

## Photoshop for Democracy

### *The New Relationship between Politics and Popular Culture*

In the spring of 2004, a short video, edited together out of footage from newscasts and Donald Trump's hit TV show, *The Apprentice* (2004), was circulating across the Internet. Framed as a mock preview for *The Apprentice*, the narrator explains, "George W. Bush is assigned the task of being president. He drives the economy into the ground, uses lies to justify war, spends way over budget, and almost gets away with it until the Donald finds out." The video cuts to a boardroom, where Trump is demanding to know "who chose this stupid concept" and then firing Dubya. Trump's disapproving look is crosscut with Bush shaking his head in disbelief and then disappointment. Then came the announcer: "Unfortunately, 'The Donald' can't fire Bush for us. But we can do it ourselves. Join us at True Majority Action. We'll fire Bush together, and have some fun along the way."<sup>1</sup>

Who would have imagined that Donald Trump could emerge as a populist spokesman, or that sympathetic images of corporate control could fuel a movement to reclaim democracy? A curious mix of cynicism and optimism, the video made Democrats laugh at the current administration and then rally to transform it.

True Majority was founded by Ben Cohen (of Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream). Its goals were to increase voter participation in the 2004 election and to rally support behind a progressive agenda. According to its Web site ([www.truemajority.org](http://www.truemajority.org)), the group has attracted more than 300,000 supporters, who receive regular alerts and participate in letter-writing campaigns.<sup>2</sup>

Interviewed a few weeks before the election, Garrett LoPorto, a senior creative consultant for True Majority, said that the core of viral marketing is getting the right idea into the right hands at the right time.<sup>3</sup>

This video generated a higher than average response rate, he argues, both because it expressed a widespread desire to end a failed administration and because *The Apprentice* provided a perfect metaphor to bring that decision closer to home: "We aren't here talking about this grand cause of appointing someone as the leader of the free world. We're just trying to get some guy who screwed up fired. It's that simple." Their goal was to get these ideas into the broadest possible circulation. To do that, they sought to create images that are vivid, memorable, and evocative. And most important, the content had to be consistent with what people more or less already believed about the world. Locating people who share your beliefs is easy, LoPorto says, because we tend to seek out like-minded communities on the Web. Each person who passed along the video reaffirmed his or her commitment to those beliefs and also moved one step closer toward political action. A certain percentage of the recipients followed the link back to the True Majority site and expanded its core mailing list. Repeat this process enough times with enough people, he argued, and you can build a movement and start to "nudge" the prevailing structure of beliefs in your direction. At least that's the theory. The real challenge is to get those ideas back into mainstream media, where they will reach people who do not already share your commitments. As LoPorto acknowledged, "All we needed to do is to get NBC to sue us. If they would sue us over this, this thing would go global and everyone will know about it. That was our secondary hope. . . . NBC was too smart for that—they recognize it was a parody and didn't bite."

Hoping to make politics more playful, the True Majority home page offered visitors not only the "Trump Fires Bush" video, but also a game where you could spank Dubya's bare bottom, a video where "Ben the Ice Cream Man" reduces the federal budget to stacks of Oreo cookies and shows how shuffling just a few cookies can allow us to take care of a range of pressing problems, and other examples of what the group calls "serious fun."

In some senses, this whole book has been about "serious fun." The U.S. military develops a massively multiplayer game to facilitate better communications between service people and civilians. Companies such as Coca-Cola and BMW enter the entertainment industry to create a stronger emotional engagement with their brands. Educators embrace the informal pedagogy within fan communities as a model for developing literacy skills. First Amendment groups tap young people's interest

in the *Harry Potter* books. “Fan-friendly” churches use discussions of movies and television shows to help their congregations develop discernment skills. In each case, entrenched institutions are taking their models from grassroots fan communities, reinventing themselves for an era of media convergence and collective intelligence. So why not apply those same lessons to presidential politics? We may not overturn entrenched power (whether that of the political parties or their big money contributors) overnight: nobody involved in these popular culture-inflected campaigns is talking about a revolution, digital, or otherwise. What they are talking about is a shift in the public’s role in the political process, bringing the realm of political discourse closer to the everyday life experiences of citizens; what they are talking about is changing the ways people think about community and power so that they are able to mobilize collective intelligence to transform governance; and what they are talking about is a shift from the individualized conception of the informed citizen toward the collaborative concept of a monitorial citizen.

This chapter shifts our focus from popular entertainment franchises and onto the selection of an American president. In conventional terms, these two processes are worlds apart—one is the stuff of consumption, the other the stuff of citizenship. Yet, with the 2004 election, we can see citizens starting to apply what they have learned as consumers of popular culture toward more overt forms of political activism. Popular culture influenced the way that the campaigns courted their voters—but more importantly, it shaped how the public processed and acted upon political discourse.

I am focusing here less on changes in institutions or laws, which are the focus of traditional political science, but more on changes in communications systems and cultural norms, which need to be understood through tools that have originated in the study of media and popular culture. The current diversification of communication channels is politically important because it expands the range of voices that can be heard: though some voices command greater prominence than others, no one voice speaks with unquestioned authority. The new media operate with different principles than the broadcast media that dominated American politics for so long: access, participation, reciprocity, and peer-to-peer rather than one-to-many communication. Given such principles, we should anticipate that digital democracy will be decentralized, unevenly dispersed, profoundly contradictory, and slow

to emerge. These forces are apt to emerge first in cultural forms—a changed sense of community, a greater sense of participation, less dependence on official expertise and a greater trust in collaborative problem solving, all things we have seen throughout this book. Some of what this chapter discusses will look like old-style politics conducted in new ways—efforts to shape public opinion, register voters, mobilize supporters, and pump up the “negatives” of a rival candidate. Other things will look less familiar—elections conducted within massively multiplayer game worlds, parody news shows, Photoshopped images—yet these forms of popular culture also have political effects, representing hybrid spaces where we can lower the political stakes (and change the language of politics) enough so that we can master skills we need to be participants in the democratic process.

The 2004 campaign was a period of innovation and experimentation in the use of new media technologies and popular-culture-based strategies. On the one hand, the closeness of the election enflamed the passions of voters who tended to commit early and feel strongly about the candidate of their choice. On the other hand, the closeness made both campaigns desperate to mobilize their base, attract undecided voters, and register new participants—especially the young. Add to this a new generation of campaign organizers who had been monitoring developments in digital culture over the past decade and were ready to apply what they had learned. Howard Dean’s campaign manager, Joe Trippi, posed the core questions in a much-discussed memo: “The tools, energy, leadership and the right candidate, are all in place to create the Perfect Storm of Presidential politics—where millions of Americans act together and organize their communities, their neighborhoods and their precincts. . . . How do these Americans find each other? How do they self-organize? How do they collaborate? How do they take action together?”<sup>4</sup> And this is where popular culture enters the picture.

### “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised”

Working for an obscure insurgent candidate whom few pundits gave any real chance, Trippi sought to harness this emerging grassroots power. Dean raised more money online from small contributions than any other previous candidate, setting a model that John Kerry would subsequently follow to close the “money gap” with the Republicans.

His staff used blogging to create a more intimate, real-time relationship with his supporters. They deployed “smart mob”-style tactics, including an adept use of Meetup.com, to quickly launch rallies, drawing together thousands of people at a time when other candidates were still speaking to half-empty rooms. Dean didn’t so much create the movement; his staff simply was willing to listen and learn.<sup>5</sup>

Trippi describes the Dean campaign’s early successes as a “tipping point”: this was where the politics of television gave way to the politics of the Internet. Like the dot-com executives before him, Trippi (and Dean) mistook their own sales pitch for a realistic model of how media change takes place. So far, the most active cybercandidates have been insurgents who have not been able to ride digital media into victory but who have been able to change the nature of the debate. It is significant that Trippi titles his memoir, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (2005), after the Gil Scott Heron song. The slogan became self-fulfilling prophecy. If the Internet made Dean’s candidacy, television unmade it.

