Cyberchiefs. Autonomy and Authority in Online Tribes

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Cyberchiefs

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INTRODUCTION

C'est en ce sens qu'il est permis de penser que la vérité de ce rapport sur mon temps sera bien assez prouvée par son style. Le ton de ce discours sera en lui-même une garantie suffisante, puisque tout le monde comprendra que c'est uniquement en ayant vécu comme cela que l'on peut avoir la maîtrise de cette sorte d'exposé.  

Guy Debord, Panégyrique

The defining fact about the Internet is that it is a network, a collection of nodes connected by ties. Any node on the Internet is accessible from any other node, and there are no differences between the ties that connect the nodes: all hyperlinks are equal. In liberal democracies, this many-to-many structure and the informality of online social relations are taken to mean that cyberspace allows people to freely engage in social and political exchanges with others who share common interests. Though inequalities of access persist, goes this argument, the Internet has become a prime avenue for spontaneous expression and organisation.¹ Online sociality is said to reject hierarchy, creating a sort of permanent autonomous zone of democratic communication and production. In the realms of independently produced media, knowledge and code, participatory cooperation is the rule. Pyramidal structures and proprietary practices are being inexorably challenged by a swarming multitude of self-organised agents.

In reality, authority runs rife on the Internet. Online self-organisation and self-expression, in order to avoid an incoherent Babel, require participants to exercise quality control over their work and the membership of their groups. Participants need to be able to determine who is reliable; what contributions are pertinent;

* It is in this sense that the truth of this report on my time will be well enough proved by its style. The tone of this discourse will in itself constitute sufficient guarantee, for everyone will understand that it is only by dint of having lived in this way that one can master this kind of account.
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and, on that basis, who will be included or excluded, reinforcing the feeling of belonging. This book focuses on authority in online projects or 'tribes'. Since the Internet is a stateless system, the interactions which occur on it can properly be called 'tribal'. Online tribes are social formations which favour grassroots direct democracy, the pleasurable provision of free gifts, and the feeling of proximity to others. Max Weber classically defined authority as the recognition by others of a person's legitimate right to exercise power. The question this book addresses is: How does authority take into account the central value on the Internet, autonomy? Analysing authority necessitates an interrogation of the notions of expertise and leadership; ultimately, it raises the question of the nature of domination.

Michel Foucault suggested that expertise is an instrument of elite domination: in his view, the state used scientific experts to define individuals and groups as deviant or sick, and to justify their discriminatory treatment. But specialised knowledge has also been used for autonomous purposes. Computer engineers or 'hackers' (not to be confused with computer vandals or thieves) created the Internet. If computer code was efficient and elegant, if it worked, its author was rewarded with high status. Quasi-scientific expertise became independent from hierarchical institutions: hackers recognised the judgment only of their peers. The authority of experts is traditionally subordinated to the authority of leaders. However when the Internet was developed learned authority to a great extent determined administrative authority for the simple reason that only computer hackers knew how to run the systems. Following the lead of hackers, expertise on the Internet became dependent not on credentials issued by an institution to an individual, in the shape of a diploma or professional certificate, but on an individual's unique skill, developed over time, and publicly demonstrated. In his memoirs, Guy Debord declared that only someone who had lived a life apart from, and against, capitalism and its media propaganda (the 'society of the spectacle') could write in classical French: the truth of his account would be proved by its style. Online communication similarly requires
public performances blending humour, profanity and knowledge to confirm that expertise is both authentic and valid.

Beyond communication, the user-generated social Internet ("Web 2.0") is increasingly a site of peer production, of cooperative work. Distributed projects involve thousands of people, located in different places and submitting at different times contributions that vary widely in scale. How are these contributions assembled? More broadly, how does domination operate in self-directed networks? And how should we go about finding out? To answer these questions, we have first to recognise that, on the Internet as everywhere, the playing field is never level. Structural inequalities exist because of the effects generated by the Internet's growth pattern, which privileges early entrants. In addition, archaic forms of power, such as overt sexism, are rife online. Pierre Bourdieu once said that sociology was the 'science of domination'. Bourdieu's critical approach provides invaluable tools for understanding the reproduction of privilege. But does this mean that only sociologists can understand the truth of power? In other words, is everyone else a 'cultural dope'? Not in the least: archaic power can be contested. Moreover, people are capable of making judgments about what is at stake in conflicts, what the roles of leaders should be, and whether decisions are fair. The analysis of online domination must take these different dimensions into account.

The distribution of administrative authority to autonomous individuals is an essential part of the appeal of volunteer projects such as Wikipedia, precisely because it gives people the possibility of rapidly attaining positions of authority. In the online context, administrative authority is the capacity to exclude people from a network, or to limit the actions they can undertake on that network. To understand how autonomous social formations justify these actions, it is useful to look at David Beetham's contention that two legitimising principles are more emancipatory than others. The first is the principle of democratic sovereignty, based on the collective will of the group. The second is the meritocratic principle of differentiation which, in theory, challenges the reproduction of advantage. On the Internet, meritocracy was separated by hackers from hierarchy and bureaucracy. Merit
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assumed an anti-authoritarian slant, based on the regard for the charismatic genius of great initiators, and, subsequently, on the charismatic position of great nodes. The principles of autonomous charisma and democratic sovereignty structure the online space of authority.

The Internet has proved highly popular with researchers of all stripes because it provides free and easy access to innumerable traces of human and network activity, whether in the form of text or hyperlinks. Scores of empirical studies, both quantitative and qualitative, have been carried out. Less common have been comprehensive conceptualisations of issues other than virtual identity and community. Why is it necessary to create new frameworks for the analysis of online authority? Because the primary aim of domination is to be misrecognised, and what better misrecognition could there be than the widespread notion that the Internet is a non-hierarchical space? And yet: the persistence of some forms of domination should not prevent us from recognising instances where authority really is self-directed.

Internet research, since it is still an emerging field, offers a welcome opportunity to break through disciplinary silos. Though this book’s main thrust is sociological, its conceptual toolkit draws from communication and new media studies, anthropology, political theory, network theory and law. The first part of this book reviews concepts useful for the analysis of online sociality. Chapter 1 focuses on the role of autonomy within informational capitalism and on the emergence of neotribalism. Chapter 2 examines the impact of anti-authoritarian meritocracy, distribution and aggregation on online charisma. Chapter 3 considers structural determinations such as network growth and archaic sexism. Chapter 4 examines justification, governance and law in online tribes. This first part concludes by presenting a model of the space of online tribal authority, structured along two main axes: charismatic and sovereign authority. Part II examines four projects representing distinct locations in the space of online authority. In each case the focus is on the key characteristics of the project, its authority structure, and the nature of the conflicts it generates. Chapter 5 looks at the
Primitivism radical text archive. Chapter 6 analyses Daily Kos, a progressive political community weblog. Chapter 7 focuses on the Debian free-software project, particularly mailing lists. Chapter 8 examines Wikipedia, the encyclopedia that anyone can edit. Chapter 9 pulls the book’s strands together and argues that online authority should be understood in the context not of networks, but of a new organisational form, online tribal bureaucracy.