

Power to the People? Web 2.0, Facebook, and DIY Cultural Citizenship in Aotearoa New Zealand

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This paper interrogates Facebook, a prime example of a “Web 2.0” technology, as a means for empowering citizens and democratising the media. Focusing on uses of Facebook pages, and drawing on the conception of cultural citizenship, I identify two dimensions of empowerment. The first relates to Facebook as a “space of becoming,” and I explicate this through an analysis of Māori cultural identity. The second relates to online protest, and here I explore a campaign to stop a “Win a Wife” radio competition. These appropriations of Facebook afford citizens a degree of Do-it-Yourself media empowerment. However, I argue that they rely on notions of user agency that become problematic when the nature of Facebook as a platform is considered. Drawing on political economic critique, I argue that Facebook is a thoroughly branded environment that commodifies social relationships, reinforces the power of global media corporations, and facilitates forms of neoliberal subjectivity. Furthermore, I draw on the work of David Beer to argue that Facebook produces metadata and related forms of “algorithmic” power outside of user control, and is associated with the rise of a “technological unconscious.” These issues limit user agency, but are often elided in the face of popular discourse that constructs Web 2.0 applications as liberating technologies. I end by calling for a broader and more critically informed debate.

Web 2.0, Facebook and the Empowerment of “The People” in Aotearoa

While writing this article, the resignation of President Mubarak of Egypt dominates world headlines, after a popular uprising unprecedented in modern times. The use of new media technologies by Egyptian citizens is being heralded as crucial to these events. Amidst the relentless flow of news coverage, the most telling narrative to emerge in this respect relates to the extraordinary rise from obscurity to prominence of Wael Ghonim. Just days before the fall of Mubarak’s regime, the *Dominion Post*’s “World” section led with an article entitled “Crowds Salute Young

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‘Dreamer’.” It profiles Ghonim, a Google executive who “lacks charisma, physical presence, or oratorical power,” but who nevertheless represents a new breed of youthful revolutionary leaders “who have turned the mouse and the keyboard into weapons powerful enough to destroy dictatorships” (B1).

Ghonim’s newfound status relates to a single act: his creation of a Facebook page. Its title – “We Are All Khaled Said” – makes explicit reference to a young Egyptian dragged from an Alexandria café and beaten to death by police in June 2010. The page was purportedly instrumental in initiating and helping sustain popular protest in Egypt, and Ghonim himself has since gone on record as stating that the revolution started on Facebook (Smith). The page’s creation certainly placed Ghonim at the forefront of events, particularly as it resulted in his being detained and interrogated for twelve days by Egyptian security forces. The *Dominion Post*’s profile goes on to outline that, as he addressed crowds in Tahrir Square upon his release from detention, “young men spray-painted Google, Twitter and Facebook logos on walls and tanks” (B1). Young, technologically literate, and with no previously established national political profile, Ghonim’s surprising Facebook-facilitated emergence as a leader capable of “inspiring” (B1) the masses in Tahrir Square represented the personification of “a nightmare for President Hosni Mubarak, 82, and a regime that can scarcely comprehend the nature of the force it is battling” (B1).

In a strict sense these events are historically specific and contextually unique. As part of an unprecedented uprising in a foreign country, Ghonim’s story in so many ways stands outside our commonplace realities. Yet in a more profound sense it resonates closely with “us,” rather than simply being a story about “them.” This is because it represents the latest articulation of a growing, more broadly applicable understanding of the “inherently” democratic and empowering potential of day-to-day, user-led uses of contemporary Web-based technologies, an understanding that feels increasingly familiar. Despite his newly acquired high profile, Ghonim is constructed in news coverage as an unassuming, everyday character: an unlikely, even unwilling political revolutionary. At the same time his story is one of efficacious *active user*-led empowerment, of profound self-directed *transformation* through the use of technology. In reflecting upon it from the (privileged) position of being half a world away from the turmoil in Egypt, one is left with the warmly reassuring sense

that, because “we” are also able to draw on the same technological potential of Facebook, “we” too have access to the same user-led power as Ghonim and his online contemporaries, a power so profound it is capable of “destroying dictatorships.” In this sense his narrative is tied to a broader rhetoric of technology and democratisation, one increasingly entrenched and with a global currency. It is associated with the arrival of “Web 2.0.”

First popularised by Tim O’Reilly, owner of O’Reilly Media, the term Web 2.0 captures a fundamental shift towards the design and use of the Web as a “platform” for user-generated content (UGC). Users, previously largely confined to surfing Web content provided by others, are reconceptualised here as active co-creators of online culture. Over the last five years, the changes associated with Web 2.0 have received increasing popular attention. For example in 2006 *Time* magazine, in reflecting on the “millions” now “seizing the reins of the global media,” designated “You” as its Person of the Year (Grossman). The article specifically references a number of UGC platform applications, including YouTube, MySpace, Facebook and Wikipedia, that it links to the rise of a revolutionary, collaborative online culture. Such popular emphasis on Web 2.0 UGC has been reinforced through a spate of recent media research. For example it is highlighted in the coining of new hybrid terms such as Bruns’ “produsage” (227), which stresses the productivity of online “audiences,” and has been accentuated through the broader significance now assigned to “participatory culture” (Jenkins 135). Beer argues that the continued rise of Web 2.0 applications, research and rhetoric has resulted in profound change in commonplace understandings of the Web, in at least two senses. First, being implicitly opposed to “Web 1.0,” it implies “a sense of teleological progress” (986) in software development, linked, often uncritically, to purposeful “designed improvement” (986). Second, in emphasising the role of UGC it has become popularly associated with “empowerment and liberation as ‘the people’ apparently reclaim the internet” (986).

