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Brand New World? Globalization, Cyberspace and the Politics of Convergence (Key Note Address)

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Brand New World? Globalization, Cyberspace and the Politics of Convergence

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Thank you very much. It is a pleasure to be here and I want to thank Gaëtan and his colleagues for organizing two excellent conferences. Presenting an opening address is like cooking tomato sauce, something I learned long ago from my grandmother and mother. You

organize the ingredients, mix them in at the right time, and, most importantly, as they liked to say, stir the pot a lot. My job is made more challenging because my talk is also meant to close the Colloquium on the Americas as well as to open 2001 Bugs. But I also learned from my cooking instructors that it is always possible to stretch the sauce for more than one occasion and that a good sauce is always a work in progress. So let's get cooking.

In her award winning book, Naomi Klein (2000) reminds us that we are living in a branded world. Starting from the view that the brand is "the core meaning of the modern corporation," she documents the global spread of brand identities made most successful in such visual brand icons as the Golden Arches of McDonalds and the Nike Swoosh. Brands have spread beyond the specific commercial product like the hamburger or running shoe to encompass places, events, people, activities, and now governments. My home town of Ottawa has gone through several brands, most recently spending close to a quarter million dollars to marry its new high tech image with its attractive surroundings. Sadly it came up with the brand name Technically Beautiful, to less than resounding support. Now the Canadian national government, perhaps taking a cue from a popular beer commercial celebrating Canadian identity, is promoting the need to brand Canada. If we can brand countries, why not the world? Indeed, globalization might be better viewed as a brand for the world than as an analytical tool or concept for understanding political and economic processes. It is much too loose and contested to serve usefully as a means to understand the world, but as a brand it provides an expression that is its own explanation. In this respect, globalization exists *sui generis* as the word for what is happening today, not unlike the mantra whose utterance places the chanter among a group of believers who need say no more. Concepts lead to questions. As a brand, globalization leads only to one response: Amen. Brands don't tell stories, advance conversations, support narratives; propel politics; they end all of these. The iconic brand is the period, better still the exclamation point; it is a rhetorical stop sign. (By the way Coca Cola has branded highway signs across Tanzania so that its brand is literally that nation's stop sign).

Successful brands transcend not only the products that inspired them but the limits of the brand itself. They do so by turning the mantra into the myth. This is significant because myths are different from brands in that they are meant to tell stories, animate conversations and extend narratives. These qualities are difficult for us to think about because we are trained to test the value of ideas by assessing their truth or falsity. Indeed it is common to define myth as falsehood. But, as Alisdair MacIntyre (1970) reminds us, myths are not about these things; they are not true or false but living or dead. And the power of myth is not based on its ability to reflect reality but to live on in the face of, or in spite of, what a positivist may judge to be real. A myth is alive if it continues to give meaning to human life, if it continues to represent some important part of the collective mentality of a given age, and if it continues to render socially and intellectually tolerable what would otherwise be experienced as incoherence. In this respect, globalization is one of the master myths of our time. More than just a way of branding the world, it informs the world with a story about how different people come together to transcend their messy differences to create a universal culture. It is a story that, in its more sophisticated forms, inoculates itself by admitting to deficiencies, bumps in the road, unevenness and genuine divides. But these too will be overcome by the inevitable spread of globalization (roughly a combination of Hegel's unfolding dialectic and Disney's "It's a Small World After All").

Computer communication is central to the myth of globalization because it provides the latest version of what James Carey (1992) once called "the electrical sublime," at once both the banal infrastructure for globalization and the spectacular vision of universal intelligence celebrated in the breezy triumphalism of Wired Magazine and the disturbing visions of people like the theologian Teilhard de Chardin (1959) with his image of the noosphere, a literal atmosphere of thought mounting in pressure upon a globe whose linked intelligence prepares the way for an evolutionary leap. Cyberspace provides the transcendent spectacle, what Leo Marx once called "the rhetoric of the technological sublime" offering hymns to progress that rise "like froth on a tide of exuberant self-regard sweeping over all misgivings, problems, and contradictions." (1964: 207). It renews what was once promised by the telegraph, telephone,

radio, and television, propelling the myth of globalization specifically by offering the literal connection, the missing link that will bring about the end of history, the end of geography and the end of politics.

