UC Santa Barbara
Digital Cultures and New Media

Title
"After 9/11: Wiring Networks for Security and Liberty"

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0331v09w

Author
Warner, William

Publication Date
2007-07-19

"After 9/11: Wiring Networks for Security *and* Liberty"
William B. Warner
Professor of English
Director, The Digital Cultures Project

As an English Professor and as Director of The Digital Cultures Project, I seek to bring the values of the humanities, and the historical sense provided by the disciplines of the humanities, to the new digital technologies of inscription and communication. As part of the English Department's Transcriptions Project, directed by my colleague Alan Liu, I've joined with other faculty and grad students in teaching our students to use their core abilities to read and write so as to build web-pages that link their work to the resources and communities available through the World Wide Web. The events of 9/11 have dealt a powerful shock to this project. It is forcing us to ask difficult new questions about the utility and dangers of intelligent networks and the global communication of information. My talk this morning will seek to do three things: first, understand how the attacks on 9/11, and the subsequent anthrax attacks, have succeeded in compromising our networks; second, suggest how early American communication networks played a central role in winning American independence from the British Imperial system. Finally, I will end this talk by arguing that 9/11 should not mean that we reconfigure American networks by bartering away our liberty in the name of security. Instead, in the wake of 9/11, we should think through ways to make our networks more secure by making them more robust, more extensive, and more intelligent.
**

The first networks compromised by 9/11 were the television networks that brought us the event. **The affective power of the WTC disaster arises from the particular kind of concentrated televisual spectacle it produced.** The first strike against the WTC tower #1 brings the cameras of news media into play around both towers, so that live coverage can capture images of a Boeing 767 [check] striking WTC 2. The second strike changes the meaning of the event. What was widely reported to be an accident—a small plane colliding with a WTC tower—is now revealed to be part of a design. [Aside: This initial act of misreading might have cost thousands of lives.] The 2nd strike, televised live, has a startling resemblance with television's favorite way of dealing with disaster: the instant replay. Within the rhetoric of television disaster coverage, the replay works to contain and incorporate a traumatic event by replaying it over and over (for example, in the footage of the Challenger disaster). This repetition can be understood as a coping mechanism, a response to shock, like the repetitive, post-traumatic responses discussed by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Through brute repetition, the replay incorporates the event into the spectator's experience, making it available for subsequent narrative. But the striking of Tower 2 of the WTC had an effect the opposite of incorporation and normalization; it brings an unsettling rupture at least two levels—the level of televisual representation and the level of audience self-understanding.

At the level of television coverage, this sequence certainly *looks like* an instant replay—a jet is once again hitting a pristine WTC tower—but it is actually an uncanny double of the first, a second strike that is neither staged nor anticipated nor simulated by the TV networks which broadcast it. The second strike is a replay that isn't; it is controlled not by the broadcast network, but by the malevolent agents who have planned this attack and taken momentary control of the television coverage, so as to broadcast it, in real time, to the whole world. We learn something that was always true: that the television apparatus is not ours; it is not under "our" control. This network can be made to serve the agendas of others. Secondly, at the level of audience experience, this is "uncanny": it is both monstrously unthinkable yet bizarrely familiar. Familiar because, after all, hasn't Hollywood produced numberless action adventure films featuring malevolent Arabs plotting a disaster for us? Within these fantasy formations, the greater the disaster, the more evil the Arabs, the greater the opportunity for a redeeming heroism. [I think George Bush inserts himself into this fantasy when he says of al Qaeda, "these folks are evil."] But on the other hand, the literal collapse of the greatest office towers in the world was *thought* to be impossible. [It certainly was not reflected in WTC evacuation plans!] Although some had plotted to do this eight years earlier, surely *that* attack was merely symbolic; who would *want* to cause the deaths of thousands of innocent office workers?

The shock (and attraction) of the uncanny involves the eruption into consciousness of what was present in the unconscious, but inaccessible to consciousness. What is the repressed term here? It begins with the undeniable fact that 19 resolute young men and their supporters would *wish* to kill thousands of Americans; but it extends to a wider circle of implications: the fact that millions in the world do not accept American military and economic and cultural preeminence as a natural fact; millions may attribute their suffering to our use of that power; and finally, that many might take pleasure, whether vocally or silently, in the spectacle of the collapse of American invulnerability. If the first phase of the attack is hyper-visible, the anthrax attack has the invisibility of a disease: it offers a diffuse spectacle. The circulation of anthrax produces anxiety, precaution, a wondering who is vulnerable. Thus the anthrax attack is 99.9% scare, and .1% anthrax, but somehow all the more powerful for that.

