward democracy, civil engagement, and the public

sphere.

Chapter 2: The Tea Party Movement in Context

Legend has it that the spark which ignited the grassfire known as the Tea Party

Movement began on February 19th, 2009, when CNBC business news commentator Rick

Santelli, just one month after the inauguration of President Obama, began fuming on the floor of

the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, rebuking Obama's aid to homeowners facing foreclosure,

charging that the Obama administration was "promoting bad behavior" by subsidizing what he

called "the losers' mortgages." He shouted, "This is America!" adding, "We're thinking of

having a *Chicago* Tea Party in July. All you Capitalists that want to show up to Lake Michigan,

I'm going to start organizing…we're going to be dumping in some derivative securities, what do

you think about that?"[1] McGrath noted that within hours of what became known as "The Rant

Heard 'Round the World," "a Web site, OfficialChicagoTeaParty.com, had gone live, and by the

end of the following week dozens of small protests were occurring simultaneously around the

country.[2] The rant went viral, the story goes, generating millions of views and inspiring mini

movements all around the country that eventually coalesced into a unified Tea Party Movement,

angry about the climbing national debt and the failure of both parties in finding a remedy for our

financial crisis.

This is only partially correct. As Kate Zernike notes, the movement we now know today

as the Tea Party began as a loose confederation of conservative bloggers, whose scattered

protests throughout the country had been gaining momentum for months until Rick Santelli

finally gave it a name. In fact, the first Tea Party protest was actually three days before Santelli

went on the air, orchestrated by 29 year old conservative blogger Keli Carender, writing under

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[1] Rick Santelli, *Squawk Box* CNBC, New York, February 19th, 2009.
[2] Ben McGrath, "The Movement." *New Yorker* 85, no. 47 (2010): 40-49.

the pseudonym "Liberty Belle." Carender, a vocal minority of young conservatives in Seattle,

decided to form her own protest, called the "Anti-Porkulus Protest," a term borrowed from

conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh. With the help and publicity from local conservative

radio hosts in Seattle and other conservative bloggers, Carender organized what many consider

to be the first Tea Party rally on February 16th, 2009. All Rick Santelli did, Zernike writes, was

"give the discontent a name, and a bit of imagery."[3]

Perhaps the most significant impetus for the Tea Party movement's meteoric rise was

from a technology consultant and self-described "grassroots new media strategist." Before

Carender's first protest, Michael Patrick Leahy, former delegate to the Republican National

Convention in 2008, had been writing for some time about what he called a "technology gap"

between Republicans and Democrats. Leahy urged conservatives to follow his 15 "tactical rules

for conservative radicals," which involved taking advantage of free, cheap, and fast new media

communication technologies like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.[4] After Obama's election in

2009, Leahy began collecting names of conservative activists on Twitter, a social networking site

where people micro-blog 140 character "tweets" to their "followers" or blog subscribers. Twitter

was the only place, Leahy observed, liberals had not already claimed as their own. "I found

there were a lot of conservatives on Twitter, and they were lonesome and competitive," he told

the *Wall Street Journal*. "We got up to 1,500 [names] within weeks."[5] Leahy organized a list of

Twitter users he called "Top Conservatives on Twitter" or #TCOT, a searchable hashtag that

allows various followers to read and keep up with other conservatives, as well as code their own

relevant tweets that others can see.

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[3] Kate Zernike, *Boiling Mad: Inside Tea Party America* (New York: Henry Hold and Co, 2010), 20.
[4] Leahy, Michael Patrick. "Rules for Conservative Radicals," (2009).
[5] Douglas Blackmon et al, "Birth of a Movement." *Wall Street Journal - Eastern Edition* 256, no. 102 (2010): A1-
     A4.

After Carender's initial protest, which gained publicity among conservative bloggers and talk radio hosts, in addition to Santelli's now infamous rant, which was publicized by FOX News just hours later, Leahy pounced, and began organizing weekly conference calls among prominent conservative bloggers and activists. Taking Santelli's cue, Leahy, utilizing his growing list of contacts, helped organize Santelli's call for a Chicago Tea Party, which he also synchronized with other activists' protests around the country the following week, on February 27th, 2009. Writing on a guest blog of *The Telegraph,* Leahy proudly urged everyone to join him: "The tea party will be held in Chicago, at dozens of locations around the US, and on Twitter, using the #teaparty hashtag."[6] On February 27th, 2009, the day of the protest, Leahy and company counted "fifty-one events across the country, with thirty thousand people attending in all."[7] Carender's first protest, Santelli's rant three days later, and the new media prowess of Leahy (in addition to other, smaller conservative protests aimed at the economy) catapulted scattered protests into large-scale events.[8]

Despite the common history, without any strict, coherent ideological backbone and no national spokesperson or leader, the "Tea Party" conceptualized as a large cohesive movement is difficult to quantify, let alone describe, as one description of a Tea Party sympathizer may diverge from the views of another. Most social movement theorists would agree, though, that while "social movements *do* exhibit less social differentiation than settled social groups," it does not mean that they are "necessarily homogeneous or united."[9] However, with such a wide swath of Tea Party supporters, from those on the fringes exhibiting racial under (and over) tones, to the

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[6] Milo Yiannopoulos, "A message from Michael Patrick Leahy: Join The Chicago Tea Party!" *The Telegraph*, February 21st, 2009.
[7] Zernike, *Boiling Mad*, 22
[8] Zernike, *Boiling Mad,* 22. Zernike also goes into much greater detail about all the mini-movements that made up the initial drive of the Tea Party movement.
[9] John Wilson, *Introduction to Social Movements*, New York: Basic Books, (1973), 8

young libertarian conservatives with more socially liberal views, we nevertheless see an organizational dilemma with regard to the Tea Party. How do you effectively organize such diffuse and disparate strains of thought when the only prevailing and unifying idea is fiscal conservatism (and even there Tea Party members split into different camps)?[10]

The answer, in part, lies in Internet Communication Technologies, or social media. Blogs, social networking, and wikis were the media of choice for the originators of the Tea Party Movement, and fuel much of the current activity of Tea Party organization, dissemination of information, and inter-group communication. Therefore, studying the new media practices of several prominent Tea Party websites is valuable in order to gauge not only how the Tea Party can organize such a popular and relevant social movement, but also how the Tea Party understands itself and its role in civic engagement. Through a close rhetorical analysis of several Tea Party websites, specifically *Tea Party Patriots*, *Tea Party Express*, and *FreedomWorks*, we see the complexities of the Tea Party's new media engagement with regard to organization, communication, and ideas about citizenship and democracy. I argue that the Tea Party movement, while disparate in its political motivations, ideas, and attitudes about the role of activism, nevertheless construct a consistent populist rhetorical narrative about the role of technology, framing it as an indispensible method for acquiring new members, spreading their message, and fighting for "freedom" and "democracy." Moreover, I argue that this reflects a prevailing ideology in America in general, and within the Tea Party in particular, that views technology as representations of democracy, liberty, and a valuable check on powerful and unreliable media, and other various types of "fat cat" elites and populist adversaries.

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[10] Brian Montopoli, "Tea Party Supporters: Who They Are and What They Believe," CBS News, 2009

Part of this approach relies on various understandings of the relationship between political rhetoric and culture, and also definitions of populism from chapter 1. For instance, Hariman analyzes political rhetoric as an art, or a political "style:" Political style, he writes, is a "coherent repertoire of rhetorical conventions depending on aesthetic reactions for political effect." [11] Hariman outlines various typologies of political styles as a method to better understand politics, and furthermore to argue that political rhetoric can shape culture and civic engagement in general. "Ordinary political actors in our culture," Hariman writes,

> Routinely persuade by mastering considerations of costume, tone, and timing without suffering moral deterioration. Furthermore, questions of freedom, equality, and justice often are raised and addressed through performances ranging from debates to demonstrations without loss of moral content. An attention to appearances doesn't disregard certain values so much as it looks for the problems and techniques shaping their successful performance, on the assumption that values only can be taken seriously once performed successfully." [12]

Hariman, along with others like James Boyd White, who writes that words produce "the methods by which culture is maintained, criticized, and transformed," theoretically informs my rhetorical approach to the Tea Party's use of new media. [13] Along with Kazin's notion of a "linguistically informed history" I approach the Tea Party rhetorically and historically to get a sense of how the Tea Party's rhetoric about and use of new media is embedded in a particular historical and cultural context. In this way I show that the Tea Party uses a populist framework to rhetorically

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[11] Robert Hariman, *Political Style: The Artistry of Power, New Practices of Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4.

[12] Hariman, *Political Style,* 10.

[13] James B. White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 279.

situate itself in a particular relationship with new media, one in which new media is synonymous, if not essential, in the "battle" for democracy, liberty, and freedom.

Also, populist rhetoric uses several strategies with regard to the media. Stewart, Mazzoleni, and Horsfield argue that the media is significant in the rise of what they call "neo-populist" movements. Their study, while conducted on a global scale including countries from Europe and Asia, nevertheless provides an informative backdrop and a frame of reference for how the Tea Party frames and understands technology. Though populism can be described as "vague," "slippery," and "chameleonic," there are nevertheless common ways in which populist movements interact with the media:

- Identification as a "media underdog" to gain popular support
- Use of professional expertise
- Reversion to more traditional "unmediated" forms of communication such as rallies
- Clever exploitation of "free" media publicity
- Strategies to attract media attention (staging media "events")
- Strategic attacks on the media[14]

As we will see, particularly with developing "strategies to attract media attention," "use of professional expertise" and constructing the movement as a type of "media underdog," the Tea Party's use of new media validates Stewart et al.'s assumptions that the media is particularly significant with regard to the development of populist movements. The Tea Party's populist

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[14] Julianne Stewart, Gianpietro Mazzoleni, and Bruce Horsfield, "Conclusion: Power to the Media Managers," in *The Media and Neo-Populism: A Contemporary Comparative Analysis,* Praeger Series in Political Communication, (Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2003), 230.

rhetorical frame reveals itself in their use of new media to take advantage of "free" and "easy" communication mediums, employing "new media strategists" and using new media to stage public events and rallies. While Stewart et al. are focusing on the ways populist groups are interacting with the professional media, I think the same parallel could be made not only with how they interact with professional media, but also how they use "new media," which, as defined earlier, represents a constellation of media changes, where "consumers" are increasingly becoming media "producers" themselves.[15]

In order to understand the Tea Party's use and understanding of new media, we need to understand first how the Tea Party understands itself logistically and institutionally among the political/cultural landscape. The advocates of what is now the Tea Party operate more or less under a general ideological umbrella of fiscal conservatism and a shared sense of outrage at the 2009 stimulus bills as well as the health care reform bills of 2010. However, the movement is decentralized—there are no specifically delineated leaders, though many politicians associate themselves with Tea Party issues and many more are thwarting republican and democratic incumbents in elections across the country.[16] The Tea Party is self-described as non-hierarchical—a network of political conservatives who operate from the local, grassroots level, with hundreds of local Tea Party coordinators meeting through conference calls once a week to discuss issues and raise concerns. This loose, networked organizational style mimics the Tea Party's own concerns over an overtly centralized government and functions as a "self-propelling" movement, deliberately described by many coordinators in terms similar to those used to describe the Internet: "open-sourced," "networked," and "horizontal." Organizing in this

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[15] Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*: *Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).
[16] "What is the Tea Party?" CNN.com, from the series, "Boiling Point: Inside the Tea Party" (2010).

way is cheap, effective, and more importantly befuddling to many who seek to understand the Tea Party, often searching for a way to define it by isolating a leader, which, as Jonathan Rauch notes, is as absurd as asking "who owns the internet?"[17]

However, despite the claims of grassroots, bottom-up organization and the appropriation of "open-sourced" rhetoric, the Tea Party has faced charges by many of its detractors as being a phony movement of wealthy American aristocrats posing as arbiters of a grassroots movement comprised of "regular people." Some have charged that the Tea Party is "Astroturf," or rather, an artificially constructed grassroots movement, due in part to its heavy coverage by FOX News, donations from extremely wealthy conservatives, and financial assistance from influential politicians, most notably Sarah Palin and former House Majority Leader Dick Armey, who runs the aforementioned organization *FreedomWorks*.[18]

The statistical makeup of the Tea Party indicates some relatively unsurprising trends. A study conducted by Bloomberg found that "Tea Party supporters are likely to be older, white and male. Forty percent are age 55 and over, compared with 32 percent of all poll respondents; just 22 percent are under the age of 35, 79 percent are white, and 61 percent are men. Many are also Christian fundamentalists, with 44 percent identifying themselves as "born-again," compared with 33 percent of all respondents"[19] A Gallup Poll indicates a similar trend: "Tea Party supporters are decidedly Republican and conservative in their leanings. Also, compared with average Americans, supporters are slightly more likely to be male and less likely to be lower-

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[17] Jonathan Rauch, "How the Tea Party Organizes without Leaders," *National Journal* (2010).
[18] Paul Krugman, "Tea Parties Forever," *New York Times* (2009).
[19] Heidi Pryzbyla, "Tea Party Advocates Who Scorn Socialism Want a Government Job," *Bloomberg*, March 25, 2010 2010

income."[20] White, Christian, conservative men with money are thus a huge component of the

Tea Party. The largest Tea Party survey by CBS/New York Times gives similar data as well.[21]

Given the relatively mainstream demographic of Tea Party members (white, Christian,

male), the Tea Party has been accused of racism and paranoia among its ranks by many critics.

