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The WELL and Usenet Alternative Newsgroups: Revisiting the Free Speech Revolution on the Electronic Frontier of the 1980s and 1990s

Abstract. The democratization of personal computers and their increasing role as tools of individual empowerment, starting in the second half of the 1980s, brought along new ways of interpersonal communication on what was about to be known as cyberspace (Barlow 1990).
The examples of The WELL, founded by Larry Brilliant and Stewart Brand in 1985, and of the alt. groups created by John Gilmore (Electronic Frontier Foundation co-founder) and Brian Reid in 1987, both in the San Francisco Bay Area, illustrate new territories of free speech on an electronic frontier under construction (Rheingold 1993; Dyson 1998).
Inspired by the libertarian ideals of the local counterculture and the 1964 Berkeley Free Speech Movement, these two forums of discussion embody a techno-social revolution underway. One where the sharing of information - that may otherwise be judged as taboo in the offline world - is encouraged. Both The WELL and the alt. groups embody the development of virtual communities where online speech not only liberates itself from mainstream society, but also creates novel ways of socializing on a new "augmented territory" (Musso 2010, 76).
Based on on-site archival research and personal meetings with the main founders and members of these platforms (Brand, Brilliant, Felsenstein, Gilmore), this paper reflects on how the personal computer and online network access revolutionized communication and communities, both online and offline. How did these groups manage to implement the American constitutional value of free speech on cyberspace? With implications and repercussions (such as "fake news") still tangible nowadays through web 2.0, this paper proposes to shed some light on the digital revolution of the 1980s and 1990s and how it can help us navigate the ongoing controversies occurring on modern social networks.

Keywords: virtual community, communication, computer, revolution, coevolution, free speech, dissent, web 2.0, disinformation

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1. Introduction

As the democratization of personal computers and the arrival of web 2.0 have allowed a better access to information and higher virtual social interactions, recent events have also proven the widespread of disinformation through social media platforms can be a threat to modern democracies (Frau-Meigs 2019, electronic version). It thus seems important to go back to the roots of the phenomenon and see how the history of social networks can help users reconsider the tools in their hands through an informed prism that highlights the core values of social media platforms, a combination of dissent and free speech inherited from the 1960s counterculture, outside the boundaries of mainstream America.

Where the Berkeley 1964 Free Speech Movement allowed students to express themselves freely on campus, in the context of the fight for Civil Rights and social justice, cyberspace became both a new territory of expression and an "augmented" one (Musso 2010, 76) where offline American core values could prosper. As a "digital expansion" of that physical territory, it managed to transpose online social and political elements to a new dimension, both through their new virtual state and through their wider expansion, inconsiderate to geographical boundaries. If it truly was the Internet of the 1990s that succeeded in forming what Manuel Castells called a "network society" (Castells 1996, 52), former North American examples throughout the 1970s and 1980s encapsulated the essence of this new society, gradually forming on various online networks.

The advent of personal computers, starting in the mid-1970s, resulted in the beginnings of a novel "interface age", one where communities were formed around and behind computer screens. According to Divina Frau-Meigs, it was the very transformation of computers from thinking calculators to "interface-screens", now able to "see", that turned them into "acting and activating [surfaces]", terminals thanks to which communication became possible (Frau-Meigs 2011, 27–28). One of the first public examples of such a communication tool appeared in Berkeley in 1973 with the implementation of Community Memory. Installed in a record store, not far from the university campus, Community Memory emerged as the first public semi-virtual community, created by five young people, including Efrem Lipkin and Lee Felsenstein. During an interview conducted in San Francisco in February 2017, the latter described the project as the first opening of the "doors to cyberspace" to a non-expert audience who was surprised to discover a new "hospitable territory":

> (…) we expected they would be hostile: "How dare you bring a computer into this music counterculture place?". But because it was visually obvious and awaiting them putting their hands through the holes to use the keyboard, everybody was - with one exception we've known - delighted with the idea. And that was what I call opening the doors to cyberspace and discovering this was a hospitable territory. So we opened up the terminal in Berkeley in 1973 and another one on the counter of the Mission branch of the San Francisco Public Library (Momméja 2021b, 10–11).

