



What's on your mind?
Social media monopolies and noopower
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Abstract

This paper explores the age-old tension between the radical possibilities of thought and the institutions seeking to constrain thought as this tension plays out in social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google. I argue that these social media sites are becoming key institutions of noopower, or the power to modulate thoughts. Older institutions of power, such as states, militaries, and marketers, have begun to exercise noopower through and at social media in an effort to always be on our minds.

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Introduction

“What’s on your mind?”

I want to keep that question in mind as I think about the social media monopolies Facebook, Google, and Twitter.

The first articulation between this question and social media: social media sites allows us to publicly perform an answer to this question. Their uses are as open-ended as the question. “What’s on your mind?” Anything and everything:

- politics
- sex
- nuclear weapons
- drugs
- relationships
- seizing the means of production
- literature
- pollution
- dogs
- violent revolution
- breakfast
- libertarianism
- emotions
- queer theory
- the ends of capitalism
- ancient alien theories
- ending war
- organizing citizens
- what I like
- economic justice
- building schools and not prisons
- what bothers me
- consumerism
- where I’m going

- feminist praxis
- pictures from where I've been.

But there is another meaning to this question, one that hinges on the preposition “on.” What is on your mind? What prompts you to think about what you think about? The world around me:

- a billboard
- another of the same billboard
- a TV commercial
- and again on another channel
- and again ten minutes later
- a poster with the same brand as the billboard and commercial
- pundit A saying we need to drill
- pundit B agreeing with pundit A
- a how-to Web site that tells me how to lose weight
- a magazine article that tells me how to lose weight
- the how-to Web site now has branded weight-loss food
- the book about the making of the how-to site's new food
- a movie promo
- cartoons based on the movie
- theme parks based on the cartoon
- the soundtrack inspired by the theme park
- a TV show on the making of the cartoon
- self-help books
- theme parks based on self-help books
- a religious bumper sticker: “God wants economic growth”
- pundit C agrees with God
- pundit A agrees with God and pundit C — therefore we must drill
- first-person video games
- the Global War on Terror
- the GWOT movie
- the GWOT video game.

Social media is lauded, I would argue, for the first meaning of this question: the open-ended, participatory side. We all know the mythology: first, there was mass media, where gatekeepers maintained the boundaries between professionalized and amateur culture, where we watched the same shows, ate the same spaghetti sauce, and voted for one of two people, where we passively lived our lives unable to truly express ourselves. And then, salvation: along came Friendster, MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, and the gatekeepers were banished! We were “masses” no more. “We” becomes “You,” the Person of the Millennium. You are now free to speak back to power, to bring down unresponsive governments, to express your desires and have them met with myriad products, to become your own boss, and to become a celebrity. You are free to think whatever you like and express your thoughts via new media.

As I would also argue, social media is to be critiqued — is in dire need of critique — because of the second meaning of the question “What's on your mind?”. That is, a whole host of industries and institutions have turned to Facebook, Google, and Twitter to shape our thoughts as we express them via likes, Tweets, +1s, and comments. These entities want to be *on* our minds as we think about the world and as we constitute ourselves via our social media production. They monitor our thoughts we express them in social media architectures and then they build messages that resonate with our thoughts. Then, they repeat the messages, over and over again via various channels, until the idea is natural. They want, in other words, *noo*power, power over minds, power over thoughts, and they see social media as a key means to that end.

What follows is an exploration of social media's relationship to thought, to noopolitics and noo*power*. I consider social media in two senses. First, as noopolitical architectures. Noopolitical production is the productivity inherent in all the heterogeneous possibilities of thought, especially as thought is extended and enhanced by new media communication. The architectures of social media can be seen as providing such affordances to unprecedented numbers of people to think even the most radical thoughts and to spread those thoughts quickly to others. If, as Foucault (2003) argues, power is the action before action (that is, actions that induce, incite, or constrain others' actions), then social media users have much power because they may be the ones who think before others think. They are no longer beholden to the thought selection of, say, the *New York Times*, National Institutes of Health, or Congress. Instead, they express their heterogeneous thoughts to a worldwide audience.

But my use of the term “architectures” is meant to get at the limitations of such noopolitical media. Their architectural constraints can subtly inhibit the endless uses that thought could put them to, and moreover social media's linkages with marketing and state power imbricates these sites as special layers in the protocological stack of contemporary informational capitalism. There's a reason the text box is here, the image upload box is there, and the sign-up process asks for your birthday and not, say, your astrological sign. The architectures of social media are not accidental.

This leads me to conclude that *social media monopolies are institutionalizations of noo*power. The increasing influence of traditional institutions of perception management at, within, and through these architectures demonstrates that older institutions of power view these sites as key nodes in the construction of and modulation of thought and subjectivity. To illustrate this, I will largely focus on marketing's role in shaping social media to this end, since I see marketing as an

institution of noopower *par excellence*. I see marketers as powerful because of their particular grasp of the relationship between difference and repetition [1]. But of course marketing-like techniques have been adopted by a wide range of powerful institutions, including governments and militaries. These institutions have had a longstanding interest in being on our minds — of repeating messages proven to resonate with us until they are all we think about — and they're increasingly using Facebook, Twitter, and Google to do so.