Although “the people” are not faced with the task of toppling dictatorship in Aotearoa, I argue that emerging debates over Web 2.0 take on a heightened salience in this country for both economic and cultural reasons. Economically the Aotearoa media system, being heavily deregulated, is characterised by a concentration of

ownership in the hands of foreign-owned corporations (Rosenburg). This is evident, as Rosenburg and Mollgaard recently summarised, in respect of all major broadcast and print news media:

Four companies, all overseas owned, dominate the New Zealand news media. There is a near duopoly in two of the three main media – print and radio – a monopoly in pay television, and only three significant competitors in free-to-air television (including state owned channels). (85)

In an officially bicultural, and increasingly multicultural, society this situation has led to concern over the “hollowing out” of the national media system, linked to a narrowing of viewpoints presented in mainstream media and to a “stifling” of public debate (Hope 6). Set against this context, the prospect of “the people” appropriating the means of representation via Web 2.0 becomes particularly significant. Such prospective appropriation takes on even greater salience when set against a broader cultural context that actively valorises New Zealanders as savvy “adopters” and “innovators” of technology. Related to national discourses of Aotearoa as a settler society located on the global periphery, this context is metonymically captured in common cultural tropes such as “Kiwi ingenuity” or the “number eight fencing wire” approach to creatively repurposing technologies to meet local needs. The broader globalised discourse of “Web 2.0 democratisation” thus fits particularly well here: it resonates with our national culture and speaks to our sense of technological agency.

New Zealanders certainly have been enthusiastic adopters of internet technology. 83% of New Zealanders are internet users (Smith et al. 2), a figure which places New Zealand amongst the highest rates of usage in a global perspective (Bell et al. 5). Moreover, we have keenly engaged with Web 2.0 technologies. Most prominently, 48% of internet users are members of social networking sites (SNS), with Facebook, in capturing 75% of SNS users, being the popular choice (Smith et al. 13). These figures suggest nearly a third of *all* New Zealanders have a Facebook account, a remarkably fast rate of adoption considering Facebook only slipped the bounds of US college campuses in 2005. Given the national context and Web 2.0 rhetoric, one would expect, then, to find examples of potentially “empowering” user-led appropriations of Web 2.0 technology apposite for a New Zealand context. This seems to be the case: one can readily find just such examples, and Web 2.0 uses and applications are becoming increasingly high-profile.

In what follows I start to interrogate these popular developments with the aim of exploring the extent to which Web 2.0 empowers “the people” in Aotearoa. There are two main aspects to my argument. I first explore examples of Web 2.0 in action, investigating key dimensions of their empowering potential. I will concentrate on uses of Facebook because of the site’s popularity and for the sake of clarity, particularly in regards to Facebook pages’ functionality. I argue that what is at stake here is a renewed sense of technologically facilitated political agency that is inter-related to the power the user holds to shape their own subjectivity. I then set these developments against emerging critiques of Web 2.0 by bringing together literatures, the “culturalist” and the political-economic, that often talk past one another. This is necessary if the benefits and limits of user agency are to be fully understood. My concern is that, while the benefits of user agency are widely circulated in public discourse via stories such as Ghonim’s, understandings of its limits are less well circulated and understood. Indeed, they are often lost altogether in the celebration of a supposedly disjunctive and straightforward shift from “audiences” to “users” in Web 2.0. Rather than being a comprehensive overview, I envisage this article as a step towards a more informed debate. Before beginning we need to understand the notion of “the people” in this context, and I argue the concept of cultural citizenship is valuable here.

Exploring Empowerment via Web 2.0 through the Lens of Cultural Citizenship

Over the last decade the concept of “cultural citizenship” (Miller, Rosaldo, Stevenson) has become increasingly central to debates over the media, power and political agency. It has emerged as part of a broader critique and reconstruction of the concept of citizenship itself. While complex and contested, it begins with recognition that all human conduct is “culturally mediated” (Rosaldo 259). Conceiving of cultures as “systems of representation that carry meanings that are not determined by material dimensions” (Stevenson 17), it extends citizenship practices to include everyday practices of meaning making in a context of globalised media consumption. It recognises the role everyday culture plays in shaping the opportunities afforded to citizens for participation in society at local, national, and global scales (Miller 35–65). Indeed it recognises that the very claim for citizenship status itself can be “reinforced or subverted by cultural assumptions and practices” (Rosaldo 259). Based on these

insights, Turner has articulated the possibility of creating a range of “indices” that could be used to assess how cultural citizenship influences societal participation. In doing so he usefully summarises the major parameters at stake:

