



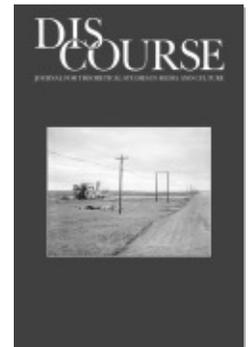
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User Be Used: Leveraging the Play in the System

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Anna Watkins Fisher

An “Open” Network

In the era of networks, what room for maneuver remains in a system from which there has appeared to be no way out? In a post-2008 global financial crisis moment marked by a waning sense of political agency, scholars and artists alike have looked to theories of new media—and indeed to cybernetics, information systems, and nonhuman ecologies—in search of serviceable models for conceiving renewed modes of intervention and resistance. That new media theory would be taken up as a means for working through the double bind of political action today is unsurprising. The “revolutionary” promise of Facebook and Twitter widely hyped in the wake of the Arab Spring and Occupy movements, new media have in recent years signified at once the euphoric potential of Internet activism and the corporate co-option of radical politics in an international climate that has proven largely hostile to frontal modes of organizing.¹ Binding corporate exploitation with the implied consent of participation, new media have thus manifested the complicit entanglements of technological buy-in with the protocols of state and corporate power, be it the appropriation of personal data

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by proprietary social media websites or the high-cost labor of the latest “must-have” mobile gadgetry. It is in this context that scholars and artists have thus sought means of resistance—often makeshift and stopgap in character—able to accommodate a sense of feeling implicated within, and even dependent on, a neoliberal system whose survival they may nevertheless seek to work against. They have sought a means for *using* the very system of use in which they find themselves embedded.

Materializing the privatized economy of transnational telecommunications that makes online participation possible, “the network” has thus consolidated and emblemized the very tangles of complicit action in contemporary life as it has represented both the theoretical abstraction and physical substrate of the immanent ecology of global capitalism.² Heralding a brave new world of viral circulation and exchange, characterized by the boundless reach of digital technologies and the hyperconnected character of social life, networks have nonetheless overstated the equalizing effects of circulation and the reciprocal capacities of exchange. So while they have been embraced as the answer to the problem of mapping complex systems, in fetishizing connectivity and exchange they have proven an impoverished model for registering gross inequity.³

Sold as an open system of exchange, networks have in fact promoted the lie of reciprocity in a neoliberal system⁴ constituted by accelerating processes of uneven precarization.⁵ New media’s much-touted virtue of “openness,” by which the digital has been defined from its inception—its collapsing of hierarchy, its exploding of secrecy, its democratization of knowledge—has also contributed to blurring the picture of the political economy of networks. Yet as Andrew L. Russell has shown, the constitutive “openness” of the network is deeply ideological insofar as it appropriates the perception that generosity is an absolute good for commercial ends: “For individuals, ‘open’ is shorthand for transparent, welcoming, participatory, and entrepreneurial; for society at large, ‘open’ signifies a vast increase in the flow of goods and information through a global, market-oriented system of exchange. In the most general sense, it conveys independence from the threats of arbitrary power and centralized control.”⁶

Ubiquitous and seemingly innocuous, the term “user” perhaps best illustrates the seductive fiction that the network is a *hospitable platform*. In it are inscribed the agential capacities vested in participation; however, this empowerment also traffics a concealed form of disempowerment, as companies such as Facebook and Google, by selling themselves as *free services*, falsely position online subjects

as their equals, counterparts able *to use and be used equally*, while the companies transform the content of this participation into data sold for enormous profit. Facebook boasts “It’s free and always will be,” and meanwhile Google, as Siva Vaidhyanathan points out, accepts no money for the algorithmic labor of making the messy work of sorting and ranking search results appear clean and simple.⁷ Disavowing their monetization of site-based advertising, such corporations insist on their role as *hosts* rather than users in their own right.