In the 1960s, when Heron first performed the song, it was clear that a narrow pipeline controlled by major media companies was unlikely to transmit ideas that ran counter to dominant interests. The counterculture communicated primarily through grassroots media—underground newspapers, folk songs, posters, people’s radio, and comics. The networks and newspapers filtered out messages they didn’t want us to hear, and the exclusionary practices of these intermediaries fostered the demand for grassroots and participatory media channels. Trippi describes television as an inherently passive (and pacifying) technology: “While TV was a medium that rendered us dumb, disengaged, and disconnected, the Internet makes us smarter, more involved, and better informed.”<sup>6</sup> Anyone who has read this far in the book knows enough to question both sets of claims.

If, circa 2004, we ask ourselves whether the revolution will be digitized, our answers look very different. The Web’s low barriers to entry expand access to innovative or even revolutionary ideas at least among the growing segment of the population that has access to a computer. Those silenced by corporate media have been among the first to transform their computer into a printing press. This opportunity has benefited third parties, revolutionaries, reactionaries, and racists alike. It also sparks fear in the hearts of the old intermediaries and their allies. One person’s diversity, no doubt, is another person’s anarchy.

The subtitle of Trippi’s book, *Democracy, the Internet, and the Over-*

*throw of Everything*, captures the revolutionary potential writers such as Hans Enzensberger saw in the development of technologies that would enable grassroots communication.<sup>7</sup> Trippi celebrates what he sees as the “empowerment age” when average citizens challenge the power of entrenched institutions: “If information is power, then this new technology—which is the first to evenly distribute information—is really distributing power. The power is shifting from institutions that have always been run top down, hoarding information at the top, telling us how to run our lives, to a new paradigm of power that is democratically distributed and shared by all of us.”<sup>8</sup>

Now, consider a second slogan, which students in the streets of Chicago during the 1968 protests chanted at the network news trucks, “The whole world is watching.” Whatever the difficulties, if the student protesters got their images and ideas broadcast via ABC, CBS, and NBC, they would reach a significant segment of the population. Is there any place on the Web where the whole world is watching?

As we have suggested throughout this book, contemporary media is being shaped by several contradictory and concurrent trends: at the same moment that cyberspace displaces some traditional information and cultural gatekeepers, there is also an unprecedented concentration of power within old media. A widening of the discursive environment coexists with a narrowing of the range of information being transmitted by the most readily available media channels.

The new political culture—just like the new popular culture—reflects the pull and tug of these two media systems: one broadcast and commercial, the other narrowcast and grassroots. New ideas and alternative perspectives are more likely to emerge in the digital environment, but the mainstream media will be monitoring those channels, looking for content to co-opt and circulate. Grassroots media channels depend on the shared frame of reference created by the traditional intermediaries; much of the most successful “viral” content of the Web (for example, the “Trump Fires Bush” video) critiques or spoofs mainstream media. Broadcasting provides the common culture, and the Web offers more localized channels for responding to that culture.

In parts of Trippi’s book he recognizes the interplay between these two kinds of media power. For example, he writes of his astonishment at watching contributions come into the Web site in real time while doing a radio broadcast: “People were hearing me on the radio, going to their computers and donating to the campaign. The Internet was

making it possible for people to register their feedback immediately. After that, we would chart the effect of newspaper, television, and radio stories and be able to predict accurately how much money would come in online after Dean appeared on *Hardball* (1997), or after a story in *USA Today*, and we'd know which media to go to in the big fundraising pushes."<sup>9</sup> This is not television politics or digital politics; this is the politics of convergence.

Elsewhere, Trippi dismisses convergence, which he associates with corporate control:

At some point, of course, there will be convergence. One box. One screen. You'll check your e-mail and order your groceries and check your child's homework all on the same screen. That might be the most dangerous time for this burgeoning democratic movement—the moment when the corporations and advertisers will threaten to co-opt and erode the democratic online ethic. The future may well hinge on whether the box is dominated more by the old broadcast rules or by the populist power of the internet.<sup>10</sup>

Trippi falls prey to the Black Box Fallacy. I don't disagree with his core claim that the public needs to fight for its right to participate, for its emerging access to information, and for the corresponding power to shape democratic processes. I don't disagree that corporate consolidation poses a potential threat to that power. But, as this book has demonstrated, we are already living in a convergence culture. We are already learning how to live betwixt and between those multiple media systems. The key battles are being fought now. If we focus on the technology, the battle will be lost before we even begin to fight. We need to confront the social, cultural, and political protocols that surround the technology and define how it will get used.

It is a mistake to think about either kind of media power in isolation. Our evolving system of media convergence is full of checks and balances. *60 Minutes* (1968) aired a program that alleged to prove longstanding charges that George Bush had used his family influence to duck responsibilities during his Vietnam-era stint in the National Guard. Conservative bloggers instantly began to dissect those memos, conclusively demonstrating that they could not have been produced on the typewriters available to their alleged author at the time they were said to have been written. At first, CBS dismissed those bloggers as well-

meaning but misguided amateurs—"a guy sitting in his living room in his pajamas writing"—who lacked the "multiple levels of checks and balances" that ensure the accuracy of television newscasts.<sup>11</sup> But, in the end, CBS was forced to apologize publicly for their initial misreporting of the story and fired several longtime producers and reporters.

Some writers saw that as a victory of new media over old. *Reason* magazine editor Jesse Walker saw it as evidence of the growing integration between the two:

[Bloggers] were doing fresh reporting and fresh analysis of the story. So were ABC, the Associated Press, and *The Washington Post*. The professional media drew on the bloggers for ideas; the bloggers in turn linked to the professional's reports. The old media and the new media weren't at loggerheads with each other—or to the extent that they were, they were also at loggerheads with themselves. They complimented each other. They were part of the same ecosystem. . . . The new outlets aren't displacing the old ones; they're transforming them. Slowly but noticeably, the old media are becoming faster, more transparent, more interactive—not because they want to be, but because they have to be. Competition is quickening the news cycle whether or not anyone wants to speed it up. Critics are examining how reporters do their jobs whether or not their prying eyes are welcome.<sup>12</sup>

The same would be true for presidential campaigns. Candidates may build their base on the Internet but they need television to win elections. It's the difference between a push media (where messages go out to the public whether they seek them or not) and a pull medium (which serves those with an active interest in seeking out information on a particular topic). The Internet reaches the hard core, television the undecided. Dean developed his initial following via the Internet that brought him to visibility in broadcast and mass market media. He was able to raise large sums of money via the Internet that was eaten up by the need to fund television advertising. The tactics he used to fire up supporters on the Internet were cited out of context on television. His posts were reduced to sound bites. Once broadcast media drew blood—for example, in the notorious "I have a scream" speech—the Internet sharks circled and hacked him to bits. One Web site links to more than three hundred spoofs of Howard Dean's self-destructive "concession" speech following his upset in the Iowa caucuses, including images of



Figs. 6.1 and 6.2. The cybercommunity turned on Howard Dean following his concession speech after the Iowa caucuses, resulting in many different Web parodies.

him howling as he gropes Janet Jackson, shouting at a kitten, or simply exploding from too much pent-up passion (figs. 6.1 and 6.2). All of which suggests a moment of transition where the political role of the Internet is expanding without diminishing the power of broadcast media.