What explains the remarkable success of the attacks of 9/11, and the anthrax attack, in disrupting not merely our economy but also our way of life and national mood? **Both phases of this attack are perpetrated through a network—the first through the commercial air transport network, the second through the postal network.** In both attacks we witness an astonishing multiplier There is the primary multiplier: in the attack on the air transport system, 19 men hijack 246 plane travelers, killing 4,312 people (NYTimes most recent account); then there is a secondary multiplier: 4 plane crashes leads to an immediate grounding of 4,500 planes, and then, in the days and weeks that follow, many millions of cancelled flights. The anthrax attack achieves multipliers of a similar scale: (apparently) 3 letters are mailed from one city and they kill 4, infect 17, send thousands out of their offices with medication: the vulnerability of the system exposed by this anthrax attack is said to require billions of dollars in

expenditures. These multipliers are achieved by operating through networks—the attack travels along the network; but, this appropriation of the network, by the way it undermines user faith in the integrity and safety of each network, compromises the air transport network and postal network. If we cannot trust our planes or the mails, then the flows essential to our economy could contract to a trickle. Remedial efforts to assure the integrity of these networks cannot ignore calculations of speed and cost that motivated the original creation of networks. If network flows of people, paper and information become too slow or too inefficient, it could fatally reduce the productive strength of the economic order. The centrality of the issue of *networks* in this crisis is given a certain displaced expression in the US government's first definition of the real enemy: not one person (Bin Laden) nor the nation that harbors him (Afganistan), but the al Qaeda, network. This is the first war against a network.

     The events of 9/11 (and after) help to challenge a certain American self-understanding of its networks. According to a familiar liberal interpretation, the kinds of networks the US has built (whether for travel, or posting mail, or circulating information) reflect our liberal virtue: that is, these networks, when compared with those of many other countries, are "open," democratic and "free." Thus, as the story goes, this country's networks *offer* equality of access, *lower* the cost of entry, *guarantee* privacy, *enable* certain forms of anonymity, and finally, *proscribe* certain forms of censorship [*"Congress shall make no law…"*]. In short, our networks are wired for liberty. The Internet and the Web have been widely interpreted as deploying hardware technology and software code so as to give these American ideals a practical and world conquering realization. Wired into the design of a global network, liberal values could overcome all others. [Or, so the story goes.] This interpretation of American networks has encouraged a presumption since 9/11: that there is a necessary trade off between liberty and security; and therefore, to increase security we need to decrease liberty. The right and left have not so much disagreed with this premise as argued about how the balance between liberty and security should be struck. The USA Patriot Act of 2001 (signed on the 26th of November, 2001) seeks to compromise certain liberties (to travel, to cross borders, and to communicate) so as to enhance national security. The Electronic Freedom Frontier rouses us to protect our civil liberties from government appropriation. [Aside: Not all of the abridgment of web-based information is an effect of legislation; since 9/11 the government has engaged in protective self-censorship by closing down a vast number of their own web sites (as documented by the Electric Freedom Frontier)].

     I'm not interested in staging a debate between John Ashcroft and John Perry Barlow. Instead, I would like to offer a perspective on the committees of correspondence developed during the revolutionary agitation in British America between 1772 and 1774, which finally issue in the Continental Congress. This episode in our early history suggests a different genealogy for American Networks. I begin with a general statement about networks from the preface to Armand Matterlart's *Networking the World*: "The communication network is an eternal promise symbolizing a world that is better because it is united. From road and rail to information highways, this belief has been revived with each

technological generation, yet networks have never ceased to be at the center of struggles for control of the world."(viii) I would add, even as they held out the promise of greater knowledge and mutual understanding, networks have always threatened contagion and violence.