Thanks to a teletype terminal linked to a modem connected to a telephone line through Oakland and San Francisco, users could type and exchange messages that they could retrieve on a screen. This electronic bulletin board allowed local residents to communicate and form bonds in a novel way, not entirely virtual as messages remained locally situated but in a manner that allowed users to type and transmit data to an intangible community formed by users and electronic components, a network of people linked together through a computer.

The implementation of the project in Berkeley and the San Francisco Bay Area confirms the existence of a geographical territory envisioned as a social and technological laboratory. One where the conducted experiments reveal an exceptional creativity, from the poets of the Beat Generation gathered around City Lights Bookstore co-founded by Lawrence Ferlinghetti in 1953 in the North Beach neighborhood, to the birth of computer companies such as Apple, founded by Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs in Los Altos in 1976. As a "creative city" (Florida 2002, 298), San Francisco (and more broadly the Bay Area) appears as the perfect stage for creations that revolutionize society at large, through various mediums, whether artistic or technological. The counterculture movement of the 1960s, inspired by the Beat movement from the previous decade, in turn became a ferment for the technological revolution that started in the 1970s.

The present paper provides perspective on that pivotal moment that now informs the use of web 2.0 social media platforms. Through the examples of The WELL, one of the first virtual communities, and the Usenet alternative newsgroups, the research delves into the techno-social revolution underway, one where free speech and dissent have remained at the core of this new American experiment, inspired by the libertarian ideals of the local counterculture and the 1964 Berkeley Free Speech Movement. By liberating themselves from mainstream society and its censorship, new ways of socializing will be highlighted in parallel with a co-evolution in between users and the computer machines that allow them to access the virtual space. Based on on-site archival research and personal meetings with the main founders and members of these platforms (Brand, Brilliant, Felsenstein, Gilmore), this paper reflects on how the personal computer and online network access revolutionized communication and communities, both online and offline. How did these groups manage to implement the American constitutional value of free speech on cyberspace? With implications and repercussions (such as "fake news") still tangible nowadays through web 2.0, this paper proposes to shed some light on the digital revolution of the 1980s and 1990s and how it can help us navigate the ongoing controversies occurring on modern social networks.

The first part of this analysis will focus on the birth of The WELL and its link to the local counterculture. It will show how the San Francisco Bay Area and its community ethos played a major role in the creation of one of the first virtual communities where freedom of speech and sharing of information have been encouraged to maintain social ties, both online and offline.

Secondly, the case of the Usenet alternative newsgroups will illustrate the need for online spaces of discussion where censored subjects can freely be discussed among

participants. The libertarian ideals behind such an "alternative" online territory will be examined through the prism of a new "digital dissent".

The third part of this paper will delve into the repercussions of online free speech and the spreading of "fake news" or "alternative truth". Large scale disinformation through web 2.0 social networks will be put in parallel with freedom of expression on web 1.0 platforms.

2. The birth of a virtual community: The Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link

In 1968, Stewart Brand, a former biology student at Stanford and member of the Merry Pranksters, a countercultural commune formed around author Ken Kesey, founded *The Whole Earth Catalog*. The publication, that would win the National Book Award in 1971, was created as a means to give "access to tools" to people living in remote rural communes scattered through the United States (Brand 1968, 1). Brand's idea was to empower these "counterculturalists" by reviewing tools, from geodesic domes to gardening books, that would allow them to transform their surrounding environment first, and then society at large (Turner 2006, 3–5). The back-to-the-land movement that started in the late 1960s sought to reinvent the American way of life of the Cold War era through communal living and a return to nature, but also through Do-It-Yourself (DIY) creations destined to help being autonomous on the neo-rural "frontier". The success of *The Whole Earth Catalog* and the performances put together by groups such as The Merry Pranksters or USCO (a multimedia artistic collective Brand was also a member of), proved the countercultural movement did not seek to reject the technology created by mainstream America but rather adapt it to improve their own social experiments (Turner 2006, 8).

The countercultural revolution phase, thus, led the way to a coevolution phase, one where the adoption of technology and computers by members of the counterculture appeared as the logical way to continue the ongoing experiments of social change and individual freedom. The democratization of personal computers confirmed their acceptance as "cool tools" (Momméja 2021a, volume 1, 126), responding to both the definitions of "cool medium" given by Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan 1964, 36) as interactive and to that of "convivial tool" as developed by Ivan Illich (Illich 1973, 16–17). By encouraging transformation and hands-on participation, such a "convivial" and user-friendly technology echoed the ideals of the counterculture, creating communities of people around itself and helping spread information freely. Gatherings such as People's Computer Company in Menlo Park (started in 1972) and books such as Ted Nelson's *Computer Lib / Dream Machines* (1974) illustrated that vision of personal computers as liberation tools for the people.