“The demand to participate can become coercive, exhausting the very collective faculties that it officially celebrates,” Jonathan Sterne writes. “While interactivity can be imagined as the ‘like’ or ‘retweet,’ it also encompasses the ‘agree to terms’ button.”⁸ Such is the *coercive hospitality of new media* whereby the very terms of participation (as use) are premised on accepting an invitation that cannot be declined. The rhetoric of the “user” therefore presents the guest in the guise of an active agent by overstating the individual’s volition within the online space. “In order to operate . . . the Internet turns every spectator into a spectacle,” argues Wendy Hui Kyong Chun. “Users are used as they use.”⁹

In this essay I argue that neoliberal logics find in the coercive hospitality of networks a perfect alibi for concealing the system’s own disavowed interestedness. I begin by showing how hospitality is the founding logic of networking protocol upon which the Internet is built. The very work of protocol, which claims to be nondiscriminating and welcoming to all, is to dissimulate the potential hostility of the network. Further, I sketch how this *performance of openness* is a predominant mode by which neoliberalism operates today, enacted by corporate and state interests alike. And finally, I conclude by gesturing toward a trilogy of “conceptual hacks” by the tactical art group Ubermorgen, with Alessandro Ludovico and Paolo Cirio, that introduce parasitism as a tactical paradigm for leveraging this coercive hospitality as the vulnerability in the system. Bringing the fields of new media studies and performance studies into overdue dialogue, I read a series of “system failures” to argue that systems perform protocol as a logical masquerade.

Codes of Conduct

The language of the RFC was warm and welcoming.

—Kate Hafner and Matthew Lyon,

Where Wizards Stay Up Late

Networking is inconceivable outside of the logics of hospitality. The idiom of *host domains, servers, clients, and feeds*—far from arbitrary—lifts into view the semantic armature of new media. Indeed, the paradigm of hospitality has resided at the heart of communications protocol since the early days of networking. Still struggling over how to map the network of computers that would lay the foundations for the Internet, in 1967 a small group of Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) researchers gathered in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to discuss plans for resource sharing that would not rely on a centralized computer and would thus be less vulnerable to attack. It was at this meeting that Lawrence “Larry” Roberts first put forward the idea of a national network of “host computers” connected to each other over dial-up telephone lines.¹⁰

Networking functions, Roberts proposed, could be handled by “hosts” that would act as both research computers and communications routers. After the meeting in a cab on the way to the airport, Roberts’s former colleague Wes Clark would suggest an ingenious modification to Roberts’s design: insert smaller computers between the host computers to map a subnetwork of interconnected nodes. These separate computers, dubbed “interface message processors” (IMPs), would act as packet-switching nodes (what we call routers today), serving as messengers between the host computers.¹¹ This “host-IMP” topology would serve as an early blueprint for the infrastructure of ARPAnet (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network) protocols, on which the Internet was built (figure 1).¹²

As this history evidences, hospitality—as the semantic bedrock of early network protocol—is the pregiven structure that makes the very idea of the Internet thinkable. As such, it constitutes the protolanguage of protocol and the paradigm of political economy in which the system insistently, and unreflexively, traffics. Attributed as if by default, the language of the host appears self-evident and ideologically null. And yet how deeply strange it is that a medium premised *on exchange*—on the sending and receiving of messages—would be imagined as a network *made up only of hosts*.

Protocol, as Alexander R. Galloway has observed, is the “set of recommendations and rules that outlines the computational standards or procedures by which technologies function.”¹³ Protocol’s

ambition is to be a good host: “It must accept everything, no matter what source, sender, or destination.”¹⁴ A term associated with performances of social etiquette protocol—particularly in diplomatic and military contexts—is “proscription for structure”: “a method of correct behavior under a given chain of command.”¹⁵ Like protocols that govern social or political practices, networking protocols establish the common rules of ceremony or formality that enable systems to function effectively.¹⁶ Galloway reminds us of this while insisting on the limits of this analogy; he argues that with the advent of digital computing, social or political protocol is replaced by the technological: “instead of governing social or political practices as did their diplomatic predecessors, computer protocols govern how specific *technologies* are agreed to, adopted, implemented, and ultimately used by people around the world. What was once a question of consideration and sense is now a question of logic and physics.”¹⁷

Here I want to probe Galloway’s sharp distinction between the sociopolitical and the technological. When Galloway argues that protocols “encapsulate information inside a technically defined wrapper, while remaining relatively indifferent to the content of information contained within,”¹⁸ he appears to buy into the fiction of hospitality. Describing protocol as nonideological, as ideal receptivity and disinterestedness, obfuscates the system’s interest-ness. There would appear to be a slippage then between *protocol as logic* and *protocol as rules* in Galloway’s account. Posing as logical becomes a means by which to dodge justifying what really drives it: the rules or agreed upon conventions, which most benefit those who make and host them. Protocol might then be defined as the terms by which systems *perform their logicity*.