We might understand this transition by thinking a bit about the difference between "culture jamming," a political tactic that reflected the logic of the digital revolution, and blogging, which seems emblematic of convergence culture. In his 1993 essay, "Culture Jamming: Hacking, Slashing and Sniping in the Empire of Signs," cultural critic Mark Dery documented emerging tactics of grassroots resistance ("media hacking, informational warfare, terror-art, and guerrilla semiotics") to an "ever more intrusive, instrumental technoculture whose operant mode is the manufacture of consent through the manipulation of symbols."<sup>13</sup> In Citizens Band Radio slang, the term "jamming" refers to efforts to "introduce noises into the signal as it passes from transmitter to receiver." Dery's essay records an important juncture in the history of do-it-yourself media as activists learn to use new media to assert a counterperspective on mass media.

Perhaps, however, the concept of culture jamming has outlived its usefulness. The old rhetoric of opposition and co-optation assumed a world where consumers had little direct power to shape media content and faced enormous barriers to entry into the marketplace, whereas the new digital environment expands the scope and reach of consumer activities. Pierre Lévy describes a world where grassroots communication is not a momentary disruption of the corporate signal, but the routine way the new system operates: "Until now we have only reappropriated speech in the service of revolutionary movements, crises, cures, exceptional acts of creation. What would a normal, calm, established appropriation of speech be like?"<sup>14</sup>

Blogging might better describe the kinds of prolonged public conversations Lévy is describing. The term "blog" is short for Weblog, a new form of personal and subcultural grassroots expression involving summarizing and linking to other sites. In effect, blogging is a form of grassroots convergence. By pooling their information and tapping grassroots expertise, by debating evidence and scrutinizing all available information, and, perhaps most powerfully, by challenging one another's assumptions, the blogging community is "spoiling" the American government. We might draw an analogy between the fan community going on location to find more information about the *Survivor* boots and the blogging community pooling its money to send independent reporters to Baghdad or the party conventions in search of the kinds of information they feared would be filtered out by mainstream media.<sup>15</sup> Or consider the example of the photographs of dead Americans returning from Iraq in flag-draped coffins or the photographs of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, both of which entered the mainstream media as digital photographs, shot and circulated outside official military channels. Donald Rumsfeld sounds a bit like Jeff Probst when he explains, "We're functioning with peacetime constraints, with legal requirements, in a wartime situation in the Information age, where people are running around with digital cameras and taking these unbelievable photographs and then passing them off, against the law, to the media, to our surprise."<sup>16</sup> (Or perhaps it is the other way around: *Survivor* often seems to be drawing on military tropes as it seeks to secure the area around its production, hardly a surprising development given Mark Burnett's background as a British paratrooper.) In some cases, the bloggers, like the spoilers, are tracking down information about events that have already unfolded; but in many other cases, unlike the spoil-

ers, they are attempting to shape future events, trying to use the information they have unearthed to intervene in the democratic process.

Just as brand communities become focal points for criticisms of companies that they feel have violated their trust, these online communities provide the means for their participants to express their distrust of the news media and their discontent with politics as usual. This impatience with traditional news channels was on display when bloggers decided to publish the exit polling data that networks drew upon for "calling" states for the candidates. Following complaints that premature release of exit polling information may have impacted past elections, the networks had chosen not to release those data. By late afternoon on Election Day, the exit polling data were widely available on the Internet, and the public was able to watch the news reports with a more critical eye. One blogger explained, "Our approach is: we post, you decide." Unfortunately, the exit polls were showing a Kerry sweep, whereas the actual vote counts pointed toward a more modest victory for Bush. The liberal bloggers—and through them the Kerry campaign—had their hopes raised and dashed because such information, normally rationed out by the networks, was more readily available than ever before. In the aftermath, professional journalists used the unreliability of these (professionally gathered) polling data to argue that nonprofessionals should not be in the business of reporting or interpreting the news.<sup>17</sup>

Since the grassroots power of blogging was new and largely untested, it is hardly surprising that Campaign 2004 saw as many misfires as it saw hits. Over the next four years, bloggers of all political persuasions will be refining their tools, expanding their reach, and sharpening their nails. Bloggers make no claims on objectivity; they are often unapologetically partisan; they deal often with rumors and innuendos; and as we will see, there is some evidence that they are mostly read by people who already agree with their authors' stated views. Blogging may on one level be facilitating the flow of ideas across the media landscape; on other levels, they are ensuring an ever more divisive political debate. Of course, as bloggers are quick to note, mainstream journalism itself is increasingly unreliable, being driven by ideological agendas rather than professional standards, burying stories that run counter to their economic interests, reducing a complex world to one big story at a time, and trivializing politics in their focus on power struggles and horse races. In such a context, the bloggers will be jousting with mainstream journalists story by story, sometimes getting it right, sometimes

getting it wrong, but always forcing a segment of the public to question dominant representations. One can't count on either side to always provide the public with the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Yet, the adversarial relationship between these two forces holds the opportunity to correct many mistakes.

As Campaign 2004 continued, the two major parties showed signs of developing a better understanding of how to work a message across those different media systems and how to draw the bloggers into their service. Consider, for example, John Kerry's announcement of his running mate. Kerry made the announcement first via e-mail to supporters who had registered through his Web site; the Kerry campaign used the announcement to expand its list of potential supporters for electronic mailings in the fall, and they used the buzz around the e-mail announcement to increase viewership of the televised announcement. The Republicans, however, were even more effective in using the Internet to respond to the announcement. Within a few minutes, they posted a series of talking points criticizing Edward's nomination, including details of his legal career, his voting record in the Senate, and his comments on the campaign trail. Opposition research is nothing new, but usually such information is released piecemeal across the full duration of the campaign season rather than dumped in one package onto the Web. This was a preemptive strike designed to cut off mounting public support for Edwards. But, more than that, it was do-it-yourself spin.

Spin refers to campaign efforts to slant the news in its direction. Campaigns develop talking points that are repeated by every spokesman tied to the campaign. The talking points imply an interpretation on the events. Spin is in some ways a product of television culture. In the old days, it occurred without much fanfare, and much of the public didn't know that every interviewee was pushing a predesigned agenda. In more recent elections, the news media has focused enormous attention on the spin process—even as campaigns have more systematically coordinated their talking points. The public has been educated about the ways spin works. The process of crafting and spinning messages has become a central part of the drama on shows such as *The West Wing* (1999) or *Spin City* (1996). As spin is publicly acknowledged, the two campaigns dismiss each other's spin for what it is—an attempt to shape the meanings of events to their partisan advantages. Some hosts promise us a "no spin zone" (which, of course, is often the most partisan space of all).

In publishing their talking points about Edwards on the Web, the GOP was not so much trying to spin the story as to give the public a tool kit they could use to spin it themselves in their conversations with friends and neighbors. The talk-radio hosts used those resources extensively in their broadcasts, and their callers responded, reading from the same scripted message. And these same ideas found themselves into letters to the editor. Bloggers both linked to the site and also used it as a set of clues that could lead them to dig deeper into the candidate's past. Broadcast media reinforced these arguments, often providing sound files or images to support the raw information. While the Kerry campaign had hoped that Edwards would infuse their efforts, the vice presidential candidate was damaged goods within hours of accepting Kerry's offer.

As the sudden visibility of blogging changed the dynamics of traditional news and public opinion, campaign finance reform helped to shift control from candidates and parties to independent action groups. A new loophole in the 2002 McCain-Feingold Act created an opening for independent political organizations—the so-called 501s (trade or business groups) and 527s (nonprofit advocacy groups)—to assert much greater autonomy and visibility in the election process.<sup>18</sup> These groups were prohibited by law from coordinating their activities with the campaigns. They also were prohibited from endorsing specific candidates, though not from criticizing candidates and their policies. They faced no caps on the amount of money they could raise, and their expenditures were not counted against the restrictions to which the campaigns had to comply. As a result, these groups became the attack dogs of the 2004 campaign. On the right, the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, and on the left, Texans for Truth created headlines by buying commercial time in a limited number of markets, making provocative claims sure to engage the mainstream media, and then drawing traffic to their home pages. This mixture of different media systems made Campaign 2004 unusually complicated. In that sense, the political parties were no different than media producers or advertisers who wanted to tap the power of consumers' commitments to their properties, but remained uncertain how much freedom they should allow groups that might undermine their long-term communication strategies.