It should be possible to create indices which could be constructed to measure to what extent location, education, social class, gender, race and linguistic knowledge stand in the way of full access to and participation in either the high or low cultural spheres of any given society. (27)

Collective forms of cultural subjectivity are vital to Turner’s summary. Cultural citizenship focuses attention on the construction of cultural identities and cultural differences, on community building and belonging, and on cultural expression, as these processes are seen as shaping citizenship opportunities. Within this context, Miller (35) summarises claims for cultural citizenship as entailing the articulation of “the right to know and speak,” as a supplement to political (“the right to reside and vote”) and economic (“the right to work and prosper”) rights. This should not be read as the separation of these factors into different spheres. Claims for cultural citizenship involve what Fraser terms the pursuit of “recognition,” or an equitable “status order” (16) in society. Yet, while analytically distinct, such claims are always inseparable in practice from claims for “redistribution” (16) that involve the pursuit of material equality, and both of these are always linked to more “first order” claims for “representation” (17): the equitable political constitution of society.

While these inter-connections require acknowledgment, cultural citizenship provides a valuable analytical focus. Popular, everyday practices of meaning-making, hitherto set largely outside the remit of “political communication,” are recognised as central to citizenship. In a cosmopolitan and globalised world, where the sovereignty of the nation state is challenged, the term captures a key communicative dimension of citizenship. That is, the “right to know and speak” is always bound up with the need for citizens to be afforded broad-ranging “access to the technologies of communication” (Miller 35). It is here where the utility of cultural citizenship for explorations of empowerment via Web 2.0 arises. One of Miller’s central concerns is that this “communicative turn” is becoming subject to processes of assimilation and “commodification by corporations” (35). The promise of Web 2.0 is that it reverses this process by placing the means of representation and communication back in the

hands of “the people.” To the extent that this affords greater user control over their own cultural subjectivities and cultural expressions, this can indeed be seen as empowering for users *as citizens*.

Cultural citizenship therefore provides a productive focus and, indeed, has previously been applied in studying the internet and citizenship (Goode, Hermes, Papacharissi 94–97). I end this section by outlining the major factors Goode underscores, in a valuable overview, as important in using the term for online investigation. He begins by recognising three dimensions of cultural citizenship: access to the means of expression, “cultural visibility” as “the wherewithal to be seen and heard” (530), and “recognition” as the generation of “greater understanding or respect” (530). He cautions that there is no guaranteed progression from access, to visibility, to respect. Moreover, he adds that investigations of cultural citizenship online should not confine themselves to tracing the circulation of cultural expressions and visibilities, but should remain open to exploring fluid senses of subjectivity:

[W]e should remain open to the intuition that, in using the Internet, individuals, groups and cultures are also being shaped and potentially transformed by and through it. (529)

This last point is pertinent for investigating “user agency” in Web 2.0. Indeed, one of the most empowering aspects of Facebook is its potential as a site of “becoming,” that is, as a user-directed means for reworking dynamic cultural identities. What is at stake here goes beyond the visibility of pre-established cultural identities being “revealed” online, as if they were somehow static or reified. With these points in mind, I will now turn to exploring specific uses of Facebook.

Facebook and User Empowerment: “Do-it-Yourself” Cultural Citizenship?

Facebook has established itself as the most popular social networking site (SNS) in Aotearoa. Moreover it is a “sticky” technology, in that many users visit the site often (Hearn 211). A recent *Herald-DigiPoll* survey suggests half of New Zealand users visit Facebook daily, with 14.3% admitting to Facebook “addiction” (Wade). Facebook has, in short, quickly become a part of quotidian experience for many in Aotearoa. It displays fairly standard SNS functionality, being based around individual profiles that allow users to create and traverse their own social connections and those of others in the system (boyd and Ellison 211). This design privileges the creation of

personally tailored networks of connection. These are highly individualised and act primarily to sustain connections with family and friends, social relations traditionally associated with the private sphere. Indeed Facebook's success is related to its ability to facilitate a myriad of intimate personal connections as quickly as possible. As Fletcher notes in a recent *Time* cover article:

When a newcomer logs in, the experience is designed to generate something Facebook calls the aha! moment. This is an observable emotional connection, gleaned by videotaping the expressions of test users navigating the site for the first time. (19)

This “aha! Moment,” related for example to reacquainting the user with an old friendship, creates a positive affective dimension to Facebook. It is “sticky” not only because of its personalised utility, but also because it is often experienced as pleasurable.