Particularly at the rallies themselves, the media often capture photographs of protest-signs that

are racial in nature. For example, a Tea Party activist in Houston was photographed at a rally

with a sign that read "Congress = slave owner, Taxpayer = niggar [sic].[22] Many other racially

tinged Tea Party rally signs and comments have been cited as an example of an underling racial

nativism toward President Obama and other minority groups.[23] Individual organizers themselves

have been charged with racism as well. For example, Sonny Thomas, a Tea Party organizer in

Springboro, Ohio, posted to his Twitter page in April: "Illegals everywhere today! So many spics

makes me feel like a speck. Grrr. Wheres my gun!?"[24] Tea Party opponents also charge that a

racial undercurrent of Tea Party resentment is more implicit in nature. For example, Glenn

Beck, one of the most popular Tea Party supporters, whose television show is the most popular

of all the cable news networks combined, held a rally on the Washington Mall in August of

2010 on the 47th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech. Beck, in

promoting the event, was quoted as saying, "We are on the right side of history! We are on the

side of individual freedoms and liberties and, dammit, we will reclaim the civil rights

movement."[25] A group mostly composed of white men organizing under a banner of

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[20] Lydia Saad, "Tea Partiers are Fairly Mainstream in Their Demographics," *Gallup*, April 5, 2010
[21] New York Times/CBS Poll: National Survey of Tea Party Supporters," *New York Times* April 5-12 2010.
[22] David Weigel, "'N-Word' Sign Dogs Would=Be Tea Party Leader," *The Washington Independent* (2010).
[23] HuffPost Citizen Photojournalists, "10 Most Offensive Tea Party Signs and Extensive Photo Coverage from Tax Day Protests," *Huffington Post* (2009)
[24] Lawrence, Budd, "Racial Slur by Tea Party Leader Hits Home," *Dayton Daily News* (April 12, 2010).
[25] Will Bunch, "Glenn Beck Rewrites Civil Rights History," *CNN Opinion* (August 26th, 2010).

"reclaiming" civil rights undoubtedly caused outrage, if not raised eyebrows, among many Tea Party detractors.[26]

Questions of whether or not the Tea Party is racist or "Astroturf" are perhaps too simple to answer definitively. However, a better argument may be that the rhetoric of decentralization, the so-called "networked" approach to Tea Party organization and its loosely coherent platform allows for these more vociferous, antagonistically racist supporters to have more of a voice than other organizations. Interestingly, though, the three most important Tea Party organizations more or less promote similar agendas, most of which either explicitly or implicitly condemn racist or otherwise antagonistic behavior. The mission statement of *Tea Party Patriots* states: "The impetus for the Tea Party movement is excessive government spending and taxation. Our mission is to attract, educate, organize, and mobilize our fellow citizens to secure public policy consistent with our three core values of Fiscal Responsibility, Constitutionally Limited Government and Free Markets." The group also states that they are "a non-partisan grassroots organization of individuals united by our core values derived from the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution of the United States of America, and the Bill Of Rights as explained in the Federalist Papers."[27] *Freedom Works* has a more succinct mission in its masthead: "Lower taxes, less government, more freedom."[28] And finally, *Tea Party Express* likewise chastises the "Washington politicians" for failing the American people with its ineffective and destructive "bailouts, out-of-control deficit spending, government takeovers of sectors of the economy, Cap & Trade, government-run health care, and higher taxes! If you thought we were just going to quietly go away," they write, "or that this tea party movement

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[26] Dana Milbank, "Civil Rights' New 'Owner': Glenn Beck," *Washington Post* (August 29, 2010).
[27] "Tea Party Patriots Mission Statement and Core Values," http://teapartypatriots.org/Mission.aspx
[28] "About FreedomWorks: Our Mission," http://www.freedomworks.org/about/our-mission

would be just a passing fad, you were mistaken. We're taking our country back!"[29] A running theme in each of these mission statements or core sets of values is derision toward overspending and taxes, and stressing the imperativeness of a need to "go back" to a simpler political landscape, in which the government intervened, and the individual "freedom" of Americans was "encroached upon," less.

Nevertheless, the national Tea Party groups seem to be at odds with the supporters, attracting attention and criticism at the local level. For example, the Tea Party's broad ideological premises naturally invite a wide swath of supporters, which garners harsh critique and criticism from both sides of the political spectrum. The Tea Party umbrella gives a voice to fragmented political outsiders, like "footloose Ron Paul supporters, gold bugs, evangelicals, Atlas Shruggers, militiamen, strict Constitutionalists, swine-flu skeptics, scattered 9/11 "truthers," neo-"Birchers," and, of course, "birthers"—those who remained convinced that the President was a Muslim double agent born in Kenya."[30] Matt Lilla from the New York Review of Books is equally skeptical of the Tea Party, highlighting its "aimless" individualism and privileged disposition. He describes the Tea Party as a crude form of populism that is:

> Nourished by the same libertarian impulses that have unsettled American society for half
> a century now. Anarchistic like the Sixties, selfish like the Eighties, contradicting neither,
> it is estranged, aimless, and as juvenile as our new century. It appeals to petulant
> individuals convinced that they can do everything themselves if they are only left alone,

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[29] "Tea Party Express Homepage," http://www.teapartyexpress.org/home/
[30] McGrath, "The Movement."

and that others are conspiring to keep them from doing just that. This is the one threat

that will bring Americans into the streets.[31]

Lilla is very critical of the fervor with which Tea Party supporters flock to the streets to protest,

deriding the movement as "aimless" and a continuance of meaningless and ill-informed uprisings

throughout American history, falsely claiming the identity of victimhood, valuing autonomy and

individual choice over collective interests.

But despite what some may call an "aimless" disposition, one binding element of the Tea

Party is Internet-based communication and social media, its use of which form a particular

narrative about the role of technology in fostering democracy, liberty, and a 21st century protest

identity. Carender's "Liberty Belle" blog gained popularity with conservative talk shows and

main stream media, which accelerated her "Porkulus" and Tax Day Tea Party protests. Santali's

CNBC rant was, as McGrath noted, "highly YouTube-able, and all the more effective to the

alienated masses."[32] The Tea Party's heavy emphasis on internet-based communication

manifests itself on the local level, too. For instance, the Valdosta, Georgia Tea Party affiliate,

which hosted a Valdosta Tea Party Study Action group in July of 2010, a member gave a

presentation entitled "Technology is Changing how we Communicate." The presentation cited

Twitter and Facebook as democratizing forces that operate on a global level, as evident in the

Iranian election scandals of 2009 and the military coup in Honduras. Making the connection to

the Tea Party, the presentation made it clear that new media communication was useful for their

organization as well:

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[31] Mark Lilla, "The Tea Party Jacobins," *New York Review of Books* 57, no. 9 (2010).
[32] McGrath, "The Movement."

Obama and the liberals were able to fully utilize these methodologies during the 2008

campaigns and they did it well. Now conservatives and others are catching up. And I can

tell you from what I've seen, we're catching up an exponential rate. Other folks are

getting their messages together and out there quickly…[new media] allows you as an

individual to research and get ACTUAL information from people around the world in

real time and not rely on biased news sources.[33]

The presentation stresses two important factors about the Tea Party's new media communication:

1) that the Tea Party is in desperate need to "catch up" to the new media "methodologies" of

liberals and 2) that this method of communication is a more reliable way for *individuals* to

disseminate information and circumvent more unreliable mainstream media. Indeed, this notion,

that new media combats mainstream, biased media, is a recurring theme in populist rhetoric. As

noted in Chapter 1, such disparate populist leaders like Father Coughlin and Ross Perot both

show a disposition toward the media of the "common man," a rhetorical frame suggesting that

the technological medium is the ideal way to reach the "people."

As for the first point, that the local Tea Party leader felt the need to 'catch up" to liberal

new media engagement, it appears the Tea Party is attempting to do just that. A nonpartisan

voter registration site recently released a report that reveals Republicans are winning the "social

media war" by a landslide, with over four times as many Facebook fans than democrats, and five

times as many "followers" on Twitter. Conservative voices dominate the social media landscape,

the report suggests, with the Tea Party ranking 11th in popularity, as measured by the number of

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[33] Estel Powell, "Technology is Changing how we Communicate." Valdosta Tea Party.
http://valdostateaparty.com/?page_id=71

combined fans on both Facebook and Twitter.[34] Another study suggests that conservative blogs

communicate and interact with each other more frequently than liberal blogs, and "hyperlink" to

each other more frequently as well.[35] Ackland supported this conclusion, noting that

conservatives indeed have a more noticeable presence in cyberspace.[36] All of these points

notwithstanding, the feeling of needing to "catch up" to the new media tactics may suggest, as

one scholar has written, that there is nevertheless a lack of a centralized community hub of

conservative blogs that matches the influence of MoveOn.org or DailyKOS. So while

conservative activists and bloggers have more *presence* online, which is something Hill and

Hughes suggested even in the 1990s, the lack of centralization and a truly powerful community

"hub" of organizers may be preventing the kind of influence online that rivals liberal new media

engagement.[37]

The gap in a meaningful technological presence, despite widespread publicity, very much

informs the online fervor of Tea Party groups at the local level, a fervor on which national Tea

Party groups was eager to capitalize. This interrelationship between local Tea Party groups and

the efforts of powerful mainstream media and political action organizations indicates the

complexity of the Tea Party movement and its relationship to new media and by extension, the

identity of the movement. After Carrander's original protest and Santelli's infamous rant, Tea

Party publicity continued to grow, particularly through coverage from traditional media and

support from Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, and other big-name media pundits. The

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[34] "G.O.P. Winning Social Media Battle by Wide Margin," in *Exclusive Midterm Elections Report* (HeadCount, 2010)

[35] Lada Adamic and Natalie Glance. The political blogosphere and the 2004 U.S. election: Divided they blog. In *Proceedings of the 3rd International Workshop on Link Discovery*, pages 36–43, 2005.

[36] Robert Ackland, "Mapping the U.S. Political Blogosphere: Are Conservative Bloggers More Prominent?," *BlogTalk 2005* (2005).

[37] Dave Karpf, "Áll the Dogs that Didn't Bark: Understanding the Dearth of Online conservative Infrastructure" (Brown University, 2011); Hill and Hughes, *Cyberactivism*

aforementioned mission statements of the three most prominent Tea Party affiliated websites shows a concerted effort to construct a concise set of goals and a unified agenda in an effort to build more of an integrated community of new media activists. A brief history of these organizations shows that despite the populist vision and similar deterministic approaches to technology, in-group fighting, controversy, and other issues with Tea Party's new media engagement reveal significant limits to civic engagement and critical/rational debate.

