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The web as exception: The rise of new media publishing cultures

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Summary

This dissertation offers a history of web exceptionalism - or the notion that the web is a source of radical change and that it is inherently different from its 'mass' and 'mainstream' media predecessors - as well as its role in various innovations in web publishing. Web exceptionalism combines a discourse of the displacement of older media with the articulation of specific media practices, technologies and forms as "web-native," i.e. as somehow reflective of the web's essence or nature. Its expressions range from early visions of the web as a virtual space and ideal public sphere to the concept of Web 2.0 and recent discussion of social media as a new form of decentralized, citizen-powered journalism. Here, I examine manifestations of such ideas in new media publishing cultures in the 1990s and early 2000s, arguing that while these narratives of exceptionalism portray the web's development in terms of rupture, or sudden break from the past, they paradoxically shape web culture as a site and source of historical continuity. The aim of this study is not to debunk claims of the web's exceptional nature. Rather, it is concerned with how a closer investigation of web exceptionalism, focused on the conditions of its emergence, serves to reveal the various historical and cultural legacies that shape the web and our perceptions of it.

In the first part of the dissertation, I explore the roots of web exceptionalism by returning to the influential conceptualization of the web as cyberspace in the early 1990s. In its most utopian configurations, the-web-as-cyberspace would be a space of 'pure information' that would free its users from physical, social, cultural and economic constraints on identity, community and enterprise. As much as cyberspace symbolized a radically different future, however, the concept was also the site of a remarkable connection between cybercultural utopianism and cybernetics, or the science of communication and control, which developed in military-related research during the 1940s and 1950s. One of the key ideas that emerged from cybernetics - that social and cultural phenomena are essentially formalizable (and thus computable) systems of information and feedback - is extended in the basic assumption underlying cybercultural utopianism, that the world might be made anew within the electronic frontier of cyberspace. This underlying assumption may also be seen to resonate with more recent articulations of the web as an exceptional medium: despite the disappearance of a utopian notion of cyberspace, similar computational metaphor is found in concepts such as the social graph, which carries the promise of a universal mapping of social relations.

In addition to the concept of cyberspace, cybercultural utopianism may be typified by its primary mode of delivery, the cool tech-culture magazines such as *Mondo 2000* and *Wired* that

entered mainstream culture in the early 1990s. As I argue in a case study of *Mondo 2000*, the magazine's mix of irony, rebellious attitude and unconventional production practices was closely aligned with its depictions of the cybercultural future, which oscillated between enthusiastic and negative visions of the potential for empowerment and authentic experience through new media. *Mondo*'s ambivalent "cool" not only represented a particular new media publishing form, but was in part produced by the rupture-talk at the center of *Mondo 2000*'s identity. Like the computational metaphor, I argue, *Mondo*'s new media cool may be seen to resonate with later manifestations of web exceptionalism, where a similar ambivalence about the effects of new media endures.

The second part of the dissertation comprises three case studies of web exceptionalism, each of which emphasizes the interplay between rupture-talk and the establishment of novel media practices, technologies and forms. The first concerns the promise of a "new publishing paradigm" at *HotWired*, the web-only publication launched by the creators of *Wired* magazine in 1994. At *HotWired*, questions of site design and editorial practice were addressed in terms of the web's promise and what the new medium required. Embedded in these ideas about the web's exceptional status and the resulting practices, however, were a series of cultural influences - from the New Journalism of the 1970s to the Bay Area rave scene of the 1990s - that tied *HotWired*'s production to past media practice. The second case revisits what appeared to be the arrival of a new age of "open news," a narrative of exceptionalism spurred by the rapid rise to prominence of the tech-news website and forum *Slashdot* in 1998. With its reader-submitted stories and intricate commenting infrastructure, *Slashdot* seemed to embody principles of open-source software production, where engineering work is delegated to a dispersed, self-organized group of volunteers. In this new context, 'openness' meant spreading the work of news production and distribution among diverse participants and providing an alternative to the closed process of decision-making by traditional gatekeepers. A closer look at the emergence of *Slashdot*'s unique technological infrastructure, however, suggests a different lineage involving the early online culture of Bulletin Board Systems. And rather than a critical intervention in news production, the site's history sooner resonates with accounts of the introduction of information technology in the workplace, as its central thread is the automation and increased visibility of production tasks. The third case study deals with the emergence of blogging as a popular web publishing format in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Taking as a starting the influential definition of blogging as "web-native," I show how blogging was defined by early practitioners as both a solution to perceived problems in mainstream media and an extension of some of its worst excesses. Most of all, I argue, the articulation of blogging as "web-

native” was aligned with what I call blogging’s logic of exposure, extending conventional publishing values and practices related to publicity into a novel web cultural form.

Overall, the case studies demonstrate how significant innovations in web publishing were simultaneously a product of narratives of the web as an exceptional medium as well as a range of cultural influences. In doing so, they support the dissertation’s central claim, that rupture-talk paradoxically shapes web-native culture as a site and source of historical continuity.