Cyberspace anoints globalization with a near apocalyptic quality- the end of history. Not merely the expansion of commerce beyond national boundaries, it becomes, in the work of Frances Fukuyama (1992), Nicholas Negroponte (1995), and Ray Kurzweil (1999), to name just some of the leading thinkers, a radical disjunction in time, opening the way to a new epoch no longer bound by the economic, technological or even biological limitations that marked every historical period. For Fukuyama globalization and liberal democracy mark the end point in an evolutionary process that has taken people through stages of development (e.g. hunting and gathering, agriculture), modes of thinking (mythic, religious, philosophic), and forms of governance (tribal, feudal, communist, fascist). For the director of MIT's Media Lab, Nicholas Negroponte, the end of history comes with the end of an analog world and the arrival of a digital one to which we must accommodate. In matter of fact prose, he offers a modern day prophet's call to say good-bye to the world of atoms, with its coarse, confining, materiality, and welcomes the digital world, with its infinitely malleable electrons able to transcend spatial, temporal, and material constraints. The world of atoms is ending, he says, we must learn to be digital. Ray Kurzweil brings the ballast of strong technological credentials to a best selling book that casts the end of history in biological terms. The radical disjunction means the end of death as we know it, as we rapidly refine the ability to preserve our intelligence in software so that "life expectancy is no longer a viable term in relation to intelligent beings." (1999: 280) For Kurzweil, one of history's fundamental problems is that we have been dependent on the "longevity of our *hardware*," that physical self which he laments through Yeats as "but a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick." History as we know it ends as we "cross the divide" and "instantiate ourselves into our computational technology." (Ibid.: 128-129)

In addition to crossing the divide in time, cyberspace helps to drive globalization's promise to cross the spatial divide, putting an end to geography as we know it. For Frances

Cairncross (1997), this means the "death of distance," as cyberspace, unlike material space, permits us to experience what it means to be anywhere at any time of our choosing. Accepting this view, Kenichi Ohmae (1990;1995) celebrates a "borderless world" where any attempt to create boundaries is doomed to failure or what William Mitchell (1999) calls an "e-topia" of near boundless choices for where and how we live and work (see also Friedman, 1999). For him, the Net does not just extend geometry:

> The Net negates geometry. ... it is fundamentally and profoundly *antispatial*. It is nothing like the Piazza Navona or Copley Square. You cannot say where it is or describe its memorable shape and proportions or tell a stranger how to get there. But you can find things in it without knowing where they are. The Net is ambient-nowhere in particular and everywhere at once. (Mitchell, 1995: 8)

Even those like Margeret Wertheim (1999) who take a less triumphalist view still see cyberspace as profoundly spatially disjunctive, exploding the singularity of the Enlightenment's vision of one empirical space and introducing an experience dimly reminiscent of the medieval era where existential space is inherently dual- comprised then of secular and spiritual space, today of material and cyberspace.

Finally, cyberspace promises to end politics as we know it by undermining bureaucratic constraints on building networked democracies and by sweeping away age-old strategic thinking. (Mosco and Foster, forthcoming) In the work of the Tofflers (1995), George Gilder (2000), George Keyworth and other members of the Progress and Freedom Foundation, the end of politics means more than just using computer communication to create electronic democracy. It also redefines what we traditionally called politics by grounding power in networks rather than institutions. New economic power rests in looser structures, systems with nodal points whose power derives not from their geographical supremacy but from networked interdependence and flexibility. Real-time and twenty-four hour networks of information flow overthrow the physical city and the nation-state too, creating new laws by which politics must comply or be threatened with extinction. Proponents go as far as to envision a quantum politics whose indeterminacy mirrors that of the subatomic world. The end of politics also means the end of fear, particularly

the age-old fear of military attack because computer communications enables a defense against it. The need for offensive weapons and strategies of mutually assured destruction disappear as ballistic missile defense systems lift a protective umbrella that shields the world. From the time that Ronald Reagan first called for such a defense, telling Gorbachev that he saw the "hand of providence" in it, to George W. Bush's latest reinvention, we hear the language of a new dawn in global security, of world peace, driven by a kind of "machina ex deo" that will transform politics as we have known it throughout history.