By the campaign's final weeks, both parties were adopting themes and mimicking tactics that had emerged from these independent organizations. For example, the official party Web sites released short,

punchy, often sarcastic videos responding to the debates. Bush's site distributed a series of videos showing Kerry's "flip-flopping" explanations for his votes regarding the Iraq war, while Democrats used videos to catch Cheney in a series of "lies" and to show Bush's "desperation" during the first debate. These videos were produced overnight and posted the following morning. As with the "Trump Fires Bush" video, they were designed to be circulated virally by their supporters.

### Fans, Consumers, Citizens

If we look more closely at the mechanisms by which Trippi and others sought to broaden popular participation within the campaign, we will see a number of ways that the campaigns were learning from fan culture. Meetup.com founder Scott Heiferman wanted a way to trade Beanie Baby stuffed toys with other collectors, and its power was first demonstrated when *The X-Files* (1993) fans used Meetup.com to organize an effort to keep their favorite series on the air. Heiferman told one interviewer, "We didn't design Meetup.com around politics or civics per se. We just knew that the *Lord of the Rings* nerds would want to meet up with each other, you know."<sup>19</sup> Dean's young supporters became known as "Deanie Babies," and Trippi describes the campaign's excitement as they surpassed other fan groups' registrations at Meetup.com.<sup>20</sup>

Moveon.org may have started with a more overtly political goal—trying to get lawmakers to "move on" from their obsessive focus on Bill Clinton's sex life and refocus on the needs of the country—yet they still often took lessons from popular culture. In the fall of 2003, for example, they launched a "Bush in 30 Seconds" contest, encouraging people around the country to use digital camcorders and produce their own commercial explaining why Bush should not be elected to a second term.<sup>21</sup> The submitted films were posted on the Web, where the community helped winnow them down, and then celebrity judges, most of them popular entertainers such as Jack Black, Margaret Cho, Al Franken, Janeane Garofalo, Moby, Eddie Vedder, and Gus Van Sant, made the final selection. This process closely paralleled Project Greenlight, a contest run by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck to help young filmmakers get a chance to produce and release independent movies. Many participants learned their skills making amateur fan movies or recording skateboard stunts and were now applying them for the first time to



political activism. The selected spot would air during the Super Bowl, one of the most heavily watched events of the television season. Again, we can see the logic of convergence politics at play here: the effort to use grassroots media to mobilize and mainstream media to publicize. Yet, we can also see here the difference between grassroots media's openness to broad participation and the corporate control over broadcasting. CBS refused to air the spot because they found it "too controversial." Of course, compared with the baring of Janet Jackson's breast during the half-time show, the finished spot, which centered around the debts that were being passed on to the next generation by showing children working to pay off the deficit, would have seemed pretty mild. Historically, the networks have refused to sell airtime for issue-oriented advertisements to "special interest groups," seeing such spots as fundamentally different from the "normal" advertising sponsored by corporate America. Previously, the networks have used such policies to block the airing of anticonsumerist spots even as they promote the more general message that it is a good idea to buy as much stuff as possible. Of course, Moveon almost certainly knew that their efforts to air their advertisement during the Super Bowl was doomed to fail and instead were seeking the inevitable news coverage that would surround the network's refusal to sell them airtime. The spot aired many times on the cable news networks as pundits on all sides discussed whether it should have been allowed to be shown on television.

One prehistory of groups like Moveon.org and Meetup.com leads back to the alternative media movement, to people's radio, underground newspapers, activist zines, early Web activism, and the emergence of the "indy" media movement in the wake of the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle. Many bloggers explicitly define themselves in opposition to mainstream media and what they see as its corporately controlled content. A second prehistory, however, takes us through efforts of fans to connect online and to exert their combined influence to protect their favorite shows.

Activists, fans, and parodists of all stripes are using the popular graphics software package, Photoshop, to appropriate and manipulate images to make a political statement. Such images might be seen as the grassroots equivalent of political cartoons—the attempt to encapsulate topical concerns in a powerful image. John Kroll, one of Photoshop's co-creators, told *Salon* that the software program had democratized media in two ways: by allowing smaller groups to have professional-

quality graphics at low cost, and by allowing the public to manipulate and recirculate powerful images to make political statements.<sup>22</sup>

These political uses of Photoshop were highly visible in the aftermath of the Florida recount, with both sides using images to ridicule the other's positions. Even more such images circulated in the wake of September 11, sometimes expressing violent fantasies about what would be done to Bin Laden and his supporters, sometimes expressing a sense of loss over what had happened to the country.<sup>23</sup> By campaign 2004, Web sites such as FreakingNews.com and Fark.com were hosting daily contests to see which contributor might make the most effective use of Photoshop to spoof a particular event or candidate. JibJab, a team of professional animators, used a collage style modeled after the amateur Photoshop spoofs to create a series of parody videos, most notably "This Land," which enjoyed wide circulation in the final days of the campaign.

The use of images may be blunt, as when Bush's face is morphed into Hitler's or *Mad Magazine* icon Alfred E. Neuman, or when Kerry's face gets warped to look like Herman Munster. Some of the images can be much more sophisticated: when John Kerry claimed that he enjoyed the support of many foreign leaders, one satirist put together a mock version of The Beatles's *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) album cover with dozens of infamous dictators and terrorist leaders lining up behind the Democratic nominee (fig. 6.3). These Photoshop



Fig. 6.3. Photoshop images spoofing the presidential campaign became part of the grassroots media war promoting and criticizing the candidates.



images often map themes from popular culture onto the political campaign: one collage depicts the Democratic candidates riding downhill inside a giant grocery cart borrowed from the poster for MTV's *Jackass* (2000) series.

It is easy to make fun of the concept of "Photoshop for democracy," especially given the persistence with which lowbrow and popular culture references are read over the more serious issues of the campaign. Some might well argue that circulating these images is a poor substitute for more traditional forms of political activism. I wouldn't totally disagree, especially in those situations where people are simply hitting the send key and thoughtlessly forwarding the images to everyone they know. Yet, I would also suggest that crystallizing one's political perspectives into a photomontage that is intended for broader circulation is no less an act of citizenship than writing a letter to the editor of a local newspaper that may or may not actually print it. For a growing number of young Americans, images (or more precisely the combination of words and images) may represent as important a set of rhetorical resources as texts. Passing such images to a friend is no more and no less a political act than handing them a campaign brochure or a bumper sticker. The tokens being exchanged are not that important in and of themselves, but they may become the focus for conversation and persuasion. What changes, however, is the degree to which amateurs are able to insert their images and thoughts into the political process—and in at least some cases, these images can circulate broadly and reach a large public.

Historically, critics have seen consumption as almost the polar opposite of citizenly participation. Lauren Berlant discusses consumption primarily in terms of privatization, blaming the shift toward a politics based on consumption for what she saw as the shrinking of the public sphere.<sup>24</sup> Today, consumption assumes a more public and collective dimension—no longer a matter of individual choices and preferences, consumption becomes a topic of public discussion and collective deliberation; shared interests often lead to shared knowledge, shared vision, and shared actions. A politics based on consumption *can* represent a dead end when consumerism substitutes for citizenship (the old cliché of voting with our dollars), but it *may* represent a powerful force when striking back economically at core institutions can directly impact their power and influence.<sup>25</sup> We are still learning to separate one from the

other. For example, this issue is in play when conservative activists sought to boycott and progressive activists sought to purchase albums by the Dixie Chicks after their lead singer, Natalie Maines, made some off-handed negative comments about George Bush during a concert on the eve of the bombing of Baghdad.<sup>26</sup> What about when Moveon.org rallied supporters to turn out for the opening weekend of *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), believing that the news media would take them more seriously if the film were seen to be a top box office hit?