We must be wary of the supposed unconditionality of hospitality as the form by which networks have trafficked the insidious infrastructure of neoliberalism through protocols, which instrumentally impose and regulate a distinction between the so-called hosts and guests of the system.

Performing Protocol

In November 2013, a news story broke about a Walmart in north-eastern Ohio that had decided to hold a holiday canned-food drive *for its own underpaid employees*. “Please donate food items here, so associates in need can enjoy Thanksgiving Dinner” read the sign accompanying plastic bins at the Canton-area superstore.¹⁹ This scenario consolidates the typically more protracted feedback loop

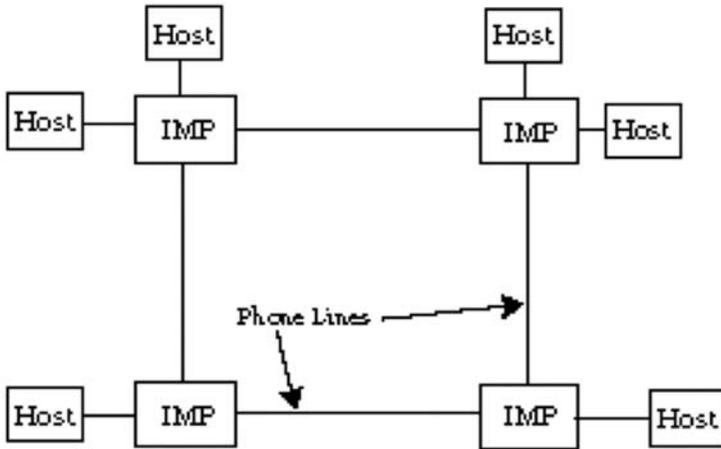


Figure 1. “The Subnet and Hosts,” early ARPAnet sketch.

of “corporate responsibility,” betraying the hypocrisy of a system in which the working poor are made into charity cases by their own employer. The added twist here is that rather than Walmart *itself* engaging in one-off bonus holiday giving, the company instead asked its low-waged employees to provide bonuses for its *other low-waged employees* (“associate” used here in place of “employee” as a term that enables the corporation to keep its hierarchy intact and, at the same time, disavow it).

Defended by a company spokesperson as “evidence that employees care about each other,”²⁰ the request is nonetheless made in the name of Walmart, which at the same time positions itself as a surrogate supplicant for its employees. The company not merely asks its employees, in a smug update on the neoliberal imperative, to “take responsibility for themselves” but perversely also *takes credit* for the generosity of the care that those most in need are asked *to give themselves*. Suggesting its benevolence through a proximity to giving (by hosting or making space for the gifts of others), the gesture instead *takes*. And it takes twice over: first in the original gifts it never gave that made the giving necessary (i.e., withheld wages and benefits) and second in the good public relations that it siphons off the “event” of its supposed charity.

Around the time Walmart was kicking off its canned-food drive, McDonald’s updated its McResource Line, a website run by the world’s largest fast-food chain to provide its 1.8 million employees with financial and health-related tips, including offering advice

for “Digging Out from Holiday Debt.” Among its holiday tips for its workers, who make on average \$7.75 an hour, is “Selling some of your unwanted possessions on eBay or Craigslist could bring in some quick cash.” The company also encouraged its employees to break apart food when they eat meals, writing that “breaking food into pieces often results in eating less and still feeling full.” Elsewhere the website offered workers (or as McDonald’s refers to them “team members”) assistance in applying for food stamps.²¹

After weeks of public outcry, McDonald’s “Digging Out from Holiday Debt” page was taken down. Instead, the website redirected to a company-specific error message (which now redirects to a standard error 404 message and no longer appears in a Google search), displaying a message that read “Hmmm. We couldn’t locate the content you were looking for. It’s possible that it doesn’t exist anymore, or has simply been moved to another location” (figure 2). We find in this error message an instance whereby the corporation seizes upon the alibi of technological protocol, performed here as a cute irregularity, to avoid having to admit to the inhospitality of an exploitative system.

The perverse genius of these marketing gestures is the corporation’s ability to acquire a soul by rendering equivalent the work of padding its own market value with that of community building. By making social responsibility, as a strategy for attracting investors, into mere theater, corporations such as Walmart and McDonald’s *perform hospitality* (or play host) as a marketing tool in order to maintain an appearance of openness to the world that, rather than ameliorating poverty as a force of circumstance, instrumentally sustains and reproduces poverty.