On noopolitics and noopower

What are noopolitics?

Following in the intellectual traditions of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Gabriel Tarde, Maurizio Lazzarato has conceived of *noopolitics* [2] (Lazzarato, 2006). Derived from *nous*, the Greek word for mind and intellect, noopolitics are the politics of memory, attention, and perception. For Lazzarato, the study of noopolitics is part of the larger project of understanding other political forms, such as biopolitics and sovereignty. For example, biopolitics centers on "health — of rates of birth and death, of diseases and epidemics, of the policing of water, sewage, foodstuffs, graveyards, and the vitality of those agglomerated in towns and cities" [3]. Thus, biopolitics is the politics of the human species as an embodied, reproductive, productive, and healthy population. Of course this is a key field to study, but biopolitics as a conceptual tool cannot entirely explain contemporary politics or power (just as Foucault's concept of discipline cannot entirely explain our contemporary moment) [4]. In addition to thinking about things like health or imprisonment, Lazzarato argues we have to account for global communications systems and the concomitant global flows of encoded memories, thoughts, attention, and perception. Even though these clearly are linked to the body (*i.e.*, in the form of the brain), we have to think about thought's preeminent place in contemporary culture and the ways in which thought both moves as a seemingly immaterial form and materializes in concrete ways.

As the nascent work on this field defines it [5], noopolitics are the entropic possibilities of the mind, new frontiers of thought. They are the politics of shifting dispositions, of "potentiality, capacity, ability, or tendency" [6]. These are the politics of virtuality, of always becoming. Whereas the physical world is seen as limiting and homogenized, noopolitics can be seen as radically heterogeneous, with a wide range of thought workers utilizing universal machines to do myriad and limitless tasks (Boutang, 2010). It is not hard to see the revolutionary potential of thought: if production is centered on thinking, new lines of thought are always virtual, always possible. Our politics can thus take on any shape we desire. And because such thoughts can be transmitted quickly and broadly around the world via communication networks, new political possibilities are always latent and can spread like viruses (or memes, if you prefer).

This accounts for much of the hype over and hopefulness for networks, especially those (seen from one vantage point [7]) to be non-hierarchical and distributed. As Warren Neidich argues,

A brain/mind that could parasitise such a network would be able to extend itself into richer sources of information and, through the process of memory, instantiate those networks into itself as intensive memories. When that brain/mind moulds itself as the result of epigenesis to the contingencies of that non-linearity and excess, its capabilities are greatly enhanced. When these mechanisms are tethered to what is referred to as the Baldwin Effect, the brain/mind, rather than simply adapting to these conditions, becomes these conditions. [8]

Simply put, for Neidich the line between a subject's mind and the environment is blurred, as the two overdetermine one another constantly. The Internet is in one sense "the new home of Mind," as John Barlow (1996) puts it, and as such this new (hive)Mind is undermining many longstanding forms of politics and economy, all by thinking and sharing radically new thoughts.

What is noopower?

If noopolitics are the endless possibilities of thought transmitted quickly around the world to active multitudes, what forms of power could possibly oppose it? Turning to Foucault, of course we see that power is not simply the ability to dominate. Rather, power

is a set of actions on possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; it releases or contrives, makes more probable or less; in the extreme, it constrains or forbids absolutely, but it is always a way of acting upon one or more acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions. [9]

In other words, anyone subject to power is free to act, is an acting subject, but the power relationship either subtly or explicitly contains the subject's possible courses of action. There is freedom in power, because freedom operates *within* power.

Both Deleuze and Lazzarato develop this complex understanding of power via the concept of *modulation*. Drawing on the valences of this term from electronics and acoustics, modulation is the alteration of a carrier signal by a modulating signal. Once modulated, the carrier signal carries the information contained in the modulating signal [10]. In noopower, the entropic possibilities of thought are altered and subtly shaped via persuasive, mediated messages. And once this alteration occurs, the two signals are merged. Given an effective communication channel and message, one mind might thus greatly influence the possible future thoughts of another. As Lazzarato argues, "The capture, control and regulation of the action at a distance of one mind on another takes place through the modulation of flows of desires and beliefs and

through the forces (memory and attention) that make these flows circulate in the cooperation between brains." [11]. If power is action before action, the modulation of thoughts and desires of subjects as a form of power can be easily seen in media systems, which (to use Bernard Cohen's famous observation) are not good at telling us what to "think, but [are] stunningly successful in telling ... readers what to think about" [12]. That is, media systems simultaneously delimit thought while enabling it to flow freely within those constraints. There is freedom of thought *within* power. Noopower is thus an essential ingredient in what Deleuze has famously called "The Society of Control" (Deleuze, 1992).