Jenny Beth Martin, and Amy Kremer, both conservative bloggers from Georgia, and participants in Leahy's original conference call, created their own social networking site in March of 2009 called *Tea Party Patriots*, the first major national umbrella group for the Tea Party Movement. Originally a local start-up to publicize some of the first Tea Party protests, *Tea Party Patriots* now boasts one of the largest followings of Tea Party supporters. Upon registering as a member of Tea Party Patriots, the organization immediately requests that its members get involved. "If you are concerned with the current state of the American government," the page reads, "then now is the time to take action. *Tea Party Patriots* has numerous positions available for you to do your part to help save America." Below the opening statement are opportunities for volunteers to sign up to be journalists, state directors, local coordinators, national event organizers, web moderators, media consultants, friends and family coordinators, percolators, rapid response team members, DC rapid response team members, or to help with graphics and photography. *Tea Party Patriots* offers members the opportunity to view and sign up for Tea Party events around the country, join local affiliate groups by state, read and contribute their own blogs, buy Tea Party memorabilia, and there is even a "recommended reading" section designated for affiliated Tea Party books and pamphlets.

The main mechanism by which Tea Party Patriot members communicate is through the "Patriot Feed," a type of discussion board simultaneously linked to Twitter—posts made to the patriot feed can be broadcast to a particular member's Twitter account as well as the Tea Party board. The Patriot feed features a text box with the prompt: "What are you doing to preserve liberty?" along with a brief introductory "about" section for new posters:

> When people first arrive, they are standing up for the first time. They are not accustomed to having their voices heard. We don't want to scare them away! Their first post is not the time to overwhelm them with all the intensity and urgency of our current challenges. Save the urgent messages for an old timer who can handle it. The new people will see it too, if they stick around. They are HERE, at the Tea Party. That's a huge first step. Please welcome them in a way that acknowledges them for taking that step and lets them know that we're glad they're here! Thank you fellow Patriots, Je235[38]

What makes this introductory note interesting is the way the administrator "Je235" cautions Tea Party members not to "scare away" new members with "intensity" or "urgency" that the cause can generate (rightfully, the administrator suggests). The message is a note first to welcome new members with open arms. But the administrator is also trying to preemptively deter vitriolic discussion from taking place on the board, perhaps in a deliberate attempt to dissuade more vocal Tea Party members from rhetoric that would make new members who are "standing up for the first time" uneasy about joining a social movement with a reputation for heated rhetoric, or to restrict debate on the board only to topics that the moderator deems valuable (a restriction on democratic exchange I talk more about in Chapter 3). The other interesting part of the "Patriot Feed" is the striking parallelism with Twitter, the social networking service that asks its users

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[38] "About the Tea Party Patriots Patriot Feed," http://www.teapartypatriots.org/status.aspx#feedInfo

"What are you doing?" as its simple prompt. *Tea Party Patriots* offer an addendum to Twitter's initial question, adding "to preserve liberty" at the end, suggesting that social networking and micro-blogging are useful tools for spreading liberty. Also, the notion that people need to publicize what they are doing to preserve liberty indicates that liberty itself is being "taken away," all specific examples of a distinct populist rhetorical framework about the uses and goals of technology.

And then there is *Tea Party Express,* an organization out of California run by republican consultants Joe Wierzbicki and Sal Russo, who were "flabbergasted" at the massive size of a Tea Party rally in Sacramento, and decided to form their own cross-country bus tour to spread the Tea Party's message of fiscal conservatism and outrage at the Obama administration's mishandling of the economy. *Tea Party Express* is a project from the political action group known as "Our Country Deserves Better," founded by Russo's political consultant firm "Russo Marsh and Rogers." Russo, the principal organizer of *Tea Party Express*, was a former aide to Ronald Reagan as well as former New York governor George Pataki. According to the New York Times, *Tea Party Express* is "now the single biggest independent supporter of Tea Party candidates, raising more than $5.2 million in donations since January, 2009."[39] Wierzbicki and Russo devised the concept of the *Tea Party Express* in the days after the "Tax Day Tea Parties" of 2009, where they deliberately planned to capitalize on the Tea Party's success by organizing a nation-wide bus tour that makes stops in the cities of "big spender" congressmen and congresswomen who were in need of being ousted by Tea Party candidates. This campaigning tool also raised significant amounts of money. For instance, *Tea Party Express* spent over $350,000, Zernike writes, on the campaign for Republican Scott Brown in his 2010 victory over

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[39] Janie Lorber et al., "G.O.P. Insider Fuels Tea Party and Suspicion," *New York Times* (2010).

Martha Coakley in the Massachusetts senate race, nearly $1 million in Nevada in support of Tea

party candidate Sharron Angle in 2010..[40] *Tea Party Express* soon raised close to 7 million

dollars for the cause.[41]

From the beginning, *Tea Party Express* involved itself in political candidates, organizing

with *FreedomWorks* and other Tea Party groups to raise money for Republican campaigns that

aligned with Tea Party goals. The *Tea Party Express* differs from *Tea Party Patriots* in this

regard, as the latter strove to remain an ideological, issues-based movement with no delineated

leaders, while the former wanted to raise money to help plan political campaigns. "Our local

coordinators told us they didn't want us to endorse candidates," Beth Martin of *Tea Party*

Patriots told the *Wall Street Journal.* And when the *Tea Party Express* invited the *Tea Party*

Patriots on their first national bus tour, a rift arouse between the two founders of *Tea Party*

Patriots, as Kremer envisioned an organization involved in political campaigning, and Martin a

grassroots movement devoted to nonpartisanship and issues-based activism. "Ultimately,

[Kremer] rode on the tour. There she began to find her voice in front of crowds, and liked it."

This ultimately led to the division between *Tea Party Patriots* and *Tea Party Express*, with

Kremer being voted off the board of *Tea Party Patriots* and later accepting a job at *Tea Party*

Express as their national coordinator.[42]

The emphasis on raising money in support of Tea Party candidates contradicts some other

Tea Party group philosophies. Mark Meckler, spokesman of the *Tea Party Patriots,* told the *New*

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[40] Zernike, *Boiling Mad*, 90.

[41] Blackmon et al, "Birth of a Movement." *Wall Street Journal*

[42] Blackmon et al, "Birth of a Movement." *Wall Street Journal.* Actually, the incident which prompted Kremer's removal from the *Tea Party Patriots* board was a bit more complicated. Just before the first Tea Party Express tour, Florida physician and Tea Party activist David McKalip circulated through email a photograph that depicted Obama as a "tribal witch doctor with a bone through his nose." Kremer was quick to defend the physician, writing to him in his defense, "I can assure you of one thing and that is we will protect our own. We all have your back, my friend." Kremer was eventually voted off the board out of protest, and eventually took a position at *Tea Party Express.*

York Times that the *Tea Party Express* is "the antithesis to what the Tea Party Movement is about" because they are a "classic top-down organization run by G.O.P. consultants."[43] While *Tea Party Express* focuses more of its attention on advertising, which divided prominent members of the Tea Party and attracted others, one thing is clear: the group indeed raises a lot of money, produces a lot of advertising, and communicates its messages to thousands.[44] Their parent website OurCountryDeservesBetter.com, states its core values of leading a "fight" to ensure "lower taxes, smaller government, strong national defense, and respect for the strength of the family as the core of a strong America." Moreover, "Our nation's future is at stake" the "About Us" section of Our Country Deserves Better PAC reads, and it is up to the people to "stand up to Barack Obama."[45] *Tea Party Express*, the largest campaign of Our Country Deserves Better PAC, touts a similar message on its website, TeaPartyExpress.org, but with fewer opportunities to get involved than the *Tea Party Patriots* site. At TeaPartyExpress.org, the site offers opportunities to view tour schedules, a list of "targets" and "endorsements" of various candidates for senate and the house, a selection of news coverage and video blogs from political commentators, a blog site, and a section to donate money and buy *Tea Party Express* merchandise. The section to create your own blog is open to everyone with Google accounts, but the profile views and user comments are small and, at present, have not been updated for nearly a year.[46]

For an organization with such stock in campaigning and advertising, the technological muscle seems less invested in the impact of individuals on the grassroots level and more on the larger mission of mobilization garnered by politicians with the goal of winning elections.

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[43] Blackmon et al, "Birth of a Movement." *Wall Street Journal*
[44] Matea Gold, "Sal Russo, the Firepower behind the 'Tea Party,'" *Los Angeles Times* (2010)
[45] "Our Country Deserves Better PAC About Us," http://www.ourcountrydeservesbetter.com/about-us/
[46] "Tea Party Express Blog," http://teapartyexpressblog.blogspot.com/

According to a September, 2009 CNN Article, rather than mobilizing from the bottom-up, *Tea Party Express* uses its prowess for executing larger goals of defeating Obama's health care reform bill, taking back the House and Senate in 2010, and winning the White house in 2012. Wierzbicki, referred to in the article as the "architect" of the Tea Party Movement, a designation to which Carender and others may object, suggested that it is only after the 2010 elections that a national leader may need to surface: "From then to 2012 is probably the period of time when you'll find a big national leader that will emerge that the majority of the people in this movement will feel comfortable following," he told CNN. [47] Until then, intense lobbying and campaigning or specific candidates sympathetic to Tea Party issues will suffice.

Though more targeted and precise in its mission, *Tea Party Express* nevertheless has a similar frame with regard to new media. *Tea Party Express* uses Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and discussion boards to garner support, but less investment is made in the use of technology to organize and *communicate* with each other and more investment in the technology itself to *influence* others. Also, online support of *Tea Party Express* is significantly lower than *Tea Party Patriots*, with nearly 8,000 followers on Twitter and under 400 fans on Facebook, while *Tea Party Patriots* boasts nearly 8,400 followers and Twitter and over 560,000 fans on Facebook. The dual existence of political factions within particular social movements, with one having an influence in campaigns and elected officials, and the other on mere advocacy, is common.[48] But here, new media engagement appears to happen more frequently and with greater frequency in the advocacy domain of social movements than the political.

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[47] Jim Spellman, "Tea Party Movement Has Anger, No Dominant Leaders," CNN Politics, http://articles.cnn.com/2009-09-12/politics/tea.party.express_1_tea-party-movement-bus-tour-white-house?_s=PM:POLITICS

[48] David S. Meyer, *The Politics of Protest: Social Movements in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

A political action committee founded in 1984, *Freedomworks* began working with the *Tea Party Patriots* and other affiliated Tea Party groups in an attempt to blend the Tea Party message with their more seasoned libertarian views they had been unsuccessfully pushing for the past several years. Zernike writes, "While many groups on the right moved to seize the Tea Party energy as it grew in the early months of 2009, it was *FreedomWorks* that moved first and most aggressively. And very quickly, the *FreedomWorks* ideology became the Tea Party ideology."[49] Zernike writes that *FreedomWorks* was responsible for a lot of the streamlining of the Tea Party's digital activism and social mobilization on a much larger scale. *FreedomWorks* staff member Brendan Steinhauser drove the Tea Part Movement forward by posting tips and instructions for holding Tea Party protests on a website set up within hours of Santelli's rant called IAmWithRick.com, which included instructions for creating Facebook pages, linking other blogs, requesting publicity from talk radio and the media, and keeping lists of email addresses to grow the movement. *FreedomWorks* and *Tea Party Patriots* worked very closely, forming a "broad nationwide coalition with local affiliates—sometimes dozens of them—in every state," Zernike writes. "Anyone who Googled "Tea Party" would find that the *Tea Party Patriots* website was the first to pop up, with a link to locate a local Tea Party group, and a how-to for starting your own."[50] *Freedomworks* and *Tea Party Patriots* worked so closely together, in fact, that others have alleged the two organizations are not separate from each other at all. *Rolling Stone* reported that after orchestrating the original Tea Party protests in April of 2009, *FreedomWorks* handed over the reins to *Tea Party Patriots* in name, but still call the shots within both organizations. *Rolling Stone* cites emails on a private listserv that indicate *FreedomWorks*

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[49] Zernike, *Boiling Mad*, 35.
[50] Zernike, *Boiling Mad,* 40.

vetoed a decision to change a *Tea Party Patriots* logo, as well as circulating a handbook for disrupting town hall meetings for "spontaneous" and angry Tea Party protests.[51]

