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Distributed Terror And The Ordering Of Networked Social Space

By: **Mark Nunes**

Abstract

Truth be told, the "Y2K bug" was quite a disappointment. While the technopundits wooed us with visions of network failures worthy of millennial fervor, Jan. 1, 2000, came and went without even a glimmer of the catastrophic. Yet the Y2K "bug" did reveal the degree to which the American apocalypse now took the form of the network itself. The spaces of everyday life in America and elsewhere in a developed world produce and are produced by network structures that Manuel Castells has called "spaces of flow." As such, Catastrophe today is marked more by dispersion and dissipation, rather than breakdown — a dis-strophe of social forms, structures, and experience.

The dissipation of enactive networks does not, however, equate with a system failure. With the Internet "bubble burst" of March, 2000, the very exuberance of market flows were very much the conditions of possibility for both the irruption of a new economy and its sudden evaporation. It is not the ephemerality of these social forms and structures that disorients activities of everyday life in a network society, but rather our lack of control over distributed processes. The bubble burst, then, by no means sounded a death knell for distributed network functions. Rather, it marked a moment of increased misrecognition of the forms, structures, and practices that were the conditions of possibility for the event itself, as an ideology of authentication eclipsed a rhetoric of emergence and flow. Billions in capital disappeared in a matter of weeks, but the network forms and structures that allowed individual users "direct access" to the flows of capital remained in place for a normative virtual class, articulated as personalized and privatized spaces of control.

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As the bubble burst signaled an instance of digital *dis-strophe*, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center marked a similar dissipative moment, articulated in the material terror of over 1,300 feet of skyscraper steel and human bodies turned to wreckage and dust. Much as the market crash of 2000 represented a collapse from within of the same network processes that enabled the market's phenomenal growth, for all the "foreignness" of the terrorists, al Qaeda as an organization appeared decidedly at home in the globalized network society that it threatened to destroy. In an instance of Baudrillardian "ironic revenge," terrorism appropriated all the trappings of a global space of flows in the name of subverting that same social structure (Baudrillard, "Spirit" 17-19). Only within the conditions of possibility of networked social space could such attacks occur. As such, terrorist cells functioned ([the media] informed us) as nodes in a distributed network, a human articulation of a space of flows capable of enacting horrifying acts *beyond control*.

While in the years leading up to the market collapse of March, 2000, a growing number of an emerging virtual middle class (from cyberhippy to day-trader *manqué*) began to understand distributed networks as material expressions of a social revolution, the image of a distributed network changed after 9/11, becoming a global spatiality of fear and danger. As independent scholar Sam Smith notes on his weblog:

I expect the organizing principle of the coming age – the era that began on September 12… – will be the *distributed network*, and we already have some early indications of what this period might look like. The decentralized potency of the Internet is a perfect metaphor in so many ways, and *al Qaeda* itself provides an apt demonstration of the character and power of the distributed network…. As our ill-prepared military has discovered, it's hard to kill something you can't find. Thank goodness for the Taliban, eh?

Although figured as an anti-modern fundamentalism, the terrorist networks associated with September 11 served as an image of contemporary network structures themselves. The enemy, it seemed, was not some reclusive figurehead, but rather, the spatiality of the network itself, enacted by distributed, autonomous agents. Carl Conetta, writing on the nature of al Qaeda as a distributed network, notes in particular its ability to "[link] subnational elements together in a transnational web," to thrive in nation-states that have collapsed or are about to collapse; in short, al Qaeda "lives in the interstices" of modern global space (Conetta). As globalization's ironic revenge, distributed terror maps the interstitial flows that exploit the inability of centralized authority to coordinate emergent, enactive forms of network agency.

