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Virtual Dystopias and the Imaginary of the Internet

Abstract: This chapter explores the counterpart of virtual utopianism, namely the dystopian imaginary that sees in the internet not freedom, liberation and equality, but their opposites – the loss of privacy and autonomy, the alienation from others through technology and addiction, and exposure to risk and danger from the likes of online thieves, terrorists and paedophiles. Drawing upon accounts offered by sociologists, psychologists, political commentators and journalists, the chapter maps a growing cultural pessimism that figures the internet as a source of, not a solution to, the problems of modern society.

Four modes of virtual dystopianism

In Chapter 4 we traced the cultural history of techno-dystopianism in social thought and science fiction, locating its original impetus within the Romantic critique of modernity. I have suggested that these discourses commonly identify technology as a source of social pathology (variously through its effects as an imperative, as a source of reification, as destructive mediation and as an instrument of control). We have further seen how such pessimistic representations of technological society are now inflected into the space of the virtual, with computer technologies occupying a central role in the genesis of nightmarish social scenarios. We now turn to consider how such fictions are recuperated into critical assessments of the internet. Paralleling and juxtaposing the modes of virtual utopianism explored in Chapter 3, these dystopian evaluations see in the internet an extension and culmination of modernity’s logic of control, domination and disenchantment, rather than a means for transcending it.

*The Death of Politics and the Eclipse of Freedom.* In Chapter 3, we encountered the political hopes projected onto the internet and its related communication technologies. For virtual utopians, ICTs offer a means to close the democratic deficit, promote civic participation, enable direct democracy, enhance freedom of speech and dissent and even drive the revolutionary overthrow of autocratic regimes. In contrast, virtual dystopians see in the internet a powerful countervailing trend that at best marginalises, trivialises and demeans political participation, and at worst serves to tighten webs of domination in the interests of political and corporate elites.

First, we must note the scepticism about the internet’s capacity to offer access to information and knowledge for a politically engaged citizenry. The great hope of utopians is that media censorship and political ‘spin’ will be shunted aside as the internet becomes a freely accessible global repository of unvarnished truths, and that a fully informed public will be thereby energised to engage in political action. Critics hold this position to be naïve, insofar as, first, the availability of politically and socially important information offers no guarantee that it will be of interest to ICT users. For example, the significant socio-political events of 2013 included the conclusion of a deal between the US and Iran around nuclear weapons proliferation; ongoing civil war in Syria; devastation in the Philippines from Typhoon Haiyan; a shutdown of US government