With almost 600,000 Facebook fans, and over 12,000 fans on Twitter, *FreedomWorks* indeed stakes a significant claim on the social media landscape. Their own website offers far greater avenues for membership engagement than *Tea Party Patriots* or *Tea Party Express*. The "About" page reads that *FreedomWorks* "recruits, educates, trains and mobilizes millions of volunteer activists to fight for less government, lower taxes, and more freedom."[52] *FreedomWorks* provides an extensive list of issues talking-points and stances, from issues of privacy to healthcare to border security. Notable are the "Technology Policy" talking points, which support less taxes and government regulation on technological innovation. These restrictions, they argue, "pigeonhold companies—especially telephone companies, and make it difficult for them to react in a dynamic marketplace." Moreover, technological innovations in communications technology, they argue, need to be "first to the market with their idea or concept."[53] These positions align distinctly with *FreedomWorks'* longstanding libertarian position on economics, but moreover suggest an understanding of technological innovation as synonymous with progress, democracy and liberty. A related blog post on technology (an intricate sidebar of related blogs that comes up when you click on any of the issues) suggests that the idea of "an internet kill switch" similar to the events in Egypt in early 2011 when the Egyptian government barred Egypt's access to the internet, is a possible reality with the United States. An internet kill switch in the United States, the blog reads, "Could be used to suppress the speech and freedom of assembly of the very people the Kill Switch legislation supposedly

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[51] Tim Dickinson, "The Lie Machine," *Rolling Stone,* no. 1088 (2009).
[52] "About FreedomWorks," http://www.freedomworks.org/about/about-freedomworks
[53] "FreedomWorks Issues: Technology Policy," http://www.freedomworks.org/issues/communications-tech

protects."[54] *FreedomWorks* also condemns political regulation of the internet, calling

"unlawful…ineffective and detrimental to the free market."[55]

In addition to the "About" page, *FreedomWorks* offers an impressive list of other "issue

analyses", "top ten" lists, a social networking site called "Freedom Connecter" which allows

members to find activists within their individual districts and zip code. The website is

significantly wired to social media like Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, Digg, and Yahoo,

suggesting that new media is a central component to the success and dissemination of

FreedomWorks rhetoric. Key words of Freedom, Liberty, combined with the intricate and

smooth new media platform suggests a correlation between those values and the wired new

media positionality of the website. Everything you read or click at the *FreedomWorks* website

can be linked to a social media platform. Shelly Goode, blogger at *FreedomWorks,* writing

about her experiences at the Conservative Political Action Conference, or CPAC, an annual

political conference attended by top conservative activists from around the country, suggests that

the need to "catch up" to the new media ecologies of the left is a thing of the past: "We have

finally caught up to the left's ability to harness New Media," she writes. "This fact confirmed

my theory and provided me with a new hope for the future of freedom; we will win because we

have mastered New Media."[56]

What makes *FreedomWorks* valuable in terms of studying Tea Party new media

engagement is the close, if not ambiguous relationship between the movement and the

foundation. The early protests in Seattle and other scattered protests around the country did not

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[54] Nan Swift, "Still Think an Internet Kill Switch is a Good Idea?", FreedomWorks
http://www.freedomworks.org/blog/nswift/still-think-an-internet-kill-switch-is-a-good-idea
[55] Wayne Brough, "New FCC Plan a Threat to Internet Freedom." FreedomWorks,
http://www.freedomworks.org/press-releases/new-fcc-plan-a-threat-to-internet-freedom
[56] Shelly Goode. "CPAC 2011: Highlights from the Intern." Freedomworks,
http://www.freedomworks.org/blog/sgoode/cpac-2011-highlights-from-the-intern

become unified around a "Tea Party" theme until the Santelli "rant" and the massive

mobilization efforts of *FreedomWorks* took effect. Paul Krugman wrote in the onset of the Tea

Party protests that the "tea parties don't represent a spontaneous outpouring of public sentiment.

They're AstroTurf (fake grass roots) events, manufactured by the usual suspects. In particular, a

key role is being played by *FreedomWorks,* an organization run by Richard Armey, the former

House majority leader, and supported by the usual group of right-wing billionaires. And the

parties are, of course, being promoted heavily by Fox News."[57] However, Jon Henke, founding

editor of *The Next Right*, a political strategy and new media activism site for conservative

bloggers, argues instead that what *FreedomWorks* and various other organizations are doing is

not "Astroturf any more than the anti-war protests of some years back were Astroturf because

ANSWER and Moveon.org helped organize people around those events. Astroturfing is paid

activism by an organization; it is *not* genuine grassroots activism that funded groups are simply

helping to organize."[58] Indeed, there is much to the relationship between *FreedomWorks and*

Tea Party Patriots, and whether or not the Tea Party movement is actually "AstroTurf" is

perhaps beyond the scope of this chapter. I present the arguments here rather to show the close

linkage between the two and the new media practices prevalent in each organization in relation

to Tea Party causes.

The connection between the conference calls, blogs, social media, "digital activism" and

online distribution of "talking points" and "issues" along with opportunities within a national

umbrella to connect with local activists indicates a specific attitude toward new media. Meckler,

of *Tea Party Patriots*, considers the tactics of the conference calls and other new media practices

as "crowd sourcing" and "open-source politics" in which the "code" (Santelli's rant being the

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[57] Paul Krugman, "Tea Parties Forever," *New York Times* (2009).
[58] John Henke, "The Tea Party Protests," *The Next Right* (2009)

"source code") can be modified by anyone to push the movement forward. Jonathan Rauch has

called this type of organization "hivelike," and a deliberate intention to "rewrite the rule book for

political organizing." Describing the Tea Party as a decentralized network, run out of living

rooms and laptops, coordinated through horizontal networks rather than hierarchical structures,

Rauch suggests that the Tea Party understands their movement much like the internet: "radically

decentralized networks—everything from illicit music-sharing systems to Wikipedia—can direct

resources and adapt ("mutate") far faster than corporations can."[59] This form of organization is

nothing new, and actually resembles tactics of the left historically, more than the right, except

now the discourse is being created online which make the movement function on a much larger

scale.[60] The goal of the Tea Party, Rauch asserts, then, is more than just the ambitions of

changing political seats and ousting incumbents. "No, the real point is to change the country's

political culture, bending it back toward the self-reliant, liberty-guarding instincts of the

Founders' era. Winning key congressional seats won't do that, nor will endorsing candidates."[61]

While Rauch is more optimistic about the limited scope and horizontal organizing of the

Tea Party movement, as the relationship with *FreedomWorks,* FOX News (as Zerniki and Lapore

highlight), and extremely influential and wealthy backers illustrate, it is nevertheless clear that

new media organization is a crucial element of the Tea Party movement. *Tea Party Patriots* use

of social networking, *Tea Party Express*'s use of YouTube, and the convergence of "spreadable

media," and *FreedomWorks'* heavy emphasis on blogs and Facebook—all show a heavy reliance

and a narrative about technology that reflects a prevailing attitude that technology is synonymous

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[59] Jonathan Rauch, "How Tea Party Organizes without Leaders," *National Journal* (2010). Tea Party members routinely cite *The Starfish and the Spider*, a business book by Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, that reinforces the idea of horizontal networks, or "starfish organizations" without a central "brain" like a spider. The metaphor suggests that starfish organizations are harder to kill, easier to spread, and has been co-opted by many in the Tea Party Movement.
[60] Meyer, *The Politics of Protest*
[61] Rauch, "Leaders."

with liberty. This is explicitly clear in *FreedomWorks* online rhetoric, and implicitly evident in *Tea Party Patriots.* However, *Tea Party Express,* with its heavy focus on top-down organization and its straight-line advocacy/political action mission, has less of a new media influence at the grassroots level and more of a influence from the vantage point of the top, such that money and media "trickle down" to influence its members, which causes concern and even distaste among other Tea Party groups. However, *Tea Party Express* nevertheless exhibits a tactical and philosophical approach to new media's vital role in political mobilization.

At any rate, it seems each group understands that the political "battle" cannot be won without successful utilization of new media, as each organization would indicate. But the complex relationship between grassroots activism, corporate influence and the mass media is not to be ignored in "winning the battle" either. The Tea Party websites show how the Tea Party constitutes itself as a movement situated between mass media and the "projects of the nation state," which manifests itself in interesting ways, from the group in-fighting to the tactics of mobilization and the spreading of information, to the social networking opportunities.[62] And if utilization of new media is indicative of more "freedom" and "liberty," does it indeed contribute to a better "democracy," as the Tea Party sites would indicate? The next chapter addresses this question through a theoretical construct of an effective democracy, the public sphere, to analyze these claims.

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[62] Arjon Appadurai and Carol A. Breckenridge, "Public Modernity in India," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World,* ed. C. A. Breckenridge. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 4-5

Chapter 3: The Tea Party, New Media, and the Public Sphere

At the heart of any sort of reflection on "the public sphere" is the distinction between the public and the private. The two constructions are intrinsically linked to one another, and their rise and continued development throughout the modern era are foundational to the rise of democracy. As Craig Calhoun has noted, the distinction between the private lives of individuals and the various types of communications that link a connected "public" have a profound impact on society. The stakes, as Calhoun mentions, are not just academic but reveal insights into social movements, legal arguments, healthcare, surveillance, the media, and the nature of communication in general. Discussing who can (or should) benefit from public goods or who is included in a "public" debate or how a sense of "privacy" is invaded—all include a tacit distinction between what is considered public and what is considered private. Thus, envisioning a successful democracy through the metaphor of "the public sphere," which, as Calhoun writes, is "shorthand for speaking about all these issues and their interconnections," then the confusing and often contested nature of the "public sphere" is valuable, especially in light of the relationship between Tea Party and their use of/rhetoric about new media.[1]

One reason the Tea Party Movement a valuable scholarly project is how its web-based communication practices provide a critique of the public sphere. When scholars theorize about the internet, they commonly laud its potential for fostering democracy, solidarity, and rational-critical debate among a public that is political but separate from the state—in other words, that the internet is a helpful tool for realizing the ideal vision of a public sphere. However, discussion on the internet can also lead to greater social fragmentation and partisanship, impeding a democratic public sphere from flourishing in a truly open space. The online Tea

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[1] Calhoun, Craig, Presentation to the Ford Foundation. 7 February 2005

Party groups do not fit neatly anywhere into this spectrum, for one can argue that they function as an activist counterpublic reacting against the public sphere. On the other hand, one can also argue that the reach of the Tea Party's influence has bled into the mainstream so profoundly as to alter elections, influence debates, and produce cultural tropes—staking a significant claim on the popular and political cultural landscape. The media obviously has a hand in the Tea Party's ascent as well, reporting on every relevant Tweet, Facebook post, or protest organized by online Tea Party activists, which bolsters Tea Party coverage and support and challenges Tea Party rhetoric that depicts the mainstream media as unreliable and malicious.

Thus my questions center on the capabilities of new media with regard to democratic exchange. How does political communication in an online environment influence the public sphere? And, by extension, how do the Tea Party's online activities contribute to this public sphere? Is the Tea Party's form of online communication actually democratic, as their rhetoric and appraisal of new media would indicate? This chapter summarizes ongoing conversations about the public sphere, a theory first introduced by Jurgen Habermas, with particular attention to how the Internet and the public sphere interact with one another. I anchor my argument in the significant public sphere literature, addressing both the cyber-utopians, or rather, those who tout the internet as a harbinger of a new era in democracy, as well as the critics of online communication. Taking the strains of literature into account, I argue that while many studies on political communication and new media stress progressive, liberal online movements to argue for enhanced democracy online, the online makeup of the Tea Party movement complicates traditional, more optimistic assessments of the internet and the public sphere. Moreover, while the metaphor of a public sphere is a useful goal for a democratic society, much of the communication online, with the Tea Party as a specific example, reflects social fragmentation

and "digital islands" of communication, a reality that challenges readings of the inherently

democratic nature of new media, which I call a form of technological determinism.