To put it another way, consider Warren Neidich's explanation of Lazzarato's thought:

Agreeing with Foucault, but using a poststructuralist scrim, [Lazzarato] still believes that sovereignty is interested in exercising its power by neutralising difference with repetition in order to reduce the power of variation (the difference that makes a difference), by subordinating it to reproduction. [In discipline,] the function of the training of bodies is to prevent the bifurcation, to eradicate any possibility of variation, any unpredictability, from action, conduct, and behaviour. But in the field of the Society of Control, the body is coerced through invisible and sublime intensive loops that incorporate it within itself to homogenise the heterogeneity. The unruly body/mind of the multitude, in all of its possibilities, must also be constrained and contained in the wide-open spaces of the world picture/movie. Accordingly, new and more sophisticated technologies are instituted for the control of the mental at a distance. [13]

Thus, noopower and the Society of Control center on the modulation of the possibilities of noopolitics, the insertion of thought before thought. They require the induction, seduction, enhancement or constraint of the possibilities of thought itself, seeking to eliminate radical differences of opinion — differences that could make a difference — with repetitious thoughts: intensive loops and repeated messages that subjects incorporate into their own perceptions. We are free to think, but there are thoughts that precede ours, that shape ours, thoughts that we confront as concretized in specific institutions and architectures (Ebensperger, *et al.*, 2010). These are real abstractions that help us think while subtly containing what we think about. Our memories are of course our own, but they are also supplemented with media prostheses, helpful tips, "intuitive" interfaces, and outright limitations.

To what ends?

It should be immediately clear that the field of noopolitics is a key site of contemporary struggle, especially as we are constantly told we live in the knowledge economy. For Lazzarato, "Memory, attention and the relations whereby they are actualised become social and economic forces that must be captured in order to control and exploit the assemblage of difference and repetition." [14] Indeed, the critical literature on knowledge work is extensive and can be very useful for understanding noopower. On the one hand, the literature recognizes that managing the creative/immaterial/knowledge /cognitive worker is difficult. (How do you manage a knowledge worker that is looking out a window? Shouting "Get back to work!" is not necessarily the way to go!) But management of such potentials — however seemingly impossible — is precisely the point of noopower, just as historical efforts such as Taylorism were geared towards managing manual labor. This is why there is such insistence upon defining, measuring, and computing the value of cognitive work. Examples abound. Richard Florida's entire career, for example, is based on quantifying the value of the "Creative Class" to modern cities. The push for transparency in higher education is in part a push to quantify the transfer of knowledge from schools to students, to seek out the exact ROI for tuition and taxes. Public choice theory seeks to draw civic activities like voting and civil service into the neoclassical economic theories of utility-maximizing rational actors. Finally, as I have explored elsewhere, the decades of production of so-called "Enterprise Information Portal" software is an attempt to codify tacit knowledge among employees in global corporations (Gehl, 2012).

Likewise, consumption is increasingly treated as productive, rather than simply the end of the circuit of production. Terms such as "prosumer," "produser," and "playbour" get at this collapse. Creative workers are lured to employers who offer ping-pong tables, video games, cafeterias, and couches to go along with 80+ weeks and constant thought-work. When we go shopping online or off, the increasingly pervasive surveillance systems monitoring consumption allow for the capture and sale of data about the consumption of commodities, producing new cybernetic commodities. The sheer amount of work that goes into making consumption more like work but also like fun belies Iván Torres's observation that "we might conclude that the imperative of capitalism is to produce subjects, publics, and lifestyles before things." [15] Noopower is, in part, about making knowledge, creativity, and desire commensurable, quantifiable, exchangeable, and more productive.

It is not certain that evaluating cognitive work or produsage in any of its manifestations is possible. In fact, theorists of cognitive labor argue that value itself, as a conceptual object, is in crisis, precisely because the older system of evaluation by the exchange of equivalents (that is, the classical commodity capitalist system) is eroding (Virtanen, 2004; Boutang, 2010). But setting this crisis aside, much effort is going into conducting the thoughts of subjects. Drawing on Gabriel Tarde, Maurizio Lazzarato notes that institutions such as polling firms, mass media, and education are the best exemplars of noopower institutions. These are the institutions capable of modulating the thoughts produced in the social factory, to the ends of managing knowledge production across the social spectrum, from within firms to within stores to within homes.

Beyond the social factory, noopower is the domain of global politics. Global financial markets now deal more in perception than in actual commodities; when a brand or market is perceived to be weak in London or Hong Kong, billions of dollars evaporate in New York as stock prices erode. Perception of a brand trumps actual products. The Global War on Terror is as much a war of ideas and information as it is a "kinetic" conflict between fighters (Lawson, in press). Leaders in the United States regularly speak about "Brand America," seeking to bolster or repair global public perceptions of that brand. Nations increasingly seek to secure their knowledge assets (intellectual property, trade secrets, scientific discoveries) against so-called "theft" by hackers and downloaders. Again, all of these practices cohere into noopower institutions such

as polling firms, media systems, and education which seek to shape how we think about the global knowledge economy.