In response, the US Congress passed the Patriot Act as an attempt to introduce modes of control into distributed networks and place them at the fingertips of state-based agencies. In an era of global flows, the Patriot Act reestablished *the homeland* as both a concept of social space and a delimited space of practice, articulated through global network structures. As part of President Bush's "war on terror," the Patriot Act declared war on the dispersive and dissipative nature of distributed networks by introducing what Deleuze and Guattari would call state-based apparatuses of capture. But as Deleuze notes, in a world of flows, "capture" occurs as a *modulation*, not an enclosure — a system of distributed control that is itself expressed in flows (4). The Patriot Act acknowledges networks themselves as modes of agency (noted in its frequent reference to an "intelligence service or network of a foreign power"), and as such institutes a legislative structure to "trap and trace" emergent network structures. In effect, the Patriot Act marks a modulation of networked social space that affirms the primacy of global flows in contemporary life at the same time that it initiates state-based systems of distributed control.

Apparatuses of capture modulate flows by eliminating the interstitial and *regulating* transmission as a mode of order. The "homeland security" measures, then, are precisely this sort of effort to modulate the forms, structures, and practices of a space of flows. As the US military force mounted, one heard less and less talk of the distributed network form of terror, as an uncontrollable threat coalesced in the modulated image of a handful of figureheads: a "line up" in its most literal sense connecting bin Laden, Zakawi, and Hussein. The infamous Most Wanted

[card deck](#) shifted our imagination from the shuffling networks of global terror to a linear ranking of Ba'ath Party players — a chain of command in a "rogue nation," from ace of spades to the two of clubs. The topology of fear had changed. Within months, the U.S. government's rhetoric had swayed our attention from terrorist networks to an "[Axis of Evil](#)." Gone were the references to the complex webbings of distributed systems, and in its place, the reassuringly linear, gravitational orientations of good and evil. The "axis" not only revived the relatively clear lines of geopolitics of the Second World War; it also attempted to reestablish a representation of space predicated upon unidirectional movements and centralized control.

Meanwhile, back in the homeland, DARPA's [Total Information Awareness (TIA) Program](#) (renamed the Terrorist Information Awareness Program for better PR) promised a means of capturing flows of information through distributed control over the network. Whereas terrorist organizations exploit the interstitial spaces of a global network society, TIA as a state-based apparatus of capture promised to utilize these same networks to modulate a space of flows and extract orderly patterns of information. The agent of the state doesn't necessarily control the flow of these networks, but rather, extracts mappings of emergent connections enacted by the network itself. Patterns of informatic exchange and transmission, then, provide distributed control over a network environment that can only be defined by flows and virtualities.

In contrast to the data mining we are all used to in a commercial setting, where patterns of aggregate data give rise to "meaningful" market analysis, distributed control systems would instead focus on "rare but significant connections" mapped by the relational structures of a situated subject (DARPA A-14). *Lines of contact* emerge as pattern recognition allows authorized agents to "connect the dots" (a favored expression throughout DARPA's report to Congress) within an undifferentiated network of data-flow. Distributed control creates a means for modulating what would otherwise appear as abject noise or aberrant links; the very fact that terrorist networks are represented as abject, interstitial social formations (and vice versa) becomes the condition of possibility for their recognition and capture.

In a world in which networks of flows shape both state structures of power and the attempts to destroy those same structures, the lines have been drawn — and modulated. Through systems of distributed control, enactive networks now increasingly speak to a social space in which agency itself maps an emergent network. Less than two years after the Patriot Act was signed into law, DARPA lost Congressional funding for TIA. Again, it was the potential for success that induced our visions of digital catastrophe — that such a large body of data subjected to distributed control presented the potential for the network's ironic revenge. Yet in many ways the modes of distributed control enacted by networks of pattern recognition are already matters of everyday life, misrecognized as "conveniences" in a network society. While spam filters and software agents hardly equate with the sophistication of TIA programs, the goal of each is the same — to modulate flows and cast off or capture the interstitial within programs of order. While information may want to be free, the forms, structures, and practices of everyday life reveal the degree to which a normative virtual class exerts a *will to control*, and an ironic willingness to distribute that control to the network itself.

In a post-9/11 America, distributed controls are all the more implicated in everyday life, and all the more misrecognized as such by a citizenry terrified by middle eastern networks and placated by lines in the sand.

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