The question we must ask, then, is how can we exploit the system’s *performance of openness* in order to force it to be more open? In order to answer this question, I’ll now briefly sketch how hospitality has emerged as a paradigm for conceptualizing the political economy of neoliberal systems in a postcrisis era by way of a look at the broader social movements that erupted in the aftermath of the financial crisis.

Hostile Systems

As the revolutions and uprisings of the Arab Spring and the mass protests of the Spanish Indignant and U.S. Occupy movements played out across the world in 2011 and beyond, a tactics of seizing a “host” territory has undergone serious trial. Whereas popular and scholarly treatments of Occupy, in particular, have coded the

movement in the discourse of imperialism, I want to suggest that the movement appropriated instead a *politics of parasitism*. Parasitism should be understood here as an antistrategy for contesting the protocols of neoliberal hospitality from the inside. By exposing the limits of the system's performance of hospitality, Occupy has mobilized parasitism as a means for mirroring back the parasitical character of the system *itself*, wherein certain parasites get called out while others do not.

In this sense, Occupy has captured a certain mimetic standoff at the heart of the performance of parasitism, as both sides of the barricade have decried the other as being the *real users* of the system. For example, in October 2011 conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh said of the Occupy movement: "What, exactly, are the contributions to society these protesters have made? . . . These protesters, who are actually few in number, have contributed nothing. They're parasites. They're pure, genuine parasites. Much of them are bored, trust-fund kids, obsessed with being something, being somebody. Meaningless lives, they want to matter."²²

By January 2012, an image began to circulate on Facebook and Tumblr. In it Marxist scholar Jason Read is pictured alongside this quotation: "People who dismiss the unemployed and dependent as 'parasites' fail to understand economics and parasitism. A successful parasite is one that is not recognized by its host, one that can make its host work for it without appearing as a burden. Such is the ruling class in a capitalist society."²³ By flipping the frame of Limbaugh's illocution, Read exposes the ideology that subtends his use of the term "parasite" and in so doing shows how Limbaugh is himself a parasitical host—as a radio host who serves as a mouthpiece for the interests of the ruling class.

The lie of the parasite is that it is the Other of politics. As soon as something is identified as a parasite, it runs the risk of eradication, as Read explains. The parasite with the greatest chance at surviving and flourishing is thus never labeled "parasite" in the first place, passing instead as "host." For his part, Limbaugh also deploys the rhetoric of parasitism for his own ends: by calling them parasites, he attempts to excise the protestors from the functional body politic (casting them as decadent and self-serving actors who interrupt the flow of healthy circulation) so that he can deny their citizenship and thus the legitimacy of their claims. Read's reading, on the other hand, affirms parasitism as issuing from a discourse of the host. With the epithet "parasite" often deployed from a position of privilege, the moniker functions to obscure and naturalize the operations of dominance. In *Where We Stand: Class Matters*, bell hooks writes:



Figure 2. McDonald's McResourceLine, "Digging Out from Holiday Debt," website error message (screenshot), December 2013.

Many greedy upper- and middle-class citizens share with their wealthy counterparts a hatred and disdain for the poor that is so intense it borders on pathological hysteria. It has served their class interests to perpetuate the notion that the poor are mere parasites and predators. And, of course, their greed has set up a situation where many people must act in a parasitic manner in order to meet basic needs—the need for food, clothing, and shelter.²⁴

Occupy has therefore used mass demonstrations to *spectacularize* the alienation of the common from the commons as a result of the neoliberal privatization of the state. By imposing themselves on city centers—spaces emblematic of the collusion of corporate and state interests—the protestors have denounced the absurdity of a world system that exploits its workers while *calling them parasites*. With the battle cry "We Are the 99%!" they have insisted on their rightful place at the center, *rather than at the periphery*, of politics.