The American nation, as an independent political structure, evolved out of the earliest American communications networks: the committees of correspondences founded to oppose British imperial policy. The first of these committees was developed by the Town of Boston in the Fall of 1772, under the leadership of Samuel Adams. This committee published a provocative concise and popular statement of colonial grievances in a pamphlet called "The Votes and Proceedings of the Freeholders and other Inhabitants of the Town of Boston in Town Meeting assembled, According to Law." The novelty of this pamphlet consists in its epistolary form: it is printed and distributed as an open letter to all the 250 towns in Massachusetts. By winning replies from over 80 of the largest towns, it catalyzes the formation of a network of committees of correspondence, with the Boston committee as its hub. (Brown) In the Spring of 1773, a rump meeting of the Virginia House of Burgesses forms a committee of correspondence, and writes to all the colonial assemblies proposing each form of committee to share information and coordinate political action. These organizational maneuvers created the context for calling a meeting, in September of 1774, of the First Continental Congress. This first Congress agrees to form an Association to organize a trade embargo against Britain, and more crucially, calls for the formation of local committees of correspondence, and committees of safety, throughout the colonies. These committees enforce the economic war with Britain, and begin to take the executive actions (like mustering troops, capturing Tory spies, etc) essential to governance between the eclipse of British authority following Lexington and Concord and the state constitutional conventions held in 1776 and 1777. There is a very real way in which the American Revolution was a war waged by a distributed network of committees.

Since networks of communication require enormous labor, it is reasonable to ask, what motivated the formation of the Town of Boston's committee of correspondence? What specific problem was the committee supposed to solve? The Boston committee was designed to circumvent the structural limitations on communication and political action built into the British imperial network. In the 18th century, the Massachusetts Assembly was convened by the governor for relatively short periods of each year, and it could be dissolved by him at any time. In times of political struggle this gives the governor important communication advantages. The governor is also the conduit for official information from and about the colony to the American secretary at Whitehall. The American Secretary is part of the British cabinet, which, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, and in consultation with the King, develops policy initiatives for direct execution in the colonies, or for consideration and legal action by the British Parliament. Considered as an information network, the British imperial system most closely resembles a "star topology", where all "devices," here the King, the Parliament, and the colonial governors, are connected to and through a central hub, here the Ministry at Whitehall. The official private correspondence between Governor

Hutchinson and the American Secretary allows a two-way flow of information and directives between Boston and London. The executive power of this system depends upon its operating continuously, and functioning on two channels at the same time, one secret or private, and the other public. Through their secure back channel communications links, Governor Thomas Hutchinson and Lord Dartmouth share information about Boston radicals, seditious publications, ministerial directives, and options for new legislative initiatives. The public broadcasting power of this network is on display when it disseminates administration interpretations and decisions: for example, the annual speech by King George opening Parliament was printed in London, carried on fast postal packet ships to New York, Charleston, and the West Indies, and then distributed by the post-riders of the royal post, across the cities and towns of North America, where it was reprinted in local newspapers, where it could be read by a highly literate citizenry.

The transmission of information and opinions from the colonial assemblies to the London administration was more difficult and haphazard. Assemblies employed agents like Benjamin Franklin and Edmund Burke to present their ideas to the ministry, and assemblies sometimes drafted formal petitions to the King or Parliament. When Boston activists receive word of a ministerial plan to remove judges from their financial dependence upon the Massachusetts Assembly, and instead receive their pay from British duties on American trade, they called the Boston town meeting referred to above. By tracing their response, we can see how they exploited the existing colonial network to rewire it according to different principles. The episode begins with a formal written request from the Boston Town Meeting to the governor for a piece of information. The "Votes and Proceedings" documents the decisive sequence of events, and shows how an incident can weave a new information network.

The Boston activists call a Town Meeting, which drafts a "message" to Hutchinson inquiring if what they have heard is in fact true: the ministry intended to begin paying judges through duties collected in the colonies. Hutchinson's response asserts his authority by drawing the line between private administrative correspondence and what can be made public to the town. Here authority speaks in the passive voice about what is proper: **"It is by no means proper for me to lay before the inhabitants of any town whatsoever, in consequence of their votes and proceedings in a town-meeting, any part of my correspondence as governor of the province, or to acquaint them whether I have or have not received any advices relating to the public affairs of the government."** Next the town petitions the governor to summon the Assembly and Council into session, so they can consider this matter. Again Governor Hutchinson responds with a legal negative, which asserts his right to control the venues and occasions for legitimate political action by the colonial assemblies: **"The royal charter reserves to the governor full power and authority, from time to time, as he shall judge necessary, to adjourn, prorogue and dissolve the General Assembly. In the Exercise of this power, both as to time and place, I have always been governed by a regard to his majesty's service and to the interest of the province."(42)** Against the impertinent request of the Boston