Still a confidential technological revolution then, personal computers truly became available to a wider audience in the 1980s. In 1985, epidemiologist Larry Brilliant contacted Stewart Brand with the idea to virtually translate the community Brand's publi-

cation had managed to create offline. The tools, reviewed and promoted in the pages of the catalog, had helped solidify an offline community of people interested in sharing information. That sharing ethos progressively transferred to technology and personal computers and culminated in 1984 with the first Hackers' Conference, co-organized by Brand in the North of San Francisco (Turner 2006, 132). The event gathered hackers, understood as DIY computer hobbyists, for three days during which they proved to be following a common "hackers ethics" based on access to computers, free sharing of information, and mistrust of authority (Levy 1984, 28–34).

Bearing that same ideal of cyber freedom and community, The Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (The WELL) was founded by Brilliant and Brand the following year. The core of its membership was composed by San Francisco Bay Area users belonging to the counterculture, journalism, and hacking spheres who had received invitations to join the platform. Thanks to a central computer based in Sausalito, The WELL members, through their subscription, were given access to a Picospan teleconferencing system where they could access different topics and participate in discussions with other members. One of them was Howard Rheingold. He later imagined and popularized the term "virtual community" when referring to the electronic link that had allowed him to connect with hundreds of people who, in spite of the distance that separated them physically, were able to connect, share information, and form a novel type of community through this new medium of communication (Rheingold 1993, 6).

The case of The WELL illustrated a new form of "connected individualism", with users choosing who they interacted with, forming bonds and communities (Flichy 2004, III). Between digital technology and society, The WELL members evolved in a new "augmented" virtual territory conceived by technical innovators who also appeared as "social innovators": "they defined the framework of use of this new type of computing on the basis of the new forms of sociability that they were experiencing both at university and in their personal lives" (Flichy 2004, XIV).

Seen as a "vehicle for social change" and a "cultural experiment" (Rheingold 1993, 41), The WELL not only revolutionized communication among people but also the way they connected and socialized in that new virtual space (Rheingold 1993; Hafner 2001). The platform is, indeed, one of the first instances where individuals first met online through a "disembodiment" process (Turner 2006, 165) before - sometimes - meeting offline. The example of The WELL parties illustrates that unprecedented way of forming social ties. It is worth noting that the diversity of topics discussed on the platform - from arts, music (The Grateful Dead fans have had a strong presence and participation in the community), travels to mindfulness, family matters, health, sexuality, LGBT and women only conferences - reinforced the feeling of the members to belong to a unique online sphere of like-minded people, free to discuss any topic. On these conferences, users could and can still use a different digital *persona*; nevertheless, their main username must correspond to their civil identity. The community's announced need to know the true public identity of its members has been praised for strengthening social ties, thus guaranteeing respect among peer users and facilitating

the construction of a virtual gathering place of free expression. The WELL's watchword, since its creation, has therefore been based on the responsibility of its members for the messages they post, a founding principle known as "YOYOW" ("You Own Your Own Words") that is still enforced today: "Since the WELL does not offer anonymous accounts, the YOYOW premise could work. It reminded you that your words determine your reputation" (The WELL 2021).

3. The alt. groups as "digital dissent"

On that same model, but with a more libertarian approach, John Gilmore and Brian Reid created the alt.* hierarchy on Usenet in 1987. Where The WELL used the Picospan conferencing system, Gilmore preferred Usenet, a worldwide distributed discussion system, precursor to Internet forums founded in the late 1970s (Gilmore 2018, in Momméja 2021a, volume 2, 92). In an interview conducted in San Francisco in October 2018, Gilmore explained:

> I did start a branch of the Usenet. So the Usenet (…) was a forum where anybody could post a message, anybody could see the messages. It was widely distributed around the world, and almost everybody on it hooked up by dialogue phone lines. But there was a set of people who exercised a certain amount of control over what topic areas would exist (…) (Gilmore 2018, in Momméja 2021a, volume 2, 87).