Applications like Facebook also create, however, a unique hybrid of private and public space (Papacharissi 138–144), or to put it another way, such personal connections in SNS are mapped out across complex “networked publics” (boyd 112). Part of the utility and pleasure of online social networking lies in the ability for users to *share* their tastes and preferences, and to *display* their social connections in online identity performances. Moreover, Facebook pages' functionality allows users – as part of the process of mapping their tastes, interests, and connections – to join or “like” online collectivities with a dedicated Facebook “profile” of their own. These profiles have information pages outlining the group's scope and rationale, provide hyper-links to similar Facebook pages and websites, have their own “wall” where comments can be posted, allow for the sharing of photos and videos, and enable the creation of specific discussions on topics of interest. Via these technological affordances Facebook pages allow for the expression and contestation of more publicly orientated opinions, for the exploration of collective forms of identity, and for the sharing of a wide range of associated information and visual imagery. SNS thus require us to re-examine what Papacharissi calls the “spatiality of citizenship” (132). That is, they enable the individual to autonomously and routinely augment their “private sphere” (131) of interactions through connections to a wider range of relationships, affiliations, and interests. In a culture that increasingly facilitates such “remote connectivity” (138), SNS become environments that are both “*privately public* and *publicly private*” (142).

We are currently witnessing the proliferation of many diverse uses of Facebook of potential interest to cultural citizenship in Aotearoa. Rather than examining specific individual profiles, I focus here on exploring potentially empowering examples of “publicly orientated” Facebook pages,¹ and I concentrate on two broad sets of uses that are of particular significance. These examples enable a preliminary analysis of specific dimensions of empowerment in relation to Facebook as a Web 2.0 user-led application. The first set of uses relates to the rise of a range of pages dedicated to exploring Māori cultural identity. The second relates to uses of pages as “campaigns.” I will focus here on the campaign to stop a “Win a Wife” radio competition, as an example of Facebook uses that contest contemporary gender identities and sexual power relations.

In recent years the appropriation of the Facebook pages function by Māori has developed apace. There are numerous pages now dedicated to routinely exploring, through everyday online interactions, broad aspects of Māori culture, identity, and contemporary lifestyles. Two of the most popular are “Random Maori Fullas” and “I’m Proud To Be A Maori” (with memberships of 35,052 and 31,199 respectively, as of 17 March 2011). The latter, created by Māori-owned and operated ICT company TangataWhenua.com on Waitangi Day in 2010, states the following as part of its “mission” on the information page:

To share positive and independent Maori news and views! To connect with other Proud Maori who share similar values. Band together ... coz we always find STRENGTH and SUPPORT in numbers.

To see if we can create a massive get together of Proud Maori, in the one place ... share the Pride, share the Aroha, tetahi ki tetahi [let us look after each other], coz we need more of that in these challenging times.

In advocating for a positive and independent voice for Māori news and views, and for cultural belonging and mutual support, this page sets an “explicitly political” frame for group interactions. Nevertheless, interaction here is linked to individuals’ Facebook profiles through applications like News Feed, and remains embedded in

¹ All the data drawn on in this article are sourced from publicly accessible Facebook pages, Facebook groups and blogs. No individual comments are quoted, or profiles and images used, for ethical reasons.

everyday socialising. “Random Maori Fullas” was created by individuals, as opposed to a company. Its information page sets a more humorous and colloquial tone, and simply states under the heading “Basic Information,” “We are two Random Maori Fullas (and a Ninja) who are Random ... and Maori ... and Fullas (and a Ninja).” In doing so, it creates a more “informal” space for social interaction and for the sharing, mostly light-heartedly, of a wide range of everyday news and views.

Other diverse uses of Facebook are evident. For example, sitting between the more “colloquial” and the more “explicitly political” contexts set by these two popular pages lies the Facebook group² “I Aint A Kiwi Im A Maori Oww!” (with a membership of 973 as of 17 March 2011). Created by one individual, its information page lists its group “category” as “Just For Fun – Fan Clubs” and its “description” is written in a colloquial tone that mirrors aspects of Random Maori Fullas. Yet its description is also a compelling personal narrative that offers nuanced reasons as to why its creator self-identifies as “Māori” as opposed to “Kiwi.” It ends with the statement that the creator is proud to be Māori, and its themes mirror aspects of the more explicitly political context set by I’m Proud To Be A Maori. Indeed the page facilitates a range of social activity that explores what it means to claim a Māori identity in contemporary society.

My intention here is *not* to evaluate what these developments might “mean” for Māori. To do so would run counter to the argument I wish to pursue. That is, these various Facebook usages produce differentiated means for Māori Facebook users *themselves* to explore, contest, and re-define Māori cultural identity across a set of technologically-facilitated social spaces. With important caveats in mind, which I will introduce in the last section, this is a *self*-directed process: both in terms of individual and collective identity. Operating autonomously from “within” the context of individualised profiles, Māori are nevertheless able to create and access broader sets of relationships that contribute to community building and belonging. Moreover, they can access, appropriate, and contribute to a wide range of culturally relevant content.

² In a strict sense Facebook groups differ from Facebook pages. For example, pages allow traffic to be monitored by page owners in ways groups do not, and groups may be set to a “private” status. For the purposes of this article, however, public groups like this one share very similar functionality with pages. In particular, public groups mimic pages by allowing “communally orientated” interactions to occur through the posting of comments, enablement of discussion, and their facilitation of photo sharing.