Town Meeting, Hutchinson jealously guards his "full power and authority" as defined by royal charter and exercised in "his majesty's service." Hutchinson's words and his haughty tone seek to enforce, and remind his correspondents of, a natural vertical hierarchy: King – Ministry – Governor –Assembly….Town Meeting.

Blocked by the governor in their request for information *and* in their request that he call the Massachusetts Assembly into session, the town of Boston responds by appointing a committee of 21 prominent Whigs to draft a document for transmission to the 250 towns of the colony stating the central constitutional issues opened by the threat of arbitrary ministerial power. This pamphlet is less important as a statement of the issues of sovereignty and representation it takes up, than as the catalyst for the formation of a network for collective political action. Here is how the committee explains the exigencies calling for this novel mode of communication.

> **"The affair being of public concernment, the town of Boston thought it necessary to consult with their Brethren throughout the province; and for this purpose appointed a committee, to communicate with our fellow suffers, respecting this recent instance of oppression, …[In this document] this committee [has] briefly recapitulated the sense we have of our invaluable rights as men, as Christians, and as Subjects; and wherein we conceive those rights to have been violated, which we are desirous may be laid before your town, that the subject may be weighted as its importance requires, and the collected wisdom of the whole people, as far as possible, be obtained, on a deliberation of such great and lasting moment as to involve in it the fate of all our posterity.**

With these words the Boston committee issues an invitation to the other towns for a conversation in writing. To encourage this quasi-public correspondence, they develop a political rhetoric that has become familiar to us. Here are the signal features of that rhetoric: 1: They speak in 2nd person plural as a collective republican subject; 2: they invoke a pubic emergency, a moment of crisis where events are fraught with consequence for our future; 3: they adopt a style that is simple and direct, and a tone that is sincere and earnest; finally, 4: they show extreme deference to the opinions of those they address as presumptive equals.

The rest of this passage shows that the correspondence that the Boston committee seeks to get going is part of a communications war with the British administration. [I continue reading]

> **—Great pains has been taken [by the Governor] to persuade the British Administration to think, that the good people of the province in general are quiet and undisturbed at the late measures; and that any uneasiness that appears, arise only from a few factious designing and disaffected men. This renders it the more necessary that the sense of the people should be explicitly declared.---A free communication of your**

sentiments to this town, of our common danger, is earnestly solicited and will be gratefully received.

By publishing its "Votes and Proceedings" the Boston committee of correspondence offers a very public alternative to the secret designs of the governor and ministry. Through years of ideological battle, American Whigs had insisted that ultimate political sovereignty lay not with the British Parliament (nor the Crown and its agents) but with the people. By soliciting and receiving a "free communication of your sentiments" so the "sense of the people be explicitly declared," the Boston committee of correspondence hopes to find a way to represent and embody "the sense of the people" outside of the institutions, like the assembly, that were fatally vulnerable to administrative control. The Massachusetts committees of correspondence, which begin to function in late 1772 and early 1773, open a new network of communications, one which only gradually achieves coherence, legitimacy, and power. The presumptive equality of the diverse towns, implicit everywhere in the Boston "Votes and Proceedings," does not admit of a special role for the Boston committee of correspondence. However, as the committee fields diverse responses from the towns of Massachusetts, and the committees of correspondence of Massachusetts accept Boston's leadership role, this network assumes a star topology around the Boston committee. This network, with its hub in Boston, not only claims to represent the people; it also acquires the operational agility to exercise administrative functions. It challenges the British imperial network by imitating its network topology. Although the American networks imitate of the star topology of the imperial networks, they are also much more "flat," rather than vertically hierarchical, and participatory: they invite and mobilize more of the citizens in networks communications than the British system had.