What the movement has made evident, then—in its putting on display police brutality and the eventual forced eviction of the protestors from the camps—is just how easily the state that likes to think itself *hospitable* is revealed to be capable of *hostility*. A similar structure of hypocrisy is put on display in the ever-looping promotional video made by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State, in partnership with Walt Disney Parks and Resorts, to play in the arrival halls at international airports as

foreign visitors wait to be questioned, fingerprinted, and searched. The video, *Welcome: Portraits of America*, was commissioned as part of the Model Ports Initiative, a project that is described on the U.S. Customs and Border Protection website as seeking “to secure America’s borders while welcoming legitimate visitors to the United States.”²⁵

So, how it is that the parasite has come to figure the very ground on which contemporary politics has been waged? The neoconservative epithet’s recent revival in postcrisis popular and political discourse—from representations of “resource-draining” housewives, “welfare queens,” and “illegal aliens” to the language of “takers versus makers” and the “dependent 47%”—has proven especially pernicious for women and minorities, whose contributions to society—whether domestic work, dependent care, or undocumented labor—have been kept off the official record. Figuring a growing underclass as interlopers on the workings of capital has been an increasingly recognizable neoliberal strategy for disavowing the necessity of the so-called users on which the system *most depends*.

Tracy McNulty has suggested that the transfiguration of the once divine subject of hospitality into the construction of the *stranger*, represented as a hostile invader and interloper, is a consequence of the rise of an economy of hospitality.²⁶ In his inexhaustible book *The Parasite*, French philosopher Michel Serres also suggested that this parasitism indexes a logic of private property. He offers the parable of a snake,

stretched out on the snow one winter’s day. It asked for nothing; it was hibernating perhaps. A villager walking by, on his own land (note this well), gathers up the snake, brings it inside, stretches it out by the fire, where it immediately begins to awaken. From the outside to the inside, from numbness to life, from sleep to anger, from indifference to hatred: from cold to hot. The serpent is not a lessee; he was not looking for a haven; he was answered without having called. . . . Someone made himself the serpent’s benefactor, savior, father. You are sleeping quite peacefully, and when you wake you find yourself in debt.²⁷

To be a parasite then, as Serres observes, is to be made a *stranger in one’s own home*, as the host that presents itself as welcoming is shown to be capable of administering *rent*. To be a parasite is to find oneself held hostage to another’s imposed hospitality. The rhetoric of parasitism, then, has served to install a sociojuridical framework of hospitality *through the backdoor*. Worker’s benefits are repackaged as “entitlements” for the undeserving, and charity is instrumentalized in the guise of “corporate responsibility,” inscribing contemporary

social life in the *logic of imposition*: rent and taxation, credit and debt. Hospitality, far from being warm and fuzzy, has been used to reframe the terms of neoliberal citizenship as those of *patronage*.

At Home in the Network

It is in this context that digital artists have embraced this debt relation as the conceptual structure on which to impose new economies of value and in so doing have recovered a long-forgotten performative potential at the heart of parasitism. Despite popular perceptions, parasitism—rather than a biological paradigm—was originally a social one. The language of parasitism only crossed over into biology in the seventeenth century, when scientists borrowed it to describe forms of life that depend on others for survival, draining nutrients or gaining shelter at the expense of others (such as viruses or certain plants). The parasite was in fact originally an ancient religious figure. A priest or temple assistant, the parasite was permitted to dine at the table of superior officers and enjoy meals at the public expense as a reward for his specialized knowledge and religious consultation. The parasite thus performs a social short game: it agrees to play by the rules of its host in exchange for having its immediate needs met. It performs its consent, and in return *it eats*, signing in its acquiescence a tacit contract with its host.

A consummate dinner guest, the parasite earned his name, *para sitos* (meaning “next to food”), by offering compliments in exchange for the hospitality of a higher order. The defining feature of parasitism for the ancients was thus not the parasite’s unsavory or exploitative nature but rather its self-conscious “*playing*” of a *patronage economy*. Perceived as trading in a currency without value or substance, the parasite puts into circulation that which is both perceived as not having value and yet dangerously passes as valuable. Indeed, these are the parameters by which I have argued that while companies such as Facebook, Google, Walmart, and McDonald’s try to *pass as hosts*, they act as parasites.