There are important technologically facilitated temporal, as well as spatial, dimensions to be recognised here, as those who choose to engage with Facebook are equally able to choose when, and how often, they wish to do so. For those with access and sufficient motivation, the cultural renegotiations occurring online can become thoroughly embedded in everyday life.

In line with Web 2.0 rhetoric, these processes revolve around UGC. This includes routine interaction on the “wall” of each page as well as more focused debates on topics of interest in the discussion section. It also includes the sharing of a range of visual imagery. For example, 211 images have been posted to I’m Proud To Be A Maori and 759 to Random Maori Fullas. The range of content covered includes explicit references to Māori heritage and culture, as in pictures of kapa haka performances, art works and various marae, but also includes more personalised displays of users in relation to broader everyday activities and interests. The posting of images also regularly blurs the divide between displays of strictly “cultural content” and personalised experience, as in a picture posted to I Aint A Kiwi Im A Maori Oww! of a marae taken in the 1920s, that the poster explains shows her mum, dad, grandparents and great grandparents on both sides. Such visual culture is often integrated into social interactions, treating images as discursive resources in the generation of individual and collective subjectivity, rather than as abstracted artefacts for “display.” By multiplying avenues for diverse forms of online participation, such UGC is linked to what Bakardjieva terms a “transformation” in the “process of identification”:

The Internet transforms the process of identification by exploding the number of discourses and subject positions to which the individual becomes exposed, as well as multiplying the participation forms available at that individual’s fingertips. Moreover, by reaching deeply into users’ everyday lives, Internet technology allows for active appropriation of discourses and constitution of new discursive repertoires by individuals and groups, thus bringing discursive agency closer to subjects’ everyday experience. (94)

Thus it is not simply “technological” but *discursive* agency at stake here, linked to everyday experience and subjectivity. Users gain greater “everyday” control over the “discourses” and “discursive repertoires” linked to the construction of their

own identities, both individual and collective. Facebook is therefore not straightforwardly a site of cultural visibility, but a *space of becoming*. This dynamism potentially facilitates progressive forms of cultural citizenship that, rather than essentialising cultural differences, are based on an understanding of “difference as a process” centred on “openness to diversity and change” (Omundsen et al 9). Moreover it facilitates forms of “subactivism,” a type of politics “that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life” (Bakardjieva, 92). That is, routine social interactions become easily bound up in activities with broader political or ethical frames of reference. This is evident, for example, in a number of discussions posted on I’m Proud To Be A Maori, with subjects including “Sovereign Maori Government of Aotearoa” and “I’m ¼ Maori & yet, brothers act like I’m not brown enough.”

Such quotidian, self-directed processes take on greater significance when set against established critiques of mainstream media. The dynamic and self-directed exploration of “Māori identity” outlined here stands in stark contrast to the reductionist/essentialist use of the signifier “Māori,” as an abstracted and excluded “other” from the “norm” of Pākehā society, as constructed in established news media. Here “Māori” is too often used to “conglomerate the indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand into a single category, which the news media then separate from the rest of the community” (Stuart 17). Indeed Matheson, in a summary of research into Māori media coverage, concludes there is little evidence of biculturalism in mainstream news agendas. Rather, Māori are, consistently over time, positioned as “problems, criminal, dangerous, exotic, deviant; as a racialised ‘other’ in all the many manifestations of that status” (93).

The potential of Facebook as a “space of becoming” is, therefore, an important dimension of its empowering prospects, and has broader relevance for cultural citizenship in Aotearoa. This includes Facebook’s implications for other ethnic identities (e.g. Pasifika or Asian), as well as in terms of alternative issues such as gender identity. In the remainder of this section, however, I will briefly outline another significant use of Facebook pages with empowering potential for cultural citizenship. This relates to users’ ability to launch online protest campaigns. I will explicate one illustrative case, relating to gender identity and sexual power relations.

On 7 February 2011 “The Rock” radio station launched a promotional competition for listeners named “Win a Wife.” It offered the chance to win \$2000 in spending money, flights to the Ukraine, 12 nights accommodation, and the opportunity to meet a potential bride chosen from the Endless Love Agency. In encouraging applications, The Rock’s website suggested, “If you’re interested in holy matrimony with a potentially hot foreign chick, fill it out [the application form] to the best of your ability” (Donnell). The promotion was promptly, publicly condemned by former Green MP Sue Bradford as derogatory to women and as commercialising “one of the most meaningful human relationships” (Donnell), and by Labour’s Women’s Affairs Spokesperson Carol Beaumont as commodifying women in general and “perpetuating stereotypes, put downs and discrimination” (Hartvelt).