Unlike discussions on The WELL, which were only accessible with a membership, Usenet's open access allowed any user to read and post messages. Nevertheless, Gilmore and Reid realized a set of people had control over what topics could be discussed on these forums called "newsgroups" and decided to create their own "alternative" topic areas, using the same software: the alt. groups:

> I and two or three other people got together and said: "Well, let's make our own topic areas!" And we made it non-threatening to the people who were administering that network by just saying: "You know the rule is any site that wants these topics can have them and any site that doesn't want them, that's fine, they don't have to have them". We just used the same software, and that was the Alt-groups (Gilmore 2018, in Momméja 2021a, volume 2, 87).

With the creation of these new alternative forums, Gilmore and Reid managed to expand a freedom of speech guaranteed to them as citizens by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution to the online territory. Such a renewed freedom of expression, through its virtuality, appeared as "augmented", allowing "disembodied" electronic citizens to experience a new form of liberty. Taboo or litigious topics that the original Usenet administrators initially refused to include in their system such as drugs, sexuality or, more surprisingly, gourmet cooking, could now be freely discussed. Gilmore

depicts what his vision of the alt. groups was: "I wanted to have a place where people could talk about these stuffs, because at the time you were kind of stuck with books, magazines and newspapers, and many of them were very slanted and uninformative" (Gilmore 2018, in Momméja 2021a, volume 2, 88).

In line with Brand's intentions, as materialized with *The Whole Earth Catalog* and The WELL, the need for a direct access to information, with no intermediary and with the aim of educating users, motivated Gilmore and Reid's. The opening of an alt. group devoted to sexuality proved to be the most dialogue-generating one on the platform, increasing the number of groups from a few dozens to several thousands, a phenomenon Gilmore justifies by the possibility these alternative groups offered to thwart mainstream censorship: "It turns out there's kind of a law, a rule, that's happened over and over which is: if there's a topic that's censored, and a new medium opens up, that topic moves into that new medium because it has nowhere else to go" (Gilmore 2018, in Momméja 2021a, volume 2, 97). Alternative groups succeeded in offering a new way to avoid censorship, both offline and online. If the "alternative" topics they discussed could also be talked about freely among The WELL community (Gilmore was also a member but mostly inactive), the Usenet alt. newsgroups provided a total freedom of access and discussion to a much wider audience. Doing so, they responded to their founders' libertarian and countercultural ideals, an influence also noted by Valérie Schafer while observing 1980s networks and communication platforms such as The WELL or Fidonet (Schafer 2018, 127), a messaging system also used by Gilmore (Gilmore 2018, in Momméja 2021a, volume 2, 86).

These alternative and "augmented" new territories not only allowed to implement the First Amendment online but also dissent as another American value transposable to the virtual space. With the alt. groups and some of the topics discussed on The WELL, it turned into a "digital dissent", reinventing itself under a novel electronic format to prosper. As explained by Divina Frau-Meigs in *Médiamorphoses américaines* (Frau-Meigs 2001, 12), when the young American democracy got established, the need to transmit its values and ideas through information, media and advertising became essential, allowing citizens to be informed but also to debate in the public space. However, faced with citizens showing suspicion towards the State and centralized powers, the Protestant heritage of Anglo-Saxon countries preferred freedom of speech to advertising, the latter appearing as a threat to individuality (Frau-Meigs 2001, 13). The American public sphere wanted to remain free and authentic, out of reach from a federal State where all information powers were concentrated; it thus had to guarantee the freedom of expression of its citizens. Their individuality prevailed in the face of the collective and the established order, making free speech and dissent core values of the American democracy.

John Gilmore and Brian Reid's alt. groups were created within this dissent frame. They placed freedom of expression and information as well as censored topics at the center of their digital alternative experiment, refusing any form of external control or governance. Flichy confirmed: this quest for "autonomy through computers" was ful-

filled by creating "alternative technologies" (Flichy 2004, XVI). Hackers and computers hobbyists, by designing the tools and systems that reflected their individual social lifestyles, sought solutions "to break away from a type of computing that to them seemed to be above all an instrument of control and centralization" (Flichy 2004, XVI).