For the purposes of this paper, and in the larger spirit of the *Unlike Us* project, I would add social media monopolies such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter to this list of institutionalized noopower. These social media monopolies provide architectures that both incite, induce, and seduce, while constraining or forbidding, thoughts. In other words, these sites are capable of neutralizing differences in thought via repetition, even as they incite difference via openness. As such, these sites channel noopolitical production and make it productive for other institutions of noopower, most notably marketers, pollsters, and states. What follows is an overview of how social media monopolies will have become central nodes in networks of noopower.

Social media's noopolitical architectures

But first let me contradict myself. In many ways, social media can be read as systems that enable, rather than modulate or constrain, heterogeneous noopolitical production. We have to look no further than the 2011 political protests in Egypt to see why. Writing about the anti-Mubarak protests in Egypt, Serajul Bhuiyan argues

Social media and networking have come to define a new generation of communication and have created a platform that possesses limitless abilities to connect, share, and explore our world. ... Egyptian protesters used Facebook and Twitter to get people out on the streets within the country and YouTube to let the world know what was happening. By using tools that the regime underestimated, activists were able to spread hope, not only to Egyptians, but also worldwide, encouraging other repressed populations to attempt something similar in their countries. [16]

Similarly, Basyouni Hamada argues

The fundamental role played by social networks is... they create collective understanding, a collective mind, a collective identity, collective tools. Through discussions, the citizen can broaden ... their understanding by exchanging information, views, pictures, feelings with others... [Through] information sharing and open discussion, the citizen can establish a shared knowledge community [and] memory. (Hamada, 2011)

Discontented youths, armed with cellphones and Internet access, primed by years of dictatorship, were able to codify and amplify their emotions and thoughts online. As Howard and Hussain argue, "social discontent is not something readymade, but must gestate as people come to agree on the exact nature and goals of their discontent. In the last few years, this gestation process has gone forward via new media, particularly in Tunisia, Egypt, and Bahrain." [17] Here, social media played a clear role in enabling political expression that contradicted traditional/state-based media and hegemonic cultural attempts to curtail it.

In addition to amplifying revolutionary thoughts, social media is central to the changing contours of journalism. As previous mass media news institutions either close entirely or severely curtail their reporting, citizen journalism via Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube could be seen as filling the void (Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2012). As opposed to traditional news media, which is a mass medium featuring editorial control, professionalized reporting, and story selection, these forms of journalism can be created by laypeople. As millions of people use social media to broadcast events around them, often some events take on the valence of "newsworthiness" and become focal points of attention. The citizen who first announces such an event is seen as "breaking" a news story [18]. As such, to update Cohen's famous dictum about the mass media telling us what to think about, a case can be made that in social media we ourselves think about what to think about, broadcast our thoughts on social media, and others may amplify our thoughts via likes, retweets, repostings, responses. Our thoughts may even get the official imprimatur of "newsworthiness" by traditional mass media systems. If journalism's goal is to create an informed citizen capable of functioning in a democracy, citizen journalism can only enhance and extend the knowledge-production process needed by those who would govern themselves.

In sum, we can argue — and many would argue, although perhaps not in these exact terms — that social media are part of a larger revolution in noopolitics. That is, social media's architecture — a combination of near-instantaneous publication via text and file upload systems, easy-to-use sharing and dissemination systems, fast search, and open-ended tagging and sorting capabilities — is enabling and extending the entropic possibilities of the mind and new frontiers of thought. Social media's politics could be seen as the politics of dispositions, of new potentials, capacities, abilities, and tendencies. In the case of Egypt (and in other recent protests), new thoughts about the contours of national politics, human rights, and citizenship, broadcast and responded to via social media, helped reshape the meaning of placing one's body in a public square and raising a fist to a regime. In the case of citizen journalism, the meaning of "newsworthiness" is altered when laypeople armed with phones and cameras constantly observe and record their immediate environments. With enough people's thoughts so changed, and their bodies so induced to get into public squares and to get into polling booths, radical political change is indeed possible.

Institutionalizing noopower in social media

But as we so often see, even in the face of the entropic possibilities of revolutionary thought, institutions of power have

not simply given up or faded away. Here I will explore two linkages between social media sites and more traditional institutions of noopower.

The Interactive Advertising Bureau

How might one modulate and contain (revolutionary) thought? As Warren Neidich argues, by “neutralising difference with repetition.” [19] He uses the example of a newborn child: it has some genetic adaptations that allow for its survival, but it also has an “entropic and overabundant, exuberant nervous system, ready to be activated and pruned by the conditions of the environment, both natural and cultural.” [20] Repetition is the reduction of the probability of difference. Repetition and constancy help shape the newborn into the human the parents wish to see ... with, of course, help from dominant culture. “Today more than ever, it is culture that modifies the brain.” [21] Indeed, repetition to modulate thoughts, to contain their radical potential by way of repeated suggestion, is one of the most important elements of noopower. And one cultural institution that has mastered repetition (and thus modulation) is marketing.