The term "public sphere" was popularized by historian Jurgen Habermas to describe a

domain of society in which citizens unrelated to the nation state came together under a banner of

common interests to deliberate political matters. In the influential study *The Structural

Transformation of the Public Sphere,* Habermas traces the rise and fall of public opinion in early

modern Europe in which new "publics" communicated their common interests to the state

through "forms of legally guaranteed free speech, free press, and free assembly, and eventually

through the parliamentary institutions of representative government." The public sphere emerged

in early modern Europe as an "arena," or a discursive realm in which private citizens came

together to form a public and engage in an "ideal of unrestricted rational discussion of public

matters."[2] The public sphere declined, Habermas contends, when it became "the court before

which public prestige can be displayed—rather than *in* which critical debate is carried on."[3] In

other words, throughout the 20th century, the rise of mass media negatively affected the public

sphere in such a way as to stifle critical debate in favor of "public prestige." "Vertical"

communication between mass media and various institutions gradually subsumed "horizontal"

communication between publics *across* networks, such that "the space for participatory

communication [was] severely constricted." This foundational theory underscores the value of

democratic public spaces as checks upon institutional power. [4]

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[2] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* no. 25/26 (1990), 58-59.

[3] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), 200-201.

[4] John Downey and Natalie Fenton, "New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere" *New Media and Society* 5 no. 2 (2003), 186.

However, Habermas's theory was subject to extensive critique and criticism.[5] Nancy Fraser points out the inherent exclusions of Habermas's romanticized version of the public sphere, noting the contemporaneous existence of several competing publics: "the bourgeois public was never *the* public," she writes. "On the contrary, virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, and working class publics." The existence of alternative public spheres, moreover, "contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behavior and alternative norms of public speech."[6] In questioning the notion of a homogenous, classless public sphere, Fraser casts light onto "counterpublics" that invent new language and counter-discourses to reconceptualize specific needs of minority identities. For example, Fraser highlights the "late U.S. feminist subaltern counterpublic, with its variegated array of journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals, and local meeting places," to show how a counter public sphere recasts the needs of the "public" to question bourgeois assumptions.[7] Multiple publics, then, are *preferable* to one comprehensive notion of a public sphere, since participating in a public sphere is at once a political proposition as well as an expression of cultural identity, and "filtering diverse rhetoric and stylistic norms through a single, overarching lens" would privilege one group over another, diminishing social equality.[8]

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[5] It should also be mentioned that Habermas himself revised much of his theory over his career to accommodate criticism, especially in regard to recognizing the existence of alternative public spheres that challenge domination. In Downey and Fenton, "New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere," 188.
[6] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 61.
[7] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 67.
[8] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 69.

Michael Warner pushes Fraser's argument further by suggesting that feminist counterpublics are not just "counter" in that their circulation of discourse is oppositional to dominant public discourse. Rather, Warner writes that feminist counterpublics are distinguished by more than just "its program of reform." Counterpublics are "counter" *also* in their "awareness of [their] subordinate status," with specific codes and forms of address that are "socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse; ordinary people are presumed to not want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene." Warner highlights the rise of a queer counterpublic as an example of a discourse that is not merely reformatory in nature; rather, it is a counterpublic also because "its participants are addressed in a counterpublic way." Warner's version of counterpublics is important because it suggests counterpublics as not only oppositional but also as imagining different subjectivities in the way they constitute and fashion themselves in terms of "discursive circulation as strangers as a social entity." In this way counterpublics are spaces in which their meaning-making is "transformative, not replicative merely."[9]

With the advent of the Internet and online communication technologies, the relevance of counterpublicity with regard to political communication and the formation of new subjective experiences are even more prescient. The existence of other counterpublic spheres complicates the notion that there was one monolithic lens through which the "public" formed opinions, and moreover invites the inclusion of the Internet into the conversation, due to the Internet's commonly regarded "alternative" forms, and because, as Peter Dahlgren suggests, the Internet is where we find "the real vanguard of the public sphere, the domain where the most intense developments are taking place—what we might call the cyber-transformation of the public

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[9] Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics" Quarterly Journal of Speech 88, no. 4 (2002), 84-88.

sphere."[10] For instance, in her study of nearly 300 political discussion groups on the internet,

Zizi Papacharissi found that conversations online are mostly civil (while not necessarily polite),

and moreover, "newsgroup postings resemble the political discussions that take place among

friends in pubs or coffeehouses," which resembles the public sphere frame put forth by

Habermas. However, political discussion online often took on very specific topics, which aligns

with Fraser's conception of multiple coexisting counter-public spheres. Papacharissi writes:

"These newsgroups form several mini-public spheres that are not equally powerful, and serve to

articulate diverse collective interests and concerns."[11]

Dahlgren addresses whether these alternative online forms of political communication

can interfere with the dominant public sphere to inspire critical debate by highlighting two

distinct and overlapping domains of the public sphere: the "advocacy" domain the "common"

domain.[12] John Downey and Natalie Fenton incorporate this conceptualization of the online

public sphere to suggest that the way in which the public sphere interacts with other

counterpublic spheres is integral to understanding "the relationship between media representation

and social change." They note that by separating the public sphere into the domains of a general,

universalized "public," and an "advocacy" sector that uses the dominant media comprised of

"interest groups, movements, organizations and networks," the public sphere can be considered

more in terms of "the dominators" and "also the public sphere of the dominated."[13] Downey and

Fenton discuss how the two spheres interact and overlap to understand how counter-publicity

can, under the right circumstances, "break through" into the common domain.[14]

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[10] Peter Dahlgren, "Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation," *Political Communication* 22 no. 2 (2005), 151.
[11] Zizi Papacharissi, "Democracy Online: Civility, Politeness, and the Democratic Potential of Online Political Discussion Groups," *New Media and Society* 6, no. 2 (2004), 280.
[12] Dahlgren, "Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication," 151.
[13] Downey and Fenton, "New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere," 188.
[14] Downey and Fenton, "New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere," 200.

As discussed in chapter 2, The Tea Party Movement's digital genesis is a unique aspect of the movement, which reveals new and important insights into notions of the public sphere. Dahlgren, incorporating Habermas's concept of the public sphere, extrapolates the role of online political discussion in the creation and sustenance of democracy. When discussing online public spheres, Dahlgren notes the "impressive communicative heterogeneity" in the Internet's contribution to the public sphere containing multiple voices of agency, but notes the possibility of fragmentation and public spheres veering off toward "islands of political communication," which arises from the "mushrooming of advocacy groups and the array of issues available." He continues: "While traditional online party politics and forms of e-government may serve as centripetal forces to such fragmentation, the trend is clearly in the direction of increasing dispersion."[15] In the context of what he calls the "destabilization" of political communication in late modern societies, within particular activist/advocacy domains of online public spheres, there is, he writes, "modest potential for making a contribution to the renewal, growth, and strengthening of civic cultures among many citizens who feel distanced from the arenas of formal party politics." Dahlgren does admit, however, that citizens engaged in civil activities online are complex and nuanced, and due to the "wide variety of political colors in this sector," not all activists and groups should "be considered democratic and progressive."[16] Dahlgren's conclusion is optimistic, yet cautious: "The values and commitments espoused by these groups are largely very democratic," he writes:

> And can be seen as a counter to some of the very undemocratic values associated with the prevailing neo-liberal order. They are able to diffuse their knowledge through the Net to each other, and on occasion their efforts are picked up by journalists on the Net or in the

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[15] Dahlgren, "Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication," 152.
[16] Dahlgren., "Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication," 159.

traditional mass media and become disseminated further to wider publics…The affinities demonstrated by many of these groups foster a spirit of cooperation between various organizations and their loosely defined memberships, contributing to the formation of a broader counter political culture…Via the identities that are developed by participation, people are exploring new ways of being citizens and doing politics."[17]

The contemporary Tea Party movement both aligns with and complicates Dahlgren's assessment of civic engagement in an online public sphere. What began as an advocacy group, the Tea Party represents Dahlgren's assessment of a fragmented political island of communication comprised citizens who feel unrepresented or "distanced from the arenas of formal party politics," but nevertheless, their influence has broken through, so to speak, from the advocacy domain into something resembling a broader political culture. The Tea Party sees itself as a counter public, providing frequent protestations to "get our voice heard" and other tropes that indicate a perceived subaltern status. For instance, a local *Tea Party Patriots* affiliate in Rhode Island advertises in its "About Us" section that their voices will "be heard" when raised in unision: "Nothing less than the futures of Rhode Island and America is at Stake. We are Americans. We have a rich history full of strength and resolve. Improvise, adapt, and overcome!"[18] Here, in addition to the populist tropes mentioned in Chapter 1, is an implicit identification with a public unrepresented, disenfranchised, and in need of the "strength" to "overcome" the oppression of the current political climate.

However, the Tea Party has a *significant* influence and massive political presence, partially due to social media websites and their use of new media communication technologies.

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[17] Dahlgren, "Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication," 159.
[18] "Cumberland Tea Party: About Us," http://www.teapartypatriots.org/GroupNew/29fe0144-e8a8-47e4-b750-80f153f4292d/Cumberland_Tea_Party.

Digital media is a fundamental component of their organizational strategies. The real question, though, focuses on the significance of their new media use with regard to the public sphere. Are Tea Party members actually creating and sustaining an alternative public sphere? Or are they replicating the dominant discourse in American political communication—the status quo—in the guise of dissent and revolution against tyranny? Part of the massive success and influence of the Tea Party, especially in the midterm elections of 2010, was in their ability to "[connect] local groups to the national conversation," and as noted in Chapter 2, social media usage and well-funded organizations like *FreedomWorks* and *Tea Party Express* offer websites and training seminars for the usage of social media in more "effective" grassroots activism.[19] And, as Dahlgren optimistically notes above, sometimes online discussion can foster cooperation across groups and contribute to a broader alternative political culture. But there is a difference between the "small but determined groups" Dahlgren mentions when discussing the grassroots activism tactics of the Civil Rights Movement with the civic engagement practices of the Tea Party. The Tea Party incorporates much of the rhetoric of Civil Rights both on and offline in an effort to bolster support of their base as well as to appeal to those who understand the current state of America as one in turmoil, its leadership oppressive, and the republic in need of restoration and reclamation.[20] This suggests that the ease with which political rhetoric can spread and influence others due to social media tactics may be detrimental to democracy, even in the guise of it.[21]

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[19] Corban Hiar, "How the Tea Party Utilized Digital Media to Gain Power" PBS.org
http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2010/10/how-the-tea-party-utilized-digital-media-to-gain-power301.html
[20] Christopher Hitchens, "White Fright: Glenn Beck's Rally was Large, Vague, Moist, and Undirected—the *Waterworld* of Self-Pity" *Slate.com* Aug. 30, 2010 http://www.slate.com/id/2265515/. Glenn Beck's rally at the Washington Mall in 2009, which was on the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a Dream Speech" drew much controversy, as indicated by Hitchens' editorial. However, the Tea Party claimed no foul play, arguing instead that the rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement argues for equal rights for *all* of humanity, not just the African American community, which lead Hitchens to suggest that "in a rather curious and confused way, some white people are starting almost to think like a minority, even like a persecuted one."
[21] Michael Lee, "The Populist Chameleon," as mentioned in Chapter 1, reveals how easily "restorationism" rhetoric can spread across the political spectrum. Lee highlights the distinctive rhetorical tropes of populism, understanding

Skeptical of the notion that coexisting counterpublic spheres can enhance democracy,

Downey and Fenton cite Habermas's similar doubts as to whether or not these technologies

could function as an expansion of an inclusive public sphere, writing that the growth of new

information and communication technology contributes to the "fragmentation of civil society, as

well as political mobilization and participation." Moreover, they write that "greater pluralism,"

or rather, multiple and competing voices of dissent in the public sphere, "may be regarded as a

risk for deliberative democracy rather than its savior."[22] Another important part of Downey and

Fenton's argument is that when considering the advocacy domains of the public sphere and their

potential for democracy and civic engagement, "it is important not to fall prey to a Left cultural

romanticism that sees all forms of grassroots cultural expression as "resistance."[23] The existence

of multiple and competing counterpublics, for Downey and Fenton, does not necessarily mean

enhanced democracy and greater corporation across ideologies. "Unless powerful alliances are

made," they write, "the oppositional energy of individual groups and subcultures is more often

neutralized in the marketplace of multicultural pluralism, or polarized in a reductive competition

of victimizations."[24]

Read in this way, much of the rhetoric used on Tea Party websites is "neutralized" in its

oppositionality and resistance to critical/rational debate. For instance, in the "Frequently Asked

Questions" section of the *Tea Party Nation*, a for profit company that also hosts a social

networking site for its members, states: "Tea Party Nation is for principled, patriotic debate and

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it as a "chameleonic political discourse," and "a pattern of argument reverberating through U.S. history." Moreover, Lee writes, "populists of all political stripes have used this language to disparage the shielding of concentrated power in the space between citizens and their government," which "explains why radical political reformers of both the left and the right have found it a congenial language with which to challenge the status quo." This all demonstrates the "shared political skepticism and uncompromising style of otherwise dissimilar rhetorics" (373).