There are several ways to respond to these myths of cyberspace and globalization. One is immediately tempted to simply debunk them. And indeed the history of the communication technology, including the telegraph (Standage, 1999), telephone (Martin, 1991) radio (Douglas, 1987) and television (Fisher and Fisher, 1996) reveal a pattern. The arrival of each is accompanied by the triumphalist expression that they mark a break with history, the death of distance, and an end to the politics of division, if not the arrival of world peace. Sure, each also typically contains a subtext that worries about the impact on the family, privacy, and what passes at the time for authentic communication. But there is no doubt that each wave of communication technology, and its associated systems like electricity, had their time to bask in the glow of the technological sublime, before the inevitable routinization set in and common sense, in the Gramscian sense, catches its breathe. Then there returns a view that Raymond Williams gave some conceptual heft: technology is little more than a congealed social relationship. As such it is capable of good, evil and, as it literally withdraws into the woodwork of our homes and offices, considerable banality.

It is also useful to address myths by taking them more seriously. If in fact their value is determined less by their empirical truth or falsity but rather by whether they are living or dead, then the question is not are they true but what keeps them alive. Myths are sustained by social practices that involve the leadership of iconic story tellers whose accomplishments in one area give them a platform to promote mythic story-telling. Bill Gates' ability to sustain a business monopoly permits him to mythologize about revolution and transcendence in his books The

Road Ahead and Business at the Speed of Thought. Of course, the story telling no longer takes place around a camp fire, unless you consider the television to be an electronic hearth, but through a dense, recombinant and reiterative field of media which amplify, simplify and customize the tales of Gates, Negroponte, Gilder, the Tofflers, et al. for global audiences. These deceptively simple stories of a new age, new economy, next new thing, often contain the sophisticated practices perfected by magicians and conjurers over the centuries, protective covers, including what Barthes (1972) called the process of inoculation, and even find a role for the ancient and wily trickster now taking on the shape of the computer hacker.

Revealing the components and processes of modern mythmaking does assert that myths matter, but in order to understand why they do, it is important to consider the values and desires they tap into. The cyberspace myth is a story about how ever smaller, faster, cheaper, and better computer and communication technologies help to realize, with little effort, those seemingly impossible dreams of democracy and community with practically no pressure on the natural environment. According to this view, it empowers people largely by realizing the perennial dream of philosophers and librarians: to make possible instant access to the world's store of information without requiring the time, energy and money to physically go where the information is stored. Moreover, the story continues, computer networks provide relatively inexpensive access, making possible a primary feature of democracy, that the tools necessary for empowerment are equally available to all. Furthermore, this vision of cyberspace fosters community because it enables people to communicate with one another in any part of the world. As a result, existing communities of people are strengthened and whole new "virtual" communities arise from the creation of networks of people who share interests, commitments, and values. In essence, by transcending time, space and resource constraints, approximating what Karl Marx called "the annihilation of space with time," (1973: 539) cyberspace provides the literal and figurative missing links that bring genuine, sustainable democracy and community to a world in desperate need of both. One can begin to understand what James Carey (1992) meant when he said that "nostalgia for the future" is one of our most potent pastorals (p.200).