Repetition, however, is not easy to develop. It takes studious observation of its dialectical mate, difference. Marketing’s long history is marked by experimentation with different forms. This is achieved through the classic scientific method of abstracting independent variables from events and phenomena, altering them slightly and seeing what changes in the results. Marketers have for decades shown variations on advertising themes, product packaging, and promotions to test audiences, seeking to induce desired responses (typically an increasing in “liking” [22] the brand or of course making a purchase) [23]. Once such a response is seen, the best variation — the images, texts, audio, price — are repeated across different channels to different publics. And as they appear, the experimentation begins again, with new theories of human behavior developed to be tested.

Thus, marketing is the master field of noopower. It is explicitly positioned to induce and incite differences in subjects by way of myriad variations on themes, messages, utterances, and so on. But marketing’s goal is to modulate such differences, to seek out a smaller pool of messages that resonate widely with their target publics, and then present them repeatedly in every possible location (try going to a urinal these days without being advertised to). This is an assemblage of difference and repetition. This field decomposes subjects and objects into variables and potentialities, and then recomposes them into coherent networks of power flows [24]. As Jack Bratich argues, this form of power involves “breaking down the interiorities of subjects, dissolving them into individuals, reconnecting capacities with others — in sum, turning subjects into variables, a set of modifiable powers.” [25] This is precisely what Neidich describes: the neutralization of difference via repetition. It simply takes the analysis of difference (among a selected group of subjects tested via experiments) to build repeating forms that neutralize it. Difference to be commanded must be obeyed.

The political economy of social media, of course, centers on marketing as a means to “monetize” user affect and thoughts that happen within Facebook, Twitter, and Google. This was not accidental, by any means. As I show elsewhere, advertisers and marketers played a central role in shaping the contours of the World Wide Web in the years immediately before social media arose [26]. They did so by way of the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB), a standards consortium and trade group that in the mid–1990s brought together content producers (such as Turner Interactive and Time, Inc.) and networks (such as Microsoft and Prodigy) to standardize the shape of the Web. The IAB has since then set standards for all the practices of online advertising, from the size, shape and placement of ads, the technologies of ad networks and tracking software, to the metrics and language by which marketers judge the success or failure of online advertising campaigns. Facebook, Google, and Twitter were born and grew into a world and network architecture already shaped and determined by the IAB — and of course they too became members of the organization, joining a growing list of global ad networks, marketing firms, content providers, and social networking sites.

Operating within the larger political economy of advertising–supported media, it is not surprising that Facebook, Google, and Twitter mirror marketing’s penchant for experimentation and repetition. Software engineers working for these firms pore over data about what actions users most commonly take — that is, what is most often repeated within the architectures of the sites. These engineers then constantly tweak their interfaces, APIs, and underlying software to reinforce these actions and to produce (they hope) new ones. The tiny changes in the Google homepage, for example, are akin to ripples on the surface of a body of water caused by motion deep underneath, as software engineers seek to increase the attention and productivity of users of these sites. Facebook extensively develops and internally tests iterations of its interface and new apps (Byron, 2009). This is the process of decomposing the abstract “user” into myriad — and monitored — flows of information. But once these architectures are optimized, users confront repeated forms, shapes, and ideas. They learn through the pedagogy of the interface where to click, what a red box with a number means, what a gray box with “5 new Tweets” means, what a search box is for, what a blue–underlined tag can do, where to upload a file, and so on. In other words, these sites become “intuitive” or natural via experimentation and then repetition, and the abstract “user” is recomposed via and within a particular, non–accidental architecture. Social media monopolies seek a balance of familiarity and change — all with the goal of pedagogy through repetition, of homing in on architectures that would resonate with publics.

One might say marketing has
modulated social media.

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Marketing and social media thus merge as they move both towards the telos of repetition and across the linkages

between traditional marketing, the IAB, and sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google. One might say marketing has modulated social media. Facebook offers marketers a way to increase the likelihood that mentions of their products and services appear in users' social streams, thus repeating mentions within the familiar flows of affect users normally confront and increasing the odds that those who confront the message like, share, and repeat it across the social network [27]. Real-time data collection on links clicked and videos watched provide marketers with the data they need to experiment with different messages, images, sounds, and narrative structures, allowing them to tailor messages to target publics, and then this process is repeated, *ad nauseam*, in a cybernetic loop. Behavioral tracking of users allows marketers to repeat messages across heterogeneous Web sites as users visit them, as well as make sales pitches via mobile devices as users travel through space. The messages that result in sales are repeated; those that do not are archived (perhaps they will be useful later). Liking, "+1"ing, or retweeting an ad enters users into a contest to win a trip to the theme park built around the movie that was based on the video game currently being advertised, a game in which the main character must use social media to build a following to solve a crime. All of this is, of course, a marketer's dream: the observation, experimentation upon, and ultimate modulation of the thoughts of billions, the chance to increase what they call (in some of the most frightening language imaginable) "brand consciousness" over other forms of consciousness and subjectivity. It is the reduction of the scope of thought to a particular civic activity. It is the production of the flexible and always-willing global consumer as the real abstraction of our time. *Consumption über alles*.