My wager, then, is that the parasite is abhorred not so much for its claimed inability or refusal to “contribute” to its host economy but for the manner in which it signals the *threat of passing* as host. Recognized as such, the parasite represents a “glitch” in its economy, a breach that threatens to expose the contradictions of the values of its host system. It is in the spirit of potentiating this breach that the tactical media collective Carbon Defense League argued in a 2003 manifesto for a new form of digital intervention: “we need

to feed and grow inside existing . . . systems while contributing nothing to their survival; we need to become parasites.”²⁸

Parasitism, then, is an antistrategy for *using* the conditions *by which one is used*, performing back the very thing that one is *already given to be*. Serres characterizes the world as a system of parasitical relations where certain parasites get called out while others don't. Serres's study offers what I perceive to be three extraordinary insights for elucidation of the performative politics of the parasite that his work lays the foundations of but does not itself undertake. First, like parasites, systems work because they do not work. In other words, failures, flaws, and nonfunctioning—rather than excessive—are fully integral to the system. Second, for Serres “abuse”—following the Latin—is not to be understood in purely negative terms, since it is the very condition for the existence of the system itself. We use one another, and there is nothing essentially tragic about that. Third, the parasite is not an ontological entity but a position held in a field of shifting asymmetries. In other words, it is a position to be taken up and *played*. All three of these insights present parasitism as an exemplary paradigm for rethinking our relationship to use through performance or performative value—use not merely as exploitation but also as *what work a thing does*.

Distilling the performative value of Serres's parasite, Cary Wolfe writes:

But perhaps we will do more justice to the peculiarity and specificity of *The Parasite* . . . by understanding the “abuse” of “abuse value” not in the common pejorative sense of “mistreatment” but rather in light of the Latin prefix *ab-* meaning, the *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us, “off or away from”: “abuse” value *at a tangent* to use and exchange value, at a distance from it: a different vector, a different type of value. Serres writes—again in obvious if indirect dialogue with the Marxian theory of value: “The producer plays the contents, the parasite, the position. The one who plays the position will always beat the one who plays the contents. The latter is simple and naive; the former is complex and mediated. . . . To play the position or to play the location is to dominate the relation.”²⁹

In performing the parasite, we find one possible answer to the question of how we might reroute the vulnerability of the system to use the user. As Chun observes, the web's “constitutive vulnerability [is] the fact that in order to use, one is used, and that one's online interactions are fundamentally open.”³⁰ Moreover, Tiziana Terranova has argued in her work on free labor that the digital, like the parasite, refigures our assumptions about value, work, use, and

exploitation.³¹ The pervasive rhetoric of the “online user,” wherein to be an online citizen is to participate *as a user in a community of users*, has compelled a reappraisal of *the value of use* in a system of use value.

By way of conclusion, I want to gesture toward a series of tactical media artworks that in effect outsource their artistic practice to corporate digital platforms, making the system’s coercive hospitality work for them and against itself. Self-styled big-media hacktivists Ubermorgen (Hans Bernhard and lizvlx [real name Maria Haas]) joined forces with Italian net artists Alessandro Ludovico and Paolo Cirio on what the group calls its “Hacking Monopolism Trilogy”: a series of “conceptual hacks” for which the group claims to have “generate[d] unexpected holes in [the] well-oiled marketing and economic systems” of three of the biggest online corporations: Amazon, Facebook, and Google.³²

For “Amazon Noir” (2006–7), the group gained access to Amazon’s digital library, downloading complete volumes of copyright-protected books sold on the site by manipulating the website’s “Search Inside the Book” feature, sending five thousand to ten thousand requests per book and reassembling them into pdf formats. After Amazon threatened legal action, the case was settled out of court, with Amazon buying “Amazon Noir” for an undisclosed sum in return for both parties signing a nondisclosure agreement and thus reintegrating their parasite back into their host system.

The artists expose the structural contradictions of neoliberal capitalism’s avowed hospitality by interfering in processes that are, strategically or not, left somewhat open by a logic of purported accessibility. They take their host’s invitation too literally, refusing the tacit expectations of the contract imposed by fair use. Exploiting the modicum of access granted to them, they hold the system hostage to its own inhospitality.