More and more, groups with ties to the entertainment community are using their visibility and influence to push young people toward greater participation in the political process. MTV, Nickelodeon, Norman Lear, Russell Simmons's Def Jam, and even World Wrestling Entertainment launched efforts to educate, register, and rally young voters. And these groups joined forces within what is being called the "20 Million Loud" campaign to mobilize around key public events—concerts, wrestling events, movie premieres, and the like—to get their message in front of as many young voters as possible. Although these groups were, for the most part, nonpartisan, seeking to recruit young voters regardless of their political beliefs, it was no secret that they emerged in response to the so-called culture wars, which had themselves sought to tap distaste over popular culture for political ends. According to the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, the "20 Million Loud" campaign met its goals: almost 21 million people under the age of thirty voted in 2004—a 9.3 percent increase over 2000. In so-called battleground states, there was a 13 percent increase in youth participation over the previous election.<sup>27</sup>

### Entertaining the Monitorial Citizen

In his famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin argued that the ability to mass-produce and mass-circulate images would have a profoundly democratic impact.<sup>28</sup> His most famous claim was that mechanical reproduction erodes the "aura" surrounding works of high art and dethrones reigning cultural authorities. He also argued that a new form of popular expertise would emerge; people felt more authorized to offer judgment on sports teams or Hollywood movies than on artworks cloistered in museums. Does

making politics into a kind of popular culture allow consumers to apply fan expertise to their civic responsibilities? Parody newscasts like *The Daily Show* (1996) may be teaching us to do just that.

In early 2004, the Pew Foundation released some telling statistics. In 2000, 39 percent of respondents regularly got campaign information from network newscasts. By 2004, that number had fallen to 23 percent. Over the same period, the percentage of people under the age of thirty who received much of their campaign information from comedy shows such as *Saturday Night Live* (1975) or *The Daily Show* had grown from 9 percent to 21 percent.<sup>29</sup> In this context, ABC's *This Week with George Stephanopoulos* added a segment showcasing highlights from the week's monologues by David Letterman, Jay Leno, and Jon Stewart.

As early as 1994, Jon Katz had argued in *Rolling Stone* that a growing percentage of young people felt that entertainment media, rather than traditional journalism, more fully reflected their perspectives on current events.<sup>30</sup> Katz claimed that young people gained much of their information about the world from music videos and rap songs, *Saturday Night Live* sketches and stand-up comedians, the plots of prime-time dramas and the gags on sitcoms. Katz saw this as a positive development, since the ideological perspectives of popular entertainment were less tightly policed than news, which he feared had fallen increasingly under a corporate stranglehold. Katz's argument was met with scorn by established journalists.

The Pew Study, released on the eve of the 2004 campaign, added further fuel to the fire. Pew showed that young people were getting information from entertainment media instead of news media (although their questions only asked if entertainment media was one source of information, not the exclusive or even primary vehicle) and also demonstrated that people who got their information from such sources were on the whole less informed about the world—or at least less able to recall certain facts about the candidates—than consumers of traditional news. As others were quick to counter, recall is not at all the same thing as comprehension, and many of the items on Pew's survey, such as which candidate had been endorsed by Gore or which candidate had made a misstatement about the confederate flag, illustrated the ways that news reports often trivialized the political process by focusing on horse-race polling, gaffes, and scandals.

*The Daily Show*, a nightly parody of news, quickly emerged as the focal point for this debate. Comedy Central offered more hours of coverage

of the 2004 Democratic and Republican National Conventions than ABC, CBS, and NBC combined: the news media was walking away from historic responsibilities, and popular culture was taking its pedagogical potential more seriously. According to a study conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania,

People who watch *The Daily Show* are more interested in the presidential campaign, more educated, younger, and more liberal than the average American. . . . However, those factors do not explain the difference in levels of campaign knowledge between people who watch *The Daily Show* and people who do not. In fact, *Daily Show* viewers have higher campaign knowledge than national news viewers and newspaper readers—even when education, party identification, following politics, watching cable news, receiving campaign information online, age, and gender are taken into consideration.<sup>31</sup>

The controversy came to a head when *Daily Show* host Jon Stewart was invited onto CNN's news-discussion program, *Crossfire* (1982), and got into a heated argument with commentator and co-host Tucker Carlson. Carlson apparently wanted Stewart to tell jokes and promote his book, but Stewart refused to play that role: "I'm not going to be your monkey." Instead, Stewart charged the news program with corrupting the political process through partisan bickering: "You have a responsibility to the public discourse and you fail miserably. . . . You're helping the politicians and the corporations. . . . You're part of their strategies."<sup>32</sup> The circulation of this segment, legally and illegally, brought it to the attention of many more citizens than watched the actual newscast, representing perhaps the most visible illustration of a mounting public concern over the ways media concentration was distorting public access to important information.

To understand why such controversies matter, we may need to rethink our assumptions about what it means to be an informed citizen. Michael Schudson traces shifting concepts of citizenship over the first two hundred plus years of the American republic. Our modern notion of the "informed citizen" emerged at the turn of the last century. Literacy rates were rising, the price of newspapers and other publications was coming down, and the right to vote was expanding to include many who had previously been disenfranchised. The notion of an informed citizen took shape in the context of an information revolution

that made it conceivable that voters could follow the nuances of public policy debates. The notion of the informed citizen challenged more traditional notions of citizenship that deferred to the expertise of aristocrats or political parties.

At the end of the twentieth century, Schudson argued, explosions in information technology have flooded us with more data than we can possibly process. The promise of the digital revolution was complete mastery over the information flow: "Everyone can know everything! Each citizen will have the voting record of every politician at his or her fingertips! A whole world of political knowledge as close as one's computer and as fast as one's dial-up connection!"<sup>33</sup> In reality, Schudson argues, "The gap between readily available political information and the individual's capacity to monitor it grows ever larger."<sup>34</sup> No one citizen can be expected to know everything about even one core debate, let alone the range of issues that shape national politics. Instead, he argues, "Monitorial citizens tend to be defensive rather than pro-active. . . . The monitorial citizen engages in environmental surveillance more than information-gathering. Picture parents watching small children at the community pool. They are not gathering information; they are keeping an eye on the scene. They look inactive, but they are poised for action if action is required. The monitorial citizen is not an absentee citizen but watchful, even while he or she is doing something else."<sup>35</sup> Although monitorial citizens "are perhaps better informed than citizens of the past in that, somewhere in their heads, they have more bits of information," Schudson argues, "there is no assurance that they know at all what to do with what they know."<sup>36</sup>

One might see Schudson's monitorial citizen as a participant in the kind of knowledge culture Lévy described—knowledgeable in some areas, somewhat aware of others, operating in a context of mutual trust and shared resources. As we have seen in this book, many are learning how to share, deploy, trust, evaluate, contest, and act upon collective knowledge as part of their recreational lives. Applying those skills to a parody news show may be the next step toward fuller participation in democratic decision making—a way of mobilizing those skills that Benjamin suggested emerged spontaneously in our response to popular culture, but that are hard to cultivate in relation to news and politics. *The Daily Show* consistently focuses attention on issues badly covered through the mainstream media, ensuring that they register on the radar of many monitorial citizens. Given the nature of its genre, the

show must pick its targets, but a growing number of viewers are talking about the targets the show identifies. Not every viewer will make the effort to learn more about the issues raised, but if the Annenberg statistics are accurate, more than one might expect do so.