At the same time as such public figures were speaking out, a Facebook page was created entitled “Stop The Rock’s ‘Win a Wife’ Campaign.” By 15 February the page had been “liked” – or joined – by 1,170 Facebook users. Postings to the page’s wall mirrored aspects of the MP’s concerns but also allowed users to expand discussion of the issues, for example in relation to the discriminatory history of international “mail order bride” businesses. This activity was supplemented by broader discussions occurring simultaneously on Twitter and in the blogosphere (most notably in *Well Behaved Women Rarely Make History* by “Scuba Nurse,” a co-moderator of the Facebook protest page). The page was also used to call for advertisers to pull their ads from The Rock station. This immediately received broader mainstream press coverage (e.g. NZPA). Although none chose to confirm they would pull ads, many, such as ASB Bank and Harvey Norman, responded by distancing themselves from the campaign in written responses republished on the protest page and in the blogosphere. Lufthansa also required The Rock to remove their name from the competition’s terms and conditions. In light of the developing furore, the Ukrainian Association of New Zealand chairwoman Natliya Poshyvaylo-Tower contacted the Ukrainian Embassy (Donnell). On 15 February, the embassy wrote a letter to the Broadcasting Standards Authority (BSA). Citing its witnessing of events in “printed and electronic media,” and support from “general public opinion” in Aotearoa, it asked the BSA to review the “provocative, humiliating, and derogatory

advertising” of the competition. This letter was re-circulated online (e.g. see Scuba Nurse).

Facebook’s role in protest over the competition was not limited to the “Stop The Rock’s ‘Win a Wife’ Campaign” page. A counter-protest page was set up entitled “The Rock win a wife (like it),” which by 17 March had 2,744 members. This “anti-campaign” was joined by women as well as by men, and aimed to mobilise support for the competition by gaining more “likes” than the original group. It also encouraged members to write to targeted advertisers in support of The Rock, and suggested members join the original protest page in order to disrupt it by posting adversarial comments. Some comments expressed fairly reasoned opposition, while others contained abusive, misogynistic and vitriolic language that further perpetuated sexist and discriminatory attitudes towards women (for example by suggesting Sue Bradford needed to “get laid” and get a life). The level of abuse – accompanied at times with pornographic imagery – directed towards the original campaign page resulted in one co-moderator resigning her role (Hanson).

While this latter episode speaks of uses of Facebook that stand in stark contrast to progressive forms of cultural citizenship, the protest/counter-protest equally marks out Facebook as increasingly significant to the contemporary expression and contestation of gender identity and sexual power relations. Despite the vitriolic online reaction, the original campaign illustrates the “empowering” potential of Facebook in this respect. Once again temporal dimensions are significant. Facebook swiftly mobilised users into a protest group, thereby enabling the competition to be challenged *as it ran*. The group helped maintain broader public attention and pressure on The Rock from mainstream media and agencies such as the Ukrainian Embassy, and forced advertisers to make their viewpoint public while such attention was in place. Ultimately The Rock decided to go ahead with the competition under a name change: “WIN A TRIP TO BEAUTIFUL UKRAINE FOR 12 NIGHTS AND MEET EASTERN EUROPEAN HOT LADY WHO MAYBE ONE DAY YOU MARRY.” Nevertheless, the case illustrates the potential of Facebook to enhance citizenship’s “monitorial role” (Papacharissi 100–103), that is, the everyday ability of the citizen to scan the information environment and react to issues of concern using discourses meaningful to him or her.

In sum, the examples explored here serve to illustrate my argument that key aspects of Facebook's "empowering potential" revolve around enhanced everyday user agency in the expression and contestation of cultural citizenship. In line with common cultural tropes, we might label this as the rise of a "Do-it-Yourself" approach to cultural citizenship. This differs, however, from the *individualised* "cyber-libertarian" (331) discourse of DIY citizenship recently critiqued by Dahlberg. Rather than solely revolving around the freedom to pursue individual interests in a transcendent "conflict free" (348) realm, what is at stake here are "spaces of becoming" facilitated online in a broader socio-political context where both individual and *collective* identities are bound together, fundamentally contested, and impact on citizenship opportunities. "Empowerment" involves a greater discursive agency to rewrite identity, and the associated ability to mobilise in collective online protest. In the final section I turn to a set of concerns that I share with Dahlberg, which involve examining the limits of "agency" in Web 2.0 through political economic critique.

The Paradoxical Limits of Agency: Investigating Facebook as a "Platform"

As illustrated, empowerment via Web 2.0 platform applications like Facebook relies on UGC and its links to generating enhanced user agency. Here I argue that fully assessing such agency requires recognition that Facebook, as a "platform," is not a neutral facilitator of UGC. Facebook is first and foremost a business, and its business model is now so highly regarded that in March 2011 Facebook was re-valued at US\$65 billion (Faber). This success represents the culmination of nearly two decades of commercial experimentation with the internet. It is built primarily on leveraging the value of UGC for third-party marketing and advertising. For example, more than "176 billion banner ads" were flashed on Facebook in the first three months of 2010 (Fletcher 20). It is also linked to charging third-party software developers for access to Facebook users so that they in turn can generate profit through creating diverse applications – for gaming, internet commerce, travel advice, dating, etc.

From this perspective UGC on Facebook, while linked to greater user agency, is equally a form of unpaid labour ripe for the extraction of "surplus value" (Fuchs 191). The nature of the content shared, the associated meanings made, and the political uses to which content is put make no difference to this economic relation.

