

Commentary: “Cyberspace in Prison”

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THE ANALYSES IN THE “CYBERSPACE IN PRISON” SECTION COVER KEY POINTS ALONG a spectrum. Alejandro Molina largely examines information technology (IT) in its most repressive forms, while Rob McBride views its use as an activist or organizing tool. Claude Marks takes us in a slightly different direction, calling attention to the ways in which “voices of the disappeared” can be recovered and integrated into radical history through media.¹ We are offered several avenues through which we can explore the role of technology, communication, and media in the context of the prison-industrial complex.

Several questions frame our discussion. As McBride notes, prisoners cannot directly access the Internet themselves, and thus rely on their comrades on the outside to “plug them in.” This dynamic holds the potential for opportunism and struggles over power that are typical of politics generally, including the Left and progressives. We must examine the subtleties of our language, such as the phrase “giving voice,” to reveal problematic power relationships, in which we are the *givers* of voice. Those on the outside doing communications work are privileged to choose who speaks, when, and toward what political agenda. Left unchecked, this ability can potentially lead to tokenism or paternalism, rather than solidarity, ultimately reinforcing only silence, disempowerment, and civil death.

Equally complex is the relationship on the outside between information producers and their audience. How do those of us with access to media and information technology dictate the conditions under which information is consumed, interpreted, and constructed as meaning? How do we either maintain or challenge the dominant frames of reference and intelligibility in the marketplace of ideas? For Marks and McBride, how does commodification affect the packaging of information, and how might silence on this question ultimately reduce information technology to a performative function? How can we approach information technology in a way that serves to substantiate visions of radical change, rather than become merely a catch phrase?

A more detailed interrogation of this question opens up the issue of audience. For Molina and McBride, the “digital divide” is a form of elitism that colors who

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controls and uses different forms of technology to construct or gather information. Our "cyber activism" is also affected by this divide. We must acknowledge that this type of activism (e.g., the Internet, digital imaging, and video) necessarily engages an audience comprised predominantly of elites who can access it. How does cyber activism as practiced overlook the engagement of communities the prison-industrial complex was designed to control, and from which most prisoners come? If we look at privilege not as a value assignment (i.e., "privilege equals corruption"), but as a reality, how might terms of engagement, set by those privileged to shape them, change to suit an elite audience, e.g., detail critique rather than package revolution?

At the conference, the reception of the panel presentations evidenced an unwillingness by the (privileged) audience to examine the reality of social death. Discussions on activism and on the use of technology revealed a strong desire to be "constructive," but there was general apathy or even resistance to examining the depths of the destruction we face or the things we must destroy (i.e., the repression detailed by Molina). The liberal tendency to portray one extreme of this dialectic (construction/destruction) as mutually exclusive severely debilitates our capacity to collectively theorize and act upon our struggles. As long as elite audiences sustain this level of denial, we will lack the critical tools needed to interpret the political messages of captured individuals such as David Gilbert.

It is exciting, encouraging, and a formative step forward to develop new ways to add materiality to the disappeared, both in the form of people and ideas. The Freedom Archives and the Prison Activist Resource Center have done so, bringing much to our struggles to be free. They have recorded radical history and created new avenues through which prisoners may be present on the outside with us. A serious contradiction, however, is that discussion and interpretation of this new materiality remain at, or are re-routed to, an abstract level.

One way this is manifested, as Marks notes, is in the idealization and objectification of (political) prisoners (see also Liz Appel's commentary). Given this tendency, it is no wonder that media technology creates stars or celebrities (or in the absence of deification, ghosts or fictions). Commodified iconization results in silence in the face of opportunities to relate or respond to what has been communicated to us.

At the heart of these problematic tensions is the practical erasure of the fundamental context of this discussion. It is ironic that we would discuss communication in relation to the prison-industrial complex and limit this discussion to the uses of the highest forms of technology, thereby overlooking the most elementary issues of communication it creates. That is, the most basic reality of the prison-industrial complex is marked by its goal to destroy communication and community, down to the most fundamental scale of the body. The success of such normalization is perhaps indicated by the fact that we allow the most obvious atrocities of the prison-industrial complex to remain decontextualized. Under

these circumstances, it becomes more difficult to think about communication, with a concept of a multi-layered “digital divide” acting as our main or only point of reference.

This tension speaks to the larger question of reformist versus abolitionist politics. Mainstream leftist audiences are generally comfortable with “constructive” discourses on prisoner rights regarding Internet and technology access, or on new and creative ways to use our access, making it easier to widen support for cyber activism. However, how can we build on this issue while sustaining a larger vision of dismantling the prison-industrial complex? What do we do with supporters who say prisoners have the right to use the Internet, but *not* to be present with their people and communities (i.e., prisoners do not have the right to be free)?

The tension between the question of cyber activism or technology and the more basic human right to communicate was never addressed at the conference. Upon reflection, perhaps the conceptual framework of the panel did not make it possible. That is, discussion centering mainly on how to communicate about political prisoners eclipsed discussion on how to communicate *with* prisoners. The former provides a safety zone, allowing discourse to remain largely focused on technology and those who use it; the latter entails a more detailed examination of the grounds for mutual contact, if not solidarity. The former assumes a certain level of political cohesion; the latter interrogates where that cohesion might begin.

NOTES

1. For the purposes of this special issue, Claude Marks and Rob McBride’s presentations were synthesized into a co-authored work. At the conference, they made separate presentations that were multimedia in nature. Each varied slightly from subsequent revisions that appear in their joint work here. Thus, this commentary includes questions raised in the original and the presently featured works.