[22] Downey and Fenton, "New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere."189.

[23] Downey and Fenton, "New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere."189.193.

[24] Downey and Fenton, "New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere."189.194.

organization against liberal ideology and agenda. It is not a forum for personal attacks, lewd or profane language, racism, bigotry, anti-Semitism or calls for militant uprisings or for the formation of a third party." Rhetorically, the Tea Party Nation rules call for "debate" and exchange on the issues that refrain from rhetoric reinforcing racism and other types of speech that may stifle rational/critical debate. However, further down the paragraph, the rules get more specific: "Tea Party Nation exists largely for the discussion and dissemination of our goals, as stated above. Extensive use of non-English may be viewed as exclusionary, an attempt to subvert or divert such open discussion, and may be dealt with summarily." While publically decrying racism, the debate rules on the *Tea Party Nation* forum call for the use of English as the primary language of communication, while any alternative languages are viewed as "exclusionary" or "subversive." Moreover, the end of the section includes a note addressed to what they label "liberal trolls" ("troll" is internet jargon for one who posts instigative comments on message boards or blogs to provoke dissent, disruptions, and mischief):

> Note to Prospective Liberal Trolls: TPN does not tolerate liberal trolls. If your sole purpose is to join this site in order to disrupt the flow of constructive dialogue against liberalism, you will find your time here very short. You can and will be banned for *being* a liberal. If you wish to debate the virtues of liberalism (as though there were such a thing), there are many other sites on the web who will tolerate you. TPN is not one of those sites (emphasis added)

Tea Party Nation makes it very clear that they are there to debate issues only upon which they agree, issues categorized specifically within their ideological boundaries, which fall somewhere between "God given Individual Freedoms written out by the Founding Fathers…Limited Government, Free Speech, the Second Amendment, our Military, Secure Borders and our

Country." Read in a certain way, indeed the *Tea Party Nation* is resisting *something*, but is it power? The very rules of debate by which the *Tea Party Nation* operate function not as a "discussion" or a space for enhancing a "principled, patriotic debate," among a diverse public, but rather in terms of what Dahlgren describes as an "island of political communication" that contributes instead to fragmentation, isolation, and nativism. [25]

Other scholars fall into the trap that Downey and Fenton describe of characterizing new media in in terms of fostering more progressive political movements of resistance to dominant society. For instance, Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner highlight the internet activism of the famous "Battle for Seattle" protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) in December of 1999. The internet, they write, fostered "an international protest movement…in resistance to neoliberal institutions and their related globalization policies, while democracy, social justice, and a better world were championed." Thus, there are profound implications in using the internet in this way, they write, which give rise to increased democracy and emancipation by the hands of "a growing planetary citizenry that is using the new media to become informed, to inform others, and to construct new social and political relations."[26] Kahn and Kellner consider "cyberactivism" to be the new front of resistance to global capitalism—and the increasing permeability of communications technologies is creating "highly informed, autonomous communities," linking people in such a way as to provide the possibility for "a new politics of alliance and solidarity to overcome the limitations of postmodern identity politics."[27] While acknowledging that the internet is indeed a contested space where many dissonant voices mingle and serve their own interests (especially in a capitalist society that favors individualism,

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[25] "Frequently Asked Questions," *Tea Party Nation, http://www.teapartynation.com/page/frequently-asked-questions*;
[26] Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner, "New Media and Internet Activism: From the "Battle of Seattle" to Blogging." *New Media and Society* 6, no 1 (2004), pg. 87-88.
[27] Kahn and Kellner, "New Media and Internet Activism," 89.

competition, and corporate interests), Kellner and Kahn nevertheless understand new

communications technologies as a revolution in political mobilization that "constitute[s] a

dramatic transformation of everyday life that is presently being constructed and enacted by

internet subcultures."[28]

Kahn and Kellner are not the only scholars who have suggested that the internet is the

harbinger of more horizontal networks with an inherent tendency to democratize power, bring

about new forms of democratic discussion, and organize progressive activists into coalitions that

successfully resist the crushing forces of global capitalism.[29] However, throughout many of the

discussions on the democratic potential of new media and new communications technologies,

there tends to be an over-emphasis on the many examples of progressive social movements that

have effectively used the internet to organize campaigns in favor of social justice or left-leaning

political agendas.[30] While these examples are important in assessing the ways in which

progressive forms of online alternative media can empower grassroots movements and other

social groups, there seems to be a disconnect: Indeed, the internet can foster communities that

enhance the possibility of activism and agency where, combined across communities, there lies

"a potentially loud, booming voice."[31] But there is less of a gaze on the other end of the political

spectrum, even though conservative political movements, as mentioned before, are mobilizing

with online social media and Web 2.0 technologies in far greater numbers than perceived

"liberal" democrats. What might we make of the liberatory rhetoric of new media technology

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[28] Kahn and Kellner, "New Media and Internet Activism," 93.

[29] Pierre Levi, Mathew Fraser and Soumitra Dutta, Henry Jenkins, Dimitra L. Milioni, and J.A. Knapp are just a few examples.

[30] For instance, Victor Pickard, "Assessing the Radical Democracy of Indymedia: Discursive, Technical, and Institutional Constructions," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 1 (2006), pg. 19-38; Susan O'Donnell, "Analyzing the Internet and the Public Sphere: The Case of Womenslink" *The Public*, 8 no. 1 (2001) pg. 39-58.

[31] Mary Chayko, *Portable Communities: The Social Dynamics of Online and Mobile Connectedness.* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 191.

and the increased possibility of more "critical-rational debate" when it is employed by anti-progressive, hyper-individualistic political movements?

On the one hand the Internet can provide opportunities for many counterpublics to engage in political communication in the form of protest or mobilization, as the "internet offers them a way not only of communicating with supporters, but also the potential to reach out beyond the "radical ghetto" both directly…and indirectly, through influencing the mass media."[32] But, a key question is the role that politically counterpublic websites play in fostering support of their radical political opinions beyond their own "political island," and whether or not this counter sphere can achieve more publicity through the mass media, regardless if the coverage is overwhelmingly positive or negative. Following Habermas's vision and revision of the public sphere, Downey and Fenton suggest that:

> The mass-media public sphere will become more open to radical opinion as a result of the coincidence of societal crises and the growth of virtual counter-public spheres. This should be understood as a self-reinforcing process that will lead, in turn, to greater counter-public sphere activity. This may further lead to an examination of the relationship between shifts in counter-public spheres, the mass-media public sphere and societal change. In the early 1990s, Habermas tended to foreground the "positive" aspects of this process (for example, the impact of environmental groups on critical-rational debate in the public sphere), but it is now abundantly clear that the instability of the public sphere can also be exploited by the extreme Right. [33]

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[32] Downey and Fenton, "New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere," 198.
[33] Downey and Fenton, "New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere," 198.

Downey and Fenton's hypothesis that the instability of the public sphere can be exploited by the extreme Right simultaneously with progressive, inclusive democratic exchanges, is useful when understanding the Tea Party Movement's media engagement. Read as an oppositional counter-public sphere, indeed the Tea Party facilitates solidarity among people who identify specifically with their ideology. The Tea Party's vocal opposition to the mainstream media reinforces the notion of a counter-public fighting the status quo and reinvigorating the public sphere. But as James McPherson argues, though criticism of the "liberal media" by conservatives has been around for a long time, the mainstream media has actually drifted more to the right since the 1960s. The changes in journalism and mass media since the 1960s, McPherson argues, allowed conservatives more than liberals to benefit the most, especially in the realm of talk radio, direct mail, and other methods that reinvigorated a conservative base and, through aggressive media tactics, persuaded mainstream journalists to adopt more of the conventions of the conservative media: "Even without trying to analyze the biases of individual journalists or their messages, some obvious tendencies have emerged," McPherson writes. "Though those tendencies do not necessarily correspond to overt partisan biases, in most cases they do reflect a broader kind of conservative bias—a reflection that shows American journalism to be wary of change or those who promote change, while promoting a pro-business, pro-community, pro-status quo, pro-American perspective." [34] Moreover, "partly because conservatives have unceasingly criticized the supposed liberalism of the press, in some respects the American news media probably now cover politics worse—less correctly or less "right"— than they once did." [35] Conservative media, McPherson argues, is more about *reacting* to issues and topics that subvert the status quo, rather than striving to *change* the status quo: "The

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[34] James McPherson. *The Conservative Resurgence and the Press: The Media's Role in the Rise of the Right,* Medill School of Journalism Visions of the American Press (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008) 13.

[35] McPherson, *The Conservative Resurgence and the Press,* pg. xx.

"middle" on the spectrum of American political thought shifts from time to time to the left and to the right, but the mainstream media, despite claims of objectivity has generally leaned to a more "reactive" or conservative bent."[36] A right-leaning mainstream press, in other words, aids rather than opposes Tea Party resentment, and the rhetoric exhibited on Tea Party websites reveals more exclusive rather than inclusive parameters, exposing an unstable public sphere made more isolated and more fragmented through the new media practices of the Tea Party Movement. Moreover, new media are not solely or causally responsible for the creation of counter public spheres. But, through "contributing to the destabilization of the public sphere and the generation of new forms of fragmentation and solidarity," new media are crucial in this conversation. This "presents both opportunities and dangers to the theory and practice of democracy."[37]

Downey and Fenton make an important contribution in their analysis of Right-Wing conservative websites in the destabilization of the public sphere, highlighting how digital communication technology can be both enabling and stifling, or as they say, dangerous, to democratic exchange. While Dahlgren and others are right to point out that digital communication technologies signal a new way of doing citizenship, perhaps it is important to remember the somber, if not pessimistic contention by Evgeny Morozov that digital technologies can just as easily enable dictators, dominators, and extremists of all camps to suppress democracy and dominate others. Particularly concerning mobilization for social reform, it is incorrect, he writes,

> to assess the political power of the Internet solely based on its contribution to social
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> mobilization: We should also consider how it empowers the government via surveillance,

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[36] McPherson, *The Conservative Resurgence and the Press,* pg. xx.
[37] Downey and Fenton, "New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere," 200.

how it disempowers citizens via entertainment, how it transforms the nature of dissent by

shifting it into a more virtual realm, how it enables governments to produce better and

more effective propaganda, and so forth…The point here is that while the Internet could

make the next revolution more effective, it could also make it less likely.[38]

To be fair, the Tea Party's online presence is nothing like the oppressive new media tactics of the

Iranian or Egyptian government to which Morozov eludes. However, what Morozov reveals is

that just as new media can be utilized for more effective democratic engagement, especially

under the parameters that Dahlgren or Downey and Fenton outline, those very same tactics can

just as easily function as fragmentary, destabilizing, isolationist, and contrary to fostering a more

democratic public sphere.

For instance, in an "online activism" seminar hosted by influential Tea Party affiliate *The

American Majority*, a speaker instructs a group of potential Tea Party activists in a slightly

different mode of what he calls "digital activism." "We're going to go on this tour called the

American Liberty tour where we go to 18 cities, we hold presentations like this, educational

seminars, we do blogger breakfasts where we connect bloggers in the cities and we then hold

liberty rallies at night to get people fired up" the speaker says. But, in addition to firing up the

potential "digital activists" the trainer also instructs the group in what he calls a "Guerilla" style

internet activism, connecting what the Tea Party is trying to do to the American Revolution.