The more the user is willing to share, to create content, to transmit it to others, and to establish social connections, the more Facebook profits from this “work” as they attract more advertising and greater revenue. The *magnitude* of surplus value generated on *globally* successful, commercially orientated applications like Facebook results in them being thoroughly penetrated with a logic of commodification. While the disenfranchised may benefit from certain online exchanges, *all* interactions in commercial Web 2.0 applications are economically productive (van Dijck 47, Goldberg 744–47). If Facebook brings an empowering ability to rewrite identity closer to quotidian experience, in doing so it facilitates the thorough commodification of everyday social relations previously outside the ambit of capitalist accumulation.

Web 2.0 business manifestos elide concerns over such issues. In celebrating a “perfect match between producers and users, commerce and commons, creativity and consumerism” (van Dijck and Nieborg 860), they suggest the goals of owners and users are mutually beneficial. Users willingly deliver their immaterial labour in exchange for “free” access to the benefits provided by sites they enjoy using. The simple presence of Facebook’s 500 million users (Fletcher 16) demonstrates, surely, that many willingly make this “exchange.” To offer criticism here seems, on the face of it, to be speaking against their “popular will,” or to be sowing discord where – on the whole – there isn’t any.

Yet if we are to assess Web 2.0 as a means for the democratic appropriation of the media, such base assessments are of little use. Truly “revolutionary” democratic change requires a fundamental realignment of the status order, of wealth and of control. Yet, while being associated with user agency and the collapse of media hierarchies, Facebook’s platform has facilitated its ability to concentrate media and economic power in its own hands. Indeed it *is* a new global media corporation. There are particular paradoxes here for Aotearoa. UGC on Facebook appears to offer an alternative to the domination of “our” “national” media by foreign-owned corporations; however, every action taken by New Zealand users ultimately contributes to the entrenchment of Facebook’s power as global (foreign-owned) media giant. Facebook’s on-going realisation of this power presents further paradoxes. It is in Facebook’s vested interests to encourage commercial penetration into the “social” space it provides, and ironically this includes the active

representation of other established global media corporations. The Rock, owned by Australian private equity corporation Ironbridge, has its own Facebook page that it uses to develop its audience. Its membership, 54,521 as at 17 March 2011, dwarfs the 1,170 users mobilised in the “Stop The Rock’s ‘Win a Wife’ Campaign.” Rather than simply providing a means for “participatory culture” to disrupt corporate media control, Facebook also reinforces it.

Undeniably, Facebook is a thoroughly branded environment. As part of expressing their tastes, connections, and interests, users are continuously invited to participate in branded “communities.” Facebook, in fact, developed its ‘pages’ function primarily as a way of enabling commercial interests to develop brand loyalty: “A Page lets Fans become brand advocates” (Facebook). Groups that appropriate this function to different ends, to enable cultural identities to be thoroughly rewritten as part of everyday experience, co-exist with an “overwhelming majority” (van Dijck 45) focused on consumerism. Both these uses of pages are actively appropriated by users in expressing their individual and collective identities, but it is difficult to conceive of the latter in terms of discursive agency and citizen empowerment. It resembles, rather, a form of neoliberal subjectivity that reinforces the role of private corporations in public life. As Goldberg argues, “far from liberating the passive consumer from control, participation may simply install control on a ‘deeper’ level under the guise of self-expression” (5).

In thinking through the paradoxical nature of agency on Web 2.0 applications like Facebook, van Dijck argues it is useful to distinguish between the role of users as “*content providers* and *data providers*” (47). That is, users, in uploading content, also “willingly and unknowingly provide important information about their profile and behaviour to site owners and metadata aggregators” (47). The permission to use such metadata is signed over via site-service agreements. This metadata can then be “mined” in a multitude of different ways for commercial purposes, but while users retain control over UGC they have little control over such developments.

More broadly, as Beer points out, the programming of the software used to establish platform applications, and the associated algorithms used to mine metadata, play a fundamental role in assessing the extent of user agency in Web 2.0. That is, the

forms of computer code involved constitute new “performative infrastructures” (1000) that, rather than neutrally mediating user experiences, actively shape them. The relationships that users encounter, the content they come across, and how they are sorted, categorised and treated by site owners and third parties (e.g. advertisers) are influenced in significant ways by software that *acts* in a generative manner. Facebook, for example, regularly prompts the user to develop further connections with new friends or with branded products and services that are identified as “good fits” via algorithms. Drawing on Scott Lash’s notion of “power through the algorithm” (994), Beer therefore argues that Web 2.0 platforms, primarily considered as a means for *users* to exercise agency, are becoming increasingly significant shapers of lifestyles, cultural formations, and social environments *in their own right*. In other words, in technologies like Web 2.0 there are “technological challenges to human agency offered by the decision-making powers of established and emergent software algorithms” (987). This fundamentally complicates notions of who – or what – “acts” to constitute the social in Web 2.0. Such algorithmic processes are also an expression of particular forms of power: “not of someone having power over someone else, but of the software making choices and connections in complex and unpredictable ways in order to shape the everyday experiences of the user” (997).