State noo-power

The techniques of marketing, especially experimentation followed by repetition of messages and themes, have been taken up (if not developed first) by states. The most obvious contemporary intersection of marketing, social media, and state power is in the complex and powerful microtargeting of voters, especially visible in recent U.S. Presidential elections. As the *New York Times* reported, the Obama 2012 re-election campaign relied on a massive data collection and analysis effort "where scores of political strategists, data analysts, corporate marketers and Web producers are sifting through information gleaned from Facebook, voter logs and hundreds of thousands of telephone or in-person conversations to reassemble and re-energize the scattered coalition of supporters who swept Mr. Obama into the White House four years ago" (Rutenberg and Zeleny, 2012). This process is aided by experimentation with messages, colors, and images at every possible market segment level, as the campaign seeks to gain volunteers, donations, and of course votes during the election cycle. Video ads distributed via YouTube, for example, were seen as inexpensive experiments to test various permutations on themes. These noo-power processes are now required of modern electoral politics in the United States. As a member of the rival Mitt Romney campaign explains, using social media allows campaigns "to monitor what people are looking at, what they're responding to from a fundraising perspective And it's important for the campaign to obviously keep a close eye on that and look to see what trends are developing from a Web ad perspective" (quoted in Shapiro, 2012).

Despite this microtargeting effort and experimentation with heterogeneous messages, one marker of modern political statecraft is an administration's ability to "stay on message," to exhibit "message discipline," or in the derogative sense rely on "talking points" or simply avoid "gaffes." Thus, the heterogeneous affect and thoughts of potential donors and voters — observed via their social media usage, along with other surveillance techniques — are channeled into a highly disciplined "branding" of a presidential candidate, distributed repeatedly and consistently by all members of a campaign across multiple media channels. The victorious Obama campaigns of 2008 and 2012 have been hailed as masterful demonstrations of such message discipline.

This form of microtargeting and repeated messages — again, a process of experimentation to produce repetition — is also used by the military in war, particularly what has been traditionally called psychological operations. The *U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Manual* is famous for its Appendix B: "Social Network Analysis." After establishing the importance of the perceptions held by publics within an occupied territory, the manual lays out basic social network analysis (SNA): the mapping of nodes and edges (or links in the *Manual's* parlance), the painstaking research into who is related to whom within an insurgency, protester, or terrorist network, and means to categorize nodes in a network along sundry demographic, psychographic, lifestyle, and issue-based lines (all classic market segmentation techniques). This Appendix does not mention social media, but of course the application of SNA to social media was obvious and quickly, if controversially (Lawson, in press), taken up by militaries across the world. The military's use of SNA and social media has been in part to microtarget key nodes in networks: tribal leaders, influential politicians, heads of NGOs, media outlets, and so on. SNA and tailored messaging via social media allows military leaders to map the heterogeneous political terrain they operate in.

But again, this seeming heterogeneity in targeted publics is met with the age-old tactic of repetition. Like their politician counterparts, militaries all over the world seek to "stay on message," even with heterogeneous publics. To illustrate, as Caldwell, *et al.* (2009) argue, the Israeli government and military were schooled in this regard by Hezbollah in the 2006 "Second Lebanon War." Hezbollah used strategic repetition, posting the same footage and images of war-damaged Lebanese homes across multiple media platforms (from satellite TV station Al-Manar, other regional media, YouTube and billboards) to amplify the perception of Israeli aggression. For Hezbollah, Caldwell, *et al.* argue, this was about the repeated production of a message: Israel's response to the trigger of the war (the kidnappings of several Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah) was disproportionate and greatly affected Lebanese civilians, and Hezbollah was the righteous defender of the Lebanese. Israel paid little attention to this "information war," instead focusing on military objectives. However, crucially, through the coordinated use of new and old media, "Hezbollah was able to create a 'perception of failure' for the Israelis, with consequences more important than the actual kinetic outcome." [28] The Israeli government learned a lesson from this. Soon after, Israel created the National Information Directorate, which will "direct and coordinate in the information sphere so that the relevant bodies present a unified, clear, and consistent message and so that the various government spokespersons speak with a single voice." [29] In a conflict in Gaza in 2009, Israel used this noo-power strategy to control messaging about the war. As Caldwell, *et al.* note, the Israeli Defense Forces launched a YouTube channel two days after the Gaza campaign began. In early January 2009, "the channel became the second most

subscribed channel and ninth most watched worldwide, garnering more than two million channel views.” [30] This channel was linked up to others — bloggers, Twitterers, and Facebookers — to repeat messages about the attacks being humanitarian (and not colonizing) in intent, thus buying Israel time to complete the operation before raising the ire of global political bodies such as the U.N.