Myths can be understand for what the reveal but also for what they conceal. In this case the myth of globalization and cyberspace is a primary example of what Barthes meant when he defined myth as depoliticized speech. As Chantal Mouffe (2000) perceptively puts it, “Here, as in many other cases, the mantra of globalization is invoked to justify the status quo and reinforce the power of big transnational corporations. When it is presented as driven exclusively by the information revolution, globalization is deprived of its political dimension and appears as a fate to which we all have to submit.” (p.119)

What is this political dimension? Globalization can be thought of as the response of business to what several writers, including the conservative political scientist Samuel Huntington, referred to as the crisis of governability of the 1970s (see Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki, 1975). That decade brought to a culmination the growing problems of the fordist model of economic development. That model was based on mass production of standardized products and services by national firms and their heavily unionized workers for markets of mass consumers overseen, regulated and, in some cases, controlled, by national governments. But by the mid-1970s it was shredded by the growth of transnational firms based in numerous countries interested in producing a multiplicity of often customized products for complex and shifting markets of consumers. These firms no longer needed the support of their traditional unionized work force and sought to transform their dealings with both labour and the national governments that had overseen the relationships between business and labour and between business and consumers.

Globalization began as an economic transformation from a fordist to a post-fordist economy. But that left a crisis in the governance of this new economy, no, not the new economy of the dot coms that pundits once thought had rewritten the economic rulebook until most of dot coms were crushed by the old rulebook. Rather, it is a new economy of global capitalism where business seeks the freedom to operate where labour is cheap for the skills business needs, where taxes are low, where rules protecting workers and consumers are weak, where the social safety net is feeble, and where environmental protections are tenuous and barely

enforced. The resistance of governments, workers, consumers and other civil society organizations produced for the political Right a crisis of governability. The response was political globalization, the transformation of national governments, new regional and international treaties, and governance bodies that would carry out as fully as possible the economic agenda of transnational business. As a result social welfare states became neo-liberal corporate states, even if some carry the "third way" brand. The rest are little more than national versions of the old company town, reborn as the company state. Meanwhile NAFTA, the EU, the WTO and other regional and global additions to this alphabet soup extend corporate governance with little more than a nod, perhaps a bit more in the case of the EU, to social welfare, citizenship, and the natural environment (Mosco and Schiller, 2001).

Myths also conceal a great deal about the nature of cyberspace and here it is useful to focus on the relationship between two processes: digitization and commodification. Digitization refers to the transformation of communication, including words, images, motion pictures, and sounds into a common language. It provides enormous gains in transmission speed and flexibility over earlier forms of electronic communication which were largely reliant on analog techniques (Longstaff 2000). Mythmakers leap from here to the view that the world of atoms is morphing into a virtual utopia. This is a serious mistake because it neglects to recognize that digitization takes place in the context of, and greatly expands, the process of commodification or the transformation of use to exchange value. The expansion of the commodity form provides the context for who leads the process of digitization and how it is applied. It is used first and foremost to expand the commodification of information and entertainment, specifically to enlarge markets in communication products, deepen the commodification of labour involved in the production, distribution and exchange of communication, and expand markets in the audiences that receive and make use of electronic communication (Mosco, 1996). Digitization not only takes place in the context of powerful commercial forces; it serves to advance the overall process of commodification worldwide and its specific application to communication. Cyberspace therefore results from the mutual constitution of digitization and commodification.

Digitization expands the commodification of communication content by extending the range of opportunities to measure and monitor, package and repackage information and entertainment. The packaging of material in the paper and ink form of a newspaper or book has provided a flexible means to commodify communication offering an adequate form in which to measure the commodity and monitor purchases. Challenges arose in the commodification of communication when what Bernard Miège calls "flow" type communication systems arose, most importantly television (Miège 1989). How does one package a television program for sale to a viewer? Initially, commodification was based on an inflexible system of delivering a batch of broadcast channels into the home with viewers paying for the receiver and for a mark-up in products advertised over the air. This system did not account for differential use of the medium or make any clear connection between viewing and purchasing. It amounted to a fordist system of delivering generic programming to a mass audience which was marketed to advertisers for a price per thousand viewers. Each step toward the digitization of television has refined the commodification of content, allowing for the flow to be "captured" or, more precisely, for the commodity to be measured, monitored and packaged in ever more specific or customized ways. Early cable television improved on broadcast systems of commodification by charging per month for a set of channels. As this medium has become digitized, companies can now offer many more channels and package them in many different ways, including selling content on a per view basis. Material delivered over television, the Internet or some combination of these and other new wired and wireless systems can now be flexibly packaged and then repackaged for sale in some related form with the transaction measured and monitored by the same digital system.