This power operates, however, in ways that are often unconsidered by users themselves (Beer 995). Web 2.0 technologies like Facebook are increasingly familiar, an intimate part of lived everyday experience and mundane routines. The software algorithms that run them therefore operate “up close and personal,” in ways that are not necessarily conducive to a great deal of user reflection. Moreover, as Beer points out in drawing on the work of Nigel Thrift, the power of software algorithms often operates at the level of the “technological unconscious” (995) – that is, in “unseen and unknown ways” (995). Exactly how user participation and content generation feeds into processes of sorting, connecting, discriminating and filtering that are carried out by algorithmic processes in Web 2.0 is essentially occluded in the day-to-day act of engaging with the user interface, and is in any case difficult to determine due to the proprietorial nature of the software involved. Yet these processes may well have important implications for assessing agency and empowerment. One of the most pertinent factors Beer describes in this respect relates to the “likely” emergence of new digital divides:

Considering how popular Web 2.0 applications ... have become there is a pressing need to explore with some detail this vision of power through the algorithm operating in their incorporation into users' lives. It is likely that we will find that these algorithms are carving out new complex digital divides that emerge in unforeseen and unnoticed ways in the lives of individual agents. (999)

The role of metadata mining for commercial purposes, the concept of “power through the algorithm,” and the associated rise of the “technological unconscious” raise particular issues for the themes pursued in this paper. What, for example, does this mean for Māori who choose to share cultural content on proprietary software owned and controlled by Facebook? In celebrating their cultural diversity online, do they lose crucial elements of control over cultural experiences and cultural content? If they do, is this trade-off worth it? Indeed how aware, in the first instance, are Facebook users of the trade-offs they may be making? Different iwi and hapu will undoubtedly approach answering such questions on their own terms. Yet it seems that a broader debate about the empowering potential of Facebook, and Web 2.0 applications more generally, is needed here.

Facebook, Cultural Citizenship and User Empowerment in Web 2.0: A Call to Debate

This paper has provided a preliminary investigation of the empowering potential of Web 2.0 applications in a New Zealand context. Focusing on Facebook as a prime example, it has used the lens of cultural citizenship to explore the democratising prospects of Web 2.0. Within this frame, “empowerment” for the citizen is conceptualised as greater user control over their own cultural subjectivities and cultural expressions. I have argued that many potentially empowering examples of Facebook can be readily identified in this respect, and have explored two illustrative cases relating to uses of Facebook pages: the “rewriting” of Māori cultural identity in online “spaces of becoming,” and the use of pages as campaigns in the expression and contestation of gender identities and sexual power relations.

These examples suggest a degree of empowerment is afforded to users in their everyday lives, and that the links drawn between Web 2.0 and the democratisation of

the media deserve close scrutiny, particularly given the corporate domination of New Zealand media. We may be witnessing the nascent development of what I have termed a “DIY” approach to citizenship that affords a greater degree of autonomy over mediated cultural expressions, contestations and subjectivities. This is a significant development for Aotearoa, especially given our bicultural/multicultural context. Yet, equally, the analysis suggests that the “user agency” at the heart of these developments is deeply paradoxical. Web 2.0 commodifies social relationships, generates a branded environment permeated by commercial interests, reinforces the power of global media corporations, facilitates forms of neoliberal subjectivity, produces metadata and algorithmic power outside of user control, and is associated with the rise of a “technological unconscious.” All of which suggests “user agency” is constrained in significant respects. The contemporary situation is therefore ambivalent and complex. We not only need a more focused research agenda capable of interrogating these developments, but a broader-ranging social debate to explore their impact, especially as use of Web 2.0 applications by New Zealanders continues to rise rapidly.

Yet, I argue, this is precisely what we are missing, and the prospects for a wide-ranging debate developing are at present somewhat remote. This is because popular discourse surrounding Web 2.0 effectively elides its full critical consideration. The narratives that circulate most often in relation to Web 2.0 are those of the “Wael Ghonim” variety. They foreground democratisation, agency, empowerment and transformation. This is true globally, but in New Zealand these narratives take on a compelling resonance. They speak to our national sense of technological agency, to our history of appropriating the tools available to us in a settler society on the global periphery. This is reinforced by industry commentators such as Tim O’Reilly and academics eager to coin new hybrid terms that aim to capture the changes afoot, as in “produsage” and “participatory culture.” Perhaps equally importantly, the popularity of Web 2.0 applications like Facebook, and their positive affective dimensions, makes critique itself seem “undemocratic” and it is easily ill-received. Many people *enjoy* using Facebook and engage with it willingly.

To date, where debate has occurred over Facebook it has been limited to concerns over young people’s online safety, moral panics over their often intensive

engagements with the technology, or lobbying over privacy policies and settings. While I do not want to minimise the importance of the issues raised thus far, the deeper-seated concerns outlined here are too often set aside, and cannot in any case be addressed through lobbying site owners to adjust their privacy policies. Rather than offering definitive conclusions, it is my intention that this article should contribute to a broader critical debate over Facebook, Web 2.0 generally, and the prospects for democratisation and user empowerment.

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