Governor Hutchinson recognized the dangerous emergent political power of the committees of correspondence, and registered his alarm in letters to his superiors. The committee, its pamphlet, and its avid networking appeared as a scandal to the operational hierarchies of the British colonial system. The Boston committee of correspondence, by occupying the hub of a communications network, assumed a signal characteristic of the executive branch: as a standing committee for managing the correspondence of the town, it met twice a week, and it is always "there", ready to meet and respond to political emergencies with writing. The publicity successes and administrative potential of the Boston committee of correspondence so disturbed Governor Thomas Hutchinson, that he opened the Massachusetts Assembly, on January 6, 1773, by making a sustained, elaborately crafted defense of the necessary sovereignty of the British Parliament, and the constitutional principles that should link the colonies to Britain. However, this address does not resolve the crisis: the responses by the Council and the House, the governor's rejoinder, the second round of responses, and the governor's final rejoinder, are all grist for the Boston committee of correspondence, which published and circulated the debate they had helped to provoke.

By 1773, the network of committees of correspondence are there to provoke and respond to the crises that break over the Massachusetts Bay colony in the next year: the public scandal provoked by the printing of Governor Hutchinson's private letters to the ministry; Parliament's passing of the Tea Act, and the agitation culminating in the Boston Tea Party; and finally the larger crisis triggered by the "Coercive Acts" passed in the Spring of 1774 to punish and isolate Massachusetts. The Massachusetts committees of correspondence offer a model for the relatively "flat" and relatively self-organizing committees of correspondence with which to organize the colonies for united action. When the Continental Congress convenes in 1774, 1775, and 1776, they find themselves engaged in the same acts of writing, publicity, and performance first pulled off by the Boston committee: repeatedly and patiently, they state fundamental rights; list grievances against Parliament and the King, and initiate action. But the Continental Congress acquires the authority to engage in more consequential performatives: economic warfare; forming an army and waging war; calling upon every state to write its own constitution, declaring independence, and finally, crafting and ratifying first the Articles of Confederation, and then a Federal Constitution.

My narrative suggests that the committees of correspondence developed by the American Whig opponents of British policy were not idealistic constructs: these communications systems were **not** designed as "open" and egalitarian and accommodating to wide participation simply because American patriots "believed" in equality or freedom of speech [though many did]. Instead these networks of communication were tactical inventions in a nearly two decade long struggle against the British imperial network. They are designed to be broadly participatory so they could forge consensus, and unite Americans in opposing British policy. Given the historical experience of the American Revolution— fighting an imperial network with an emergent republican one—it is hardly a surprise that, when it came to constituting a new political order, the framers of that order appended a Bill of Rights to the Constitution with articles that protect precisely the sort of activities most crucial to allowing them to construct the committees of correspondence nearly two decades earlier in 1772: freedom of speech and the press, the right peaceably to assemble, and the right to petition for redress of grievances. Should it become necessary in the future, these guarantees would enable citizens to build new networks of political opposition.

I would like to end by reposing this question: how, in the wake of 9/11, can we develop our networks so we have the security we need and the liberty upon which our culture thrives? Rather than "dumbing down", slowing down or reducing access to our networks, I hope we figure out how to use the resources of liberty to make our networks more robust, more intelligent, and still more inclusive, and thereby more secure. For while it is undeniable that networks open their users to vulnerability, networks also enable their users to fight back against a network's violent misappropriation. Thus, on September 11th, passengers on flight 93 used their cell phones to learn from television viewers about the dark new meaning of an airplane hijacking. This intelligence led them to make an heroic, and successful, effort to redirected flight 93 from its intended target—

perhaps the White House or the Capital building—into a field in Pennsylvania. This might be called an intelligent network's immune response, a self-organizing check on network misappropriation. Such a response depends upon two kinds of intelligence—that provided by users, and that which arises from the network's computational power, data set, and software code. The understandable response to 9/11, embodied for example in the many provisions of the Patriot Act of 2001, is to raise boundaries of entry to the US, and to undermine the privacy of network communication. Both weaken our networks. But after 9/1ll we may need to be **not less, but more completely, and more intelligently, networked;** this will allow us to learn from those who have the deepest understanding of those who threaten us. To close with a practical example: one speculates that US university faculty, who sponsor a conference on Islam, the Middle East or Terrorism, might find that the Patriot Act of 2001 makes it more difficult to bring into the country the very people we need to listen to, learn from, and network with.