In addition to expanding the commodification of communication content, the recursive nature of digital systems expands the commodification of the entire communication process. Digital systems which measure and monitor precisely each information transaction can be used to refine the process of delivering audiences of viewers, listeners, readers, movie goers, telephone and computer users, to advertisers. In essence, companies can package and repackage customers in forms that specifically reflect both their actual purchases and their demographic

characteristics. These packages, for example, of 18-25 year old men who order martial arts films on pay-per view television, can be sold to companies, which spend more for this information because they want to market their products to this specific sector with as little advertising wasted on groups who would not be interested or able to buy. This is a major refinement in the commodification of viewers over the fordist system of delivering mass audiences and it has been applied to most every communication medium today (Mosco 1996).

A similar extension of commodification applies to the labour of communication. The replacement of mechanical with electronic systems eliminated thousands of jobs in the printing industry as electronic typesetting did away with the work of linotype operators. Today, digital systems allow companies to expand this process. Newspaper reporters increasingly serve in the combined roles of editor and page producer. They do not simply report on a story, they put it into a form for transmission to the printed, and increasingly, electronic page. Companies retain the rights to the multiplicity of repackaged forms and thereby profit from each use. Broadcast journalists carry cameras and edit their own tape for delivery over television or computer networks. The film industry is beginning to deliver digital copies of movies to theaters in multiple locations over communication satellite, thereby eliminating the distribution of celluloid copies for exhibition by projectionists. Software is sold to customers well before it has been debugged on the understanding that they will report errors, download and install patches and other corrections, and figure out how to work around problems. The ability to eliminate labour, combine it to perform a multiplicity of tasks, or shift labour to unpaid consumers further expands the revenue opportunities (Hardt and Brennen 1995; McKercher 2000; Sussman and Lent, 1998).

The mutual constitution of digitization and commodification helps to explain the rapid integration of the communication sector and the concentration of corporate power within it. Specifically, the adoption of a common digital language across the communication industry is breaking down barriers that once separated print, broadcasting, telecommunications and the information technology or computer data sectors. These divisions have been historically very significant because they contained the legal and institutional marks of the particular period in

which they rose to national prominence. The print publishing industry is marked by a legal regime of free expression, limited government involvement, and local, typically family, ownership. Broadcasting and telecommunications came later, rising to prominence alongside the rise of strong nation-state authority and national production regimes. The legal system in Canada, as well as those of the United States and Europe, placed a greater regulatory burden on radio, television, and telephone systems, even going as far as to create publicly controlled institutions in these sectors, in order to accomplish national objectives such as reflecting a national identity and building a national market. National companies were more likely to control commercial broadcasting and telecommunications systems than was the case in print publishing. The information technology or computer data industry took off in the post-World War II era and embodies the trend away from nation-state regulation, except to advance the expansion of businesses, and toward control by multinational businesses. There are numerous legal and institutional struggles within this sector but it began from the premise that, unlike broadcasting and telecommunications, the computer industry would face no public interest or public service responsibilities, no system of subsidized pricing, no commitment to universality of access, and no expectation that national firms would be anything more than one step on the way to multinational control. (Schiller 1999; McChesney 1999). And this has become the model for the convergent communication industry.