For the web-based collaboration “Google Will Eat Itself,” the group purports to have tried to take down Google, using the mechanisms built into its own advertising scheme. Calling the project an “auto-cannibalistic system,” the collaborators ran approximately fifty hidden websites packed with Google ads that regularly generate clicks using an army of online bots. “This isn’t that hard to do if you have the technical skills,” Bernhard explains. “Google’s system is not perfect.” The trick, he adds, is to keep each bot below Google’s click fraud threshold. At the end of each month Google pays the group for these clicks, which they then move to a Swiss bank account. Having accrued 819 shares of Google stock valued at over \$405,000 by the conclusion of the project, they estimate that at

that rate, they would fully own Google in roughly 202 million years. In a 2005 press release for the project titled “Hack the Google Self-Referentialism,” the group writes that “The greatest enemy of such a giant is not another giant. It’s the parasite. If enough parasites would suck small amount[s] of money in this self-referentialism embodiment, they will empty this artificial mountain of data and its inner risk of digital totalitarianism.”³³

The project, which ran from 2005 to 2008, turns the tables on the manner by which Google has made an estimated \$36.5 billion in advertising revenue in one year alone by using algorithms to analyze and sell what users search and send over Gmail and then by using the data to sell targeted ad space.³⁴ Over the course of the project, the amount of time until the artists would own Google didn’t decrease but rather *increased* by 345,117 years. Google has hardly eaten itself. With its stock price valued at \$495.01 a share in 2012, the project, rather than exposing the effectiveness of a tactical micropolitics, calculates the limitations of its own parasitical response.

In March 2012 a project similar to “Google Will Eat Itself” appeared on Kickstarter, a website that offers artists a platform for soliciting backers for various projects and thus crowd sourcing’s answer to the privatization of arts funding in a post-National Endowment for the Arts era. Los Angeles-based comedian Eric Money Penny advertised that he would like to buy Kickstarter by raising money on Kickstarter, which at the time was valued at \$18.6 million. The ad was soon removed, with an error 404 message appearing instead that read “Oh my goodness. We apologize but something’s gone wrong—an old link, a bad link, or some little glitch” (figure 3). Much as Keith Obadike’s 2001 digital performance *Blackness for Sale*, in which the artist attempted to sell his “blackness” on Ebay (promising the buyer a “certificate of authenticity”), was deemed “inappropriate” by the site, Money Penny’s prank compels a system, ostensibly without limitation, to expose its limits.

While these artists and media activists merely follow the very protocols established by media corporations such as Google, Amazon, and Kickstarter, they are nevertheless treated as parasites. These projects compel the network to address them as parasites—as “bad links” or “little glitches”—within a much larger machine, treating as exceptions the protocols that it itself has imposed.

These works are not radical; they’re parasitical. As forms of systemic mimicry, they open themselves up to a ceaseless feedback loop of appropriation. Leveraging the parasitical substrate of digital media, these artists take advantage of the infrastructural

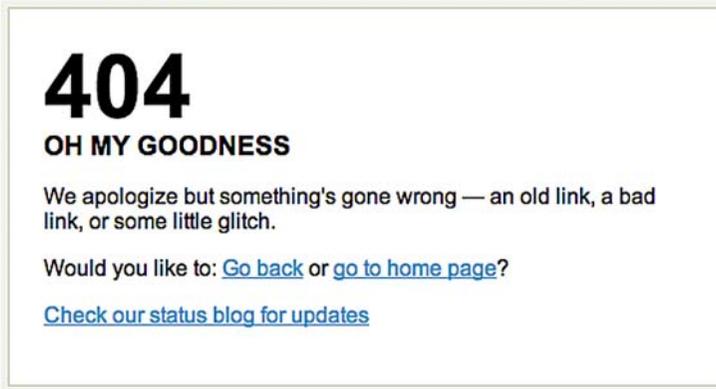
KICKSTARTER

Figure 3. Kickstarter error message (screenshot), March 2012.

vulnerabilities of their host systems. But more significantly, they compel big-media conglomerates to expose that while they are designed to be user friendly, they cannot easily be used in return.

Notes

¹ For an incisive discussion of the frustrated possibilities of social organizing in the digital era, see Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter, “The Politics of Organized Networks: The Art of Collective Coordination and the Seriality of Demands,” forthcoming in *New Media, Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, 2nd ed., edited by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Anna Watkins Fisher, and Thomas Keenan (New York: Routledge, 2015).

² Jodi Dean has nicely captured this tangle: “The ideal of the public materializes an economy of transnational telecommunications corporations, media conglomerates, computer hardware, software and infrastructure developers, and content (information and entertainment) providers. . . . Our deepest commitments—to inclusion, equality and participation within a public—[therefore] bind us to practices whereby we submit to global capital.” Jodi Dean, *Publicity’s Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 151.