While social media has seemingly broken down barriers and removed gatekeepers, this has left a vacuum into which new, coordinated forms of network power flow: governments that “speak with a single voice,” repeating experimentally-developed messages to modulate the thoughts of citizens, allies, and enemies alike. This is becoming a ubiquitous practice: institutions ranging from the U.S. State Department to al-Qaeda engage in “information wars” via social media sites (Bratich, 2011). Their tactics of modulation are, of course, various, ranging from outright censorship to polling- and social media-based experimentation with messages and publics and subsequent subtle spinning of events and ideas, but they always end with “staying on message.” This contradiction is (unwittingly) captured by the prescription offered by Caldwell, *et al.* to U.S. military leaders: “Only by fostering a culture of engagement where the military proactively tells its own story in an open, transparent manner can we successfully navigate the many challenges of the media environment now and in the future.” In other words, if institutions of noo-power construct a story in the right way, and if they repeat it enough, it will appear “transparent” or natural — the only way to think about the world. Social media has made this age-old propaganda practice different, but not impossible.

In fact, it possibly makes it easier by automating it. As I argue elsewhere [31], a very recent phenomena arising in social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook are “socialbots.” These are automated social media profiles programmed to friend and follow humans, like, and Tweet across these networks. Most importantly, these ‘bots are designed to *appear* to be human, and they are quite successful at doing so. These programs arise from the noopolitical production of social media users, who for years now have been confessing personal information and preferences to the rationalized archives of the social media server farms. From this heterogeneous production — happening within the standardized architectures of social media — arise these programs that draw on *patterns of thought* and replicate it. They are so good at this mimicry that they pass a latter-day Turing test: they become our friends and we follow them in large numbers (Giles, 2011). Their goal is to subtly alter the contours of the social graph by — of course — repeating certain messages and ignoring others. As socialbot engineers Hwang, *et al.* note, “In the future, social robots may be able to subtly shape and influence targets across much larger user networks, driving them to connect with (or disconnect from) targets, or to *share opinions* and *shape consensus* in a particular direction.” [32] The roots of these programs, like so many other media technologies, lie in the U.S. military, specifically the Air Force’s call for “Persona Management” software to help cyberwarriors infiltrate and influence the ideas of online terrorist networks (Fielding and Cobain, 2011). For state leaders, such ‘bots can automate the process of dissent-quelling. As Evigny Morozov notes, “Following the Arab Spring uprisings, anyone posting critical comments about Bahrain or Syria on Twitter was likely to receive angry corrections from the government loyalists or, more likely, their bots” (Morozov, 2012). Likewise, in post-Mubarak Egypt, it is quite possible that anti-Military Council sentiments expressed in social media are modulated by bots refuting protesters and praising the Revolution. Beyond military and state use, of course these programs will be very useful to corporations who seek to bring their brands to life within Facebook and Twitter. Again, military and marketing merge to create new contours of power over thoughts, enabled by standardized social media monopolies.

Thus, social media monopolies are increasingly utilized to great effect by what Lazzarato and others argue are the key institutions of noo-power: marketing, polling firms, strategic communications entities, and the public relations branches of states. These institutions incite and induce users to express thoughts and ideas via calls for participation, analyze these expressions for patterns of thought, and then use the same channels to amplify ideas they desire and mute those they don’t. To borrow an idea from Sean Lawson (in press), these entities are projecting noo-power through social media. And, noo-power is also directed at social media, as well: due to the political economy of social media monopolies, Facebook, Google, and Twitter increasingly look to their patrons (state governments, global entities like the World Intellectual Property Organization, large investors, and marketers) for direction as they set their Terms of Use agreements and structure their sites to increase certain patterns of thought and dissuade others. Thus, social media monopolies are articulated into larger systems of noo-power; they themselves become institutions of noo-power while also being architectures enabling noopolitical production.




Unlike Us: What to do about noo-power?

After this, there is one conclusion we can draw: ironically, resistance is indeed fertile, precisely because thought-resistance as captured and analyzed within social media can be appropriated to create repeated messages attuned to dissolve resistance. As with many post-Foucauldian conceptions of power, one wonders what to do about noo-power. As Iván Torres argues, “The paradox and contradiction of our contemporary governmentality is: on the one hand, it is open and tolerant, while on the other hand it deploys much more flexible, penetrating and exhaustive forms of control.” [33] It is difficult to think of a better description of noo-power in general and social media monopolies in particular. If limitless thought is incited and contained by experimentation and repetition on the part of institutions of noo-power, if hacks and glitches [34] and differences can be appropriated and neutralized with the next iteration of the perpetual beta, what is to be done? What can be done?