The "information age" in extension, understood as an era during which information and its exchange among networks are central to our global social organization (Castells 1996, 477), not only placed information as a sharable commodity but as a tool for online democratic participation in a cyberspace built with its own set of rules. Whether members of The WELL or participants in alt. groups, digital citizens or "netizens", evolved in a new "augmented" territory thought as an extension of the offline public and political space while also claiming their independence from it. Such a separation was enacted a few years later in 1990 with the creation of a non-profit organization, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), by John Perry Barlow and Mitch Kapor, joined by John Gilmore who had met the two men on the WELL (Gilmore 2018, in Momméja 2021a, volume 2, 87). As the American government sought to gain control of the new "electronic frontier" - arresting hackers during FBI operation "Sun Devil," for instance, and trying to implement regulation on cyberspace with the Communication Decency Act (CDA) section of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 - the EFF saw the need to assert the independence of the new digital nation (Barlow 2018, 170–171). With "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" (1996), Barlow confirmed that autonomy, comparing it to the one revolutionaries fought for against the British monarchy. At the same time, the Electronic Frontier Foundation became the guarantor of the freedoms enshrined in the Constitution the government was supposed to protect. Electronic frontier pioneers Barlow, Kapor, and Gilmore self-mandated as defenders of constitutional rights, offering an alternative form of dissent as a hybrid of the offline and online territories in order to defend individual freedoms.

4. From alternative groups to "alternative truth"

The "information age" that was still burgeoning in cyberspace in the late 1980s and early 1990s expanded with the beginning of the Internet. Indeed, it led to a true "cyberist era" understood as a third industrial revolution and based on the commodification of information as facilitated by the use of screens as extraction and socially disruptive tools (Frau-Meigs 2011, 111). The virtual communitarian culture that contributed to the Internet's early "ideology of freedom" (Castells 2001, 37), as illustrated with The WELL and the Usenet alt. groups, slowly made way to web 2.0's social networks and the culmination of big tech giants known as GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft).

With these, two phenomena appeared. On the one hand, the democratization of information led to progressive social changes and revolutions, such as during the Arab Spring. For instance, the Tunisian social movement that started in the last days of 2010 following

the tragic suicide of a street vendor demanding more social justice, was favored by what Manuel Castells described as a "democratic deficit" and "crisis of political legitimacy" (Castells 2012, 45). Nevertheless, what truly helped these movements to expand was the communication that happened through social networks seen as "spaces of autonomy, largely beyond the control of governments and corporations that had monopolized the channels of communication as the foundation of their power, throughout history" (Castells 2012, 2). What Castells called the "safety of cyberspace" (Castells 2012, 2) allowed the sharing of information and the creation of communities of individuals whose common interests motivated their offline gatherings and protests in public spaces.

Not unlike The WELL which Rheingold depicted as a "vehicle for social change" and a "cultural experiment" (Rheingold 1993, 41), the web 2.0 social network platforms used during the Arab Spring – and especially Facebook and Twitter - facilitated a cultural, social, and political change. Of course, it is worth noting that revolution process happened on a wider and deeper scale than what The WELL had managed to create at its level from the San Francisco Bay Area, with different socio-cultural stakes. Castells noted that in late 2010, 37 percent of the Tunisian population, mostly young and urban, had Internet access while 20 percent of these users had a Facebook account in early 2011 (Castells 2012, 28). Motivated by a desire to change society, this youth found a community of like-minded users on Facebook and Twitter which welcomed their free speech through conversations and debates. Again, this community and freedom of expression ethos can be compared to what early cyberspace users experienced, whether on The WELL or the Usenet alt.groups.

Furthermore, in the same manner these early pioneers first met online before meeting offline for events that can appear frivolous in comparison, Castells described a Tunisian movement that shifted " from cyberspace to urban space, with the occupation of the symbolic public square as material support for both debates and protests" (Castells 2012, 45).

Though the democratic and political aftermath of the Tunisian revolution remains fragile ten years later, these examples prove web 2.0 social media platforms can fulfill their promises of personal and collective empowerment through information sharing, access to that information and community building around that same data as demanded and celebrated on early virtual communities. Castells confirmed "powerlessness was turned into empowerment" (Castells 2012, 45), echoing the original ideals of cyberspace as a tool of democratic transformation. Indeed, by shifting conversations from the online sphere to the offline agora, social networks in the early 2010s allowed social movements and revolutions to take shape online before taking place offline, more or less successfully. This all happened despite censorship and the dangers these users and citizens could face for expressing themselves freely and demanding a democratization of their societies, in line with the beginnings of cyberspace and its "ideology of freedom" (Castells 2001, 37).