The combination of digitization and commodification and the growing integration of communication sectors into a consolidated electronic information and entertainment arena explains much of why there has been an unprecedented acceleration in mergers and acquisitions. Communication systems in the United States are now largely shaped by a handful of companies including Microsoft, AT&T (which also owns the largest cable television firm Media One), General Electric-NBC, Viacom-CBS, Disney-ABC, and AOL-Time Warner (which owns Turner Broadcasting). There are others, including foreign-based firms like Bertelsmann which owns Random House publishing and Vivendi, the French telecommunications firm which merged with the Canadian firm Seagrams and its movie business Sony. Indeed each of these firms has a

significant transnational presence through outright ownership, strategic partnerships, and investment. The Canadian arena is even more highly concentrated with arguably four firms in the most dominant position. These include BCE-CTV-Thomson, Rogers-Maclean Hunter, CanWest Global-Hollinger, and Quebecor-Sun Media -Groupe Vidéotron. The combination of growing concentration and diminishing regulation lead some, most recently Cass Sunstein (2001), to fear that cyberspace will be little more than a commercial space with less than adequate room for diversity and the clash of ideas so vital to democracy.

The transformation, however, is far from complete. Canadian communication firms, like their counterparts in the United States and elsewhere, face enormous pressures toward regional and global integration (Mosco and Schiller, 2001). To advance transnational corporate communications services in general, and media services in particular, nationally controlled communications institutions would have to be eliminated or at least marginalized, and public service principles would have to be sharply diminished. U.S. corporate and political leaders lobbied during the 1980s and 1990s to advance these sweeping changes within broader efforts to liberalize trade and investment rules. Government initiatives, private economic diplomacy, bilateral negotiations between states, and multilateral organizations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization all played important roles in this process. The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) which brought together Canada and the United States and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which added Mexico, comprised prominent initiatives within this larger movement, and each was perceived as a prelude to a broader push for liberalization of global trade and investment within the organizational context of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and World Trade Organization (WTO) frameworks.

But there is good reason for this conference to be called 2001 Bugs. Media concentration often does not produce the synergies that companies anticipate and sometimes results in content that fails to attract audiences. Digitization is not a flawless process and numerous technical problems have slowed its development. More importantly, we can observe deeper political

contradictions. Neo-liberalism is founded on the retreat of the state from critical areas of social life, including the communication arena where the state historically was directly involved in the construction of infrastructure, the development of technical standards, the regulation of market access, and the direct provision of services. According to the neo-liberal view, such functions are best provided by the private sector with minimal state involvement. Aside from the ideological commitment to this perspective, neo-liberalism aims to customize state functions, to tailor them to suit business needs and thereby avoid the problems that the vision of the state as a universal or public space, open to a wide range of contestation, once provided. But the communication arena demonstrates that it is not so easy to accomplish this feat.

One of the most significant of what are typically presented as narrow technical concerns is standardization. Digitization only succeeds to the extent that common technical standards are used to harmonize the processing, distribution, and reception of digital signals. It is one thing to translate audio, video, and data streams into digital packets; it is quite another to ensure their flawless flow through global information grids. In order to accomplish this, a wide range of standards for equipment necessary to encode and decode signals and for managing the data flows through networks is essential. Achieving such agreement is normally difficult because competitors are reluctant to cooperate since it requires sharing information which itself is increasingly valued in its own right and central to success in developing new technical systems.

Capitalism has traditionally dealt with this problem by establishing government agencies or private-public partnerships that might serve as independent standards arbiters. For example, almost a century and a half ago, competing telegraph interests established the International Telecommunications Union, a global body, made up of mainly government organizations and run on a one-nation, one-vote basis to establish global standards for the new technology. Over the years the ITU expanded its role as each new communication technology came along specifically to set standards for the telephone, allocate broadcasting frequencies, and eventually the orbital locations of communication satellites. But as the number of nations grew, particularly the number of former colonial societies eager to create standards to expand widespread access