³ Richard Florida argued in his 2005 *Atlantic Monthly* article that the world is not flat but “spiky.” This is but one possible model for capturing what I am here suggesting is the need for a third dimension that would be able to account for the political economy of the network or for forms of difference that are not only spatial (as opposed to the two-dimensionality of most representations of the network). Richard Florida, “The World Is Spiky,” *Atlantic Monthly*, October 2005, www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/images/issues/200510/world-is-spiky.pdf.

⁴ Much attention has been paid to the coemergence of neoliberalism and digital networks over the last four decades. As David Harvey has argued, an open network is

crucial to lubricating the flows of capital: “Frictions within or barriers to this spatial movement take time to negotiate and slow down circulation,” he writes. “Throughout the history of capitalism much effort has therefore been put into reducing the friction of distance and barriers to movement.” David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 42.

⁵ Precarity is a provisional term that U.S. academics have borrowed from the European and Latin American Left to describe a state of being made dependent on an unstable system.

⁶ Andrew L. Russell, *Open Standards and the Digital Age: History, Ideology, and Networks* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2014), 1–2.

⁷ Siva Vaidhyanathan, *The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 1.

⁸ Jonathan Sterne, “What If Interactivity Is the New Passivity?,” Flow TV, April 9, 2012, flowtv.org/2012/04/the-new-passivity/.

⁹ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Control and Freedom: Power and Paranoia in the Age of Fiber Optics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 28.

¹⁰ Kate Hafner and Matthew Lyon, *Where Wizards Stay Up Late: The Origins of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 71.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

¹² “A host computer, or simply ‘host,’ is the ultimate consumer of communication services,” reads a blueprint of early ARPAnet RFC protocol titled “Requirements for Internet Hosts,” which defines the Internet as a system of hosts. Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 243.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7–8.

¹⁹ Scott Keyes, “Walmart Holding Canned Food Drive for Its Own Underpaid Employees,” Think Progress, November 18, 2013, thinkprogress.org/economy/2013/11/18/2960371/walmart-food-drive/.

²⁰ Allison Kilkenny, “Ohio Walmart Holds Food Drive For Its Own Employees,” *The Nation*, November 18, 2013, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/177241/cleveland-wal-mart-holds-food-drive-its-own-employees>.

²¹ Adam Peck, “McDonald’s Advice to Underpaid Employees: Sell Your Christmas Presents for Cash,” Think Progress, November 19, 2013, <http://thinkprogress.org/economy/2013/11/19/2970651/mcdonalds-advice-underpaid-employees-sell-christmas-presents-cash/>.

²² *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, October 10, 2011.

²³ “How Professor Read Became an Internet Meme,” University of

Southern Maine, January 26, 2012, <http://usm.maine.edu/phi/how-professor-jason-read-became-internet-meme>.

²⁴ bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 45.

²⁵ “Disney Donates ‘Welcome: Portraits of America’ Video to CBP Model Airport Project,” U.S. Customs and Border Protection, www.cbp.gov/travel/customer-service/model-ports-program/info/disney-mp.

²⁶ Tracy McNulty, *The Hostess: Hospitality, Femininity, and the Expropriation of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

²⁷ Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 22.

²⁸ Nathan M. Martin for the Carbon Defense League, “Parasitic Media: Creating Invisible Slicing Parasites and Other Forms of Tactical Augmentation,” Subsol, http://subsol.c3.hu/subsol_2/contributors3/martintext.html.

²⁹ Cary Wolfe, “Introduction to the New Edition: Bring the Noise; *The Parasite* and the Multiple Genealogies of Posthumanism,” in *The Parasite* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xx.

³⁰ Chun, *Control and Freedom*, 130.

³¹ Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” *Social Text* 18, no. 2. (Summer 2000): 33–58.

³² Paolo Cirio and Alessandro Ludovico, “Hacking Monopolism Trilogy,” Press release, Paolo Cirio Official Website, http://www.paolocirio.net/press/PDF/HackingMonopolismTrilogy_PR.pdf.

³³ “Hack the Google self-referentialism: Google Will Eat Itself,” Press release, Google Will Eat Itself, December 18, 2005, http://www.gwei.org/pages/press/press/Press_Releases/pressrelease_art_12122005.html.

³⁴ Lori Andrews, “Facebook Is Using You,” *New York Times*, February 4, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/05/opinion/sunday/facebook-is-using-you.html?pagewanted=all>.