While that first step of online participation through web 2.0 social media platforms still carried the marks of early cyberspace and its counterculture ethos, it nevertheless was part of a new "cyberist era" where information, beyond reinforcing social ties and democracy, truly became a commodity.

Whereas cyberspace pioneers had envisioned social liberation through online networks of communication, the rapid spreading of disinformation through "fake news" proved online freedom of expression on a wide global scale could have damaging offline consequences on the democratic sphere. These two ends of a same digital media revolution embody the ongoing tensions between a free "outlaw" territory and a controlled, regulated, one. If for cyberspace libertarian pioneers such as John Gilmore the Internet must remain a genuine democratic tool (Gilmore 2018, in Momméja 2021a, volume 2, 98), ungoverned by any central authority, the risk for the propagation of "alternative facts" by citizens or governments is a real danger (Blake 2017, Frau-Meigs 2019).

Over the years, the "information age" which then evolved into a "cyberist era" (Frau-Meigs 2011, 111) - with information having tangible social repercussions on the offline world - has been coexisting with a new "age of disinformation". An era where the online dissemination of lies and "fake news" has had major social and political repercussions offline. Here, the contradictory term "fake news" is used as a synonym for disinformation defined as "deliberate (often orchestrated) attempts to confuse or manipulate people through delivering dishonest information to them" (Ireton, Posetti and UNESCO 2018, 7). It denotes the intended distortion of reality and truth by its creators who reproduce mass media online formats purposefully, creating confusion around verified facts and their interpretation by readers (Frau-Meigs 2019, electronic version).

The distinction between geographic territory and cyberspace seems to have been growing thinner as the integrity of information available online can now undermine the stability of democracies around the world. While the cyberspace defended by the EFF and its pioneers was supposed to increase and support democracy and more particularly ensure the U.S. Constitution was applied online, an "era of disinformation", accelerated by the American executive power itself with the 2016 election and Donald Trump's victory, gave way to a deluge of disinformation that shook traditional media and the democratic institutions in place. In this regard, Frau-Meigs noted a gap between mass media from web 1.0, from 1996 to 2004, and social media from web 2.0 since 2008, the former appearing as a symbol of verified information, while the latter considered mass media as too elitist and failing to represent grassroots points of view (Frau-Meigs 2019, electronic version).

Nevertheless, it was that grassroots base that was given a voice by cyberspace, as well as the possibility of exchanging information and creating virtual social ties, just like on The WELL. But web 2.0 proves ill-informed users become unable to distinguish the truth from inaccurate theories, or "alternative facts" to use the term popularized on American television by President Trump's advisor, Kelyann Conway, after his inauguration in January 2017. During a television interview, Conway maintained the crowd present at the inauguration of the new President was larger than that of his predecessor, Barack Obama, despite facts proving the contrary. As the journalist questioned her statement, she retorted: "Alternative facts are not facts; they're falsehoods" (Blake 2017). For Divina Frau-Meigs, that moment remains a key event in the rise of "fake news" (Frau-Meigs 2019, electronic version).

While the term "alternative facts" is reminiscent of "alternative groups", the alt. groups created by John Gilmore and Brian Reid aimed at the dissemination of information considered alternative because it was censored by mainstream society. Here "alternative" takes on a different meaning, implying the existence of different types of truths, depending on who communicates them. Of course, the sharing of false information (whether intended disinformation or unintended misinformation) was possible in alt. groups and on The WELL, but it is the circulation of lies on a wider scale, and on an institutional level, made possible by web 2.0 and its social networks, that now threatens democracy when it was supposed to foster it.

For John Gilmore, these "alternative facts" and "fake news" must continue to exist and be disseminated in cyberspace, unregulated or censored (Gilmore 2018, in Momméja 2021a, volume 2, 98–99). Though he certainly welcomes media education initiatives to form critical minds about information encountered online and offline, at the same time, he stresses the need for a diversity of viewpoints:

> I think it's a great idea to teach people how to be skeptical of what other people are trying to tell them, absolutely. But making a censored Internet is not a good way to do that. People who grow up in a censored world tend to believe a lot of what they're told because they don't see contradictory information (…) (Gilmore 2018, in Momméja 2021a, volume 2, 98).