and not just the profits of communication companies, conflict grew at the ITU and core capitalist powers, led by the United States, begin to consider alternatives. These included first political bodies, like Intelsat, a global communication satellite organization whose rules permitted Western control and more recently, private corporations, such as ICANN, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, which essentially establishes standards for the Web. The goal of these organizations has been to set standards to advance the interests of business but to do so without sacrificing global credibility. But it is more and more difficult to accomplish this. Digitization is increasingly global and the competition to dominate markets for the short term by controlling one phase of a rapidly changing technical system or for the long term by setting a critical standard (such as for a computer operating system) is intensifying. Furthermore, the diversity of global interests is expanding so that even something as seemingly innocuous as setting a national suffix for a web address becomes a political question when, to cite one particularly contentious case, it is Palestine petitioning for .pa. Moreover, should the common ".com" suffix expand to include ".union" as one public interest group proposed? Private businesses hoping to depoliticize these issues by setting up Western controlled private or only quasi-public standards organizations are actually only displacing tensions and contradictions. As a result, seemingly technical questions are caught up in political economic maelstroms that, at the very least, slow the process of global technological development. But the alternative, setting up genuinely public national or international regulatory authorities, a central feature in the expansion of communication during Fordism, invites turning this arena, widely recognized as critical to capitalist expansion, into a highly contested terrain (Lessig, 1999).

This problem is not only evident in the struggle over standards, it has marked debates about how to expand access to technology in order to build markets and about how to ensure some measure of privacy to create consumer confidence in the technology. In the early days of radio, capital felt it did not need the state to regulate frequencies. The result was chaos, as broadcasters poached eachother's frequencies and the air was filled with worthless static.

Business brought the state in to regulate the mess and it succeeded, but in doing so it opened this private arena to the wider public which used the opportunity to fight for public broadcasting and the regulation of private station content. The technology has indeed changed but the underlying political economic dynamic has not and so the same tensions and contradictions mark the process of digitization. Consider the recent collapse of the telecommunications bubble where once industry giants like Nortel, Cisco and Lucent have seen their market values drop by close to ninety percent in one year, with Nortel declaring the largest quarterly loss in the history of business and the once proud Lucent, heir to the legendary Bell Labs, seeing its shares reduced to junk bond status. Their decline, the overall crisis in the dot com and telecommunications industries, and, most importantly, the yawning chasm between the massive glut of high-speed, long haul information lines and the shortage of high-speed, local access connections needed to gain access to the Web can be directly traced to the almost religiously driven neo-liberal strategy that the market would do a better job of regulation than traditional forms of state intervention. With no political or social policy check on investment decisions, cemented into law in various forms, in the U.S. it was the 1996 Telecommunications Act, companies went on a long haul building binge. Much of this was done by small companies holding few assets, but with Wall Street flush with "new economy fever" (after all this was the end of history), capital was remarkable easy to raise. One company Global Crossing, led by a protegé of junk bond felon Michael Milken, managed to raise $750 million almost overnight, went public, reached a value of $30 billion, built a transatlantic fibre network valued at much less and with a glut in capacity (95 per cent of fibre network capacity goes unused) is now worth one-tenth of its peak value. But that is considerably better than competitors like 360networks which has filed for bankruptcy. In one year, June 2000 to June 2001, more than 100,000 jobs disappeared from the U.S. communications industry. And the promise of universal access to broadband communication remains just that (Romero, 2001). Meanwhile, in another demonstration that the "new economy" is not all that new, a Canadian federal government task force, most of whose members come from the telecommunication and computer industry, recommended in June that the Government

spend $2.5 to $4 billion to expand broadband access in Canada, presumably by spending the money to bail out the companies that would build broadband networks.

