

Arzu Ozkal Telhan | Crossroads 2006, Istanbul | Panel Session: Digital Differences: Theories, Practices, Cultures.

### **Technology Hijacking the Public Sphere**

Since the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, people of the modern digital culture – we – are psychotics who cannot communicate with others in person. We have eating disorders (we are either obese and anorexic), we are impotent, and making money is our biggest fantasy and perhaps the only reason to exist.

At least, the spam emails we receive everyday express this. Don't we all – regardless of gender and sexual preference – know the up-to-the-minute developments about penis enlargement drugs? This is not necessarily because everyone is complaining from similar disorders, but everyone is assumed to have these disorders or, better, persuaded to feel as if they do so. If a lie is told long enough and loud enough, doesn't it become the truth?

It is getting difficult to talk about the differences between people in digital culture. Perhaps, homogeneity would be a good word to characterize the times we are living through. It is always much easier to deal with a standardized group. When people like the same cuisine, enjoy listening to the same kind of music and do similar activities, etc, doesn't pleasing these people become trouble-free?

However, when there is even only one person with a divergent viewpoint, problems occur. Certainly there are many tactics to avoid these problems. One

could either exclude the divergent opinion or at least threaten to exclude and therefore silence the deviant voice. These tactics stem from the need for standardization of the societies in the name of protecting commonalities and securing the territory.

This presentation discusses the side effects of standardization: control and surveillance. Societies are getting more and more used to living under surveillance. Having surveillance cameras in public spaces does not bother the public anymore. Knowing the fact that all electronic mails and electronic transactions are read by third parties (governments or corporations) does not bother us anymore.

How about altering the human body in the name of cultural sterilization and standardization, say using the RFID technology (Radio Frequency Identification Tags) and/or biotechnologies? Lucia Sommer argues in her article “the In/Visible Body” that “repro-tech scientists can view a human egg as it is pierced and implanted with sperm. Even smaller components of life – genes and chromosomes – can be seen, organized, and compiled using new digital technologies, via their representation as DNA, selected and transformed for profit” (subRosa, 2002, p.126). It wasn't very long ago that the discussion of the privatization and the militarization of the public space was started, and now it seems like the discussion will extend to the militarization of the human body.

Since many people have voluntarily accepted television to be the focus of their daily leisure activity and welcomed the outside world into their domestic space, they have started to speak the same way, dress and eat the same way. Life started to flow in sync with broadcast schedules.

Today we have more personalized digital technologies, such as personal computers, smart phones etc. that help us – oblige us – to be a part of the global network. We stay connected via the symbolic exchange through these networks, and subscribe to stereotypical western identities, no matter who we are or wherever we are from. Briefly, everything related to the body (language, appearances, desires) is ready to be, perhaps already is, negotiated with the (global) western standards.

### **Why is there the need for homogeneity?**

“Giving to every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests” (Bailey, F.G, 1998, p.11) seems like an effective solution to power. There are examples of propaganda of homogeneity from different cultures. One example from Turkey is the “Love or Leave” motto. One from the US is the “One Nation Under God” part of the national pledge of allegiance, which states the discourse of the state: “swallowing the minorities, and digesting them by imposing national standards for language, currency, education and health” (De Landa, M., 2000, p.272). And, apparently, media always functions to support and

broaden the ideology of nation-states, discouraging marginality and inducing the commonalities.

Angelica Bammer discusses 'belonging and foreignness' in relation to this context. She argues that both nation and home are fictional constructs, "mythic narratives, stories the telling of which has the power to create the 'we' who are engaged in telling them" (Morley, D., 2000, p.16). Once the "we-ness" has been constructed, it needs to be extended to every member of the society. TV is still a successful ploy in this case for broadcasting the ideology to the domestic space and fixing the symbolic order of its inhabitants.

Inspired by Margaret Morse's analogy "TV is the crossroads of everyday life," I want to say once it was critical to bring the masses to meet at this conjunction, however today what's more critical is to continuously know and control where the people are, how close/far away to come across at this conjunction.

The PATRIOT Act "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Investigate and Obstruct Terrorism Act" that came as a response to the 9/11 phenomena makes a good example. It shows us that governments are becoming more obsessive about control and beginning to watch their citizens under the name of securing the "we-ness". For instance, section 220 of the PATRIOT Act allows the nationwide service of search warrants for any electronic evidence, including the seizure of voice mail messages, sources of payment (credit card

number or bank account number), library records, selection of video programming from a cable operator, etc. This is all very possible as everything is getting based on the universal language of ones and zeros. The PATRIOT Act is a good attempt for securing the “we-ness” by the means of available digital technology.

Authorities impose limits on their people in many forms: tradition, ideology, law, or patriarchal value systems. The “we-ness” is an affirmation of beliefs or at least an affirmation of lack of disbelief in the implicit order hidden in social and cultural norms.