The monitoring citizen needs to develop new critical skills in assessing information—a process that occurs both on an individual level within the home or the workplace, and on a more collaborative level through the work of various knowledge communities. *The Daily Show's* mix of spoof segments with interviews with actual public figures demands an active and alert viewer to shift through the distinctions between fact and fantasy. Such a program provides a good training ground for monitorial citizens.<sup>37</sup> John Hartley contends that news and entertainment have different "regimes of truth" that shape what information gets presented and how it is interpreted.<sup>38</sup> The conventions of news reassure us that it has provided all we need to know to make sense of the world and that it has presented this information in a "fair and balanced" manner. On the other hand, docudrama and parody programs invite audience skepticism because the balance between these competing regimes of truth are unstable and fluid. *The Daily Show* makes no pretense of offering an objective or total view of the world. As Stewart told Carlson during the *Crossfire* encounter, "You're on CNN. The show that leads into me is puppets making crank phone calls." Clips from other newscasts and interviews with newsmakers coexist with comic reenactments and parodies of common news practices. From the start, *The Daily Show* challenges viewers to look for signs of fabrication, and it consistently spoofs the conventions of traditional journalism and the corporate control of the media. Such shows pose questions rather than offering answers. In such spaces, news is something to be discovered through active hashing through of competing accounts rather than something to be digested from authoritative sources.

Quantifiable

### Playing Politics in Alphaville

In his book, *The Making of Citizens* (2000), David Buckingham examines the factors that tend to discourage children and young people from consuming news.<sup>39</sup> Some of them we have already discussed—children find the language of politics unfamiliar and uninvolved compared to the immediacy offered by popular entertainment; news presents the

world as hermetically sealed from their everyday lives. But he adds another: children and youth feel powerless in their everyday lives and, as a consequence, have difficulty imagining how they might exert power in a politically meaningful fashion. Children are not allowed to vote and are not defined as political subjects, so they do not think of themselves as being addressed by the news. If we want to get young people to vote, we have to start earlier, changing the process by which they are socialized into citizenship. If what Buckingham argues is true, then one way that popular culture can enable a more engaged citizenry is by allowing people to play with power on a microlevel, to exert control over imaginary worlds. Here again, popular culture may be preparing the way for a more meaningful public culture; in this case, the most compelling example comes from the world of video games. Let's consider what happened in Alphaville, one of the oldest and most densely populated towns in *The Sims* online, a massively multiplayer version of the most successful game franchise of all time.

For democracy to function there needs to be a social contract between participants and a sense that their actions have consequence within the community. These things were at stake in Alphaville in 2004 just as they were in the offline world. In Alphaville, though, children had an active role to play, their voices mattered, and they were asked to think through complex ethical issues.

The game's creator, Will Wright, says he had no idea what would happen when he put *The Sims* online.<sup>40</sup> He knew players would become deeply invested in their characters and their communities. He could not have predicted that organized crime would run rampant, that community leaders would rally against con artists and prostitutes, or that the imaginary elections would devolve into mudslinging and manipulation. In an election to determine who would control the imaginary town's government, the incumbent, Mr. President (the avatar of Arthur Baynes, a twenty-one-year-old Delta Airlines ticket agent from Richmond, Virginia) was running against Ashley Richardson (the avatar of Laura McKnight, a middle-schooler from Palm Beach, Florida).

In spring 2004, as Howard Dean's campaign was starting to disintegrate, the Alphaville presidential elections attracted national and even international media attention. National Public Radio's *Talk of the Nation* hosted a debate between the candidates, complete with an array of pundits pontificating about cyberpolitics and virtual economies. (I was one of them.) The best coverage of the campaign came from the *Alphaville*

*ille Herald*, the small-town newspaper serving the needs of the virtual community. The *Alphaville Herald* is run by Peter Ludlow, a professor of philosophy and linguistics at the University of Michigan. In the game realm, Ludlow goes by the moniker Urizenus.

Important issues were at stake here, both in the world of the game and the world beyond the game. Within the game, the candidates represented different perspectives on what would be best for their community; the choice of leaders would affect the way players experience the game world. Ashley Richardson wanted to set up information booths at the city limits to warn newcomers about some of the ways scammers might trick them out of their cash. It is significant that one of the leading candidates was five years too young to vote in the actual presidential elections and that participants in the online debates kept accusing one another of playing the "age card." Consider what it means to exercise power in a virtual world when you have so little control over what happens to you in your everyday life.

In another era, many of the youth involved in this online election would have been devoting their energies to student governments in their local high schools, representing a few hundred constituents. Alphaville has an estimated population of seven thousand and its government employs more than 150 people (mostly in law enforcement). The student council members of the past might negotiate with the school principal over the theme for the school dance. The virtual town's leaders have to negotiate with Electronic Arts, the company that creates and markets *The Sims* franchise, to shape the policies that impact their community. On one level, some adults might still prefer engagement in student government elections because it represents action at the local level—actions that have real world consequences. This is a classic critique of online communities—that they don't matter because they are not face-to-face. From another perspective, children have more opportunities to exert leadership and influence the actions of online worlds than they ever enjoyed in their high school governments. After all, it wasn't as if schools gave students much real power to change their everyday environments.

When the votes were counted, Mr. President had beaten Ashley, 469 to 411. Ashley cried foul play, contending that she knew of more than one hundred supporters who were not allowed to vote. Mr. President's defenders initially claimed that the undercounting resulted from a bug in the system that made it hard for America Online users to accept the

cookies used on the election Web site. And in any case, they said, many of Ashley's supporters were not actually "citi-sims" of Alphaville. Mr. President argued that he had campaigned among hard-core participants in the game, while Ashley brought her offline friends and family members (many of whom are not subscribers) into the process. While the Alphaville constitution makes clear who is eligible to be a candidate, it doesn't specify who is permitted to vote. Nobody actually "lives" in Alphaville, of course, but many call the online community "home." Should one have to interact there for a specific period of time to earn the right to vote, or should voting be open to everybody, including those who have never before visited the community?

The situation blew up when the *Alphaville Herald* published what it claimed was a transcript of an Internet chat session between Mr. President and mobster J. C. Soprano (the avatar of a player who presumably lives a law-abiding life in the real world). The chat suggested that the election process may have been rigged from the very beginning, and that Mr. President may be the silent partner of the organized crime family that helped them fix the electronic voting apparatus. Mr. President had coded the program that determined the outcome. If this was play, then not everyone was playing by the same rules.

Writing under his real world name in the *Alphaville Herald*, Ludlow raised the question, "What kinds of lessons were we teaching Ashley and other younger players about political life?" Yes, he wrote, *The Sims* online was a game, but "nothing is ever just a game. Games have consequences. Games also give us an opportunity to break out of the roles and actions that we might be forced into in real life. I decided to take advantage of that opportunity. I freed my game."<sup>41</sup>

Reading through the reader responses in the *Alphaville Herald*, it is clear that, for many, the stolen election forced them to ask some fundamental questions about the nature of democracy. The odd coincidence that many of those who tried and were unable to vote came from Palm Beach invited comparison to the dispute in Florida four years before. Ashley, a John Kerry supporter, evoked the specter of Bush-Cheney and the "stolen election" while she was called a "cry baby" and compared to Al Gore. As one participant exclaimed, "Where is the Alphaville Supreme Court when you really need them?"

Even in play, American democracy felt broken.