A similar conundrum shapes the issue of privacy. The drive to use communication and particularly the new media of cyberspace to expand the commodification process inevitably leads to the commodification of personal identity. The production and distribution of information about consumers and workers takes on a value related to, but distinct from, the value of their purchases and their labour. The threat to privacy is not just an offshoot of technology or a correctable oversight but is intrinsic to the commodification process. Consequently, the fight for personal privacy is part of a wider struggle against the expanding commodity. Among the many examples of the link between commodification and the struggle over privacy, consider a January 2001 Nortel Networks announcement of a new line of "personal content" network software that the company will sell to Internet service providers in order to package online services to suit individual preferences. The software tracks every choice a user makes on the Internet and configures the network to deliver efficiently the kinds of material a user typically selects. In essence, Nortel is adding to the value of the Internet by making it more responsive to customer profiles. But it doing so, the company makes it possible to gather, package, and share information on customer choices thereby posing a privacy threat. The response of one privacy activist focuses on the company's responsibility charging that it is "unacceptable" to enable Internet service providers to watch where their customers are going. But Nortel's behaviour is less a matter of corporate irresponsibility and more the response of a company that needs to expand the commodification of its major resource, the Internet. But even more than this, Nortel's product reflects a fundamental contradiction besetting the business of cyberspace: the conflict between the need to build consumer confidence to turn the Internet into a universal market tool and the need to commodify without government intervention whatever moves over the Internet, including personal identity.

If we step back from this analysis and recall Roland Barthes' description of myth as depoliticized speech, we might conclude that he did not get it entirely right. For this discussion,

which began with the myths of globalization and cyberspace, was able to peel back the glossy cover they describe and move from there to the politics of globalization and cyberspace. Yes, these myths demonstrate Barthe's claim that they are depoliticized speech because myths purify social relations by eliminating the tensions and conflicts that animate the political life of a community. But if myths evacuate politics, then the critique of mythology restores and regenerates it. In this regard I would agree with Doniger who concludes that we need to replace Barthe's vision of myth as *apolitical*, in essence, what is left after the politics is eliminated, with the view of myth as *prepolitical*, as an early step in a process that, when examined with a critical eye, can restore, with every critical retelling, the political grounding that myths leave out. (Doniger, 1998) In essence, myths can foreclose politics, can serve to depoliticize speech, but, they can also open the door to a restoration of politics, to a deepening of political understanding.

Peeling away the myths of cyberspace reveals the messy, the buggy politics of digitization, commodification, concentration, and contradiction. Let's conclude by saying something about the politics of convergence. I won't repeat familiar and practically banal arguments about technological and institutional convergence which have been repeated so often they are approximating the status of mantras. Rather, I want to consider convergence of a different sort, of the sort that leads one to wonder about the potential for a new cultural politics, if not a new internationalism. The recent demonstrations in Seattle, Prague, Quebec City and elsewhere, as well as the global movements organized around culture jamming are grounded in a powerful and unprecedented broad-based understanding of the convergence of labour and consumption in the world today. They understand the links between Nike ads and sweatshops making running shoes, between familiar brands like Wall-Mart, Esprit, Kmart, J.C. Penney, etc. and slave labour. This is in part because they are extend the analysis that Marx began in Volume 1 of Capital where he described the commodity as a fetish, one might say a brand or myth, which, when its glossy skin was peeled back revealed an exploitative labour process. Today's global social movements today are based on a similar ability to strip the cover from the gloss of a

brand to reveal not only the exploitation of labour, but also the commercialization of life worldwide and the destruction of the earth's environment.

Convergence does not just mean plugging a cable modem into a PC, it also means the global convergence of labour and consumption practices which, in a multi-mediated world, drive home for the many what only a few understood over a century ago. Today, commodity production brings together knowledge workers and makes transparent the divide between them and the unskilled; it also brings together consumers and makes transparent the divide between them and those who have little. In essence, it makes it possible to unite the politics of labour, which, as Michael Denning reminds us, energized social movements of the first half of the twentieth century (Denning, 1996) and the politics of consumption, which drove much resistance in the second half, to create a politics of citizenship which transcends both labour and consumption with the active construction of a democratic world order. The convergence of labour and consumption and the politics of citizenship, which seem to mark so much of what gets simplemindedly called the anti-globalization movement, may be the most significant form of convergence to understand today. Perhaps it is laying the groundwork for a new internationalism, marking it arguably the nastiest of 2001's bugs, certainly containing the ingredients for a very interesting sauce. Thank you.

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