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CYBERSPACE, THE SOCIAL GRAPH AND NEW MEDIA RUPTURE-TALK

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From visions of virtual community in the early 1990s to more recent claims that social media are instilling a culture of openness, the web has long been associated with radical change in the media landscape. What should be made of these narratives of rupture in new media culture? This paper explores what new media rupture-talk is and what it does, taking the concepts of cyberspace and the social graph as its central examples.

Rupture-talk, or speculative, far-reaching accounts of a technology's significance and purpose, has attended the web's development from its initial phase of rapid growth in 1993 and surrounded networked computing technology for much longer. From the late 1980s, a new crop of technology magazines such as *Wired* and *Mondo 2000* took the hype around the internet and related technologies to new heights, presenting these as a revolutionary force in the transformation of culture, economics and politics. By the mid-1990s, though, their belief in the progressive potential of digital technology drew mounting criticism from scholars and commentators such as Vivian Sobchack (1994), Mark Dery (1996), Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron (1995). The critics pointed out the flaws in assuming universal effects, given that the digital elite had little to say about the millions of people with no access to the latest computers and gadgets. They questioned the politics of the magazines' fascination with escaping into virtual worlds, and argued that their high-tech bohemianism provided cover for Silicon Valley's real interest in filling its pockets. In recent years, such criticism of new media rupture-talk found a new voice in Evgeny Morozov (2011; 2013), whose polemical essays and books take aim at a new generation of pundits and CEOs guilty of what he calls "internet- centrism" and technological "solutionism."

At issue is not whether rupture-talk should be taken seriously, but how. For critics like Morozov, rupture-talk consists of exaggerated claims, and should be taken seriously for how it blinds policy-makers, the media and academics to the actual conditions that produce a technology and its real effects. However, what if such rupture-talk is not approached as something that exists outside of the web's development - a shiny surface obscuring a mess of cultural, economic and technological factors - but something essential to understanding this history?

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This paper outlines a theoretical framework for understanding new media rupture-talk in terms of its properties and functions, and argues for a web history that accounts more fully for how the medium has been imagined. Rupture-talk, I argue, is not simply *hyperbolic*, but also *imaginative*, *historical* and *situated*. Likewise, rupture-talk does not only *obscure* and *restrict*, but also serves to *inscribe* particular meanings and practices, as well as *animate* key actors in the web's development. To illustrate these properties and functions, I will draw on examples surrounding the concepts of cyberspace and the social graph. While these two concepts point to two very different understandings of the web's significance, they share a common lineage in digital utopianism (Turner, 2006). They also show resemblances in how they help organize web design and development, connecting a vision of the web's exceptional character to social, technological and commercial developments. While the framework highlights similarities in the content and form of these narratives, it is flexible enough to capture the very different historical conditions and outcomes that they represent.

In sum, this paper seeks to contribute to critical approaches in web history, but with a counter-intuitive starting point: rather than consider the concepts and narratives of digital utopianism as hype that obscures actual developments, such "rupture-talk" is instead studied as an important site and source of continuity with the past (Hecht, 2002).

References

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