Before we write this all off as a "learning experience," we should ask some more fundamental questions about the ways that game worlds

model ideal (or not so ideal) online democracies. Historically, the American courts have granted far greater freedom of speech in town squares than in shopping malls: the town square is a space intended for civic discourse, so there are broad but increasingly eroding guarantees protecting our right to assemble and debate public matters. Shopping malls are seen as private property, and their management is assumed to have the right to expel anyone who causes a disruption; there are few protections for dissent in such an environment. However much they represent themselves as civic experiments, massively multiplayer game worlds are, like the shopping malls, commercial spaces. We should be concerned about what happens to free speech in a corporate-controlled environment, where the profit motive can undo any decision made by the citizenry and where the company can pull the plug whenever sales figures warrant. For example, well before the election controversy, Ludlow, the editor of the *Alphaville Herald*, was temporarily expelled from the *Sims Online* (2002) because Electronic Arts was angered over his coverage of some of the issues confronting his online community—in particular an exposé he ran on child prostitution (teens selling cybersex for games credit). We would be outraged if we learned about a town government expelling the editor of the local newspaper: this would fundamentally shake our sense of how democracy operates. Yet, the expulsion of Ludlow from a commercial game generated only limited protest.

As we have seen throughout this book, people make passionate but often short-term investments in these online communities: they always move elsewhere if the group reaches conclusions that run counter to their own beliefs or desires. As such, these games represent interesting and sometimes treacherous spaces to "play" with citizenship and democracy. Given all of these concerns, we might still think about an Alphaville-style democracy as a productive thought experiment, especially insofar as participants pulled back, talked about their different perspectives and experiences, and worked together to perfect the mechanisms governing their communities. It is through asking such questions that participants come to understand what values they invest in the concept of democracy and what steps they are prepared to take to protect it. It is through staging such debates the Alphaville players found their voices as citizens and learned to flex their muscles as a community.

Ironically, while these events were unfolding in Alphaville, I was

being asked by several major foundations to consult on civic-minded projects that sought to harness the power of games to encourage youth to think more deeply about social policy. My advice had centered on ways to encourage more reflection about what occurred within the game world and to connect things experienced through play to issues that affected participants in their everyday lives. Yet, all of these things were occurring spontaneously within a game designed purely for entertainment purposes. Participants were having heated debates about the events and they were continuously drawing parallels to the actual presidential campaign. One might imagine that a broken election within a game might destroy any sense of empowerment in real-world politics, yet Ashley and her supporters consistently described the events as motivating them to go out and make a difference in their own communities, to become more engaged in local and national elections, and to think of a future when they might become candidates and play the political game on different terms. When something breaks in a knowledge culture, the impulse is to figure out how to fix it, because a knowledge culture empowers its members to identify problems and pose solutions. If we learn to do this through our play, perhaps we can learn to extend those experiences into actual political culture.

Jane McGonigal has found that the Cloudmakers, who had forged their community and tested their collective intelligence against "the Beast" (chapter 4), are now ready and eager to turn their attention toward larger social problems. There were active discussions in their online forums after September 11 about whether their puzzle-solving skills would be of use in tracking down the terrorists. As one explained, "We like to flout our 7000 members and our voracious appetite for difficult problems, but when the chips are down, can we really make a difference?"<sup>42</sup> After several days of debate, the group decided that unmasking a global terrorist network might be a problem of a different order of magnitude than solving fictional puzzles; but the issue resurfaced again when a sniper was terrorizing Washington, D.C., and this time the group did make a concerted effort to identify the culprit. As McGonigal explains, "This strategy drew on various methods developed by the Cloudmakers during the Beast, including combining technological resources to accomplish massive web analyses; interpreting character clues to track down more information; and employing all of the network available to them to interact with as many potential informants as possible."

Subsequently, another Alternative Reality Group, Collective Detective, formed a think tank whose first task was to try to identify corruption and waste in U.S. Federal government spending. One team member explained: "The perfect kind of case for Collective Detective. First phase is research into sources of information. Second phase is research within the sources. Third phase is analysis of research to see what kind of correlations we can draw. Fourth phase, secondary research to help tie together the connections we find. Sounds like fun to me. Can also actually make a difference in how the country is run." McGonigal is more skeptical that the groups are ready to tackle such large-scale problems, suggesting that their game-play experience has given them a "subjective" sense of empowerment that may exceed their actual resources and abilities. Yet, what interests me here is the connection the group is drawing between game play and civic engagement and also the ways this group, composed of people who share common cultural interests but not necessarily ideological perspectives, might work together to arrive at "rational" solutions to complex policy issues.

### Vote Naked

An advertisement for the Webby Awards, given in recognition for outstanding contributions to digital culture, depicts a pair of feminine bare feet with what would seem to be a blurry bed in the background. Its slogan was "vote naked." Ever since I first saw that advertisement, I have been intrigued by what it might mean to "vote naked." The advertisement suggests that the computer now allows us to conduct the most public of actions within the privacy of our own home in whatever state of dress or undress we desire. More than that, the image and slogan invite us to imagine a time when we are as comfortable in our roles as citizens as we are within our own skins, when politics may be a familiar, everyday, and intimate aspect of our daily lives much the way popular culture is today. We watch television in our underwear; we dress up to vote.

We feel passionately about popular culture; we embrace its characters; we integrate its stories into our lives; we rework them and make them our own. We have seen throughout this book that consumers and fans are beginning to take pleasure in their newfound power to shape their media environment and that they are using elements borrowed

from popular culture to broker conversations with people they have never met face to face. What would it take for us to respond to the political world in this same fashion? How do we break through the sense of distance and alienation many Americans feel toward the political process? How do we generate the same level of emotional energy challenging the current Powers That Be in Washington that fans routinely direct against the Powers That Be in Hollywood? When will we be able to participate within the democratic process with the same ease that we have come to participate in the imaginary realms constructed through popular culture?

In this chapter, I have suggested a range of different ways that activists mobilized popular culture to encourage voter awareness and participation in the 2004 presidential campaign. They adopted technologies and techniques pioneered by fan communities and used them to mobilize voters. They used concerts and performances as sites for voter registration. They used films as occasions for political discussions and public outreach. They created Photoshop parodies that encapsulated core debates. They built games where imaginary communities could learn to govern themselves. And yes, they allowed some of us for a short time to imagine a world where Bush was simply an apprentice who could be dismissed from power with a swat of The Donald's hand.

Many of the groups we have discussed above responded to the election results with profound disappointment. They had devoted so much effort to defeat Bush and felt that none of it had mattered in the end. More conservative activists felt that their efforts to get out the Christian vote and their criticisms of the Democratic nominee had proven to be decisive elements in Bush's victory. However we feel about the election results, we can argue a growing integration of politics into popular culture and everyday life helped to mobilize record levels of voter participation. Grassroots communities of all kinds—right as well as left—mobilized to promote their own agendas and get their members to the polls. Candidates and parties lost some degree of control over the political process, and networks seemed a bit less authoritative in defining the terms by which the public understood the campaign.

What happens next? Precisely because these efforts were linked so closely to a particular election, they treated political participation as a special event and not yet part of our everyday lives. The next step is to think of democratic citizenship as a lifestyle.

In *Collective Intelligence* (2000), Pierre Lévy proposes what he calls an “achievable utopia”: he asks us to imagine what would happen when the sharing of knowledge and the exercise of grassroots power become normative. In Lévy's world, people from fundamentally different perspectives see a value in talking and listening to one another, and such deliberations form the basis for mutual respect and trust. A similar ideal underlies the work of the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University.<sup>43</sup> Interested in how to reconnect a notion of deliberation—the active “weighing” of evidence and argument—back to popular democracy, they have run a series of tests around the world of new processes whereby participants of diverse political backgrounds are brought together—online and sometimes face-to-face—over an extended period of time, given detailed briefing books on public policy issues as well as the chance to question one another and experts. Over time, they found dramatic shifts in the ways participants thought about the issues as they learned to listen to alternative viewpoints and factor diverse experiences and ideas into their thinking about the issues. For example, in one such session, support for foreign aid jumped from a 20 percent minority to a 53 percent majority in part because the group learned what a small percentage of the total federal budget went to such purposes; discussions on the Iraq war led a new consensus position that saw Iraq as a legitimate interest but one that was largely separate from the War on Terror and one that might best be combated through multinational rather than unilateral means.<sup>44</sup> They also found evidence that people who felt better informed on the issues were more likely to vote or otherwise participate in the political process. Theoretically, they argue, citizens have greater potential for deliberation than governmental bodies because they are not bound in any formal way to constituents or parties and thus are much freer to shift their views as they rethink issues. The challenge is to create a context where people of different backgrounds actually talk and listen to one another.