Far from censorship, the need for access to "fake news" to distinguish them from "real news" is Gilmore's solution to disinformation campaigns. Such a tolerance may raise questions, but it nevertheless follows a pre-established libertarian logic to which the EFF also continues to adhere, deploring in January 2021 the closure of President Trump's Twitter account. This closure concerned his private account, not his presidential account or that of the White House, and followed online comments in which he did not condemn the attack on the Capitol by his supporters on January 6, 2021, violating the rules of the Twitter community related to incitement to violence (Twitter 2021). The EFF regretted that decision, likening it to censorship, while also condemning the actions of the President and recognizing Twitter's rights, as a private platform, to enforce its own regulations and to benefit from its own rights as guaranteed by the First Amendment and section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (CDA) included in the 1996 Telecommunications Act (McSherry 2021).

While section 230 of the CDA, welcomed by the EFF, aimed to guarantee online freedom of expression, as ratified with the First Amendment, by considering web platforms as mere hosts, with no editorial responsibility, it is today this same section which paradoxically allows "fake news" to get disseminated without any regulation. In spite of itself and as a hosting platform, Twitter, thus, became a content publisher and crossed a line which until then guaranteed users' freedom of expression and discharged platforms from any criminal liability. This new turn of events highlighted social networks' moral responsibility and also showed their relative free will and ability to make random decisions lacking transparency, a risk the EFF warned against: "We call once

again on the platforms to be more transparent and consistent in how they apply their rules" (McSherry 2021).

Faced with the drifts of cyberspace, drifts that were already present in the offline space but got "augmented" by virtuality, the Electronic Frontier Foundation has been playing a lobby role since 1990. As web 2.0 revolutionized communication, spread information that helped social movements to expand, and later disseminated disinformation that threatened democracies, the EFF continues getting involved in politics and remains vigilant in order to protect netizens' constitutional rights and the libertarian technological creations of its founding pioneers who hoped for alternative free spaces of expression.

5. Conclusion

From virtual communities to social networks, the examples of The WELL, the alt. groups, and more recent web 2.0 platforms such as Facebook and Twitter revealed different implementations of freedom of speech within the "safety of cyberspace" (Castells 2012, 2). Indeed, analyzing early virtual communities from the late 1970s until the 1990s offers to witness the formation of safe alternative spaces of expression where individuals tried their best to implement their countercultural democratic ideals online, founding networks of users where free speech became the key to bond newly formed communities. Community Memory, The WELL, and the Usenet alt. groups all illustrate the early "ideology of freedom" that was present at the origins of cyberspace (Castells 2001, 37). By placing the sharing of information at the center of their different projects, cyber pioneers hoped to create and experiment a convivial and communal technology that would co-evolve with its users whether online or offline (Momméja 2021a, volume 1, 5).

If such a coevolution between users and their computers appeared possible during the "information age" (Castells 1996, 477), the commodification of information with web 2.0 has turned technology into an ideal propaganda tool for spreading disinformation. Recent examples prove the original "safety of cyberspace" has been challenged by controversies regarding the nature of information being shared online. Though such issues have certainly existed with every new media revolution, the recent disinformation era has proven a discrepancy between the democratic promises of web 1.0 and the large-scale consequences of web 2.0. From The WELL's "You Own Your Own Words" to orchestrated "fake news" campaigns on social networks, the need for Internet users' accountability and digital media education appear as crucial, as noted by Guess et al.: "without the necessary digital media literacy skills, people frequently fall victim to dubious claims they encounter" (Guess et al. 2020, 15536).

Meanwhile, maintaining the possibility for alternative uncensored online spaces is also primordial to allow the sharing of information out of mainstream media and society within social groups and communities of interest. Only a proper use of platforms can achieve such a goal while some form of governance and regulation against disin-

formation and hatred speech appears necessary on their part to return to the original cyber ideals of information sharing within enriching, diverse and democratic virtual communities: "Despite its current (and perhaps, in some areas permanent insufficiencies), we should go to Cyberspace with hope" (Barlow 1994).

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