The activists, technologists, and theorists brought together via the *Unlike Us* events and networks have this very problem on their minds — many of them for years. There are myriad projects being built to counter the reactionary tendencies happening online, some better known than others: Diaspora, FreedomBox, Tor, Facebook Resistance, meshnets, YaCy, Ixquick, Crabgrass, Creative Commons, Move Commons, Riseup, and Lorea. As I explore elsewhere, the activists and technologists working on these projects are dealing with the gap between abstract political or social ideals and their

concrete implementation in code [35]. That is, we might desire a media system that brings together people in a decentralized, non-hierarchical, free, progressive, anti-surveillance, and open manner — all the things we cannot have with Facebook, Twitter, and Google — but this can be very hard to encode in a technology!

This gap plays out when we think about noopolitics and noopower. The answer to the double bind of noopolitical possibilities and noopower lies in continued recognition that technology has always had politics and always will, and so the technologies we create must be imbued with what we value, even if it is not perfect. For example, as Elijah Sparrow of the distributed social network Crabgrass puts it, Crabgrass “really reflects as a technology object the intentions... and historical context of the people who originally created it We’re not bashful about saying this: we’re organizationally obsessed anarchists, and so we really wanted to impose on our users better organizational capacity” (Sparrow, 2012). That is to say, the makers of Crabgrass recognize that software, like any technology, contains politics within its structure, and those politics can shape use. They realize that we cannot treat software as a neutral tool. Thus, to counter the reductive noopower operating in and through the social media monopolies, activists and technologists must create systems that allow for radical thought and heterogeneous uses, for differences that make a difference. The alternatives to social media monopolies must be built with protocols, interfaces, and databases all designed to promote new political thinking — noopolitical thinking — and to resist reduction of thought to repeated marketing messages of all varieties. We all can agree that this is probably impossible, but we always must keep a better future on our minds as we work with what we have on our minds. 

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Notes

1. Throughout this paper, I am thinking about the move from experimentation to repetition as it has been practiced in marketing for at least the past 70 years. Therefore, I am thinking about difference and repetition in ways that diverge from Deleuze’s (Deleuze, 1994) conceptualization, even though I am drawing (by way of Lazzarato) on Deleuze here. An analysis of marketing’s concept of repetition via Deleuze is the subject of another paper.

2. I should also note that Lazzarato’s use of “noo” isn’t, well, new. The prefix has a long lineage — as in *noosphere* in the 1920s and Arquilla and Ronfelt’s *noopolitik* of the 1990s. A fuller exploration of noo in all its forms is best left for another paper. Here I am drawing on the literature that grew up around Lazzarato’s definition.

3. Rose, 2007, p. 3.

4. Deleuze, 1992; Torres, 2010, p. 150.

5. Perhaps the best overview of the field currently available is Hauptman and Neidich (2010).

6. Easterling, 2010, p. 254.

7. As Alex Galloway argues, the Internet could be read as distributed (as materialized in the TCP/IP protocol suite) or hierarchical (as seen in the Domain Name System). To paraphrase Bruno Latour, tell me how you map the Internet and I will tell you who you are!

8. Neidich, 2009, p. 129.

9. Foucault, 2003, p. 138.

10. For a useful illustration of modulation, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Amfm3-en-de.gif>.

11. Lazzarato, 2006, p. 185.

12. Cohen, 1963, p. 13.

13. Neidich, 2009, p. 135.

14. Lazzarato, 2006, p. 185.

15. Torres, 2010, p. 151, translation by the author.
16. Bhuiyan, 2011, pp. 14–15.
17. Howard and Hussain, 2011, p. 41.
18. Bianco, 2009, p. 305.
19. Neidich, 2009, p. 135.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Neidich, 2009, p. 138.
22. Intriguingly, marketing appears to have accepted that “liking” something is equated to a positive emotional response. This acceptance begins, as far as I have traced, in the early 1990s with the publication of a study by Haley and Baldinger (2000). Linking advertising’s reduction of emotion to “like” to the ubiquitous Facebook “like” system is the topic for another paper.
23. See Wilson, *et al.* (2008) for an overview of experimental paradigms in marketing.
24. Bratich, 2006, p. 75.
25. Bratich, 2006, p. 77.
26. Gehl, in press, p. 4.
27. See <https://www.facebook.com/help/promote>, last accessed 25 January 2013.
28. Caldwell, *et al.*, 2009, p. 6.
29. An Israeli press release, in Caldwell, *et al.*, 2009, p. 7.
30. Caldwell, *et al.*, 2009, p. 7.
31. Gehl, in press, p. 1.
32. Hwang, *et al.*, 2012, p. 41, my emphasis.
33. Torres, 2010, p. 151, author’s translation.
34. See <http://www.thecreatorsproject.com/blog/glitch-art-pillow-covers> for an example of the appropriation of difference in action, as well as for very nice pillows.
35. Gehl, in press, p. 6.

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What's on your mind? Social media monopolies and noopower

by Robert W. Gehl

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