By the end of 2004, many are asking how we will be able to heal the rift that separates red America from blue America. As people integrate politics into their everyday lives, they find it harder to communicate within their families, their neighborhoods, their schools, their churches, and their workplaces. I was chilled during the election by the response of a friend to my suggestion that I had Republican friends. A look of horror crossed her face, and then she said, “I suppose Nazis had



friends too but I wouldn't want to associate with any myself." (And for the record, my friend lives in a red state!) As "attack politics" unfolds on a grassroots level, we either find ourselves at loggerheads with people around us, vilifying them for their political choices, or we find ourselves unwilling to share our political views for fear that expressing them may damage relationships we value. We vote naked not in the sense that we feel an intimate engagement with politics but in the sense that we feel raw, exposed, and vulnerable.

Having said that, despite apocalyptic claims to the contrary, we are not more polarized now than we have ever been in American history. Anyone who has read a good history textbook knows that America has faced a series of polarizing debates—struggles over the relative authority of the federal and local governments, debates over slavery and reconstruction, disagreements about the New Deal and the best response to the Great Depression, and the heated struggles surrounding the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War. In each instance, the polarization centered on important disagreements that had to be worked through, and we were better because activists forced us to confront and resolve those disagreements rather than pretending they didn't exist. In our current context, there are also important principles at stake surrounding the Gulf War or economic policies or cultural values that are making it hard for members of opposing parties to agree on core premises. Yet, the current polarization also means that we are unable to find unifying principles or to act upon points of consensus. To some degree, this polarization is opportunistic, shaped by insiders in both parties, who see the value of such disagreements for raising money and mobilizing voters.

Some are also arguing that such polarization is at least partially a product of a world in which it is possible to choose communications channels that perfectly match our own political beliefs and assumptions and as a consequence to develop a less rounded or nuanced picture of what other people believe. However narrow the range of ideas expressed by commercial or mainstream media, it did form the basis for what David Thorburn has called a "consensus culture," helping to map what most people believed and define a space of common culture that enabled further dialogue.<sup>45</sup> In the closing paragraphs of *Technologies without Boundaries*, written shortly before his death in 1984, Ithiel De Sola Pool warns of the potential dangers democracy might face from the emergence of communication niches:

We can expect that there will be a great growth in specialized intellectual subcultures. . . . If that happens, the complaints we would hear from social critics will be just the opposite from today's. . . . We are likely to hear complaints that the vast proliferation of specialized information serves only special interests, not the community. That they fractionate society, providing none of the common themes of interest and attention that makes a society cohere. The critics will mourn the weakening of the national popular culture that was shared by all within the community. We will be told that we are being deluged by undigested information on a vast unedited electronic blackboard and that what a democratic society needs is shared organizing principles and consensus in concerns. Like the present criticism of mass society, these criticisms will be only partly true, but partly true they may be. A society in which it becomes easy for every small group to indulge its tastes will have more difficulty mobilizing unity.<sup>46</sup>

Much as Pool predicted, some writers in the wake of the 2004 elections argue that it is time to move out of the digital enclaves and learn to communicate across our differences.

Writing in the immediate aftermath of Kerry's election defeat, *Salon* technology columnist Andrew Leonard asked whether the blogosphere had become an "echo chamber":

For weeks, I've gotten up in the morning, made my coffee, and then armed myself for the day with arguments and anecdotes, spin and rhetoric often in large part derived from the thrust-and-parry of discourse in the lefty blogosphere. When I visited the right-wing blogosphere, it was like going to the zoo to look at exotic animals. . . . I dismissed it, secure in the armor provided by the communities of people who share my values. . . . What I find disturbing, however, is how easy the internet has made it not just to Google the fact that I need when I need it, but to get the mind-set I want when I want it.<sup>47</sup>

Cass Sunstein, a law professor at the University of Chicago, has argued that Web communities fragmented the electorate and tended to exaggerate whatever consensus emerged in the group.<sup>48</sup> *Time* magazine adopted a similar argument when it described the growing divide between "Blue Truth" and "Red Truth": "Red Truth looks at Bush and sees a savior; Blue Truth sees a zealot who must be stopped. In both worlds there are no accidents, only conspiracies, and facts have value

only to the extent that they support the Truth."<sup>49</sup> It is worth remembering that such divisions are not purely a product of the mediascape: increasingly people are choosing where to live based on desired lifestyles that include perceptions of the prevailing political norms of different communities. People, in other words, are choosing to live in red states and blue states, just as they are choosing to participate in red and blue communities as they move online.

As long as the overarching narrative of American political life is that of the culture war, our leaders will govern through a winner-take-all perspective. Every issue gets settled through bloody partisan warfare when, in fact, on any given issue there is a consensus that unites at least some segments of red and blue America. We agree on much; we trust each other little. In such a world, nobody can govern and nobody can compromise. There is literally no common ground.

What we have been describing as knowledge cultures depend on the quality and diversity of information they can access. The ability to learn by sharing insights or comparing notes with others is severely diminished when everyone else already shares the same beliefs and knowledge. The reason why Lévy was optimistic that the emergence of a knowledge-based culture would enhance democracy and global understanding was that it would model new protocols for interacting across our differences. Of course, those protocols do not emerge spontaneously as an inevitable consequence of technological change. They will emerge through experimentation and conscious effort. This is part of what constitutes the "apprenticeship" phase that Lévy envisioned. We are still learning what it is like to operate within a knowledge culture. We are still debating and resolving the core principles that will define our interactions with each other.

Sunstein's arguments assume that Web groups are primarily formed around ideological rather than cultural axes. Yet, few of us simply interact in political communities; most of us also join communities on the basis of our recreational interests. Many of us are fans of one or another form of popular culture. Popular culture allows us to entertain alternative framings in part because the stakes are lower, because our viewing commitments don't carry the same weight as our choices at the ballot box. Our willingness to step outside ideological enclaves may be greatest when we are talking about what kind of person Harry Potter is going to grow up to be or what kind of world will emerge as the machines and humans learn to work together in *The Matrix* (1999). That

is, we may be able to talk across our differences if we find commonalities through our fantasies. This is in the end another reason why popular culture matters politically—because it doesn't seem to be about politics at all.

I don't mean to put forward popular culture or fan communities as a panacea for what ails American democracy. After all, as the country has become more polarized, so have our tastes in popular culture. Hollywood talent agent Peter Benedek offered the *New York Times* an analysis of the election results that centered around competing and contradictory taste cultures: "The majority of the American voting public is not comfortable with what's in the movies and on television. . . . Hollywood's obsessed with 18- to 34-year-olds and those people didn't come out and vote. My guess is that most people who watched *The Sopranos* voted for Kerry. Most people who saw *The Grudge* didn't vote."<sup>50</sup> And most people who watched *The Passion of the Christ* voted Republican. The strong identification of the Democratic Party with controversial performers and content may have mobilized as many cultural conservatives as it rallied youth voters. Yet, there does seem to be a much greater diversity of opinion on sites dealing with popular culture than on sites dealing directly with politics. If we want to bridge between red and blue America, we need to find that kind of common ground and expand upon it. We need to create a context where we listen and learn from one another. We need to deliberate together.

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