"Over 200 years ago, guys, a group of people just like you did something extraordinary, ordinary

people doing extraordinary things," he says. "They were activists just like you, I truly believe

that. They were activists then, we are activists now. Make no distinction about it." The key part

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[38] Evgeny Morozov, "First Thoughts on Tunisia and the Role of the Internet" *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 14th, 2011. http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/14/first_thoughts_on_tunisia_and_the_role_of_the_internet

of being digital activists for the Tea Party, he says, is that "we identify the medium, we learn the medium, we manipulate the medium. It was printing presses then, it's the internet now. That's where we influence the hearts and minds of our fellow citizens. The Tea Party's got us running up the hills, the *American Majority's* trying to give you the tools, the muskets." After legitimizing the cause, the American Majority activism trainer gives tips on how to "spread" the ideals and influence of the Tea Party most effectively online, while behind him sits a power-point slide of Uncle Sam, underneath it the caption: "I want you for Blogosphere":

> So here's what I do. I get on Amazon, and I type in "liberal books." I go through and I say, "1 star, 1 star, 1 star—the flipside is you go to [conservative and libertarian] products and you give them 5 stars. So literally 80% of the books I put a star on, I don't read…this is where your kids are getting information: "Rotten Tomatoes," "Flickster," those are places where you can rate movies, so when you type in movies on healthcare or documentaries on healthcare, I don't want "Sicko" to come up. I don't want Michael Moore to come up, so I give it bad ratings…if there is a place to comment, a place to rate, a place to share information, you have to do it, that's how you control the online dialogue, give our ideals a fighting chance."[39]

An important part about this seminar is the notion of connecting their brand of activism to that of those engaged in the American Revolution themselves, a notion historian Jill Lapore has labeled "anti-history" and "presentism"— conflating founding documents and historical events with a sort of religious fundamentalism.[40] Another important aspect of the seminar is the notion that "spreading influence" and giving Tea Party ideals "a fighting chance" involves suppressing

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[39] Taki Oldham, "(Astro) Turf Wars: How Corporate America is Faking a Grassroots Revolution (USA 2010), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGB8Uuffi4M&feature=player_embedded
[40] Jill Lapore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History*, The Public Square Book Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010)

debate, digitally "burying" progressive or liberal online content on ranking-sites like "Amazon" or "Rotten Tomatoes" in favor of more conservative content.[41] While far from the oppressive tactics of the Egyptian government (in cutting off the internet to its citizens entirely), what this does is confirm Morozov's skepticism toward new media as an inherently democratic tool—and Guerilla activism is nevertheless a far cry from enabling a more effective public sphere.

But perhaps the model of the "public sphere" is inadequate. In describing civic engagement in a digital age, Zizi Papacharissi concludes that the conventional metaphor of the public sphere, a domain of civic engagement through rational, political discourse in a public setting, may not be sufficient for the changing modes of civic engagement in an era of convergent digital technologies. Rather, Papacharissi proposes a "new civic vernacular" that takes into account digitally convergent technologies that are articulated in tropes "distinct from the deliberative model of the public sphere."[42] Papacharissi argues that "digitally enabled citizens" engage in civic behavior that originates in what she calls the private sphere, and then can be "broadcast publically to multiple and select audiences of the citizen's choosing and at the citizen's whim."[43] For instance, Tea Party blogs, social networking, *Tea Party Nation* discussion boards, or even the "digital activism" tactics of the *American Majority* all originate within the *private sphere*, she writes. Far from representing civic apathy or a disengagement from political discourse, engagement with digital technology in a private sphere "represents an expression of dissent with a public agenda, determined by mainstream media and political actors. It stands as a private, digitally enabled, intrusion on a public agenda determined by others."[44] In a democracy,

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[41] Corbin Hiar also notes how this tactic is derived from a similar group of "guerilla activists" called the "Digg Patriots" to "censor progressive content" on the news aggregator website "Digg.com." http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2010/10/how-the-tea-party-utilized-digital-media-to-gain-power301.html

[42] Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* (Polity: Cambridge, 2009), 130.

[43] Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere*, 19.

[44] Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere*, 131.

which Papacharissi writes is a sort of middle-ground among notions of public and private, the private sphere is "the locus from which individuals negotiate their relationship with the status quo of democracy." Moreover, she writes, digitally networked citizens feel "more powerful" negotiating selfhood and citizenship from the private sphere, and she describes this as a political act of dissent.[45] In this sense, Tea Party digital activists are indeed negotiating selfhood and citizenship form the private sphere, dissenting against a "public agenda."

But just because an act is political does not make it necessarily democratic. Papacharissi argues that the migration into the private sphere made possible by convergent technologies does not facilitate an active and democratic public sphere. "Online digital technologies create a public space," she writes, "but do not inevitably enable a public sphere." Papacharissi notes that there are three conditions that prohibit digital technologies from being described as a public sphere in the traditional sense: access to information, reciprocity of communication, and commercialization.[46] In this way, online digital technologies are not inherently democratic, but "relatively powerless in conventional representative democratic environments, networked citizens claim their power through autonomously exerted acts of expression and connection." Though internet communication technologies enable connections with people of like-minded inclinations, as in the Tea Party social networking sites that even forbid other political viewpoints from participating, Papacharissi writes that these sort of civic connections are not prescriptive. In her closing chapter, she concludes "far form a recipe for democracy, the private sphere is an attempt at a new space and a new sociality."[47]

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[45] Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere*, 23-24.
[46] Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere*, 124.
[47] Zizi Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere*, 166-167.

The Tea Party's use of new media technology in terms of framing online debate and engaging in digital activism present several problems to traditional interpretations of new media's role in sustaining democracy and yielding a more lively and effective public sphere. There is an expectation of new media communication technologies, Gerhards and Schafer write, that the Internet can make a *better* public sphere, where "alternative evaluations and interpretations will be presented online, and that the information available will be more differentiated on the internet. In the long run, they write, "the internet might democratize the public sphere and lead to strengthened political interest and participation among citizens."[48] Taking these expectations into account, Gerhards and Schafer compared the models of both the "old media" and "internet based" public spheres to empirically evaluate if the Internet is "better" than print media, "in the sense that it better corresponds to the demands of the participatory model." Their results are intriguing. They find little evidence that the internet is any better of a communication space than print media, and moreover, "internet communication seemed even more one-sided and less inclusive than print media communication." Search engines favor institutional actors who are larger and better funded, thereby receiving a higher ranking on Google searches and more space for debate than smaller public spheres. "This manner of actor and content selection," they write, "might be even inferior compared to the old (and already often criticized) mass media, because the latter at least employ journalistic norms like balanced reporting and neutrality when selecting actors and statements, and thereby presenting a possibly better communication than the internet."[49] This empirical study is important when reflecting on the Tea Party's influence on the public sphere. For one, cyber-utopian rhetoric, as seen within the

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[48] Jürgen Gerhards and Mike Schafer, "Is the internet a Better Public Sphere? Comparing Old and New Media in the USA and Germany," *New Media and Society* 12, no. 1 (2010), 145.

[49] Jürgen Gerhards and Mike Schafer, "Is the Internet a Better Public Sphere?" 156.

Tea Party's media ecology, frames the Internet as a space where otherwise voiceless and disgruntled political dissidents now have a voice to speak out and mobilize against a powerful and oppressive regime. Framing Tea Party activism with the American Revolution, Liz Sidoti rejoices at how the "tea parties" formed in U.S. living rooms morphed into the latest political phenomenon so quickly after Obama took office," calling it "a testament to the power of the Internet and the changes in a country that's come to heavily rely on it."[50] But as Gerhards and Schafter contend, the Internet leaves *less* room for political deliberation and debate, and while Tea Party activists indeed mobilize and communicate in greater numbers thanks to internet communication technologies, whether their communication is "democracy in action" as the title of Sidoti's article contends, is questionable.

Moreover, Papacharissi writes that civility is a requirement for democratic discourse: "Conversations on the meaning of citizenship, democracy, and public discourse highlight civility as a virtue, the lack of which carries detrimental implications for a democratic society."[51] *Tea Party Nation*'s website, however, in framing the rules for participation and debate, focus less on "political interest and participation among citizens" and more on debate that only fits into ideological boundaries upon which Tea Party members agree. This sort of incivility is dangerous, Papacharissi writes, because while impoliteness in general is not uncivil or inhibitive of democracy—(it enhances it, in fact, she argues, citing Leotard's notion of "democratic emancipation through disagreement and anarchy")—disregard for the collective nature of democracy does inhibit it. "It is when people demonstrate offensive behavior toward social groups," she writes, "that their behavior becomes undemocratic." Papacharissi writes:

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[50] Liz Sidoti, "Analysis: "Tea Party" is Democracy at Work: Diverse Movement is Against Obama, Big Government, but Impact Uncertain," MSNBC.com," http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/35284139/ns/politics-more_politics/

[51] Zizi Papacharissi, "Democracy Online," 260.

> To borrow a term from the politeness literature, civility is positive collective face; that is, deference to the social and democratic identity of an individual. Incivility can be defined as negative collective face; that is, disrespect for the collective traditions of democracy. Civility can then be operationalized as the set of behaviors that threaten democracy, deny people their personal freedoms, and stereotype social groups.[52]

The examples of the online rhetoric, images, and tactics of Tea Party websites exhibit these forms of incivility, whether restricting debate from non-English speakers and "liberals," or engaging in "digital activism" that effectively censors opposing viewpoints while inflating their own. This runs counter to consistent rhetoric that stresses the democratic and liberatory qualities of new media, reinforced by a handful of "cyber utopians," mass media that covers the Tea Party and, Tea Party members themselves.

Fitting the Tea Party into the conversations about democracy, technology, and the public sphere is difficult. Matt Lilla writes that the Tea Party as a movement appeals to a rhetoric of individualism: the Tea Party "fires up emotions by appealing to individual opinion, individual autonomy, and individual choice, all in the service of neutralizing, not using, political power. It gives voice to those who feel they are being bullied, but this voice has only one, Garbo-like thing to say: I want to be left alone."[53] Moreover, political commentator Jonathan Hoenig, speaking at a Tax Day Tea Party Rally in 2009, articulated the Tea Party philosophy as one in opposition to "collectivism."

> Collectivism holds that the individual has no rights. The product of your labor now belongs to the group! So, whatever they want, whether its mortgage rates healthcare,

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[52] Papacharissi, "Democracy Online," 267.
[53] Matt Lilla, "The Tea Party Jacobins," *The New York Review of Books* May 27, 2010
http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/may/27/tea-party-jacobins/

green cars, green jobs and education, anything at all, it now becomes your responsibility

to provide it whether you like it or not! You see it in the taxes, they take money from the

people who earned it and give it to people who have not! We see it in the language, I

mean all this talk of we're all in it together, I am my brother's keeper, shared sacrifice, it

all speaks to the same idea: You are here to serve!...This is a profoundly un-American

idea…in this country you are born free, not with the duty to serve the king but with the

moral right to live your own life…you don't owe society a goddamned thing.[54]

Many Tea Party members neglect the influence of society, focusing instead on "radical

individualism" and the rhetorical association of what Hoenig calls "collectivism" with

communism, fascism, and socialism. [55] This indicates a divergence from much of the literature

that views the public sphere as a desired mode of communication where matters are discussed in

a public way—where communication is deliberative, open to all, and transparent.[56] Rather, the

new media communication practices of the Tea Party seem to mimic not an alternative public

sphere, or a counter public, but merely a replication of the dominant public sphere, a dissenting

facet of status quo where "several special interest publics coexist and flaunt their collective

identities of dissent, thus reflecting the social dynamics of the real world."[57] In other words, the

Tea Party participates in some form of a "virtual public sphere," or "culturally fragmented

cyberspheres that occupy a common virtual public space." And while it is true that "the internet

and related technologies have managed to create new public space for political discussion," this

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[54] Jonathan Hoenig speech at the Chicago Tea Party Rally," YouTube.com,
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuUsBfXI6m8
[55] A distinction made by Peter Callero in *The Myth of Individualism* as a dangerous ideological premise that favors the individual above anything else.
[56] Douglas Schuler and Peter Day, "Shaping the Network Society: Opportunities and Challenges" in *Shaping the Network Society: The New Role of Civil Society in Cyberspace* eds Douglas Schuler and Peter Day (MIT Press: Cambridge, 2004), 5.
[57] Zizi Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere," *New Media and Society* 4, no. 1 (2002), 21.

does not ensure civility, a revitalized and ideal public sphere, or a more informed, participatory culture.