As soon as a person – even accidentally – goes beyond the accepted standards, s/he would know that there is a great chance for being penalized by the authorities. This system sounds ideal for a functioning social order. However, in today’s “heavily globalized” society, where the physical territories remain but the cultural borders are expanded, perhaps even disintegrated because of internet and other networks, it is becoming more difficult for power structures to exercise control on their inhabitants with existing methods.

Identifying a suspect and following him/her to discover their social network, waiting until the members commit a crime and arresting the person while s/he is doing the criminal act is not considered efficient anymore.

Today, in America we see a new policy called 'preemptive justice' – meaning if it is assumed that a person *may* do an illegal act contrary to 'American interests' (in the future), the best plan is to arrest the person right away, and find some charge afterwards to support the decisions that sentences them to jail. The PATRIOT Act totally supports this policy as it lets the state to obtain all the personal data that belongs to or is produced by a person, online and offline. This new policy motivates authorities to invest in surveillance, personal identification, data mining, analysis, and recording technologies where the data produced by individuals not only serves for national-security but also finds its way to be consumed by corporate interest.

Today everyone in the world – even the youngest member of the populace – is encouraged to connect and stay connected to the network 24/7. It looks great to see those mini-laptops for children campaigns in the name of supporting education. Certainly there will be many positive impacts. But on the other hand, one should not dismiss that every computer hooked up to the network, every IP address assigned to a person, will identify another traceable individual to be surveyed for nationally security and/or corporate interest.

Proponents agree that digital data processing will make a major maneuver with the radio frequency identification tags, known as RFID. All main sponsors, like the US government and global corporations such as Walmart, Procter & Gamble, etc., have been supporting research for years on developing standardized

systems for tagging products as well as monitoring customer consumption patterns. Application of RFID tags to human body has already been started in the fields of health, military and border control. With an RFID tag it is possible to identify patients (especially unconscious ones) and immediately access their medical history such as insurance information, allergies and blood type. When combined with GPS (Global Positioning System) RFID can be used to identify soldiers' exact location in field in real time, providing a hyper visibility in the combat zone.

### **What is RFID?**

It is basically a tiny silicon chip with an antenna that enables it to respond to a radio frequency produced by an RFID transceiver. Every tag contains its own unique ID number. When the tag receives the radio signals in proximity, it responds to the transceiver and sends its number. An example for the usage of these tags is the KGSs (clever card) that are being used at the tollbooths on highways. When your car approaches the booth, the RFID transceiver sends a signal to the chip located at the windshield of the car, recognizes the ID number and connects to the bank account and transfers the money.

Brian Clark argues in his paper "Disarming the Panopticon" that the data collected from these tags could be used for the purpose of profiling an individual without their knowledge. He says, "Surveillance structures actively re-appropriate the boundary of what is public and what is private. The invisibility of this re-

appropriation is problematic. Surveillance increasingly falls in the periphery of our attention. It has to circumvent attention to prevent the surveilled from constant awareness of the challenges that surveillance places onto their lives. Through this awareness, popular rejection of surveillance loses its foundation. Therefore surveillance structures are most effective as furtive systems, blending into the environments that they invade. “ (Clark, B 2006 p.1).

This begins to sound very much like a Kafka story: technology and repression transmute the body. The tiny, invisible chip under the skin successfully merges into the skin tissues and blends in with the body. In this case the person could constantly communicate with other machines surrounding him/her. Thus, his/her reading patterns, acquaintances, sexual habits etc. could be under close surveillance by machines and data processing algorithms. Once again, the problem is the invisibility of this action: its very intrusive yet subtle. It is just the basic idea of a scanner and a receiver. It could be anywhere receiving signals from our own bodies broadcasting a continual recording of data from our lives.

Apparently, this is an instrument of self-discipline, in Foucaultian words: the panopticon; eradicating autonomy and variety. In this, it is revealed that the function of the state has been transformed from serving diverse citizens to serving to a mass produced populace.

This presentation does not intend to criticize technology and show its ups and

downs, but I wanted to bring your attention to the implicit political economy of technology serving standardization. We 'all' certainly benefit from the fruits of this research. We "all" love social networking sites, search engines, free e-mail accounts with tons of free space. We "all" enjoy the no wait lanes on highways. Don't we "all" love cheap food? Think even further:

Today there is a lot of debate in American about how grade school students and their parents are stressed out by the medication requirements imposed by their schools to enhance the learning capabilities. These are medications that inhibit activity and regulate attention for the promise of better education. For the benefit of the all, medication will improve the standardized test results.

Yes, genetically modified foods, babies and pharmaceuticals, and memory aids are not that convincing. But I invite you to think once again the impact of the technologies we consume or are forced to consume every day.

What is the cost of these technologies on our freedom to choose, differ and express individuality? For those who are willing to preserve and individuality, I would like to ask even how much resistance is possible against standardization before we are convinced that our individuality is actually something dangerous to us.

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