Just as Downey and Fenton call for alliances across online public spheres, the vision of the "true" public sphere, or "several spheres of counterpublics that have been excluded from mainstream political discourse, yet employ virtual communication to restructure the mainstream that ousted them" is nevertheless a vision instead of a reality.[58] The various facets of the Tea Party media ecology exhibit this notion, and are a testament to the complex and unstable nature of extending the public sphere metaphor into the virtual realm. As Schuler and Day write, "Since the concept of public sphere is abstract and imprecise, its best use may be as an indicator for direction and as a metric for criticism and action." Therefore these observations and reflections on the Tea Party media engagement helps, to use the public sphere as a way "to critique existing systems and imagine better ones."[59]

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[58] Zizi Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere," 21-23
[59] Schuler and Day, *Shaping the Network Society,* 6.

Conclusion: Contributions and Limitations

The prevailing idea throughout this project is that associations of freedom and liberty with innovations in technology share a closely linked rhetorical legacy in the United States. By looking at the Tea Party Movement in terms of its history, rhetoric, and new media ecologies, I argue that the Tea Party embodies a form of digital populism, utilizing populist rhetorical frameworks in an online environment to construct a narrative about the role of technology in society as liberatory, transformative, and essential to reaching and sustaining its rhetorical goals.

First, by outlining a brief history to the study of populism, I argued for a definition of populism that incorporates two components: a rhetorical base and ideological range. In this way, populism is better seen as a rhetorical strategy, a "linguistic mode" subject to historical and cultural forces, but nevertheless situated along a spectrum of ideologies that range from progressive to reactionary. This allows for a more holistic understanding of how populism both works rhetorically and institutionally. Also, reflecting on the writings of Hofstadter and Wood, in light of Lapore's recent work on the Tea Party, I distanced myself from the Tea Party, refusing neither to fall victim to pathologizing their discourse nor to neglect to provide an engaging critique of it. Instead, I place my scholarship somewhere in the middle. Approaching populism in this way, I provided several examples of social groups and political leaders utilizing populist rhetoric to construct particular narratives about the role of communication technology. Whether it was the Populist Party in the 1890s circulating alternative newspapers, Father Charles Coughlin in the 1930s broadcasting sermons on the radio, Ross Perot taking advantage of cable news channels to campaign for the presidency, or Tea Party sympathizer Sarah Palin rebuking the mainstream media—in each case populist rhetorical frameworks inform the relationship between social groups and technology. Social groups and individual politicians using populism

as a linguistic mode of persuasion consequently construct a narrative about communication technology as inherently democratic, revolutionary, and an integral part of American society.

Next, I provided a brief history of the Tea Party movement, in which I described it as a loose confederation of bloggers and social activists reacting against the Obama administration's healthcare reform acts and stimulus packages of 2009. Critiques of the Tea Party as a faux grassroots, or "Astro-Turf" movement, with millions of dollars being funneled in from corporate interests to create the illusion of a bottom-up movement, while not necessarily unwarranted, are not fully correct either. Grassroots activism is a huge component of the Tea Party—most recognizable in their new media presence on both the local and national levels. The tension between Tea Party activists who wish to remain decentralized, grassroots, ideologically-centered, and those who align the Tea Party with political candidates, highlights the complexity and variation within the Tea Party. This is not to say that the Tea Party is completely free from corporate ties, though. Politicians and other organizations like *FreedomWorks,* for instance, co-opted Tea Party rhetoric to capitalize on the growing media coverage to pursue their own political interests. These tensions reveal a nascent movement still competing for power, attempting to articulate its place both at the local and national level, and also attempting to establish a coherent social identity. Ultimately I argue that one component of these struggles is a close relationship with new media. Through a look at the history and digital rhetoric of *Tea Party Patriots, FreedomWorks, and Tea Party Express,* I explore some of the populist rhetorical patterns from chapter 1 to show a close relationship with populist rhetoric and technological determinism, or rather, assertions that technology is a liberating weapon of democracy, freedom, liberty, etc. The Tea Party's use of new media, like populist rhetoric in general, promotes democracy and freedom while simultaneously restricting access to others.

In light of the Tea Party's new media communication strategies which are linked closely to a history of populist rhetoric, the last chapter was a reflection on the data to see how the Tea Party's engagement with new media fit into broader conversations about the relationship between technology and democracy. Is new media actually democratic? Using a theoretical model of what many call a successful democracy, the public sphere, I analyzed how the Tea Party's digital rhetoric fit into this conversation. Beginning with Habermas's vision of a public sphere, rearticulated through notions of counter-publics, multiple publics, and other redefinitions of the public sphere, we see that the role of technology in creating and sustaining democracy is complicated, and far from democratizing information and freeing otherwise stifled voices. New media technology, I argue, can also be just as fragmentary and exclusory. Tea Party website FAQ sections that restrict access to non-English speakers, or digital training seminars for Tea Party members that teach "digital activism" tactics that encourage the suppression of dissenting views—reveal a relationship with technology that contradicts the prevailing rhetoric implicit and explicit throughout the movement. Moreover, the way the Tea Party uses technology reveals less of a more informed civic engagement process, and more of a complex relationship with technology that stifles just as many voices as it illuminates. Ironically, this is characteristic of populism in general, which makes the entire relationship between populism, technology, and democracy even more dynamic, complex, unstable, yet fundamentally interrelated, than we may have previously thought.

However, the Tea Party is just as much entangled with race as it is with technology. It would be foolish to assume that rhetoric of populism and the way it informs societal relationships with technology can be disassociated with racial histories as well. Carolyn de la Pena writes that technology isn't just some tool used by a monolithic group called "Americans."

On the contrary, "racial, ethnic, gender, and class differences play a dramatic role in who gets to create technologies and to what ends those technologies are used."[1] Moreover, Joel Dinerstein writes that technology itself in America is a *white mythology*, part of a "Western tendency to universalize its own concepts," reflecting tired equations of technological progress with western superiority."[2] Perhaps future research on the intersections of populist rhetoric, technology, and society, would benefit from a more thorough consideration of race in this process. While I touched on several of the racial currents and criticisms of the Tea Party, and others elsewhere have noted how closely linked the Tea Party is to issues of performative whiteness and racism typical of right-wing reactionary movements-past, the field of research that explores intersections of race, rhetoric, new media, and political movements, is still relatively small and understudied.[3]

In this project, my aim was to link populist rhetoric with technological determinism, using the Tea Party as a case study. By providing historical examples of populist rhetoric and understandings of technology, a case study of three Tea Party websites, and an investigation into new media's democratic potentials, I argue that the Tea Party is a distinct site where issues of populism, technology, and democracy are being performed, understood, and contested, constructing a particular narrative about the role of technology in society. Future analyses may benefit from a study of technological rhetoric similar to Michael Adas's *Machines as the Measure of Man.* Through historical and rhetorical accounts, Adas traces how the West became a colonial power through technological narratives of cultural dominance, racial superiority and

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[1] Carolyn de la Pena, "Slow and Low Progress, or Why American Studies Should Do Technology, *American Quarterly* 58. No 6 (2006), 921.
[2] Joel Dinerstein, "Technology and Its Discontents: On the Verge of the Posthuman," *American Quarterly* 58. No 6 (2006), 592.
[3] Scholars like Adam Banks, Ben Chappell, Joel Dinerstein and others are emerging writers in a wave Pena calls the "third wave of technology studies," but Pena also notes that more are needed in the quest to better understand how technology works in our everyday lives using a more interdisciplinary scope that incorporates notions of difference, power, dominance, and race.

technological "progress."[4] Subsequent projects should explore how similar theories of race complicate the relationship between rhetoric of social movements like the Tea Party and new media engagement.

Also, populism is a very convenient mode of persuasion for understanding technology's role in society, and may explain America's propensity to construct technology as a pivotal and essential tool for modernization, democracy, freedom, and American culture in general. For the Tea Party is not the only group that understands technology in this way; the movement is merely a valuable case study of how populist rhetoric informs technological narratives. Michael Lee even goes as far to assert that there is a "populist paradox" in America, precipitated by the very founding of the United States. The founding documents of the American republic itself invoke a populist argumentative frame envisioning a singular people "as the sole beams of democratic light in a world darkened by greed and corruption." In other words, the utility of populist rhetoric is central to the origins of American political thought entirely, which yields obvious problems: "In attempting to empower the "people," populism often disempowers specific groups of people." Asserting that populism represents the best and the worst of the nation's political languages, the "populist paradox" also means populism is likely here to stay.[5]

Can American society, then, relate to technology without attaching to strains of populist rhetoric that depict it as a benevolent, progressive project of democracy? Perhaps. But as we look at television commercials that show cell-phones as an essential tool capable of revolutionizing and democratizing society, or when we are confronted with rhetoric about the Internet that assumes democracy cannot be obtained without online social networking freedoms

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[4] Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Man: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).
[5] Michael J. Lee, "The Populist Chameleon: The People's Party, Huey Long, George Wallace, and the Populist Argumentative Frame," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 92, no. 4 (2006), 373-375.

like Twitter or Facebook—I argue that we should temper these images with reflections on the limits of technology. The relationship between technology and society can benefit from the consideration of how money, power, racism, access, and historical forces limit the reaches of "progress" and consequently shape our narratives about the implications of technology.

In 2006 Carolyn de la Pena wrote that American Studies practitioners should look to include technology studies into their scholarship, particularly due to the lack of a sufficient critique of technology "as both substance and ideology in American cultural life."[6] The gap, she writes, is usually left to others, while technology has seldom been studied through lenses of fundamental issues within the field of American Studies: diversity, equity, social justice, etc. Pena argues to include technology studies within the methodologies of American Studies, because of the tendency of American Studies to "make broad leaps," fashioning interdisciplinary connections that would better illuminate "Americans' complex relationships with technology."[7]

Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden* was one of the early and pivotal American Studies approaches to technology, tracing the tension between two symbolic modes of thought in American culture: pastoralism and notions of technological "progress." The cold, individualistic "machine" of industrial society supplants itself onto the simpler, purer landscape of the American garden, Marx writes, representing the quintessential dilemma in 20th century American culture: the stark contrast between these two separate, seemingly opposed conditions of consciousness. *Machine in the Garden* traces the impact of the symbolic power of the implantation of the machine onto the pastoral ideal through the works of various intellectuals and novelists throughout the 19th century. The inability to create an "ideal middle landscape" of

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[6] Pena, "Slow and Low Progress," 915.
[7] Pena, "Slow and Low Progress, 920.

reconciliation between the "natural" vitality of a green, idyllic pasture, and the inexorable, mechanic train of history is, according to Marx, the root conflict in American history.[8] Marx understands pastoralism as a particular mythology "perpetuated by those who pursued technological 'progress.'"[9]

Since Marx, technology studies has gone through several "waves," as Pena writes, including pushing the concept further, from thinking about technology not just as a material consequence or as a narrative concept, but focusing also on how technology is an everyday experience. The current "wave," addresses technology with regard to questions of difference and power, or rather, rearticulating definitions of technological progress, focusing on the "ways in which technology enables diverse expression and enhances human experiences."[10] I envision my scholarship connected to the technological investigations predicated by Marx, and contributing to the current conversation, incorporating the cross-sections of rhetoric, new media, and politics to challenge and rearticulate conventional assumptions about technology and progress. Pena writes that more interdisciplinary projects in the field of technology studies will help us "better understand how technological assumptions guide the production of all knowledge."

My project, in addressing rhetorical modes of persuasion that inform social groups' relationship with technological narratives, adds to the conversation in a new and meaningful way, and suggests avenues of new research within the field of American Studies and technology studies, that incorporates rhetoric of technology with regard to social movements. In highlighting the new media practices of the Tea Party, my project is not a linear history of technological rhetoric, but an interdisciplinary investigation that challenges norms and

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[8] Leo Marx, *Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).
[9] Pena, "Slow and Low Progress," 918.
[10] Pena, "Slow and Low Progress, 937.

assumptions about the role of technology in our everyday lives, suggesting new ways to look at populism, technology, and democracy. In subsequent works I hope to expand this mode of thinking, to heed Pena's call for a richer field of American Studies, to "transcend linear narratives of technological history" to eventually "master the steps of our long-running dance with the machine."[11]

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[11] Pena, "Slow and Low Progress, 939.

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